TORN BETWEEN ALPHAS

Season 43

**Episode 5450**

**Greyson**

I couldn’t remember ever feeling so uncomfortable in wolf form. It was a strange, unfamiliar sensation that I couldn’t quite describe. It was like wearing a too-tight sweater…it just felt…wrong. My bones felt too big for my skin, my chest felt tight, and the dull ache behind my eyes was even stronger in wolf form than it had been in human form.

I saw the shock on Cali’s face and immediately shifted back to human. But even then, I still felt wrong. I didn’t feel as bad as I had while in wolf form, but it was close.

“What the hell is going on? Something isn’t right,” I said to myself.

Xavier had shifted back as well, and he looked green about the face. He stumbled a bit and sat down in the dirt, pressing his fingers against his temples. “What the hell was that?” He looked at me, his expression twisted in concern. “You felt that, right?”

Cali was already talking a mile a minute, and I was struggling to focus on her words.

“You were the wrong wolves,” I finally heard her say. “Greyson, you’ve always been a grey wolf, and Xavier has always been a black wolf…but this time it was reversed. The portal did something to you guys—I don’t know what—but I know what I saw.”

Cali came up to us both, using the back of her hands to feel our foreheads as if checking our temperatures.

“You don’t feel any different than usual to me…but something is definitely off.” Cali stood back and shook her head, watching both of us closely.

The blood rushed from my face as it all became clear. Xavier seemed to reach the same realization at the same time, and the green hue to his face deepened. We looked at each other in horror.

“You don’t think… It can’t be, right?” he said to me. “Could it be that— Is it possible that our wolves have been…*switched?*”

I shook my head. “I have no fucking idea.”

“It certainly looked like it,” Cali said. “Have either of you ever heard of anything like this before? Wolves being switched? And if that isn’t what’s going on here…what is?”

“It had to be the portal. I think it mixed us up somehow. Xavier has my wolf, and I have his.” I cursed under my breath, the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach intensifying.

Cali gasped again, and my hackles went up. I was confused for a second, wondering why I was reacting so strongly to a gasp, but then I realized it was because Xavier’s wolf was reacting to any semblance of discomfort from Cali.

Xavier’s wolf had a distinct feel—nothing like my own—and I was now all too aware of my brother’s wolf’s love for Cali—its instinct to always make Cali feel better, all the time, at any moment.

Xavier’s wolf—its thoughts and desires—were so strong within me that they were starting to overpower my other thoughts. I turned to stare at Xavier, dumbfounded.

“Is this what it’s like for you all the time?” I asked him.

“Is what like what for me all of the time?” Xavier asked, arching an eyebrow at me.

I gave Cali a look, wondering if this was something that she should know or if it would worry her more. And did I want to profess Xavier’s obvious adoration for her aloud? It wasn’t like she didn’t know, but maybe hearing it coming from me would somehow make her see it in a different light. Either way, I decided that this issue was better discussed between just the two of us.

*Are you always so tuned in to Cali like this?* I mind linked to him. *It’s intense. It’s like you’re a live wire awaiting Cali’s every need.*

*Yes, it’s always that way*, Xavier replied. *Is it that much of a surprise?*

Xavier was right that I knew the feeling well—I also spent my life worried about Cali’s health, comfort, and safety, but it was strange to realize that my brother was feeling this way, too.

It wasn’t like I didn’t know how deep my brother’s love for Cali was, but of course I’d never had such insight into how it felt emotionally. Now I knew like I’d never known before that we both genuinely, truly, loved her.

*It’s weird to know just how intensely Xavier feels for her. It’s unbelievable, the power of it. How does he function like this? How has he survived being away from her for so long and with the Samaras? It has to be painful for him—not knowing how she’s feeling and what she’s doing day to day.*

Xavier had moved to stand beside Cali. He touched her shoulder. “Are you sure you’re okay? If our wolves got twisted in our journey through the portal, how can we be sure that something hasn’t happened to you, too?”

I had to stop myself from rushing over to push Xavier away from Cali. I understood how deeply he felt for her now, but that didn’t change the way I felt when he was trying to get close to her. She was with me, not him, and I was more than capable of protecting her and making sure that she was okay. It was just like him to use this latest issue to get closer to her.

“I’m fine,” Cali said. “But I’m worried about the two of you. I don’t understand how this could have happened, or what it means for you both. Can it be fixed?”

“We have to fix it,” I said. “There’s no way in hell I’m staying like this.”

I had no desire to be this intimately acquainted with Xavier’s wolf’s inner thoughts. I wanted to be reattached to my own as soon as possible, and I was right on the cusp of panicking about our current states.

“Me neither,” Xavier said wholeheartedly. “It feels like I’m stuffed into a box I don’t really fit inside. Being saddled with Greyson’s wolf is torture.”

“My wolf isn’t bad,” I snapped.

Xavier cut his eyes at me. “Take my word for it, it’s not pleasant.”

I could only wonder at what was going on in my brother’s head right now. It obviously wasn’t any easier for him, dealing with my wolf’s emotions and urges like I was contending with his.

The Fae world had given us an awful parting gift, and I couldn’t say that I was surprised we hadn’t left the place unscathed.

“We need to talk to someone else. We’re not going to be able to fix this here in the woods with no guidance whatsoever,” I said.

Already, I was contemplating the stress of navigating our relationships with witches, elder wolves, and anyone else who might be able to tell us what was going on. And I shuddered at the thought of needing to appeal to any of the Fae for their help in resolving this. Would they help us? And even if they wanted to, how much could they claim to know about the inner workings of werewolves? They’d probably be just as clueless as the three of us.

What I was feeling now was how resistant I was to shifting—afraid, almost. I didn’t want to feel that way again, though I wasn’t sure what the alternative was. Shifting was a part of me, something that I relied on to realign myself. And after that stay in the Fae world, I needed that realignment big time. It was a nasty surprise to realize I couldn’t depend on that now that I was twisted up with my brother’s wolf.

“Do you think maybe it was a fluke? Maybe if we try again, we’ll shift normally?” I asked Xavier. It was wishful thinking, but I wasn’t in the mood to have something so important to me be so out of whack. What would I do without my wolf? And did I want to keep my wolf exposed to Xavier like his was exposed to me?

“The last time we had an issue, it did just go away,” Xavier said. “Maybe it is just a short-term thing and will be over by morning.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said. “Maybe we should just try and keep it quiet for now, not involve anyone else.”

Again, I was all for avoiding bringing other people into this problem for as long as we could.

“You do realize this means we can’t shift in front of our packs, right? How is that going to go over?” Xavier said. “Are you sure that’s a good plan?”

“Do you have a better one?” I snapped. “And it’s not such a big deal yet. Technically no one knows we’re back from the Fae world, so maybe we can lie low and take the night and see where we stand in the morning. I’m hoping that everyone will be okay by then.”

Cali frowned. “I hope that works out, and I’ll stay positive, but what are we going to do if it’s permanent?”

**Episode 5451**

**Artemis**

I was waiting for Rishika to go through the portal, but she just stood there looking at it, not making a single move to step through and return to the human world. What was she doing? My heart clenched, wondering if there was a particular reason she was sticking around…

I watched her for a few beats before I finally asked her what was going on. “What is it, Rishika? Cali and the others are probably on the other side waiting for you. Why aren’t you going home?”

Rishika stepped backward and turned toward me. “I can’t leave. Not yet.” She looked defiant. “It’s not the right time.”

From behind me, I heard Marius busy getting the others together, dispersing the crowd that had gathered. “Nothing more to see here. Everyone should start making their way back to the residence.”

*Thank the gods for Marius*, I thought when everyone finally started to drift away. *He always comes through just when I need him.*

I moved forward so I was just a few feet away from Rishika. “What do you mean?” I asked her. “Why can’t you leave?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

I gestured at the world around us. “So does that mean you want to stay here in the Fae world? Are you sure this is what you want?”

The Fae world took some adjusting to—even for some Fae—and it wasn’t like the place was kind to non-Fae—especially werewolves. Rishika wasn’t going to enjoy the freedom she had in her world. But I knew her, and when she made her mind up about something, it was very hard to convince her otherwise.

Rishika nodded. “If that’s what it takes to stay with you, yes. This place is as good as any. You get it, right? I don’t want to leave because I can’t say goodbye to you. I don’t want to forget you, and I hate the feeling I get when we aren’t together. I don’t remember the last time we said goodbye, but I remember the feeling of being left behind. I don’t want to feel that again. And I think the best way for me to remember you and to avoid that feeling is to stay with you.”

My heart clenched at her revelation, but I kept my expression blank. I just couldn’t let myself read into any of this yet. Rishika still didn’t even remember everything, but our last night together was still fresh in my mind. I’d broken up with her because I had to return to the Fae world to find Kadmos.

That said, I wasn’t about to send Rishika away if she really felt like she wanted—*needed—*to stay. I’d been longing for her since even before she stepped foot back in my life, and I didn’t want her to leave either.

“Of course you can stay,” I said. “I’ll deal with anyone who says otherwise.”

We returned to the Wrenthorn home together. Hera greeted us, but her displeasure was obvious when she saw who I’d brought with me. She wasted no time pulling me aside.

“Artemis, what’s she still doing here? It’s not a good idea for her to stay. We need to distance ourselves from outsiders until the peace talks have finished. Having werewolves running wild already nearly cost us everything, and I’m not keen on dealing with any more upheaval.”

“I’m sorry, Hera, but she’s staying, outsider werewolf or not. I know I’m in for a lot more than I thought by taking on this role, but I’m not about to sacrifice my relationship with Rishika to play a political role I never wanted in the first place.”

“Funny way of showing you didn’t want a political role…deciding to push your way into marrying Kastian,” Hera said flippantly. “You’re a very smart girl, Artemis. Surely you had some inkling about what marriage to Kastian meant for you.”

“I knew, and I still did what I had to do to save my sister—and this realm. Think what you want about my motives, but Rishika stays.”

Hera gave me a long look and sighed. “I don’t like it, but I won’t get in the way. I’ll have a room prepared for Rishika. And I know you’re not going to listen, but I encourage you to maintain your distance from her. The Fae aren’t going to like you consorting with an outsider in their faces—especially with your new station. You have to at least pretend to protect and uphold Fae customs and standards.”

I nodded, knowing I was asking much of Hera under the circumstances. I was observant enough to realize Cali’s mates *had* caused conflict in the Fae court, and it was no surprise that now the Fae saw the wolves as nothing but trouble.

“I know that, and I’ll be conscious of it,” I said.

“Good. And while we’re discussing the future, I think it’s probably a good idea for us to talk about what comes next for you. You and Kastian are expected to travel throughout the Fae lands to take an audience with all the major Fae families, both Dark and Light. It’s customary to make the rounds as soon as possible.”

I was already irritated. “I didn’t realize how much stupid bureaucracy would be involved in this role.”

“Be that as it may, it’s part of the process,” Hera replied. “Being in your position requires more than the power to order people around. You have responsibilities, too, I’m afraid.”

“I get it,” I said. “I’ll take Rishika to her quarters and get her settled.”

Hera beckoned to an attendant. “Please show Artemis where her guest will be staying.” She leaned close to the servant’s ear as if giving her instructions.

“Right this way,” the servant said once Hera was finished. He led us down many long hallways and through a number of twists and turns before we arrived at Rishika’s room, and it wasn’t lost on me that Hera had put her in a room almost comically far from my own, but it wasn’t worth a fight right now. No matter how strongly I still felt for her, it wasn’t like Rishika and I were together—nor did she even remember me. The room would do for now.

Once the servants were gone, we sat together in the room in a comfortable silence. It was clear that Rishika was still a little overwhelmed.

“I’m glad I get to stay,” she said finally. “But now that I’m here, I can’t help but wonder what type of role I might play.”

“You don’t have to play any role at all. I just want you to relax and get your memory back. You don’t need to think about anything else,” I told her. I was just happy I had the means to allow her a place to relax and gather her wits about her.

There was a knock at the door, and I called for whoever it was to come in. I assumed it would be another servant, but instead, Marius appeared.

Quiet fell between the three of us, and it wasn’t the comfortable kind. It was like no one knew what to say to each other. I kept opening my mouth as if to speak before snapping it closed, extremely nervous about saying the wrong thing considering I was in the room with two people I was—to some degree—romantically involved with.

*How does Cali do this all the time? Handling two people she’s with at once? Having feelings for two people?*

I was still searching for a way to break the tension when Marius beat me to it. “I was surprised to learn Rishika was staying, but I’m glad to know you’ll have someone else in your corner.” He paused, took a pensive look around before he continued. “Anyway, I’ve come to say my goodbyes. I’m worried I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

I was surprised by how strongly I reacted to the idea of him leaving. I didn’t want him to go—in fact, I didn’t want either one of them to leave. The only thing keeping me from freaking out about what I’d just done—tying myself to this role and the Fae world for who knew how long—was having the people I cared about close to me.

“Hera said you would be safe here. That doesn’t mean you’ll be safe anywhere else. You should stay,” I told Marius.

Marius looked between me and Rishika. “Really? Should I?”

“Yes, you should. The only people I trust one hundred percent are standing right here in this room. I don’t want to lose half of that. I can’t. I don’t know what I would do.”

“But what am I even going to do here? I love spending time with you, but this isn’t my scene. Servants and politicians and debutantes and privilege oozing out of everyone’s pores. It’s not…appealing to me.”

I searched for an answer, realizing Rishika had asked pretty much the same thing only seconds earlier.

Then it came to me. “I know, you can both be my shadow advisors.”

**Episode 5452**

**Xavier**

Cali’s question echoed in my mind, and dread bloomed inside of me.

*What if this thing is permanent? What if I’m stuck with Greyson’s wolf, and he’s stuck with mine forever? What will that mean for us?*

Fuck me. We hadn’t even been back for five fucking minutes, practically.

I missed my wolf already—it had always been a comforting warmth that ran through my veins and rested at the back of my mind, and Greyson’s wolf felt like something else entirely. Now, I was starting to think this was probably what it felt like to have an alien invade your body.

For one thing, I was surprised by how quiet Greyson’s wolf was. My own was usually far more aggressive. I tried not to feel jealous. It was almost overwhelming—Greyson’s wolf was fully focused on Cali, constantly aware of where she was. Every instinct, every thought centered around Cali. That was the only trait our wolves shared as far as I could tell.

There was no difference in how Greyson or my wolf reacted to Cali; it was obvious we both loved her deeply. It was difficult to grapple with this new sense of love Greyson had for our mate. As much as I’d always known that Greyson loved Cali as much as I did, it was strange to feel how comforting this love was coming from Greyson’s wolf. I almost wished I didn’t know. I had no desire to live in Greyson’s emotions, and I was certain he had no desire to live in mine either.

*No thanks.*

I suddenly realized Greyson was talking to me. I couldn’t help but snap at him. “What are you going on about?”

I knew it wasn’t fair to treat Greyson like he’d done something wrong, but everything about this situation had me feeling uncomfortable and irritated. Other than spending as much time with Cali as I could, part of me had been excited to get away from Greyson and go back to the Samara pack house to see Ava. I knew she and I had a lot to talk about, and Cali was still topmost in my mind, but that didn’t mean I didn’t miss my life.

We hadn’t been in the Fae world long, but even now it felt like we’d been gone an eternity. I wasn’t like Greyson—leaving my pack whenever I felt like it and having other people taking the reins all the time. I’d fought to be Alpha of my own pack, and I missed it and was ready to get back to it.

Greyson frowned at me but otherwise didn’t react, choosing instead just to repeat his question. “I was asking if we should go to my place in Portland to see how we feel in the morning.”

“That’s a good idea,” Cali said. “It’s just the first part of the plan, and hopefully we won’t even need any other parts because this will be over in the morning. But no matter what, we’ll figure it out.”

I liked Cali’s positivity, but I wasn’t sold. This strange wolf swap was something I’d never experienced before, so that meant it could behave in unexpected ways. There was no guarantee that a good night’s sleep or time would fix things, and I was doing everything in my power not to give myself over to panicking about what it would mean to be stuck with Greyson’s wolf for the foreseeable future.

*It had better be fine in the morning. I cannot stay this way. My wolf is such a big part of who I am. I tap into my wolf to center myself, for decisions, to guide me when I’m dealing with Cali. Without it, nothing feels right.*

Greyson shifted, and I was thrown by seeing *my* wolf standing in front of me. It was like I was back in the spirit world—it just wasn’t right. I didn’t really want to shift, but it would take so much longer if we didn’t. Hopefully this would be one of the last times I had to shift into Greyson’s wolf.

I followed suit and shifted. Cali climbed up onto Greyson, and I took off behind them. I felt a twinge of irritation as Greyson sped ahead of me, but it quickly simmered down, and I kept my pace steady, trying to concentrate on running in this uncomfortable skin.

But as hard as I tried to adjust, everything felt off. It was like I knew I should be making a different decision, taking some other kind of action—and then it hit me. If things were normal, I would be racing with Greyson, showing him it didn’t matter that Cali climbed on his back instead of mine. Under normal circumstances, I would prove to Greyson that even though Cali was riding him, I was the better choice. But without my wolf driving my intentions and my choices, that wasn’t my first thought.

Ignoring Greyson’s wolf’s instinct, I sped ahead. As I raced forward, I was almost immediately hit with a heavy wave of nausea. I stumbled to a stop, dry heaving. The world was spinning around me, and I planted my paws, trying to keep from collapsing.

Several yards ahead, Greyson stopped. Cali slid off Greyson’s back and started running toward me. “Xavier! Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

*I’m fine*, I mind linked to her. *Keep going. I’ll catch up.*

Cali didn’t look convinced. *But you don’t look fine, Xavier. Maybe we should stop for a second and—*

*Really, I’m good. Just a little nauseous, but it will pass. Go back to Greyson; I’ll be right beside you in no time.*

Finally, she listened and went back to Greyson. We took off again. Soon we were close enough to the Portland city center that it was time to shift back. We did, Cali giving us clothes from her pack to change into, and then we made our way to Greyson’s apartment.

On the way there, I couldn’t shake the wrongness still surging inside of me—even in human form. I hated this. We’d finally escaped the Fae world and all its drama only to return home with drama literally attached to the very essence of who Greyson and I were—our wolves. I was so frustrated I could scream.

As soon as we walked into Greyson’s place, Cali made a beeline for the shower.

“I’m going to make some calls—” Greyson started to say, then stopped. He shook his head. “I almost forgot. We don’t want anyone to know we’re here.”

Something about that rubbed me the wrong way. Not only was it not Greyson’s call to make, but I had responsibilities I’d been shirking while twisted up in Fae land. I needed to check on my pack, make sure everything was fine. And I needed to tell Ava what was happening with me. I *should* tell Ava at least.

Whatever was going on with me could affect not only Ava but the entire Samara pack, and she had a right to know as my Luna. Greyson could keep everyone in the dark if he wanted, but that was his choice, not mine. But how was that conversation going to go?

“I’m going to go lie down, hope maybe I’ll sleep this off,” Greyson said. “Fingers crossed.”

*He’s probably dealing with his own wolf nausea but doesn’t want to share it with Cali and worry her.*

Now that I was intimately acquainted with his wolf, it was like I had more insight into how my brother’s human mind functioned as well. Everything was about Cali. Every choice, every single thought, all the things he said and didn’t say. It was strange to realize how keyed into our mate he was at every single second.

“I’m going for a walk,” I told him. “Be back soon.”

If things were normal, I would probably shift, make a break for the woods, and go for a long run. It was nice to be back home, and I missed just existing as my wolf without worrying about tripping over some damned Fae, but sadly that wasn’t an option. Going for a run in wolf form meant going for a run as Greyson’s wolf, and that wasn’t a pleasant notion.

The second I made it outside, I pulled out my cell phone and scrolled down to Ava’s number. My thumb hovered over it.

*Should I call her? Is my brother right? Should we keep this to ourselves for now? I know I have to give Ava some credit; she’ll most likely understand this is a delicate situation, and it’s not like she’ll get off the phone with me and run and tell everyone. And I really want to talk to someone else about this.*

*Someone other than Greyson.*

I stared at Ava’s name for a few seconds more before I finally made the decision. I tapped the screen and brought the phone up to my ear. It rang once, then twice, and then Ava answered, her voice urgent.

“Xavier, what’s wrong?”

**Episode 5453**

I was rinsing the shampoo out of my hair and dealing with the vague sense of discomfort and dread I’d had ever since Xavier and Greyson came walking out of the portal. I’d been worried they would come out of the portal fighting, going for each other’s throats, but that wasn’t what happened at all.

*I would have much preferred seeing them fight to them having to deal with whatever this is—this random exchange of their wolves.*

I’d tried to hide it for their sake, but clearly neither of them was in a good place, and that worried me. They were out of sorts and confused, but both were trying to put on a brave face for my sake even though I knew they were freaked out.

I’d immediately regretted asking them if this change could be permanent, so I dropped it right away. They’d both reacted so strongly to the idea of being stuck this way, and why wouldn’t they? As far as I understood it, their wolves were their identity. There was no way in hell Xavier wanted to be forever tied to Greyson’s wolf and vice versa.

I also felt a little guilty since the only reason they’d gone to the Fae world in the first place was because of me, and now, their wolves were all messed up.

I really hoped that when we woke up in the morning, everything would be back to normal. I was hoping for some respite from this anxiety, and from the fear that neither of them would ever go back to normal.

I didn’t know how much more stress I could handle. I’d just spent a tense week in the Fae world, and then we got back and things were still going wrong. It wasn’t fair.

*Why is this happening? I wish I could just be happy about being back home in a world I understand with people I care about. Maybe I really should have just stayed behind with Artemis. Is all this a sign that I shouldn't have left her there by herself?*

I hated this. So much.

I turned around and let the hot water run over me, trying my best to clear my thoughts. This wasn’t the time to spiral. I had to stay clearheaded. Greyson and Xavier needed me to be strong for them. Especially if this didn’t turn out to be a fluke and we all needed to go into problem solving mode to fix this.

I heard the bathroom door open, and a second later, Greyson stepped into the shower with me. I was thrown.

“What are you doing here? Isn’t Xavier out there?”

Greyson grinned. “He went for a walk. We’re all alone.”

“Yes, but what if he comes back? Are you sure this is a good idea?”

Greyson didn’t seem to be listening, already had his hands on my back, kneading my shoulders.

“I’m sure,” he said. “And besides, I just… With everything that’s happened, I just need to be with you right now.”

I smiled and dipped my head forward, enjoying Greyson’s touch. His fingers found a tension point, and I let out an appreciative hum. I relished the massage for a few minutes before turning around and looping my arms around Greyson’s neck. I pushed up to my toes to kiss him, and Greyson dropped his arms around my waist, pulling me close so I was flush against his chest.

I got such comfort from being in his arms like this. I always felt so safe and secure with him, like nothing could get to me or hurt me. And it was also nice being in his apartment where he had an actual, decent shower and not in some random Fae court or keep. The moment was calming after how shaken up we’d all gotten earlier.

Then Greyson deepened the kiss, and I closed my eyes, smiling against his lips when I heard the low growl rumble out of his throat.

I gasped when Greyson turned me around and pressed me up against the wet, warm tile wall. He swept my hair to one side and kissed me on the cheek, nibbled my ear. His hands were busy sliding all over my body, still massaging, kneading my flesh, squeezing my ass until I took in a sharp breath.

“Sorry, did I hurt you?” he asked.

“No, the opposite. That felt really good.”

But I had to admit that something felt different with him. It was in the way he was touching me, the way he nudged my legs apart with his knee, almost roughly. He took my wrists and planted my hands on the wall above my head.

“Stay just like that,” he commanded. “Don’t move.”

One hand was plotting a course from my neck down the arch of my back to where my center was fluttering, waiting, and then he slid a finger inside of me and twisted it in deep.

“Greyson!” I hissed through clenched teeth. My knees almost buckled, but I held strong, excited for what was coming next.

He shifted his hand around so his fingers grazed my clit. I reared back against his hand as he began stroking me, one finger plunging in over and over again while the others were busy spreading me open and softly touching me, urging me toward a heightened arousal that made me close my eyes and bite my lip, excitement simmering in the pit of my stomach.

And then I felt his mouth on me, kissing me gently for a few beats before his tongue replaced his fingers inside of me. He thrust it in hard, keeping it rigid, lapped at me with such fervor that my body shifted and moved with the intensity of it.

His strong hands were squeezing my ass still, pulling my hips apart so he could get better access to me, and before long I felt the tickle of my climax creeping up.

I gritted my teeth, wanting to hold back until Greyson was inside of me, but before I knew it, I was coming. I rolled against Greyson’s face, and he kept going, suckling and licking while his fingers slid across my clit in a quick rhythm that extended the crash of my orgasm.

“P-Please,” I gasped. “More.”

And then Greyson was on his feet and turning me around. He wrenched one leg up to curve around his waist, and then without needing to ask again, he dove inside of me, his hard, rigid shaft sending shockwaves through my body as he plundered me. His hips were like pistons, slapping against me and pinning me to the wall so I couldn’t do much but surrender to him.

His teeth were bared, and I watched the expression on his face, the hardness there—it wasn’t the way he usually looked at me at times like this, but I liked it.

He was saying something, chanting it, really, and I leaned close to hear him better.

“You’re mine,” he was saying. “You’re all mine, love. Every delicious, sweet inch of your body belongs to me.” With one hand still holding my leg pressed against him, the other began a slow journey up my abdomen. He cupped my breast in his hand and leaned down to take a nipple between his teeth, gently tugging at it. Then his hand kept going where it loosely gripped my neck.

With both hands, I held onto his wrists, my body vibrating with the force of his thrusts, my breath puffing out of my mouth in moans. There was a hardness to how he was making love to me, a strength I’d not felt with him before, but I didn’t want him to stop. I liked how rough he was being and was enjoying this sexy dominance.

Greyson slammed a hand against the wall, his eyes wide and focused on mine. “I’m coming,” he said. He held my hips in place and then jerked against me, the warmth of his climax setting something off in me so that I was coming again, much harder than the first time.

“Shit,” I panted, running my fingers through his soaking wet hair and surrendering myself to him until the last of our mutual climax drained away.

Afterward, we both laughed a little as we did a thorough clean up under the hot stream of the shower. Greyson stepped out first and handed me a towel, then left me to get dressed.

I took my time drying off, enjoying the way my body felt, my sex still swollen and pulsing a bit, my arousal finally waning. I went into Greyson’s bedroom—surprised to see he wasn’t there—and pulled a change of clothes from my pack and got dressed.

I felt so good, just like I always did after being with Greyson, but I couldn’t ignore how different that had felt. He’d never acted so aggressively before. A thought entered my mind as I replayed everything that had just happened in the shower, the way he manhandled me, smacking my ass and squeezing and biting…

Then I something hit me…

Did Greyson act that way because of the wolf swap?

**Episode 5454**

**Xavier**

“What do you mean? Why would you answer the phone like that?” I asked Ava. It was like she already knew something was up before even speaking to me. There was no way she could know what happened at the portal, could she?

“I don’t know, Xavier. It’s just that for the last few hours, I’ve felt kind of strange, like there’s something wrong. But I couldn’t figure out what it could be… And then you called, and that strange feeling ramped up to a million. So, what is it, X? What’s wrong? Tell me.”

I was glad she was doing exactly what I thought she would—she was ready to listen to me.

“I’m not sure where to start… We’re obviously back from the Fae world since I’m calling you.” I quickly sifted through the events of the last week, trying to figure out in real time what to leave out and what to share. I wanted Ava’s sympathetic ear, but I didn’t want to piss her off either.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Ava said softly. “It feels like you’ve been gone forever.”

Something twisted in my gut at that admission. She’d missed me while I was away, and honestly, I hadn’t thought about her much until I stepped foot back through the portal—and not much even then because of the whole wolf swap thing.

“I know, it felt like forever for me, too. We’re in Portland now,” I continued.

“And I’m guessing there’s a reason you’ve made a pitstop there instead of coming straight to the pack house?”

She sounded so worried, and I was struck with the need to calm her down, to soothe her anxieties before they grew out of control. I wanted to make it clear that everything was going to be okay.

*This feels like part of Greyson’s wolf instinct—always trying to minimize the problem to keep the rest of the pack calm. Talking everyone down so they never felt upset or scared.*

It wasn’t how I normally operated, but I leaned into it. Instead of answering her question outright, I asked, “How’s the pack? Is everything okay? Are you okay?”

I was sure everything was fine. Ava was more than capable of running the pack on her own, but I wanted to hear it directly from her. And I didn’t want to assume everything at the pack house was status quo. The Fae world had been full of drama, but I could admit the human world had a good share of its own.

“I know what you’re doing,” she said around a sigh. “I’m fine, and the pack is fine. Everything is great other than the fact that you’re not here. So just tell me what’s wrong, X, and we can figure out how to fix it.”

I couldn’t help but be warmed by how eager she was to help me. Ava’s attention was always squarely on me; she always had my back no matter what. It was refreshing to talk to someone who only had eyes for me, whose loyalty was reserved for me alone.

“The Fae world was a fucking nightmare,” I said. “The only reason we went there was to help Artemis out of the bind she was in with the Fae court and bring Cali back to the human world unharmed, but it became so much more than that.”

I kept quiet about the changes that had taken place in my and Cali’s relationship. There was no use getting into the details about that when not even Cali and I had taken a real chance to discuss it.

“There was all this Fae politics bullshit that Cali had to deal with…and she was seconds from marrying some Fae noble.”

“What?!” Ava said. Then she snorted. “You know, I really can’t believe that.”

“I couldn’t either, but it didn’t happen, and Artemis ended up marrying the noble instead.”

“Uh-huh. Typical Caliana Hart drama and chaos. What else? Seems like your worst fears weren’t realized since she didn’t marry someone other than you… So what’s going on?”

I decided not to touch on any of that, knowing it was a sensitive subject.

“The problem is that when we came through the portal at Haystack Rock, my wolf and Greyson’s wolf got switched somehow.”

Ava gasped. “What? I’ve never heard of anything like that happening before. What’s it like?”

Horror was in her voice, and it made me panic again. All I could think was what if I had to deal with Greyson’s soft, quiet wolf for the rest of my life?

“It must feel so invasive, having someone else’s wolf inside of you, its thoughts tainting yours.”

“That’s exactly what it’s like,” I said. “I hate it. Greyson’s wolf… It’s hard to describe. It’s just not *my* wolf. It doesn’t react the way I do. It doesn’t gel with my internal dialogue in the least. It’s like having him in my head twenty-four seven with no way to shut him off.”

“Oh, Xavier, I’m so sorry this happened. I hate that you have to go through this. What can I do? I want to help.”

“It’s enough that you’re listening,” I said. “Greyson and I both are hoping it’s just a temporary thing. But shit, does it suck. I just keep reminding myself that every other portal issue has eventually fixed itself, so we’re just waiting until the morning, and we’ll reevaluate then, depending.”

“Okay…that sounds like a reasonable plan for now.”

“I just wanted you to know—and for you to know I’m back.”

“All of this explains why I was feeling so strange. And I’m glad you called. I missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

It wasn’t hard to admit that. It was true, after all. Despite my feelings for Cali, it wasn’t like I didn’t still harbor strong feelings for Ava. Even as I called her, I’d been confident I would be able to talk to her about this without her overreacting or freaking out.

“I hate that this happened, or I’d be there with you,” I said. “But it is what it is.”

“Yes…and where are you exactly?” Ava asked. “I’m coming there. I don’t think you need to deal with this alone.”

“No, you don’t need to. We’re at Greyson’s apartment.”

“Oh…so it’s you, Cali, and Greyson?”

I immediately picked up on the hint of irritation in her voice.

“Why do you need to stay there with them? Why can’t you just come home to see if everything will work out in the morning?”

“We’re better off together, because if it doesn’t get back to normal, Greyson and I will probably have to go and do some stupid magic shit to fix this.”

Ava sighed. “I don’t like the idea of you there with them.”

“What does it matter? I’ve been with the two of them for a week in the Fae world already. What’s one more night?”

“The difference is that you’re close to home, and you could be here if you wanted to be.”

I let out a tired sigh. So much for Ava just listening to what was going on without stressing me about the details.

“Don’t worry, Ava. It’ll be fine.”

“I’m not worried,” Ava said. The irritation was now leaning toward frustration and more than a little anger. “It’s just that you’re there with two Redwoods, and I think you should have a Samara with you.”

I pushed back again. “Just wait, Ava. This is best for now. I’ll call you first thing in the morning with an update, okay?” Then I softened my voice, not wanting to argue with her or make her feel like I was avoiding coming home. “Thank you for trying to take care of me—and for always being there for me.”

“You know me, I’m always here for you…whether you deserve it or not. Talk to you tomorrow.”

I heard the click of the line, and I slid the phone back into my pocket. All things considered, Ava was taking this well. I knew she’d probably been miffed by my being away with Cali for such an extended period in the first place, and now I was only miles away and still choosing to stay away from the Samara pack house. I was lucky she hadn’t pushed for an argument.

I returned to Greyson’s and was immediately hit with a strong rush of Greyson and Cali’s mingled scents. I knew immediately what had happened between them.

*What the hell? Already?*

I’d been gone probably less than thirty minutes, and Greyson had already rushed to get his hands on Cali, all too eager to take advantage of me leaving. Only a snake moved like that.

I rounded a corner and spotted Greyson and Cali seated at the dining room table talking softly. Greyson was touching her, of course, running a finger up and down her arm. She smiled at him, and then they both laughed about something.

My anger reached a fever pitch.

“The fuck is this?” I asked, taking a step toward my brother, my fists clenched and at the ready.

# **Episode 5455**

**Greyson**

I knew it was Xavier the second he walked through the door of my apartment, but I didn’t react. Unless Xavier had lost his sense of smell, he probably knew exactly what had just happened between Cali and me. And if our history told me anything, it was that my brother was about to try to start a fight.

Staying calm and not reacting was probably the best thing I could do, because having Xavier wreck my apartment in a fit of rage wasn’t how I wanted to spend my time. He had no right to be upset that I had sex with *my* girlfriend in *my* apartment. It wasn’t up to him, it was between me and Cali.

“Oh, Xavier! Hi.” Cali must’ve just noticed him come in too. Guilt flashed in her expression, which pissed me off more than I was willing to admit. We had nothing to apologize for. “Are you hungry? We’re going to order some food.”

I watched my brother carefully, just waiting for him to lash out or make some snide remark about “working up an appetite” or something similar.

To my surprise, he just shrugged. “Sure. Anything’s fine.”

Cali nodded and looked back down at her phone to finish the delivery order. Was it just me, or did she seem relieved?

Xavier turned away from us both and flung himself onto my couch. Something about that rubbed me the wrong way. I wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was the careless way he was taking up space in my apartment? Or maybe it was just that he was here at all, when this would otherwise be a lovely relaxing side trip with Cali after everything we’d been through in the Fae world.

It was so easy to see how it could be if things were different. We could take our time getting back to the pack house and all the responsibilities that waited for us there and just enjoy each other. Just enjoy the fact that we were here, and we were safe, and we’d managed to leave all that Fae world nonsense behind us.

I still hadn’t really had time to process the whole marriage thing. Cali agreeing to marry Kastian, trying to come to terms with that awful reality, and then the sheer relief of Artemis taking her place, even though Cali still wasn’t happy about it.

To say nothing about this wolf swap bullshit…

So, yeah. Not having my little brother here sticking his nose in everything would be aces. But since when did I get that lucky?

I glanced at Xavier, who was stretched out across *my* couch, his arms clasped behind his head like he had every right in the world to be there. My teeth ground together. I didn’t know why, but him just being there bothered me more than if he’d thrown a punch.

So when the words appeared in my mind, I didn’t think twice before saying them aloud. “How’s *Ava*?”

Maybe it was petty to bring it up, but I didn’t really think Xavier had any right to be irritated with me and Cali for living our lives and being in love when he’d been on the phone with his *Luna* at the time. His Luna, who was a member of an entirely different pack. Ava had been his mate before Cali, and unlike my brother, my heart wasn’t split in two.

*I’m not a greedy bastard like him…*

The thought made my mouth twist. *God, I really do sound petty. Like a pissed-off teenager. What’s wrong with me?* I sighed, softening my tone into something more agreeable. “I hope everything is fine with the Samaras since we left the Fae world.” Then, before Xavier could say anything else, I added, “I think it’s best if we all just eat and go to bed. Hopefully everything will be back to normal come morning.”

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The next morning, I peeled my eyes open with a low growl. “Fucking fuck.”

Nothing had changed. I could feel it. I still felt *wrong* inside, like I’d been taken apart and put back together in the wrong order. Still—because apparently, I was a glutton for punishment—I held my hand out in front me and tried to partially shift. Amidst the sound of a few cracking bones, my hand shifted into a claw. A claw covered in black fur.

*Hello, Xavier’s wolf. You fucking asshole.*

I shifted my hand back to its human form—the only form I had right now that was mine—and slumped back against the mattress with a sigh. Cali was fast asleep next to me, and all I wanted to do was curl my body around hers, breathe her in, and forget about all the things that were wrong in the world.

But of course I couldn’t do that. No rest for the guy with the wrong wolf inside him. Besides, with Xavier on the couch in the living room, *my* wolf inside him, I doubted I’d be able to relax even if I tried. I sat up and gently smoothed Cali’s hair away from her face.

“Love, wake up,” I said softly.

Cali came to over the course of a few seconds. She smiled sleepily at me, and my heart swelled at the sight. It really was a fucking shame that we couldn’t enjoy ourselves.

She must’ve seen the truth of my and Xavier’s situation in my face because her smile quickly shifted into a frown. “I’m guessing it’s still not fixed?”

I shook my head. “I’m going to wake Xavier. We have to figure something else out, clearly.”

I stood, stretching as I padded over to the couch. I kicked the side of it probably a little harder than necessary. “Get up.”

Xavier’s eyes shot open at the jolt, and he looked around wildly for a beat before slumping back down, groaning and rubbing his face.

He mumbled something I couldn’t quite make out.

My brows rose. “Come again?”

“I said I fucking hate you. It is way too fucking early for me to deal with your bullshit.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you know what time it is. Did you notice anything else?”

He sat upright, his nostrils flaring. “I still have your goddamn wolf.”

“No shit,” I said. “So now we need a plan.”

That was how Xavier, Cali, and I ended up sitting around my kitchen table twenty minutes later with fresh mugs of coffee steaming in front of us.

“So…” Cali began, looking from my face to Xavier’s. “Any thoughts on what our next steps might be?”

“I might actually have an idea,” Xavier said. “Do you remember when I had to get my wolf back from the spirit world?”

I nodded, understanding exactly what he was getting at. “That’s not a bad idea.”

Cali frowned. “What’s not a bad idea?”

“You want to go see the same guy who helped you before, right?” I asked Xavier. “Swift, I think his name was?”

Xavier frowned. “Do I *want* to see him? Not particularly. But I think it’s probably the best move we have right now. At least we know Swift has experience with wolves being separated.”

“That’s a great idea!” Cali smiled, but it looked forced. “We have a plan, so let’s go talk to him right away. He’s in Portland, right? We can head straight to his shop. I’ll Google the address.”

Fortunately, Swift’s shop ended up being within walking distance from my apartment. It didn’t take long to arrive, but once we approached the storefront, we were greeted with the last thing I wanted to see.

A huge sign had been taped to the front door with the words “GONE FISHIN’” scrawled across the front.

Xavier stopped short. “Are you shitting me?”

“What the hell?” I snapped. “Who does that?”

I glanced at Cali, whose expression was pinched with worry. “What are we going to do now?”

Xavier pulled out his phone. “I’m going to call him and see where he is. Maybe we can meet up with him wherever he’s…fishing.”

I scoffed. “Un-fucking-believable.”

He stepped away to make the call, but it didn’t sound like Swift was interested in hearing from customers at the moment.

“Pick up your phone, Swift,” Xavier muttered. “I need to talk to you.”

I shook my head. *Great. Just fucking great. Our only viable option is out of his goddamn office. What the hell are we supposed to do?* I couldn’t go back to the Redwood pack like this. I’d already stepped away to help Cali and Artemis, leaving the pack with an interim leader, and now I was coming back with the wrong wolf attached to me? The wolf of another pack Alpha?

Suddenly, a wave of comfort settled over me. Comfort and familiarity. Like I’d just been welcomed in by someone I knew. Someone I loved.

Then, the scent hit me, and my stomach twisted. *You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.*

A few moments later, Ava herself appeared from around the corner.

She smiled when she saw us. “Found you.”

# **Episode 5456**

**Artemis**

Marius seemed to let my words sink in for a moment. He looked me up and down as he considered my proposal. “Well, while all that does sound very sexy,” he finally said, “but what does it mean?”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Rishika added, her arms crossed over her chest.

I looked between the two most important companions I had in the Fae world, carefully weighing my words. Marius, I knew, was probably down for just about anything. But Rishika was a wild card. She couldn’t completely remember her ties to the human world, sure, but nobody would blame her for going back home rather than staying here in a world that was so very hostile to her kind.

“Do you both understand that I can’t trust anyone else in this entire world the way I trust each of you?” I asked. “Everyone here has their own secret ambitions. They’re all looking out for themselves and looking for any opportunity for advancement. And most of them aren’t afraid to get their hands dirty along the way. I can’t parse through it all by myself.

“I don’t trust Celeste or Hera enough to take their words as absolute truth, and Adair is still too universally reviled by both factions of the Fae world for him to be of much help to me as I navigate my new position. Marius”—I turned my attention onto him—“you can give me the Fae world know-how I might need. There’s no gossip or rumors too obscure for you to suss out. And, Rishika”—my eyes met hers—“I trust your instincts more than just about anything. You can read people in a way I’ll never be able to.

“Plus, I’m going to have to be traveling around as part of the marriage celebration and doing all this court nonsense…” I sighed. “It makes me feel better knowing both of you can watch each other’s backs while so much is happening.

“You both have reasons that your safety is in jeopardy,” I continued. “Marius, you’ve still got a hell of a bounty on your head; and, Rishika, you’re a werewolf. People will have a myriad of motivations to try to hurt or ransom either of you. If you stay here with me, you both have people I trust to protect you. This makes sense, doesn’t it? It’s the perfect solution. Plus, I know you two can keep me grounded. You both know who I really am, beyond being Kadmos’s daughter and Kastian’s wife, and all the roles I now have to play. You two can help me remain the real Artemis.” My eyes lingered on Rishika. “And even if you don’t remember me, I know you still *know* the real me.”

My proposition hung in the air for seconds before a loud, impatient knock sounded at the door to my chambers. The door flew open before I could answer it, and my brand-new husband stepped into the room.

I glared. “Can you—”

He held up a hand, cutting me off. “Hold onto your face. You don’t need to glare at me like that.”

My brows rose. “Don’t I?”

Kastian ignored me, gesturing to Marius and Rishika. “I thought you all agreed to be discreet. Maybe you’re new to being a high lady’s paramour, but this is not what discreet looks like.”

“We’re just talking,” I snapped. “Besides, these are my rooms.”

“Honestly? I don’t care what you do or whom you do it with, but parading your extramarital love interests around these rooms probably isn’t a great idea. If people see these two coming and going, they will talk.” He frowned. “And it’s a little early in our groundbreaking, peace-ensuring union for there to be discord, don’t you think?”

I rolled my eyes. *Why does anyone bother with getting a husband?* I’d thought allying with Kastian would be useful to me, but right now all he was proving himself capable of was being a pain in my ass. “Is there something you wanted, Kastian?”

“Indeed.” He held out a hand. “Will you walk with me?”

I hesitated, looking back at Rishika and Marius. Kastian had stormed in before they’d had a chance to respond to my request. There was still so much unsaid, so much unsettled between us.

“Go,” Rishika said. “I’ll be here when you can talk again.”

“I’ll hang back too,” Marius said. “I think Rishika and I need to discuss your proposal a bit more.”

I nodded, and with more grace and dignity than I was actually feeling at the moment, I stood to join Kastian at the door.

“Thank you,” I told them. “I’ll see you both soon.”

Kastian led me out of the room, making sure to close the door behind me the moment I was through it. I hadn’t realized he’d be so uppity about maintaining the image of our marriage. He certainly hadn’t seemed to care about how much of a man whore people thought he was back at the Dark Fae court.

*I suppose marriage changes a man…* I snickered at the thought. Kastian hadn’t changed at all. He’d just become more unashamedly ambitious.

“You’re taking advantage of your position,” he said, his tone light, the volume of his words low as he led me through the halls.

“I just barely got this position,” I said, trying to match his tone, keeping my expression neutral. “How am I supposed to have taken advantage already?”

“Keeping both your paramours close. I hadn’t pegged you for such a hedonist.” He smirked. “If circumstances were different, I’d say I was proud of you.”

I scoffed, heat rushing into my face. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. They’re sticking around to help me. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“I’m not worried. What do I care if you’re in love with both of them? All that matters is that no one else finds out.”

I stopped short, jerking my arm out from under his. “I’m not *in love*.”

Kastian grimaced, glancing up and down the hall, presumably to make sure we hadn’t been overheard. “Will you please lower your voice?” He leaned in close. “I get it. They’re both *very* attractive in their own ways. I’m not judging.”

“Oh my gods. Will you please just shut up?”

But it was too late. Kastian had already planted the seed, and now its vines spread through my mind, unearthing memories I’d tried to forget. The entire reason I’d broken things off with Marius years ago was because I hadn’t wanted to acknowledge my feelings for him. But now he was sticking around… And Rishika was too.

Rishika, who didn’t remember me, but knew I mattered to her. Rishika, who sure as hell mattered to me too.

They were all I had in this world. The only real support and comfort I could lean on as I stepped into my new role and navigated all these toxic court games while I continued my search for my father. Sooner or later, I was going to have to figure out what my feelings really meant.

I did know one thing: Kastian didn’t need to be part of this. He had nothing to do with Rishika or Marius or my feelings for them, and I certainly wasn’t about to fall in love with my husband.

“Leave it all to me,” I finally said. “I’ll deal with whatever I need to. You can just go on lazing around or whatever it is you do with your time.”

He flinched. “Ouch.” He shook his head. “You know, it hurts how little you think of me. How you refuse to see how skillful I truly am.”

I rolled my eyes.

“That is exactly what I mean! I know I present this party boy attitude. It’s a deliberate ruse. You should know better than to buy into it. I wanted this role. And I wanted there to finally be peace between the Light and Dark Fae. This is my way of fulfilling my family’s expectations, of continuing the Haseneau legacy. It means something to me, Artemis. I’m not just here to spend my life throwing lavish parties.”

I frowned. His words stung. Not just because he was right—I should know better than to fall for his act—but because I understood the pressure of legacy more than anyone. Peace between the Light and Dark Fae was supposed to be my birthright. And even though this wasn’t the way I would have chosen for it to happen, ensuring that peace meant something to me too.

I groaned.

“What? You have a problem with my family legacy too?”

I shook my head. “I don’t need you to humanize yourself to me.”

Kastian shot me a snide smirk. “All I’m saying is, don’t forget that I can be a resource to you. I can tell you the ins and outs of the Dark Fae court; I can walk you through the politicking. I’m not useless.”

A young Fae page scurried up and tucked a note into Kastian’s hand before disappearing just as quickly as he’d appeared.

Kastian opened the note and read it, his face expressionless. Then he refolded the note and tucked it in his pocket. He leaned in close. “We may need to revisit that bounty hunter of yours. It looks like you were seen…” His mouth twisted in distaste. “…in a passionate embrace.”

# **Episode 5457**

**Ava**

I couldn’t hide my grin as I approached Xavier. He’d only been gone for a week, but as far as I was concerned, he’d been gone a week too long. I gave him a long once-over. He seemed to be physically okay, despite all the bullshit he was dealing with. *As if trouncing off to the Fae world after Cali wasn’t enough, now his wolf is all messed up.*

I resisted the urge to glare at Cali and Greyson. This was all their fault. It was *always* their fault. Time after time, the Redwoods came to us with some new bullshit, begging for help, and every single time, Xavier came out of it worse for wear. This time was no fucking exception.

I was so over it.

All I wanted was for my mate to be safe and strong and whole and to come back and continue to be the Alpha our pack needed. Was that so damn much to ask?

Cali waved at me from several feet away, forcing a smile that looked physically painful. *Good.* Maybe it was petty, but I figured she deserved a little pain, a little discomfort, for everything she’d put Xavier through.

I glanced at her coolly and wiggled my fingers in her direction.

Xavier finally got off the phone, shoved his cell in his pocket, and wrapped his arms around me. All the tension humming through my body immediately went still. I savored the feel of his arms around me, and a thrill of desire, of *rightness*, raced through me when Xavier practically lifted me off my feet.

I pressed my face against his shoulder and breathed in deep. God, I’d missed him so much. It was hell having him in the Fae world where I couldn’t even text him to make sure he was okay. I wasn’t letting him out of my sight so easily ever again. And now that I was here, I was going to make damn sure he came back to our pack in one piece, no matter what it took.

I pulled back. “I figured I’d show up and see how I could help.”

“Just admit it.” Xavier said, his voice low and teasing as he grinned. “You missed me.”

I laughed. It felt good, so fucking good, being here with him again, even with things as messed up as they were. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too. I’m glad to see you.”

My stomach fluttered. *This is good*, I thought. *He still feels strongly for you, despite whatever it is he feels for her.*

I tried to be present with him, to just focus on this moment with the two of us together, and the comfort it offered, but there was no denying that bone-deep sense of discomfort. That sense that something was wrong that had been sitting with me for the past fourteen hours. It was *there*. Heavy in my stomach.

“But I said you didn’t need to come,” he replied. “We’re gonna get this sorted out. You didn’t need to leave the pack.”

“I disagree. Everything’s all messed up with your wolf. I needed to see you, so I had to come and be here for you in person.”

His smile didn’t fade a bit, which comforted me to no end. “I’m glad to see you. Don’t get the wrong idea. I just wonder who’s taking care of pack business while you’re gone?”

“I left Marissa and Donovan in charge since I figured we wouldn’t be gone long.” I sighed. “I hope we can get this taken care of quickly. I’d like to feel normal again.”

“Wait!” Cali piped up. She’d clearly been eavesdropping on my and Xavier’s conversation. “You can feel it too?”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes at Cali’s surprise, only because I knew Xavier wouldn’t like it. *Does she have to butt in to everything?* “Why wouldn’t I feel it?” I asked. “I’m also Xavier’s mate. Of course I’d know when something was wrong with him. Plus, I haven’t been able to focus with my wolf. It’s like it’s distracted, or it can’t focus its attention or something. It’s restless. It knows something is wrong too.”

Cali nodded. “I mean, I obviously don’t have a wolf, but I’ve also been feeling really weird since the switch. It’s more like a sense of dread. Like something is about to go wrong.”

Greyson tightened his arm around her. “Well, I don’t like the sound of that. We really need to figure out how to fix this, like, yesterday.”

*No shit.* I peered at the sign stuck to the shop’s front door. “I thought people only did that in movies.”

Xavier shook his head with a little growl. “Apparently not.”

I mind linked with him. *Isn’t Carlson this guy’s competition? Maybe he might know what to do if Swift is…unavailable?*

Xavier seemed to consider this, then nodded. His voice slipped through my mind. *That’s not a bad idea, but why not just say it out loud? Is there something you don’t want them to know?*

I shrugged. *I just want to make sure we’re presenting a united front.*

And though I’d never admit this to him, the mind link had been a test. I’d spoken with him through the mind link because I wanted to make sure we still could. That Xavier and I were just as connected as we’d been before he left for the Fae world and all this wolf switching business had happened.

With how unsettled I’d been feeling, and how restless my wolf had been, I actually wasn’t totally sure the mind link would actually work, or that it would work, but I’d end up mind linking to Greyson or something similarly awful. But it had worked just fine, and relief flooded through me.

Xavier turned to Cali and Greyson. “We could go see Carlson Greene,” he said, repeating my suggestion. “He’s Swift’s competition, so he may know how to help us.”

Greyson’s expression soured. “You want to go see if your couple’s counselor knows how to switch our wolves back?”

Xavier frowned. “That’s not exactly—”

Greyson cut him off. “Let’s not waste any more time on these useless leads. I want to go to someone I trust. We should go see Big Mac.”

I frowned. Something about Greyson was…off. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. But if Xavier noticed, he didn’t care enough to comment on it. Xavier shrugged. “That’s fine.”

Greyson didn’t move. “And we need to figure out what to tell the packs. If fixing this is going to take longer than just today, we’ll have to tell them something. We can’t avoid them, and we can’t avoid shifting in front of them.”

I didn’t understand where Greyson was coming from with this question. Why he felt the need for secrecy. “Why wouldn’t we tell our packs the truth about what had happened?” I asked.

What had happened with Greyson and Xavier’s wolves was just some weird, magical fluke. It wasn’t like it was some dirty little secret. But was that how the Redwoods wanted to treat it? Did Greyson really want to leave his own pack in the dark? How was he expecting to pull that off? He’d said it himself: They couldn’t *not* shift in front of their packs. Their roles as Alphas demanded it. How was he going to keep them from finding out he’d ended up with Xavier’s wolf?

I, for one, trusted my own pack to be able to hear and understand what had happened. Sure, they’d probably have questions, but I didn’t doubt that the Samaras would do whatever they needed to do to support their Alpha at the end of the day.

I mind linked with Xavier again. *Regardless of whatever Greyson chooses for the Redwoods, we should tell our pack the truth. They’ll be more help to us if they understand what happened than if we leave them in the dark.*

*I agree. Though, I don’t think the Redwood pack will be unwilling to help Greyson, either.*

Greyson, who was totally unaware of our conversation, shrugged. “I just want some more answers before we share anything with our respective packs.”

“That’s fair.” Xavier nodded. “The more information we have, the better. And, again, maybe this is just a quick thing Big Mac will be able to deal with. Should we head over there now?”

He nodded. “Let’s go. We’ve wasted enough time pursuing Swift already.”

I continued to ponder the strange vibe I was getting from Greyson. He seemed…more volatile than I remembered.

“Um, what are you doing?” Cali asked me suddenly.

I blinked. “I’m…” I stopped short, shock pulsing through me. I’d left Xavier’s side and moved next to Greyson without even realizing it. I looked back and forth between my mate and Greyson, who was still *right next to me*.

I’d just moved automatically. I hadn’t thought twice about it. My body and my instincts had guided me…to the wrong person.

*It must be our wolves. My wolf knows where Xavier’s is and wants to be near it.*

My stomach twisted. Did this mean my wolf *wanted* Greyson?

# **Episode 5458**

Calling out Ava had been a knee-jerk reaction, but I didn’t regret it. Even now, as she looked back and forth between Greyson and Xavier like she was coming out of some kind of fugue, it took every ounce of self-control I had to not just, like, body check her away from my mate.

I didn’t want to see her standing next to Greyson—in any capacity. It felt wrong, and my god, I already had to share Xavier with her. There was no way in hell I was sharing Greyson with this mate-stealing harpy.

*Okay, maybe that’s a little dramatic…* But it honestly wasn’t too far off the mark, was it? *Where’s the line?*

Ava’s face reddened as she seemed to come back to herself and moved back over to Xavier. He immediately took her hand and entwined their fingers.

I averted my eyes. *I don’t need to see that either*.

This whole thing felt like it was going off the rails. Greyson and Xavier were both on edge; I felt wrong too; Swift was apparently too busy enjoying his hobbies to put in a day’s work; and now Ava was here, throwing a wrench into things?

*Seriously, why did she come?* I heard Xavier tell her explicitly that he’d asked her not to come. And yet here she was, sticking her nose in everything.

Some slightly more reasonable part of me whispered that I wasn’t being fair, that I’d probably do the same thing if I were in Ava’s shoes. I told it to shut up and mind its own business. Finally, all the wolves shifted, and I climbed onto Greyson’s back. It was still so, so weird to see him with Xavier’s wolf. I held on tight to the thick, black fur I’d come to associate with someone else.

I mind linked with him. *Are you doing okay?*

My mind kept flashing back to last night. To how…different it had been between us. Greyson had been so much more assertive than usual, so much more dominant. And I’d kind of loved it? No, I’d *really* loved it. It was just strange, being intimate with him that way. Usually, Xavier was the more hotheaded one in bed…

Nope, scratch that. Don’t think about that.

*I’m as okay as I can be*, he told me. *I understand you’re worried, but we’ve dealt with bigger problems than this.*

*Have we?* I asked. *I mean, getting your wolves switched… That’s kind of a big deal.*

*As long as we’re together, I know we’ll be able to work this out.*

I wished I shared Greyson’s faith in us. I didn’t want to alarm him or be a downer. And maybe it was just that feeling of dread that was getting to me, but I had a sinking feeling that none of this was going to be as easy to resolve as he seemed to think.

*So…you feel okay about everything then?* I asked carefully.

*Why wouldn’t I? Other than some weirdness with my instincts, I can still shift. Xavier, too. We can still take care of each other. I’m just thankful this problem isn’t any worse.*

His words warmed me from the inside out. He sounded exactly like the old Greyson. The one with the silver wolf. *He’s not turning into someone else.*

I hadn’t even realized it was something I worried about until the thought occurred to me. As much as I’d enjoyed last night, it was kind of creepy to imagine Greyson turning into Xavier or vice versa. I loved both of my mates so much, and I loved them for all the reasons they were different. Having their switched wolves turn them into each other was some kind of uncanny valley nightmare.

*But he’s still Greyson. He’s still your Greyson. Don’t forget that. He might be borrowing Xavier’s wolf for a little while, but that doesn’t change who he is. And it won’t.*

I pulled in a deep breath and tried to will my tense shoulders to relax. *You do have a point*, I said through the mind link, my tone purposely brighter. *This isn’t* Freaky Friday*. It’s not like you and Xavier are totally body-swapped or anything like that.*

*Oh god.* He shuddered. *Don’t put that picture in my head, please.*

I laughed, the wind flying through my hair as Greyson ran through the woods, and it felt really damn good after all the stress of, well…everything. It felt like I hadn’t had a moment to enjoy myself and just *be* since before Marius showed up to bring me to the Fae world.

*What did you mean when you said there’s some weirdness going on with your instincts?* I asked.

*It’s hard to explain… It’s like there’s something in my gut that’s pushing me to make the more hotheaded choice, I guess? There’s this instinct to move without thinking through completely, to just take whatever I want.* His tone sounded irritated.

It didn’t take a psychiatrist to put together that Greyson was attaching “taking whatever he wants” to Xavier. It was silly to even think about, considering the history there, but I couldn’t help wondering how much smoother this all could be if Greyson and Xavier weren’t warring with each other all the time.

*Nothing about what you’re saying is inherently bad*, I gently tried to push back. *There’s an argument to be made for taking action with the best information you have, when it’s necessary, don’t you think?*

He was quiet for a while, seeming to mull my words over as we loped toward our destination. *I guess not*, he finally said. *Not when it’s necessary, at least.*

I curled my body closer to his, the best comfort I could give him while we were running through the woods. *I’m sure Xavier is struggling with this too; and like you said, we’re all going to get through it.*

Greyson’s words stayed with me even after our conversation ended. They gave me some much-needed insight into why Greyson had acted the way he did last night. And the whiplash he was probably feeling constantly with Xavier’s wolf tied to him.

My stomach sank as I realized I was going to have to work a little harder to keep the peace between Xavier and Greyson, especially if Greyson had lost some of the levelheadedness his wolf gave him. I’d been certain they were going to all-out fight the night before, and I still wasn’t sure if they hadn’t fought because Xavier had exerted some rare self-control, or if it was sheer luck.

The wolves didn’t have to run for much longer before Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s place came into view. We all slowed to a stop in the front yard, and I slid off of Greyson’s back. The wolves all shifted back to their human forms. Ava was frowning at Xavier, looking deeply unsettled, and even Xavier and Greyson looked a little green.

I wished they didn’t have to deal with feeling physically unwell when they shifted in addition to how screwed up they must be feeling mentally and emotionally.

Since the wolves all seemed in rough shape, I didn’t wait for them to rally before jogging up the stairs of the front porch and knocking on the door.

It took a few moments for the rest of them to join me on the porch, but that turned out to be fine because nobody was answering the door.

“It looks like nobody’s home,” Xavier said, his tone irritated. He was practically snarling. “Great plan, Greyso—”

Xavier stumbled to the side, and I realized Greyson had shoved him. He hadn’t even waited for Xavier to finish talking. “We don’t need any of your shit right now,” Greyson growled. “This is hard on everyone. You think I had any fucking clue Big Mac wouldn’t be home? You think I *want* us stuck like this?!”

My eyes widened. *Shit, there’s the hotheadedness.* My stomach twisted. It was unlike Greyson to have such a strong reaction to a pretty tame comment, where Xavier was concerned.

I pulled at Greyson’s arm. “Hey, it’s okay. We’ll figure it out.”

Xavier was staring at Greyson with pure murder in his eyes. His shoulders heaved like he was on the verge of rushing Greyson right there on Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s little porch. This was getting out of hand, and fast.

“Um, Ava?” I called. “Can you get him to stand down? We don’t need this right now.”

I half-expected Ava to jump down my throat for talking to her, but to my surprise, she nodded and grabbed Xavier’s arm. “Cali’s right. Take a breath. We don’t have time for infighting.”

I frowned, looking at my two mates, who seemed like they wanted nothing more than to kill each other. Greyson and Xavier needed help—they needed to be guided. They couldn’t trust their wolf instincts while things were so messed up.

That feeling of dread intensified. I was going to have to help my mates navigate this, and I couldn’t do it alone.

I was going to have to work with Ava.

# **Episode 5459**

**Xavier**

All I wanted was to literally rip Greyson’s throat out. He was the one who’d insisted we come all the way out here to Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s place to try to get their help. *Christ, couldn’t he have at least called ahead?* And now we were stuck out on their porch, no closer to getting our wolves sorted out.

Greyson was so fucking dismissive of my suggestion to go see if Carlson Greene could help us. But if he’d just listened to me, we could already be there by now and maybe getting things fixed, instead of standing around out here like a bunch of assholes.

But as much as I had good reason to want to wring my brother’s neck, I knew I shouldn’t fight with him. Not now. And *that* pissed me off even more because that little voice in the back of my head that was trying to help me keep my cool? That was Greyson’s fucking wolf talking, and it was right.

This wolf-swap thing was worse than I’d even imagined. It was like my know-it-all brother was sitting inside my skull, telling me what to do, and—the worst part of all—making the *right* call.

*This is unbearable.* I wanted my wolf back. I wanted to feel like me again, even if it meant my much more hotheaded wolf wanted a fight. At least then I’d know I was the one calling the shots and not Greyson.

I pulled in a breath through my nose, stepped back, and shook Ava’s hand off my arm. I hated that she’d had to talk me down like that. Like I couldn’t even control myself, so my Luna had to step up and manage me. *I’m not a fucking child.*

Ava watched me warily, like she was waiting to see what I’d do next.

I blew out the breath and shook my head. “I’m fine. I’m not going to fight Greyson.”

“Good call,” Ava said. “But for the record, my money would’ve been on you.”

My mouth twitched in the beginning of a smile. Ava was patronizing me right now, sure, but my battered pride was eating it up. “Thanks.”

Cali had pulled Greyson to the other side of the porch and was speaking softly to him, probably talking him down too. He certainly seemed to have a hair trigger since he’d gotten lumped in with my wolf. I tried not to think too hard about what that said about me.

I could listen in on Cali and Greyson—the porch wasn’t that big—but I had no interest in whatever the hell she was telling him. For once, it didn’t even bother me that she was comforting him, sticking with *him*. I just wanted to get Greyson’s wolf out of me. Everything else could wait.

“Hey.” Ava’s fingers brushed my arm as she linked our fingers together. “It’s going to be okay, X.”

I squeezed her hand tightly, my mind drifting back to when we were all standing outside of Swift’s shop and Ava had sidled up to Greyson.

As she smiled up at me, I couldn’t help the relief and protectiveness that bubbled up inside me. Everything was fucked up beyond reason, but Ava had been my constant through it all. For all of our issues, I’d never had to worry about her feelings for me. She was devoted. She was loyal. She was committed.

She was mine.

And seeing her move to Greyson’s side so naturally, so mindlessly…

A shiver slipped down my spine, and I held her hand a little tighter. If this thing with our wolves didn’t get sorted, Ava could be just one more thing I’d lose to my brother.

*Fuck that.* I’d never let that happen. I was already sharing Cali with him. It’d be a cold day in hell before I let that bastard lay a hand on Ava. Besides, the only reason she’d gone to his side was because of *my* wolf. Because she loved me, and our bond was strong—whether we were human or wolf.

No, she was mine, and that wasn’t changing either, no matter whose wolf was stuck inside me.

I tilted my head down toward Ava, my lips curving into a soft smile. “You know what? I’m really glad you decided to come. This whole thing… It’s better with you here.”

Her smile brightened, and she stared at me with that look of pure adoration that never failed to make my heart trip over itself.

Still, I felt a twinge of guilt. Because, if I were being honest, there was some selfish, shallow part of me that was only happy Ava was here because the alternative would be that Greyson and Cali would be on one end of the porch, and I’d be alone on the other. But that wasn’t totally right either. I loved Ava, but I loved Cali too.

I shoved those thoughts down as far as I could and leaned in to kiss her. Just as our lips brushed together, a loud throat clearing made me freeze.

I stepped back and turned to see Big Mac and Mrs. Smith looking up at us from the bottom of the porch steps. Big Mac was glaring at me, naturally, but Mrs. Smith seemed thrilled to see Greyson. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I could feel Greyson’s wolf’s excitement at seeing his mother.

*Must be fucking nice.*

“What the hell are you doing on my porch?” Big Mac demanded. “Whatever you’re selling, I don’t want it.”

“We need your help,” I piped up before anyone else could. It was probably Greyson’s busybody wolf pushing me to take control. “We got through the Fae world okay, but now there’s something wrong with our wolves.”

The witch raised a brow. “And that’s my problem because…?”

*Fucking Greyson.* I should’ve known Big Mac wouldn’t want to help us. That, at least, hadn’t changed. She was already sick to death of us coming to her to fix our problems, and even if this was kind of a Big Fucking Deal, I could already tell she didn’t see it as anything more than another demand for her time and knowledge.

Mrs. Smith put a hand on her wife’s arm. “Why don’t you all come in and tell us the whole story?”

Big Mac groaned but didn’t resist, and we all followed the two of them inside the house.

“Take a seat in the living room,” Big Mac practically barked at us.

“I’ll make some tea,” Mrs. Smith added, her tone extra sweet in contrast to her wife’s.

A few minutes later, we were all seated around the coffee table, sipping a truly delicious herbal tea and sharing the full story of our wolves switching for Big Mac.

“When we realized this wasn’t going to fix itself, we tried to go to Swift for help—he’s this paranormal specialist in Portland—but he’s away,” I explained. “So here we—”

“Yes, here you are.” Big Mac cut me off. “I’m all caught up. Now, did anyone feed you anything in the Fae world?”

I frowned. “I mean, we both ate while we were there. We were there for a week. So…”

“And this problem didn’t present itself *until* you exited the portal?”

“Right,” Greyson said. I’d been taking charge with talking things through with Big Mac, but I couldn’t help but notice my brother piping up any chance he fucking could.

“What did you feel like going through the portal?” she asked.

I glanced at Greyson for a beat. “I don’t know about him, but it just felt weird. It always feels weird.”

“Super helpful,” Big Mac said dryly. “Thanks.”

“I don’t know what else to tell you!” I huffed.

Greyson set down his teacup. “Isn’t there just some spell you can do to swap the wolves back?”

The witch gave him a level stare. And I actually started to sweat. What if she refused to help us? “Maybe. I can certainly do something to see exactly what happened.”

“Yeah, do that then,” I said.

Big Mac pulled a small pouch out of her pocket and poured some dust into her palm. She lifted her hand in front of her face and blew the powder in my and Greyson’s direction. I sneezed, waving the dust away from my face.

“Is this a bit?” I asked. I wouldn’t put it past the witch to do some made-up ritual to punish us for coming here in the first place.

“Hush,” Big Mac said. “I’m reading your auras.”

She leaned back and stared, her eyes darting from my aura to Greyson’s and back. Seconds passed into long, quiet minutes as she took in whatever the hell her magic dust was telling her.

Finally, she let out a long sigh. “Well, you were mostly right. Your wolves are just tied to the wrong souls.”

“So what do we do then?” I asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “I don't know how to fix it. As far as I can tell, you guys are stuck like this.”

# **Episode 5460**

**Greyson**

I felt myself pale. *This can’t be happening.*

This was exactly what I didn’t want to hear. I’d been terrified the moment we arrived at Big Mac’s place. Not because I didn’t think she’d try to help. She’d complain about it, for sure, but if push came to shove, Big Mac would try to set things right.

But to not have the ability or knowledge to fix us? She was a witch! One of the best witches we knew. If she didn’t know what to do…then what the hell were we supposed to do now?

Cali had my hand in a vise grip, and I could hear her speaking to me, but she sounded miles away. “Everything will work out, Greyson,” she said, her voice warm, yet firm. “We’ll figure this out, okay?”

Clearly, she was trying to keep me calm because that was apparently her job now, thanks to Xavier’s wolf being stuck inside me and giving me a hair trigger at the least opportune times.

*No, there has to be another way. I can’t fucking live like this. I can’t go back to the Redwoods like this. I can’t… I can’t do anything with my brother’s wolf inside me!*

“So…what?” I snapped. “We’re supposed to do nothing? Just settle in for a lifetime of being tethered to my brother’s wolf?”

Big Mac glared, and I glared right back. She didn’t get to act like I was supposed to take the high road when she was being absolutely useless and I was in crisis.

“Is that what I said?” she asked. “It’s going to take some time. I need to do some research, and then we’ll see what we can do to get you boys sorted out.” She glanced at my mother, who was watching our interaction with wide eyes. Sabine hated it when Big Mac and I argued.

“I can contact Steinar too,” Cali said. “Maybe he can find something.”

“Sure, ask the gargoyle,” Big Mac said wryly. Her gaze flicked back to me. “You know, you’re lucky you have such an amazing mom. If it were up to me, I would have kicked you off my porch, and this wouldn’t even be an issue.”

*Correction. It wouldn’t be an issue for* you*.* Still, I forced myself to look somewhat contrite. “Thank you for your help.”

She stood. “I’m going to my library. I need to reference one of my books. I’ll do some research and then get back to you. For now, you all just need to sit tight and figure out how to deal with the wolf-swap thing in the interim.”

With that, she brushed past me on her way out of the room, muttering, “They never bring me anything nice. Just problems. They always come here with problems.”

Xavier stood, and Ava followed suit.

“If that’s all that can be done right now, I need to head back to the Samara pack,” Xavier said.

I frowned. “What are you going to tell them?”

“The truth.” He shrugged. “What else is there to say? Like you said before, it’s not like we can avoid shifting in front of them. We’ll tell them that you’ve got a witch working on it and in the meantime, we’re just…dealing with it, I guess.”

I sighed. “Fair enough.”

They turned to leave, but Cali shot to her feet. “Ava? Can I talk to you for a second?”

“What?” Ava said, looking bewildered. I felt the same way, and judging from Xavier’s expression, he did too. It was no secret that things between Ava and Cali were about as cozy as a cold war. So why was Cali reaching out to her now?

I mind linked with her. *What’s going on?*

“I just have something I need to talk to Ava about,” Cali said aloud for the benefit of everyone in the room. Then, she mind linked back. *I’ll tell you about it later.*

“Um…okay,” Ava said. She gave Xavier a confused look before following Cali outside.

Which left my brother and me alone with Sabine. Normally, I’d love a chance to catch up with my mother, to tell her a short version of everything that had happened in the Fae world—a part that didn’t include being drugged by Cenwyn or being abducted and forced into gladiator fights. But with Xavier here and this whole wolf situation hanging over our heads, my mother was just looking at me with pity.

“I can tell how difficult this is for both of you,” she said. She turned her attention to Xavier. “I can sense Greyson’s wolf inside you.”

“Um, yeah,” Xavier said, ever eloquent. “It, um…it was happy to see you.”

I frowned. Xavier talking to my mother about my wolf’s feelings for her rubbed me the wrong way.

*This whole thing is fucking impossible.*

Sabine turned back to me. “I hope you won’t worry too much. You both have such strong wolves. I know that’s easier said than done, because everything must be terribly confusing right now, but I hope you understand that you’re stronger together than apart. Whatever solution MacKenzie finds…you should work through it together. And you should both try to remember that you’re brothers and, even with your struggles, you both care for one another.”

I forced a smile. “Thanks, Mom. That’s…that’s good to remember.”

And “easier said than done” was a hell of an understatement. The thought of working with Xavier had never been less palatable to me. Honestly, right now, it felt downright impossible. With Xavier’s wolf’s more hotheaded impulses pushing me to act, it took everything I had just to keep my cool.

*It’s probably best if Xavier and I separate while Big Mac looks for solutions.* It’d be harder to try to kill my brother if he wasn’t ever around.

Cali and Ava came back in, and relief loosened some of the tension in my shoulders. I didn’t have it in me for any more heart-to-heart conversations. Then, I frowned as I stared at Cali and Ava. There seemed to be a newfound connection between them, or maybe some kind of mutual understanding that made them seem united.

*What the hell did they talk about out there?*

Usually, it seemed like Ava used all her self-control to not kill Cali on the spot, but now she seemed almost relaxed around my mate.

“We’ll talk more soon,” Ava said.

Cali smiled. “Thanks, Ava.”

*Cali’s smiling at Ava? Am I tripping out right now?*

“Sure.” Ava turned to Xavier. “We should probably head out.”

“I’m coming.” Xavier stood and headed for the door.

I hung back in the living room with Cali. I had to find out what happened between her and Ava. “What was that all about?” I asked.

“What was what about?”

I huffed. “Don’t play dumb. It looks like you and Ava had a real conversation without going at each other’s throats. What did you talk about? And why are you going to talk again soon?”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that.” I bit my lip. Now was not the time for Cali to get cagey, especially if she and Ava were having private talks. *Are they planning how they’re going to manage this wolf-swap thing or something?*

“I just wanted to check in with Ava,” Cali said, avoiding my eyes. “You know, just see how she was feeling.”

I scoffed. “Come on, love. You know I trust you.”

“Of course I do.”

I put my hands on her shoulders, looking down at her. “Then I want you to know that you can even tell me if you don’t want to share something. You don’t have to avoid it. You don’t have to pretend with me.”

She blushed but nodded. “Sorry, I just had some things to talk to Ava about, and if I need to, I’ll tell you later. But it might not end up mattering at all anyway.”

I didn’t like it, but I forced myself to nod. To accept that Cali was keeping her own counsel on this. I wasn’t going to push her to tell me what was going on, even if Xavier’s wolf was snarling at me to do so.

“I’ll walk you out,” my mother said.

We headed out onto the porch together. Xavier and Ava were still standing on the lawn.

“Oh, good!” Sabine said. “You’re all still here. Xavier, don’t forget what I said, okay?”

He nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Smith. I appreciate your thoughtfulness and your advice.” He smiled. “And for talking Big Mac down so she’d help us. I’ll definitely try to remember what you said.”

My brows rose as I stared at my brother. I didn’t think I’d ever heard him speak to my mother with such deference. It was almost easy to forget we’d been seconds away from trying to tear each other apart in this very spot not twenty minutes earlier. But now, Xavier seemed perfectly in check. And I… I was managing to keep Xavier’s annoying, rabid-ass wolf caged.

*Is that true? Is he really going to try to work with me on this? Are we both going to be able to keep each other's wolves in check?*

**Episode 5461**

I rode on Greyson’s back as we headed back toward the Redwood pack house. The freezing February wind whipped around my face, but my mind wasn’t on how cold I was. All I was thinking about was how odd this felt, to ride on the back of the black wolf. Though *was* there a real difference? Or was it because I knew it was Xavier’s wolf instead of Greyson’s?

Trying to figure it all out was making my head hurt, and I tried my best to push the swirling questions aside. The fact was, there was nothing I could really do about it. We had asked Big Mac to work on the problem, and that was all we could do for the moment. Anyway, I had bigger concerns—like how we were going to explain all of this to the pack.

*Greyson?*

*Yes, love?* he asked.

*Are you going to tell the pack what’s going on?* I wondered. *About your wolf?*

He didn’t respond for a moment. He leapt lightly over a frozen stream and headed up a small rise. As he started down, he shook his dark head. *I suppose it would be the right thing to do. Secrets are almost always uncovered at some point. And trying to keep a secret like this could erode the pack’s trust in their Alpha.*

*That’s true*, I said. Secrets of any kind were hard to keep in the pack, even things much more trivial than this. And a secret like this…

*I suppose we could try to hold off telling anyone for a little while*, he went on thoughtfully. *Maybe give it another twenty-four hours or so. A couple of days, maybe? See if something changes.*

*Like what?* I asked.

*I don’t know. Maybe by some miracle Xavier and I will reclaim our wolves on our own. Then if we do, no harm, no foul, and I don’t have to explain this weird shit to anyone.*

I bit my lip. *And if you don’t?*

He didn’t answer.

*I’m just thinking, what happens when you have to shift in front of the pack?* I wondered. *They’re going to see something’s wrong pretty quickly. They might freak out.*

He sighed. *That’s a good point. I guess I should tell the pack the truth. I should trust them to handle it. And we’ve been through weird stuff before. This is just one more thing.*

*That’s true*, I said ruefully. I thought for a moment*. I wonder if people will be upset that we didn’t go straight back to the pack house after we left the Fae world.*

*I’m sure they’ll understand*, Greyson said. *We were doing what we thought was best. That’s what I do. I’m the Alpha—I always try to do what’s best for the pack.*

He was right, and I felt better hearing him say so. The pack would understand—both about the delay in us getting home, and about this weirdness with Greyson’s wolf. We just had to trust our pack members. We’d been through so much with them, and we’d always stuck together.

Greyson turned around a stand of trees and my heart began to pound in my chest when the pack house came into view. It was surrounded with snow, and I could see golden light glowing from the windows.

It wasn’t until I saw it that I fully realized how *much* I had missed it, and my eyes filled with happy tears. It was such a different feeling to the one I’d felt when I’d first seen it—when I’d first met Xavier here. I could still remember how terrified I’d been as Lola and I had slowly approached the house. I had no idea what was waiting for me. In my wildest dreams I couldn’t have known the life that would unfold when I walked in that door.

But now I called this place home—*my* home.

I thought of Xavier, and how he felt about returning to the Samara pack house. There must be some strangeness, because of Greyson’s wolf. I hoped Ava would be understanding. I tried to talk to her about it, to make sure she would be patient with Xavier while we sorted everything out. Ava had never struck me as someone with a lot of patience.

But, as usual, she had blown me off, brushing off my concerns. She’d told me that she didn’t need me to worry about Xavier. Then when we’d gone back to the guys, she acted like nothing was wrong, like our conversation had gone well—easy breezy even. I’d just done the same. We didn’t need to add more trouble onto all of this…

I had to wonder if she was still mad that I had asked Xavier to come with me to the Fae world. Yeah, maybe Ava was justified in that anger, but what choice did I have? Bringing Xavier with me was the only way I could stop the hallucinations. If the situation had been reversed, would I be upset with Ava?

Probably.

Even now, I wasn’t happy Xavier was going back to the Samara pack house with Ava. Especially after he and I had gotten so close in the Fae world. There had been a few moments where it almost felt like we were back to where we used to be.

Greyson slowed to a stop just before we emerged from the woods.

*What’s up?* I asked.

*I don’t want to show up as Xavier’s wolf in front of the pack without explaining everything first*, he said.

*That makes sense*, I agreed.

He lowered his front legs, and I slid down to the frozen ground. I was still thrown by seeing the black wolf looking at me, and it was even more unsettling seeing Greyson appear in his human form from Xavier’s wolf, and *I* knew what was going on. I couldn’t imagine how the others would react, so it was smart that we were going to introduce the idea more slowly.

I just really hoped Big Mac would come up with a solution to this whole mess soon.

As we walked across the frozen grounds toward the pack house, I felt my heart rate tick up. I was excited to see everyone, but weirdly nervous, too.

I was just thinking who I wanted to see first when the front door of the house burst open, and Lola ran out onto the porch.

“JAY!” she shrieked. “SHE’S HERE!” Then she jumped down the porch steps and started toward me, running at full speed.

I started running toward her, laughing, and groaned when we flew into each other at full speed.

“When did you get back?!” Lola demanded. “Are you okay? You were gone for so long!”

“I missed you so much!” I cried, hugging her tight.

Lola hugged me back, then pulled away to look at me. “When did you get back? Seriously? Why didn’t you call me to let me know you were back in the human world?”

“Well, it’s kind of a…not really a funny story, but…” I trailed off as Ravi, Jay, and Violet came out of the house.

“Cali!” Violet called.

“You’re back!” Jay said, waving.

Dani, Charlie, and Torin followed. The pack was streaming out, waving and calling hello. I let them distract me from answering Lola’s question directly.

Lola looked over my shoulder at Greyson, then around. “Where’s Artemis?”

Dani came down the porch steps, her brows drawn into a frown. “Where’s my sister?”

I rubbed my head. I had expected a lot of questions, and we were getting a lot of questions. I shot a look over at Greyson, wondering what I should say. He raised his eyebrows but didn’t answer. Apparently, he was going to let me take the lead on this.

I took a deep breath and looked back at the pack, who were gathered around us on the snow-covered lawn. “Everyone, listen! We’re back. What happened is a very long story, but everyone—Artemis and Tabitha included—is safe.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Greyson give a slight nod, silently approving of my handling of the situation.

“What does that mean?”

“They’re safe? Where are they?”

Greyson stepped next to me. “We’re going to fill you in on everything that happened in the Fae world,” he said, “but first I want to make you aware of something else—something you need to know.”

There had been some muttering from the gathered pack, but everyone stopped and turned to Greyson, who looked around at his pack members.

“There’s been a problem since our return from the Fae world—Xavier’s wolf and my wolf have been swapped—”

“*What?*” Jay looked shocked, and his eye widened in alarm. “*Swapped?*”

“How does *that* happen?

“*Can* that happen?”

“That’s messed up.”

Greyson put up a hand for quiet. “I know it sounds weird, but we can both shift normally. We’re looking into what happened and fixing the problem as soon as we can. It shouldn’t be much longer.”

Jay still looked worried. “Okay, but what if something happens before you fix the problem?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Jay looked at me, then back at Greyson. “I mean, Redwood or Samara? Which pack is your wolf loyal to?”

**Episode 5462**

**Xavier**

“—and that’s basically it. That witch, Big Mac, is working on it, and hopefully we’ll have it all figured out, and Greyson and I will have our wolves back,” I said, looking out over the pack.

My explanation about the wolf swap was met with dead silence from the Samara pack. I was glad to have Ava standing by my side. If there was one thing I was certain about, it was having her support—that was proving to be monumental.

The silence was the same eerie silence I’d felt when I’d first returned to the pack house. Ava had stopped me in the woods before we’d reached the house, wisely suggesting that I shift before anyone saw me.

*Who knows how people will react if they see Greyson’s wolf instead of yours?* she’d said.

She’d been right, so we’d shifted and walked to the pack house in our human forms. I hadn’t expected everyone to come running out to greet me or anything, but when we’d come in the house, everyone had been so quiet and wary—it was like they were afraid of me.

I couldn’t figure it out. I wondered if it had something to do with Greyson’s wolf—like maybe they could sense something was different.

But I’d tried to brush those thoughts away. They had just been surprised to see me. After all, no one knew I was coming back.

Now, Josephine, Fausto, Cresta, Grace, Marissa, Donovan, Perrie, Knox, and a few other Samaras looked at me silently.

Knox was the first to make a move. He’d been sitting on the arm of the couch, but he got to his feet and walked over to me, looking me over with a critical eye. I was tempted to give him a smack, just for being Knox, but I restrained myself. I actually found it easier than usual to keep myself in check. That was probably due to Greyson’s wolf interfering with my behavior.

I ground my teeth. Having Greyson’s wolf around was like having a nanny looking over my shoulder, and I couldn’t wait to get my own wolf back. I didn’t need a minder.

Ava, however, wasn’t tempered by any better angels, and she glared at Knox. “What is it?”

Knox frowned at me. “Is Xavier still Xavier?”

“What?” she snapped.

“Like”—he shrugged—“how do we know? *Really* know?”

I snarled at him so viciously Knox took a cautious step back. “That answer your question?”

He held up his hands. “I was just asking.”

I smirked. Greyson’s wolf or not, it always felt good to put Knox in his place. But—as much as I hated to admit it—the shrimp had a point. I did feel different. I felt like myself—but not.

There was some confusion, but as I looked over the grave faces of my pack members, I knew I needed to keep my doubts to myself and keep my tone positive.

“Listen, I’m Xavier, and I’m still your Alpha. This wolf-swap thing is weird, but it’s going to get sorted out.”

“None of us have anything to worry about,” Ava said firmly. “Xavier is back, and that’s that.”

I reached for her hand and laced my fingers through hers. I felt a little strange in my own skin and was glad to have Ava next to me. I was grateful for her unflagging loyalty.

Josephine looked at me for a moment, then she nodded. “Okay.”

Donovan did the same thing.

“Welcome back,” Cresta said quietly as she walked past me and headed toward the kitchen.

“Okay, so it’s a little weird,” Perrie said warily, “with the wolf thing, but it’s you, and I trust you.”

Next to her, Grace nodded. “Yeah. We’re just glad you’re back.”

“It’s good to be back,” I said, and I meant it. I felt a lot of pride hearing this from my pack. They trusted me, and I was determined to show them that I deserved to be trusted. That I was the same Alpha I had always been.

As the pack began to disperse into the house to go back to their day, Ava turned to me.

“So, are we technically the Redwood pack now?”

I opened my mouth to ask her what the hell that was supposed to mean, but then I saw the teasing look in her eye and smiled. “Absolutely not. “I’m a Samara, regardless of Greyson’s wolf rattling around inside me.”

“That’s good to hear,” Ava murmured. She glanced around, looking at the others as they filtered out of the room, heading toward the kitchen or outside for a run. She seemed to be waiting for something—maybe for us to be alone.

“Hey,” I said quietly, “thanks for having my back.”

“Oh,” she scoffed, “you don’t need to thank me for that. I’ve always got you, X.”

Then she fell quiet for a moment. She looked as though she wanted to say something, and I saw her biting the inside of her cheek.

I lifted her chin so her blue eyes met mine. “What’s wrong?’

She looked uncharacteristically hesitant. “You haven’t told me what happened in the Fae world.”

I frowned. “Of course I did. I told you we helped Artemis and tried to get her out of this crazy Fae political mess—”

“No, that’s not what I’m asking about,” she said, cutting me off.

“What are you asking about?”

She gave me a long look. “I’m asking you what happened between you and Cali.”

I was thrown by her question, though I knew I shouldn’t have been. I should have expected it. Before I’d left, I’d told Ava that I was still in love with Cali, which was still true.

But I still loved Ava too.

“I didn’t want to ask you when you called, and I didn’t want to talk to you about it when you were with the others.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I’m here, Ava. With you. Doesn’t that answer your question?”

“No. And that wasn’t my question,” she said evenly.

I paused for a moment. I didn’t know what to say. Finally, I blew out a breath. “I want you to think about what you’re asking me, Ava, and ask yourself a question too—are you *sure* you really want to know the answer?”

Her gaze didn’t falter. “I wouldn’t have asked you if I didn’t want to know.”

“Ava—”

“I’m glad you’re back, Xavier. I want…” Now it was her turn to pause. “I want to hold you, but not if…” She shook her head. “Not if you don’t want me to.”

I reached for her without thinking and pulled her to me, holding her tightly against me. “Of course I want you, Ava,” I whispered, kissing her hair.

And I did. That was true. Things in the Fae world had changed between Cali and me, but we weren’t in the Fae world anymore. I didn’t know what lay ahead for us, but I didn’t want to hit Ava with that. She had been waiting for me to return—just like I knew she would be. And now that I was here, she was standing by my side, wolf-swap weirdness and all.

She pulled back to look up at me. “I’m worried that your wolf problems might be a distraction. I want you to promise me something, Xavier.”

“What?”

“I want you to swear that you will always follow your heart.” She smiled at me. “You know how good we are together.”

I nodded and pulled her close, kissing her gently. “We’re great together.” We *were* good together. I knew we were, even if—deep inside—I was in the thick of it with where I stood with Cali. That didn’t change how I felt about Ava, and how well I knew she and I could run our pack.

She slid her arms around me. “I missed you. I hope you’re not planning on leaving me again anytime soon.”

I felt desire threading through me—I wanted to make her request come true. I wanted to stay with her. She wanted me, and I wanted her. We were matched—Alpha and Luna. I bent and pressed my lips to hers, pushing my tongue into her mouth. She made a small moaning sound as she wrapped her arms around my neck, opening herself to me. I could feel how much she’d missed me in the intensity of her kiss, and when she went on her toes, pressing her body into mine, I realized just how much I had missed her too.

“Yo! Xavier!”

Furious at being interrupted, I looked over to see Knox streaking into the room. “What?” I snapped.

“Hey, man. I just wanted to be sure your wolf sitch is totally under control,” he said, jumping onto the couch.

I glared at the shrimp, annoyed as hell by his appearance. “What the hell are you talking about? What do you want?”

But before Knox could answer, Blaine and Zipper strode into the room. Zipper eyed me, looking me up and down, and nodded to their friend.

“You and me, Xavier,” Knox said, now with the support of his friends behind him.

“What?” I asked, baffled.

Knox pointed between us. “You and I are going to throw down.”

**Episode 5463**

*Which pack is your wolf loyal to?*

I stared at Jay in shock, and felt my defenses go up right away. “What is *that* supposed to mean?” I demanded, feeling protective. “I can’t believe you’re questioning Greyson’s loyalty, Jay?”

“Hey, it’s a legit question,” Lola said quickly, jumping in to defend her mate.

Now I turned to stare at *her*. I didn’t want to get into a fight with her, but I wasn’t happy to see that both of them now seemed to be teaming up against Greyson.

“You’re both being absurd—”

“It’s not absurd,” Lola interrupted. “Greyson’s wolf is Xavier’s wolf, and he’s loyal to the Samara pack. I think Jay’s question is perfectly reasonable. We need to know that—if it came down to it—Greyson isn’t going to have some kind of inner conflict.”

“I don’t even know how you can *ask* that about your Alpha!” I cried.

“He just told us—”

“*Enough!*” Greyson put up his hands to stop the back-and-forth. “I can assure you all right now that there will be no inner conflict. I will always put this pack first. You have nothing to worry about.” He turned to Jay. “And you should know that, even though Xavier might be with the Samaras, that doesn’t mean *he* doesn’t care about the Redwoods. I can feel Xavier’s wolf, and even though things between Xavier and this pack might have changed, I know his wolf is really happy to be here, surrounded by his friends.”

My breath caught in my throat. I hadn’t been expecting to hear Greyson say that about Xavier, and I was unexpectedly moved to hear it. Jay dropped his eye, and I could see he felt it too. Greyson had handled this moment perfectly—he was not only addressing Jay and Lola’s concerns about the pack, but he was also acknowledging Xavier’s feelings. And those were complicated, especially now, after Adéluce had shattered the trust between Xavier and the rest of the pack.

I knew that Xavier had been trying hard to earn that trust back—and my trust too.

My heart gave a painful twang. If it hadn’t been for Cenwyn’s cruel magic trick, the trust between Xavier and me might be even stronger now. That I hadn’t been able to recognize an imposter Xavier had really hurt him—and I’d been hurt too. I still felt guilty that I had let the imposter’s words affect me the way they had. But it had been traumatizing to re-experience what I’d thought was Xavier treating me so cruelly…again.

I took a shaking breath as I tried to push those memories away.

Jay took a step toward Greyson. “You’re right, Greyson. You have my support. It was a question, and you answered it. Thank you. I hope there’s no bad feeling between us for me bringing it up.”

“None at all,” Greyson said, shaking his head. “I get it. We both want what’s best for the pack.”

Lola looked at me. “Yeah, me too.”

I rushed over to her and threw my arms around her. I was just glad to see her.

“I’m going to go inside,” Greyson said quietly.

I nodded, and Lola and I headed up the stairs, stopping on the porch to catch up.

“So, what happened here while we were gone?” I asked, dropping onto one of the porch chairs.

“Not much,” Lola admitted. “We had a *Lord of the Rings* marathon, which Torin really loved. I think he’s going to go to a convention. How was the Fae world? What did I miss?”

I rolled my eyes. “A lot. I don’t even know where to start—”

“Oh! Wait! Before I forget!”

“What?” I asked quickly.

Lola shook her head. “I had to do some serious explaining to your crew team when they stopped by here looking for you.”

I smacked myself in the forehead. “Oh my god! I never told them I was leaving! Of course they were looking for me. Were they mad?”

“They were mostly worried,” Lola explained. “They really care about you.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I had to tell them a little lie,” she admitted.

I eyed her suspiciously. “What kind of a lie? What did you tell them?”

Lola paused, trying to remember. “First I told them that you had to go back to Minnesota because your dad fell off the roof—”

I gasped. “What?!”

“—and ended up in the hospital,” she prattled on. “Tragically, he ended up in a coma.”

“A *coma*? Why would you say something like that?” I asked, stunned.

“It’s fine,” Lola assured me. “He came out of it, and he’s back home, resting comfortably, though your mom made it clear he can never clean out the gutters again.”

My eyes were goggling. “What else did you tell them?”

She frowned, concentrating, as she struggled to remember. “I think that was it.”

I shook my head, laughing. “Well, think hard. You better be sure, so I can keep your wild stories straight when people start asking about them.”

“Um, *excuse me*,” Lola said, looking offended. “I think you should be *thanking* me for coming up with some plausible excuses on the fly for why you disappeared off the face of the earth. Or, at least from the human world.”

“Well, I don’t know if I think those are *completely* plausible,” I noted, “but it is what it is. And thank you for letting the guys know.”

“You’re welcome,” Lola said, looking mollified.

“Anything else I should know about?”

“Oh, well…yeah. There is one other thing.”

“What?” I asked.

She looked a little uncomfortable. “Your mom called while you were gone.”

I groaned. “I hope you didn’t tell her I fell off the roof.”

She glared at me. “*Cali*. I would never lie to Mrs. Hart.”

My stomach dropped. “You told her I went to the Fae world?”

Lola shrugged helplessly. “Well, what choice did I have? She asked! And she couldn’t reach you or Artemis. She called because she was worried.”

It suddenly occurred to me that I hadn’t yet checked my phone. I pulled it from my pocket with a feeling of mounting dread, and when I looked at the lock screen—for the first time since I’d left the human world—I saw about a zillion notifications. Including a string of urgent messages from my mom and dad. At least I thought they were urgent. They were all in capital letters, which was unusual for them.

A tsunami of guilt crashed over me as I scrolled through the messages, which seemed to grow more and more desperate.

“Oh god, Lola, I have to take care of this. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

Lola nodded. “Call your mom, okay?”

“I’m going to do that right now,” I promised her.

I headed inside as I dialed her number. It was getting too cold to be on the porch anyway. I walked into the living room and curled up on a wing chair next to the fireplace.

As the phone rang, I thought about what I wanted to tell her. So much happened in the Fae world, and I really didn’t want her to worry about me or Artemis.

“Cali! Thank god you’re calling. Are you okay? Where are you? Lola told me you and Artemis went into the Fae world! Why didn’t you tell me you were going? Your father and I were so worried—”

“Mom!” I said firmly, interrupting what could have been an endless string of frantic statements. “I’m okay. I’m back. I’m at the pack house.”

“Oh, thank god,” she said with a sigh of relief. “Is Artemis there? I want to talk to her, too. Put your sister on the phone.”

I paused for a moment, a lump forming in my throat, making it hard to talk around. How was I going to explain this to my mom so she wouldn’t worry herself sick?

“Cali? Honey? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I squeaked out.

“It got so quiet I thought the call dropped. Put Artemis on, I want to tell her never to do this to me again.”

I took a deep breath, trying to steel myself for what I was about to say. “You can’t.”

“Caliana Rose Hart, what are you talking about?” my mom asked.

“She’s still in the Fae world.”

My mom was quiet for a moment. Then, “*What?* How can that be? Lola told me you went there to bring her back.”

“That’s true,” I said, realizing as I spoke that Lola and my mother had had a *very* detailed conversation. “But there were some…complications.”

“*Complications?*” my mom asked, and the change in her voice chilled me to the bone. She knew the kind of complications that happened in the Fae world, and she sounded immediately terrified.

“There’s something I have to tell you about Artemis, Mom—”

“What is it?” she asked quietly.

“She’s married.”

There was a brief moment of silence, and then a loud clatter from the other side of the line.

“Mom?” I called, my heart thudding with fear. “*Mom?!*”

**Episode 5464**

**Artemis**

I looked around the hallway of Hera’s compound, checking to see if anyone was following me, or if there was anyone nearby who could spot me. Kastian had clearly not been pleased about the note he’d received about seeing Marius and me in an *embrace*—as he’d referred to it.

I felt my face flush at the memory of the conversation with Kastian—and the memory of the *embrace* with Marius.

It wasn’t like I had planned the kiss. It had taken me by surprise. Lately I’d been feeling like I didn’t have full control over my emotions. Maybe it had something to do with everything going on—the marriage, Cali leaving, Rishika’s memory problems, and Marius just being…well, Marius. Not to mention my new role as a respected noblewoman in Fae society and all the responsibility that came with it. It had all been very overwhelming. Exciting too, but overwhelming.

As I turned these thoughts over in my head, I felt a knot of dread in my chest. I didn’t want to lose control of myself. That had happened before, and I didn’t want a repeat of my time with Letifer.

I took a deep breath, trying to ground myself. That was why I had wanted Marius and Rishika to stay with me as shadow advisors. I trusted them with my life. Even if Rishika’s memory wasn’t back, she was still Rishika. But I knew I needed to draw the line—with both of them. Sleeping with Rishika had been an impulsive decision on both our parts, but it felt as though it had ignited feelings. I knew it certainly had for me.

But the kiss with Marius, and my desire for him to stay close, had been equally as strong.

Heat flooded my cheeks, but I gave my head a shake, trying to rid myself of the thoughts. I took another look around as I cut the corner of the hallway and stopped in front of Marius’s door.

I knocked and bounced on my toes, hoping he would answer quickly. I didn’t like standing out here in the hallway where anyone could see me.

Thankfully, it didn’t take long before the door swung open. Marius stood in front of me—shirtless, drying his hair with a towel.

I stared at his bare chest for a moment—speechless—before I remembered myself and squeezed past him into his room. “We need to talk.”

Marius eyed me warily, then closed the door. “Well, hello to you too, Artemis. Am I to assume this is my first meeting as your shadow advisor? Listen, I’ll be honest, the name itself is compelling, but I’m not entirely sure what it actually means—”

“Right now it means stop talking for a second and listen,’ I snapped.

Marius looked annoyed with my short answer, but he did stop talking. He dropped into an elegant wingback chair and continued to dry his hair as he looked up at me. “Yes?”

I took a deep breath. “Someone saw us kiss.”

Marius nodded, looking almost approving, but didn’t respond.

“And?” I stared at him. “Do you understand what that means?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh. Am I allowed to respond now?”

“Oh my gods,” I muttered.

“Because you initially told me to stop talking, so I’m not sure if the question is actually rhetorical.”

“You know what—yes, yes it is. I want you to be my shadow advisor, Marius, because I trust you. Yes. I said it.”

He smirked at this, but I powered through.

“But whatever *this* is”—I gestured between us—“has to stop. I’m married to Kastian now and—”

“And you can’t be going around kissing bounty hunters. You don’t need to explain this to me, Ari. It was an impulsive kiss, but that’s it. I’ll be your advisor if you want me to, and that’s that. I understand the position you find yourself in now. Plus, there’s Rishika to consider.”

I stared at him, shocked. Then I narrowed my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Ari,” he said, tipping his head, “you can’t think I’m that much of a fool, can you? I can see how you look at that woman. I’d have to be naïve to think that I don’t play second lobo flute to her.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but then I closed it again. I wasn’t sure what I was going to say. What Marius had said felt both true and also not true at the same time. He didn’t play second lobo flute to anyone.

“Stop,” I said, shaking my head. “Just stop assuming you know everything I’m thinking. All I came here to say is that we can’t… We have to be more careful if that were to…happen again.”

Marius stood up. He dropped his towel onto the chair and crossed in front of me. He grabbed his shirt from the top of a carved wooden dresser and gave me a curious look. “Are you saying that you *want* it to happen again?”

I was about two seconds from clawing his eyes out of his head. With a huff, I swiveled around to tell him that, but before I could get the words out, I caught his gaze. It seemed to snag me, as though it were magnetized or something. I felt a frissure of electricity pass between us. He held my gaze as he slowly pulled his shirt over his head.

Then he crossed to me, his movements slow and deliberate. The smirk was gone from his face as he reached toward me, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear. The slight brush of his fingertips against my skin left a path of fire in their wake. That was hard to ignore, and I swallowed nervously.

“Just say the word, Ari,” he said, his voice low and husky, “and I’m yours. I think you know that by now.”

I looked up at him. I could see the fire burning in his eyes, and I saw the truth of his words too.

“I think you’ve known it for a while, haven’t you?”

I couldn’t bring myself to disagree. I knew Marius cared about me—I cared about him, too. That was the problem. That had always been the problem.

His hand lingered by my cheek. I had a choice—I could lean my head ever so slightly toward it, letting him cradle my cheek in his palm. That would start something that I would find very difficult to stop. Or—

I pushed his hand gently away from my face. “You understand, don’t you? We have to be careful.”

He looked at me a moment longer, then nodded. “I always am.” Without taking his eyes off me, he tipped his chin toward the door. “You should go. Your husband is waiting for you.”

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As I headed back through the compound, my head spun. Nothing felt settled, and it felt as though the harder I worked, the more *un*settled everything became. I felt more conflicted than ever.

When I reached Hera’s parlor, I found Kastian with her, having tea. *Tea*, of all things. I stopped in the doorway, staring in amazement. I wouldn’t have believed it, but there it was—the fine, gently clinking china, the tiny cakes, the crustless sandwiches.

Hera looked over at me. “Artemis, don’t just stand there in the doorway. Please be civilized and join us.”

I shuddered, but there didn’t seem to be any way to avoid this, so I walked into the parlor and took a seat next to Kastian on a low, tufted couch.

Hera poured a cup of tea and handed it to a Fae servant. The servant handed it to me, and Hera looked at me.

“Your tour is being arranged as we speak,” she said, taking a small sip of tea.

“Our *tour*?” I asked, confused.

“Your wedding tour,” she said, as though I was being deliberately dense. “It is a diplomatic mission, obviously. Your first stop will be the mountain town of Embersy.”

“Really? Embersy?” I asked, taking a small sandwich. I wasn’t hungry, but I couldn’t remember the last time I had eaten.

“Yes, really. Deep in the heart of the Dark Fae territory,” Kastian supplied.

“It is also a crucial place for trade for the Light Fae,” Hera said, “and it is a large city. It will be a good place for you to start as you introduce yourselves as the couple who will unite the kingdoms.”

I had just taken a bite of my sandwich. It had tasted good, but at Hera’s words, the food seemed to turn to sawdust in my mouth. The pressure of what was expected of me settled heavily on my shoulders, and I put the sandwich and tea down on the small table in front of me. I could barely swallow what was in my mouth.

Hera didn’t seem to notice. “You two should prepare yourselves to leave.” She stood and looked at us with a bright smile. “The Fae world is ready to meet you, and we will not keep them waiting.”

**Episode 5465**

**Greyson**

I stepped out into the steamy bathroom and reached for a towel, wrapping it around my waist. I ran a hand through my wet hair, then scrubbed it down my face with a low groan. It felt good to step out of my own shower, in my own bathroom, in my own house. Sure, my apartment was mine too, but there was something about being back at the pack house—it felt great, though the homecoming hadn’t been completely perfect. I was glad to see the pack, but everything had been tempered with the uncertainty around this whole wolf-swap thing with Xavier.

Walking into the bedroom, I tossed my towel on the bed and grabbed a pair of jeans from the dresser. I gave my head a shake as I pulled them on—I didn’t want to dwell on any of this shit, and it wasn’t like me to wallow. I had gone to the Fae world with one objective—to protect Cali. And in that regard, I’d been completely successful. She was back at the Redwood pack house, safe and sound. Whatever weird shit was happening with Xavier and me paled in comparison to Cali’s safety and security.

I pulled on a shirt, and as I headed for the door, I caught sight of myself in the mirror over my dresser. I stopped for a moment, staring into my face. It was a weird feeling, to look at my reflection and know that if I were to shift right now, it would be Xavier’s black wolf I would see staring back at me. I felt a strange shiver up my spine, and I really hoped Big Mac was working hard on something to fix this. I had faith in her—she always came up with something.

Turning my back on the mirror, I headed out my door and downstairs.

As I walked into the entryway by the front door, I caught sight of a knot of pack members sitting together in the living room. Though I was headed for the kitchen, I swung into the living room to check up.

“Anything wrong?” I asked, looking around. “Anything happen around here while I was away that I should be aware of?” It occurred to me that without Rishika around, I had lost my most reliable lieutenant. That loss was a blow, and I was going to need to be mindful of that until she got back.

“Lucian invited us all over for brunch,” Ravi told me with a shrug, “but we declined on your behalf.”

“Why?” I wondered.

“We were watching all the *Lord of the Rings* movies,” he explained. “It took a while. And Torin had made pancakes, so we really didn’t need brunch.”

I took that in. “Okay. So it sounds like things were okay. If Lucian’s brunch thing was your biggest problem while I was gone, things must have gone okay.”

“Yeah, they were fine,” Ravi said. “Hey, can I ask you a personal question, Greyson?”

“Sure,” I said, surprised. “What’s up?”

“What about Ava?”

“What?” I asked in surprise. “What about her?” Why the hell was he asking me about Xavier’s Luna?

Ravi hesitated for a minute. “Um…” He glanced over at Jay.

“Isn’t Xavier’s wolf causing problems?” Jay asked.

I frowned at him, struggling to connect the dots of this conversation. “What are you two getting at? I already told you—I’ve got the wolf thing under control.”

Ravi looked deeply uncomfortable but pushed on. “Okay, but Xavier and Ava are mates, right?”

“Right,” I agreed.

“And the wolves of mates are drawn toward each other.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. Everyone knew that. Every mated wolf knew that. “What’s your point?”

“So, we were just wondering if you were having…you know…*feelings* for Ava?” Ravi asked, looking deeply awkward.

“*What?*”

“Because I would understand what that was like,” Ravi said quickly. “I had some weird feelings for her after I had that blood transfusion. These things can be really powerful. And she’s super hot, so it’s not like it would be the weirdest thing in the world if—”

“Ravi, that’s enough,” I said, cutting him off. “Listen up, man. *Xavier* has feelings for Ava, but I do not. End of story. I need to make that really clear.”

Ravi nodded, but neither he nor Jay looked convinced.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know what else to tell you guys, but I promise you have nothing to worry about.”

“Okay,” Ravi said, shrugging. He shot a look at Jay.

I shook my head. There was nothing more to say, so I turned and headed to the kitchen. I needed to eat something, and I was done with this conversation.

But as I pulled open the fridge and pulled out stuff to make a sandwich, a weird memory floated into my mind.

I thought of how odd I’d felt when Ava had shown up at Swift’s place. How she’d come to stand beside me, instead of Xavier. She’d done it automatically. Almost instinctively. I thought of how aware I’d been of her as she’d moved around, and how Xavier’s wolf had reacted—inside of me—in her presence. The wolf had been hyper-aware of her. The feelings hadn’t been overwhelming. They hadn’t even been powerful, like the ones Ravi had mentioned, but they had been there, nonetheless.

Tapping my fingers on the counter, I turned that over in my head for a moment, considering it. I was going to have to keep my eye on that. And—more than ever—I hoped Big Mac could resolve this before it became an even bigger problem for me.

I looked at the food I’d pulled out—bread and cheese and turkey—everything I needed for a sandwich. I knew I should eat, but my stomach roiled at the thought of it. My instinct was to leave—to go for a run in the woods. I needed a chance to think this all through. But I knew that wasn’t an option. Not this time. I would only shift into Xavier’s wolf, which wouldn’t help me think about anything except the mess I was in.

I really wished I could ignore Ravi’s point, but now that he’d brought it up, it was starting to take on a life of its own.

Sure, I had things under control *right now*, but what about tomorrow? My heart thudded in my chest. And what about Xavier?

Both of our wolves were powerful, and our wolves’ attraction to our mates was also powerful. There could come a point where neither me nor my brother could control that attraction.

My jaw ached as I ground my teeth. The thought beat like a drum inside my head, but now I couldn’t push the thought away. I hated the idea that I might find myself drawn to Ava at some point. That I might feel something I couldn’t control that would pull me toward her. And I hated the idea that the reverse could be true too—that Xavier would be drawn to Cali.

It was troubling enough that I could feel how Xavier’s wolf was attracted to Cali. I suppose it wasn’t exactly surprising—I had eyes, after all, so I could see how he looked at her—but it was unsettling to *feel* what my brother felt.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my heart beating at a normal rate. One way or another, it seemed like the best idea was to end this whole thing, sooner rather than later.

But there was a nagging doubt at the back of my mind—Big Mac had seemed less than certain when we’d spoken to her. That might have just been Big Mac being Big Mac, but what if the witch couldn’t come up with a solution? This was a strange, complicated problem. I’d never even heard of this happening before.

If she didn’t know what to do, I couldn’t just sit around. I needed to fix this.

My sandwich plans forgotten for the moment, I leaned against the kitchen counter and ran through the other options in my head. Swift was off fishing somewhere and couldn’t be reached. So that meant the only other option was Carlson Greene, and that wasn’t a great choice. I knew Xavier wasn’t crazy about the paratherapist.

I weighed out the ideas. When Lilac had been separated from Plum, it had been Swift who had managed to reunite them in the end with Xavier tagging along. And Swift had also been the one who’d reunited Xavier with his wolf when they’d been separated. So it probably made the most sense to go to Swift—he had a proven track record.

But who knew where he was? And who knew when he was getting back? It wasn’t like Swift had left his itinerary with anyone before he left.

So if I wanted Swift for this job, that meant I was going to need to go find him. And if I wanted to find the guy, I was going to need some help. Luckily, I knew *exactly* who I wanted to call.

**Episode 5466**

I stared down at my phone. “Mom? Are you there?” Why wasn’t she responding?

There was another scuffling sound on the other end of the line, and then some muffled conversation that I didn’t quite catch.

“Cali, are you telling me that Artemis and Rishika got *married*?” my mom asked, coming back on the line. There was an excitement in her voice that made me wince. I hated to tamp it down, but what choice did I have?

“No, Mom, Artemis didn’t marry Rishika.”

“What do you mean?” my mom asked, her voice dropping. “You just said she got married. Who could she have married if not Rishika?”

I cleared my throat and tried my hardest to keep my voice from shaking when I answered. “Artemis married a Dark Fae.”

My mom was quiet for another moment. “*What?!*” she finally exploded. “Are you *kidding* me? Who? *Why?* Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t anyone tell me? *What* is going on?”

“Mom, listen—” I started, but there was no way that was going to happen. “The important thing is that Artemis is okay—”

“The *hell* she is,” my mom seethed. “There are many things my daughter is right now, and *okay* is not one of them. Not if she’s in the Fae world, married to a Dark Fae—”

“It was supposed to be me,” I told her, trying to explain.

This didn’t help. “*What?!*”

“I was supposed to be the one who got married to this Dark Fae noble, but then Artemis stepped in for me at the last minute and—”

“Are you *kidding* me with this, Cali? I cannot believe it! What have you two been up to?! Why didn’t anyone tell me anything?!”

I took a shaking breath. “I swear to you, Mom, Artemis made the choice to get married. She knew what she was doing when she did it. And—honestly—as hard as it is for us to be here without her, we should be proud of her. She did it to bring peace between the Dark Fae and the Light Fae kingdoms.”

My mom made a choking sound, almost a sob, but not quite. “Yes, that’s what we thought my marriage to Kadmos would do, Cali. We thought we could bring peace too. We thought we would be the answer. And look what happened. Our marriage brought nothing but more war and more heartache. And now this.”

My heart broke as I listened to the pain in my mother’s voice. I sighed. “I know how hard this is to hear, Mom, but I really do think Artemis is going to be okay.”

“Oh, Cali—”

“I wouldn’t have left her there in the Fae world if I thought otherwise,” I reminded her.

This seemed to convince her, and I heard her take a breath. “Yes, of course you wouldn’t. Thank you, Cali.” She was quiet for a moment, as though she was thinking. “Yes, that’s what I should do.”

I frowned. “What should you do?”

“I should go to the Fae world.”

My mouth dropped open. “*Mom!*”

“I need to see for myself that my daughter is safe!”

“Mom, please, you can’t!” I exclaimed. My mind reeled as I imagined what my mom’s sudden presence in the Fae world could do to the place. How Hera might react to her daughter suddenly showing up, and the other Fae nobles. They had been hard enough on me, and I was only my mother’s daughter.

There was another muffled conversation on the other end of the line, and I heard my mom say, “Not now, Tom—”

But there was a scuffling sound, and I heard my dad’s voice. “Cali, can you explain to me why I received a get-well card and a very generous fruit basket from your crew team?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes and silently cursed Lola. “I don’t know, Dad,” I lied. “It must be some kind of mistake. But you shouldn’t waste the fruit—enjoy it. And could you also talk to Mom? She’s talking about going to the Fae world. It’s really not necessary. Artemis is totally fine. Can you make sure Mom doesn’t do anything rash?”

It was a lie, but what else could I do?

“Well, I’ll try, pumpkin, but you know how your mom is about her daughters.”

I smiled. “I do know.”

“Okay, we’ll talk to you later, sweetheart.”

“Bye, Dad. Tell Mom bye for me.”

“I will.”

I ended the call and looked down at the dark screen of my phone. I wondered if I should plan a trip to visit my parents. It had been too long since I’d seen them, and I missed them both.

I wondered if Greyson would come if I asked him. Then I looked around—there was only one way to find out.

After looking in the kitchen and the living room, I knocked quietly on the half-open door of the study and found him sitting behind the desk.

He was looking through some mail, but he smiled when he saw me. “Hey, I was just coming to look for you.”

“Yeah? Why?” I wondered.

He dropped the mail on the desk and pushed a hand through his hair. “I’ve decided that I don’t want to wait for Big Mac.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to find Swift, and I think Kendall can help.”

I frowned at him. “Why do you think Kendall can help?” I knew she had been helpful when we had been fighting the Dark Fae Mafia—though she might have been the reason they were after us in the first place—but what did she have to do with Swift?

“Swift is out of town, and the faster we can find him, the better. Kendall lives among humans, but she’s a great tracker. If anyone can help us find someone, it’s going to be her,” Greyson explained.

I nodded slowly, but I wasn’t completely sold on the idea. Kendall clearly had skills, but I was still skeptical. But it probably wouldn’t hurt to have her help. Greyson was masking it, but I knew that he had been feeling off-kilter because of the wolf swap, and I needed to do what I tried to tell Ava to do—just keep things calm. And if asking Kendall for help tracking down Swift was what Greyson wanted to do, then that was fine with me.

“You know, until we get Kendall on board, Lola’s a great tracker, too,” I reminded him.

“Yeah?” Greyson asked, looking interested.

I nodded. “She does a lot of digital tracking. She might be able to track Swift’s phone. That’s what she was able to do with Macaulay’s phone when we were going after Chessa.”

Greyson nodded. “That might work.”

I thought about Lola’s process and what she had needed from me for Macaulay. “She’s going to need Swift’s number to start with,” I said.

“Xavier has that,” Greyson said.

That would mean I would have to call Xavier. The idea of calling him left me feeling both thrilled and anxious. I knew I shouldn’t let little things like that affect me—it was stupid. After all, I was only asking him for a damn phone number.

“I’ll get it and ask Lola to get to work,” I said, trying to look neutral.

“Great, thanks,” Greyson said. “The sooner we can track this guy down, the better. I’ll work on getting ahold of Kendall.”

I nodded and headed out of the study. As I walked upstairs, I chewed my lip. I knew it was crazy, but I was worried that my thoughts about Xavier were going to manifest themselves in some physical way, so they would reveal themselves in a way Greyson would pick up on. Like if I saw him, I would be drawn to him by instinct. That seemed completely possible, and the thought of that really scared me.

Everything between Xavier and me felt so complicated, and between Greyson and me where Xavier was concerned even more so. And I just couldn’t afford to make an already complicated situation worse.

When I got upstairs, I headed for my room and dropped into my bed with a sigh. I didn’t love making phone calls, and I was just psyching myself up to do it when my computer pinged, indicating that I had a message.

I pulled my laptop toward me and saw that it was Steinar messaging.

*Got the message you left earlier!*

*Oh!* I sat up, feeling hope flooding back into me. This was good. Maybe he had found a solution and we wouldn’t even have to find Swift.

But when I read his full response, my heart sank. He had *not* found a solution. And not only that, but there was only *one* record of a similar situation where two wolves swapped.

And it hadn’t gone well.

As I read the rest of Steinar’s message, something made me feel like my blood had been suddenly replaced with ice water.

*Caliana, you must know this as well, as it seems pertinent to this situation, and to the people involved: If a werewolf dies while the essence of another werewolf is inside of it, there is no possibility of retrieving it. There is no getting it back. Please understand—it is lost forever.*

**Episode 5467**

**Xavier**

I stared at Knox, then at Zipper and Blaine, who looked back at me stupidly. I nearly laughed. “You want to throw down?” I asked. Knox and his little band of merry wolves had to be joking. They couldn’t actually want to take on their Alpha.

Even Ava rolled her eyes. “Knox, why don’t you and your little friends go play somewhere else. Xavier and I were trying to have a conversation.”

I grinned at her, thinking how much I would like to take our *conversation* upstairs to our bedroom.

But Knox shook his head. “We’re not kidding around. Come on, it’s not like I want a Lupo Finale or something. But I think we have a responsibility here.”

“What are you talking about?” Ava snapped, looking annoyed.

“Have you had to fight yet, Xavier?” he asked, turning to me.

“What?”

“Have you had to fight with Greyson’s wolf?”

“It just happened—”

“Yeah, so it’s a completely unknown element, right? I bet it feels weird, too. I’d think it would. And wouldn’t it be better to know that you’re capable of fighting with someone else’s wolf while fighting with me, than if you were to fight an actual enemy.”

I pushed my hand through my hair with a sigh. I had a feeling that even if I had no wolf at all I could still kick Knox’s ass—even with Blaine and Zipper at his side—but I kept that to myself. I would much rather continue my *conversation* with Ava upstairs, but I also knew that Knox was like an irritating rash—I could try to ignore him, but it wouldn’t make him go away.

“This is ridiculous,” Ava started, shaking her head. “I can’t believe you fools are trying to challenge your Alpha like this—”

“It’s fine,” I said, putting a hand on her lower back. “I’ll do it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why? You don’t have to indulge this bullshit, Xavier. You have nothing to prove to them.”

“I know that, but Knox might have a point.”

“I do?” Knox asked, sounding as surprised as anyone by this possibility.

“I’ve shifted, but I haven’t tried to fight. And if I’m going to have a problem with Greyson’s wolf, it’s probably better for me and the pack to know now—before I’m facing an actual opponent who might be any sort of challenge,” I added, shooting Knox a sharp look. “That way we can come up with a plan.”

Ava sighed and shook her head. “Fine. Whatever. It’s your ass.”

I pulled her close. “I’ll be right back,” I said, my lips brushing her ear as I spoke.

She shivered, but when she pulled back to look at me, she was grinning. “Oh, I’m coming to watch.”

“What?” I asked.

“Are you kidding me? I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

She wasn’t the only one who felt that way, and ten minutes later, what was supposed to have just been a little test between Knox and me had become a full-scale Samara pack event.

We were outside on the front lawn, and every pack member had gathered around to watch. People had brought drinks, and sat on the frozen ground, holding steaming cups of hot chocolate, like they were waiting for a Christmas parade.

I shook my head as I looked around at the crowd. “What the hell.”

“Hey,” Ava said, stepping beside me. “You ready for this?”

“This’ll be over in a second,” I promised her. “And I’ll try to take it easy on your little cousin.”

She scoffed at this. “X, kick his ass. He asked for this, and he deserves it.” She leaned close, and her blue eyes smoldered at me. “Besides, I’ve missed seeing you do that.”

The proximity was part of it, but it was mostly the look in her eyes—I felt heat flare up inside of me. My whole body felt hot and twitchy for her, but I turned around to face Knox.

Knox’s eyes shifted around. He looked like he might be regretting some of the decisions that had led him to this point, but it was too late. With the sharp crack of bones, he shifted to his wolf form.

I hesitated for just a moment—I suddenly remembered how it had felt to run with Greyson’s wolf. It had been so strange, like wearing the wrong suit of clothes on my body—only much, much worse.

But Knox had been right, in spite of himself. This would be a good test for me, so I gritted my teeth and shifted to my wolf form.

Only it wasn’t *my* wolf form, and I could feel it right away.

Something was wrong, but I hardly had time to think about it before Knox charged toward me. My instinct was to use his momentum against him, and I dropped my shoulder, then lifted up just as he passed over me, sending him flying up, then crashing hard to the ground.

I jumped onto him, pinning him, but as Knox fought back, one thing quickly became clear—I didn’t know if I could trust myself. *I* was fighting—*my* brain was thinking—but Greyson’s wolf was driving me, providing the instinct. If it was just the two of us, one-on-one, with our respective wolves, we were a pretty even match. But this was different. I just didn’t know Greyson’s wolf the way I knew my own, and I couldn’t stop it from pushing me too far.

Instinct was hard to stop, and though I wasn’t a huge fan of the shrimp, I didn’t want to actually hurt him.

Knox managed to unseat me with a strong kick with his back legs. He took a swipe at me with his outstretched claws, but I dodged it, then doubled back and jumped him from behind. He yelped as I crushed him beneath me, kicking him hard in the spine. It was a harder blow than I’d intended—that had been all Greyson’s wolf, and I felt my heart rate kick up.

Sensing my sudden hesitation, Knox squirmed away, trying to shake off the pain, but I lunged again. I bit into his shoulder and tasted blood, then pinned him down to the frozen earth.

“*Enough!*”

I looked up. Josephine was standing in the circle, giving us both a long, hard look.

Breathing hard, I backed off, and shifted back to my human form.

Knox did the same. His shoulder was bleeding, and he looked annoyed but otherwise okay.

The pack clapped and cheered, and I was pretty sure I saw some money changing hands. I shook my head. I wasn’t in the mood to have a conversation about gambling culture in the pack house.

Ava clapped slowly as she walked toward me. “Nice job,” she said with a grin. “Glad I came out for the show. That was worth it. Good job, X. I missed seeing you around here.”

She was smiling, and I tried to return it, but I couldn’t manage it. I had won, but I didn’t feel like it had been truly earned. I felt…weird. Like I was a young werewolf again, just trying to get my bearings after shifting for the first time. Like I was learning what my teeth and claws did, and how far I could jump. It felt like learning to walk again, and I didn’t like it. It wasn’t true, but the disorientation was unnerving.

“All right, all right, you passed the test, Alpha, congratulations,” Knox said, walking over with a towel pressed against his shoulder.

He looked almost happy, I had to admit I was surprised that he wasn’t pissed about losing. Maybe the guy was finally starting to grow up at last. “Well, good fight, kid,” I said. “Keep an eye on that shoulder.”

He lifted the towel. “It’s already healed.”

“You should come inside and clean up,” Ava said, looking me over. “You’re a mess.”

I probably was, but there was something in her eyes that reignited that fire inside of me, even with Greyson’s wolf still pulling some of my strings.

I nodded and followed her into the house and up the stairs to our room.

Before I could even close the door, Ava shoved me inside. She kissed me as she snaked her arms around me and pressed herself against my naked body.

A growl rumbled in the back of my throat as I kissed her back. My hand went into her hair, grabbing handfuls of it, then all over her body, over every hill and valley of her naked form. I had missed this. I hadn’t even realized how much I had missed this, but I truly had missed *her*.

Greyson’s wolf might not be into this, but I was. It wasn’t just my wolf that lusted for Ava—my human heart and mind loved her too. She was my mate—she was always there for me, she believed in me, and she was my rock. And right now, when everything in my world felt completely uncertain, this was exactly what I needed. *She* was exactly what I needed. I needed Ava.

I grabbed her ass in both hands and lifted her up, then walked across the room and tossed her onto the bed.

I’d show her exactly how much I’d missed her.

**Episode 5468**

**Greyson**

I leaned over Cali’s desk, reading the message from Steinar that had sent Cali into a complete tailspin.

*If a werewolf dies while the essence of another werewolf is inside of it, there is no possibility of retrieving it. There is no getting it back. Please understand—it is lost forever.*

“Well?” Cali said, gesturing toward the screen. “Didn’t I tell you how bad it is?”

I pushed a hand through my hair. “I mean, it’s not *that* bad—”

“Not that bad?!” Cali repeated, “How can you say that?”

I shrugged. “I guess there’s sort of an ominous tone to it. Especially that part about the dying—”

“And losing the wolf to the spirit world,” Cali said, jamming a finger onto the screen. “What about that?”

“Yeah, that’s not ideal. Okay, but that’s just one of several possible scenarios,” I pointed out. “Steinar says it right there—this situation is unusual, and he doesn’t really know what’s going to happen. There’s only one record of it. There could be more instances of it, just not ones that got written down because they got resolved. I know this thing is weird, but I have no intention of dying anytime soon, and I doubt Xavier does either, so I think we’re probably good.”

Cali shook her head. “Yeah, but that’s the thing, we don’t know what’s going to happen—”

“No, we don’t,” I said, cutting her off before she could spiral even more. “And it doesn’t help anything to worry about it.”

She sat back in her desk chair with a sigh. “Okay, so what should we be doing?”

“We should be trying to track down Swift. He seems like our best bet in a situation like this.”

Cali nodded, but still didn’t seem certain. I wasn’t sure she had fully bought my excuse for why I wanted to get ahold of Kendall. I couldn’t blame her for being suspicious—I *had* lied to her, and I hated myself for it. But what choice did I have? I’d been warned by both Kendall and Mikah—in no uncertain terms—not to reveal that Kendall was an MIB agent. It was dangerous for too many people to know. It could put Kendall and any associates she worked with in serious danger.

And if Cali found out the truth, she could be in danger too.

I just had to think of this as a small, white lie—something far less serious than exposing Kendall.

My stomach felt tight with tension. The lie might be necessary, but no matter what I told myself, I still hated it. I wanted to be able to share anything and everything with Cali. She was the woman I loved—my mate.

I just hoped Kendall understood and appreciated what her need for secrecy was costing me.

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Half an hour later, I was in my car, on my way to Bend. I had tried calling Kendall, but—not completely surprisingly—the last number I had for her was no longer in service.

I shook my head as I drove into town. Chasing Kendall felt like chasing a ghost.

I pulled my car in front of the bar I knew she hung out in and headed inside. I looked around the dim place, but I didn’t see her anywhere.

The bartender ambled over to me, eyeing me warily. “What can I get for you?”

“Just some information. You remember that girl with the purple eyes?”

“Sure I do,” he said gruffly. “Eyes like that, who wouldn’t remember her?”

“Great. What can you tell me about her? When’s the last time you saw her?”

“I’m not going to tell you anything,” he said.

“Why not?” I demanded.

“You come in here, asking about her—how do I know who you are? You could be a stalker.”

I rolled my eyes. *Fuck*. This was going to be harder than I thought. I didn’t even bother explaining to the guy that I wasn’t a stalker. I had a feeling it wouldn’t matter—clearly this guy was not going to budge, and with Xavier’s wolf running around inside of me, I didn’t want to play the tough guy card for fear things might escalate beyond my control.

I leaned against the bar, thinking hard. I was just going to have to figure out another way of locating her. Maybe Mikah knew something, or maybe he could find her through his contacts with the MIB.

It was worth a shot, anyway.

I had just pulled out my phone to call him when the front door opened. The hairs on the back of my neck stood, and when I looked up, I saw Kendall walking in.

“Holy shit.”

I had spoken low, so I didn’t think she heard me, but something made her stop in her tracks. She looked up at me, her startling purple eyes fixed on mine, a look of surprise spreading across her face.

“Oi, Kendall!” The bartender had appeared behind me, clutching the baseball bat he apparently kept below the counter. He nodded at me. “This guy bothering you?”

Kendall kept her eyes on me. “I don’t know yet.” A smile spread across her lips, and something sparked in her eyes. “Grey, are you here to bother me?”

The look in her eyes was teasing and playful, and for a moment I was completely distracted. I had a flash of a dream I’d had where she’d looked at me just like this and asked me if I was dreaming about her. The same teasing note to her voice, the same suggestive sparkle in her eyes.

Then I snapped myself out of the reverie. “I’m here because I need your help, Kendall.”

She looked at me for a moment more. “I’m fine, Jorge,” she said, looking past me at the bartender with that bat. “I can handle this guy.”

“You sure?” Jorge asked.

She nodded, then tipped her head toward one of the tiny, rickety booths that ringed the dark bar. She laughed as she dropped into a chair. “I probably just saved old Jorge’s life. A baseball bat isn’t going to do much to stop an Alpha, is it?”

This surprised me, but I chuckled too as I settled into my side of the booth. “I wasn’t sure how I was going to find you, so I’m glad you decided to show up.”

She gave me a long, assessing look. “I’m pretty surprised to find you here, Greyson. I usually have a sixth sense about you, at least when it comes to you showing up in my orbit.” She settled back and looked me over. “You look good—a little ragged, maybe.”  
 “Gee, thanks,” I said, half laughing.

“Where have you been? I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

“How could you?” I asked reasonably. “You disconnected your number. So maybe you didn’t want me to contact you.”

“Maybe,” she said evasively. Then she smiled. “But here we are, all the same.”

“Yeah.” I leaned back and looked over at the bar. Jorge was wiping glasses with a dirty rag. It didn’t bode well, but maybe this conversation would be easier if I had something to drink. I was just about to suggest getting a little conversational lubrication when Kendall wrinkled her nose.

“*Grey*.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“You smell…*different.*”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Had she just insulted me? It hadn’t sounded like a compliment. “Is that a bad thing?” I wondered.

She frowned. “I’m not sure. It’s just…different. What’s up with that?”

What *was* up with that? I shifted a little in my seat, wondering if my scent had actually changed. If I trusted anyone’s nose, it was Kendall’s. And if it had, did that have anything to do with the wolf-swap situation?

Frustrated, I pushed my hand through my hair. I figured I was going to have to tell her about that at some point, but not yet—and certainly not now. Kendall and I had a lot of history together, but I still wasn’t convinced I could trust her. And why should I? Who knew what the MIB would think—or do—about me and Xavier swapping wolves?

“So,” Kendall said, resting her elbows on the table and leaning toward me, “you’re here, I’m here, we’re here together. What can I do to help you today?”

I leaned toward her. “I need to find a guy named Swift.”

Kendall stared. “Okay, well, best of luck. What do I care? What does that have to do with me?”

“I want you to help me find him.”

She frowned. “And why would I do that?”

I gave her a dark smile. “Because you owe me. I’ve been keeping your secret, and it’s time for me to call in my favor.”

Kendall held my gaze. Behind those purple eyes, I saw the wheels turning. She was thinking fast, but there was something else. She looked almost…amused.

She tipped her head, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “Are you blackmailing me, Grey?”

**Episode 5469**

“Stop looking over my shoulder,” Lola snapped at me.

I leaned back. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“I’ve said it twelve times already—”

“I can’t help it,” I admitted. “I just really need you to find this Swift guy.”

“Well, I’m not going to do it any faster with you breathing down my neck,” Lola grumbled.

I stepped away from her desk chair, trying to control myself. This worked for a moment, but I slowly drifted closer again, watching as Lola zipped around on her laptop, going from screen to screen so fast it made my head spin.

I ignored the low rumble of Lola’s annoyed mutterings as I watched her work. I remembered when I’d watched Lola using her hacking skills before—when we were researching Kendall. I had been uncomfortable with it then because it had seemed unethical, but I didn’t care about that now. Ethical or not, when it came to getting my mates’ respective wolves back to them, I was more than willing to look the other way.

I just wished Lola would—

“*Hurry up*,” I urged.

“Shit,” Lola hissed, glaring at her screen. She shook her head.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Nothing—I just hit a wall. I’m going to have to try something else,” she muttered.

I nodded. I had no idea what she was doing, but I was really glad to have a friend who understood this kind of stuff. I’d brought my computer in with me, and I glanced over at Steinar’s message, which was still up on my screen. Greyson might have played down the risks involved, but I could read as well as anyone else.

“You know, I’m reading this message, and Steinar made it very clear that if something bad happens to either Greyson or Xavier while their wolves are swapped, one of their wolves could die.”

Lola glowered at me. “I know that. You already told me. You don’t need to keep reminding me what’s at stake here.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. I clasped my hands together, trying to calm down. “I don’t want you to be mad at me.”

“I’m not,” Lola said. “I just need you to give me a little space.”

I sat on her bed. “My mom’s already mad at me, because of what happened with Artemis, and that’s probably enough for right now.”

“She’s just worried,” Lola said, her eyes on her screen. “She’ll calm down.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, though I wasn’t so sure.

“From what you’ve told me, what happened to Artemis in the Fae world really wasn’t your fault.”

“It wasn’t,” I said vehemently.

Lola clicked over to a new page. “She’s probably more upset that you both went there in the first place. But at least you had both of your mates there to help you.”

“Yeah, that was good,” I agreed.

Lola kept at it, tapping away on her keyboard as strings of numbers and maps flashed on and off the screen.

She entered a series of numbers and pressed enter. “Okay, this could take a few minutes.” She turned to look at me. “Did you notice the wolf-swap thing right away?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I just feel like I would know right away if Jay’s wolf was replaced by someone else’s. Did you know right when it happened?”

I thought for a moment. “I could feel something was weird, but it was complicated, because I am still mates with both of them, so that part didn’t change, you know?”

“What did you feel? What felt weird?”

I considered her question. “It’s hard to describe.”

“Did Xavier do something, or say something that tipped you off?”

I swallowed hard, thinking how Xavier and I had almost hooked up.

Some of what I was thinking must have shown in my face because Lola’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“What?”

“Did something happen—maybe with Xavier, from that guilty look on your face—that you’re not telling me?” she asked cunningly.

My face flushed, and I looked quickly at my computer, reading Steinar’s response like it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

“Cali, *did* something happen?” Lola pressed.

Growing more uncomfortable, I squirmed on the bed. I really hated to lie, and I hated to lie to Lola in particular. But how could I possibly explain what happened when I still didn’t really understand it myself? And ever since Xavier’s conflict with Adéluce, Lola hadn’t exactly been Xavier’s biggest fan, so she probably wouldn’t be thrilled to hear that we’d rekindled anything in the Fae world.

“*Cali*,” Lola said, waiting.

I shrugged. “Xavier helped me. That was the reason he came.”

“Right. How were the hallucinations? Did they get better?” she asked.

I sighed with relief, grateful for the change in direction. “Yeah, a lot better. So far, the hallucinations haven’t even been a problem. I think bringing Xavier along with us really helped.”

Lola looked like she was just getting started, but before she could grill me any further, her laptop made a dinging sound.

She turned to look at the screen and let out a whoop. “Yes! Nailed it!”

“What?” I asked, jumping to my feet and looking over her shoulder. I saw a map, and Lola pointed.

“Swift’s in Portland.”

“Lola, this is great!” I said excitedly. I felt hope blooming in my chest.

Then Lola leaned forward, looking closer at the screen. “Hang on—Swift’s *phone* is in Portland. At a phone repair shop.”

I dropped back onto the bed with a groan. “Well, that’s a whole bunch of nothing, isn’t it?”

“We should make sure before we turn into Debbie Downer,” Lola chided. She grabbed her phone from the desk and dialed the number for the repair shop.

“Hello? *Hello*,” she went on, affecting a fake British accent. “How are *you* today?”

“What are you doing?” I mouthed at her.

She glared at me. “I have a question about a phone that was dropped off at your fine establishment.”

I couldn’t handle it. I was about to start laughing, so I had to run out of the room, clamping my hand over my mouth as I went.

I stood in the hallway, listening to Lola’s half of the conversation, and trying not to pee my pants as I giggled silently at her absurdly bad accent.

“And *thank you*, young man,” she finished. “*Cheerio!* I’m done! You can come back in,” she called in her regular voice.

“What the hell was *that*, Lola?” I asked, coming back into the room.

She rolled her eyes. “Some undercover detective you’d be, Cali. Do you want to hear about the phone or not?”

“Yes,” I said promptly. “What’s going on?”

“It *is* Swift’s phone, and he dropped it off a few days ago to have the screen repaired.”

“So that means that we can’t use it to track him, right?” I asked. Lola shook her head. “So we’ve got nothing. He could be literally anywhere.”

“Anywhere there’s water. With fish in it. Which is pretty a lot of Oregon.”

“Not helping,” I said.

She shrugged. “I’m sorry I can’t track him instead of his phone.”

“I know. You tried. Thanks.” I looked out her window as a car pulled into the driveway. It was Greyson’s, and I hurried downstairs to meet him.

He walked in just as I reached the front door, and Kendall came in behind him.

Lola had followed me, and she stopped on the stairs when she saw Kendall. “What is *she* doing here?”

“Hey, love,” Greyson said, leaning in to kiss me. He looked up at Lola. “Kendall’s agreed to help us.”

Looking past Greyson’s shoulder, I spied a smirk on Kendall’s face, and I couldn’t help but wonder what that was about.

I tried my best to smile at her. “Thank you for helping out,” I said, though privately I still wasn’t exactly sure why we needed her at all. Between the Redwood and the Samara packs, we had plenty of good trackers.

*How are you feeling?* I asked Greyson through the mind link.

*Well, I’m still alive, if that’s what you’re worried about*, he answered ruefully.

I rolled my eyes. *I meant has anything changed in regard to the wolf swap?*

*No, I don’t think so. I just feel weird, and I keep finding myself thinking about Ava, which I don’t really care for. The sooner we can get this fixed, the better.*

I scowled. I didn’t love hearing about the Ava thing. I got that Greyson wasn’t into it, but I didn’t like this insight into Xavier either. I got that Xavier’s wolf had ties to Ava, I just preferred not to think about it, if I could help it. Especially not after what happened in the Fae world.

“Lola, can you gather the pack?” Greyson asked. “I want to talk to everyone.”

Lola nodded, and she had everyone gathered in the living room in just a few minutes.

“What’s going on, boss?” Ravi asked, eyeing Kendall warily.

“I wanted to let you all know that I want to leave here as soon as possible. I’ll notify Xavier, so he’ll be expecting us.” He glanced at Kendall. “All of us.”

“All right!” Ravi said, pumping a fist in the air.

“Sounds good,” Jay agreed, nodding.

I looked around and was glad to see that the entire pack looked supportive. They all wanted their Alpha back—wolf and all.

I grinned up at Greyson. “So, what are we waiting for? Let’s go find Swift!”

**Episode 5470**

**Xavier**

“I want you,” Ava panted, lying back on the bed as I crawled over her. Her voice was husky, and her eyes were half-lidded as she looked up at me. “I *need* you, Xavier.”

I dropped my head and kissed her, hard, plunging my tongue into her mouth, taking and possessing. “I need *you*,” I growled, biting her bottom lip.

She gasped as I slid two fingers inside of her—she was already slick and hot with want.

“Oh god,” she moaned as I circled my fingers inside of her. “Oh, *please*.”

I grinned down at her. “I like to hear you beg, but trust me, you don’t have to.” My eyes roved over her, taking in her naked form, my eyes lingering on the curves of her perfect breasts. I bent and kissed one, then the other, earning another moan for each.

Ava was bucking against my hand now. “Xavier,” she cried, “Please, I’ve missed you so much. I want you inside of me—it’s all I’ve been dreaming about since you left. My fingers—they’re not enough.”

I didn’t need to be asked again. I pulled my hand away and pushed myself in, filling her with one stroke. Her gasp was surprise and pleasure, all mingled together.

“You’re so wet,” I said. “Have you been wet this whole time waiting for me?”

“God, *yes*,” she moaned, and wrapped her legs around me, driving me even deeper.

She rocked against me, moving like she was trying to climb me, and I knew how she felt. I pushed over and over, holding myself back as I felt my orgasm building inside of me. I wanted this to last. My head had been going wild since I’d returned from the Fae world, but now, in the middle of this most primal act, it was quiet and clear. All I could think about was her.

I was pushing hard, but Ava was right there with me, meeting me thrust for thrust. She was clasping my back, driving her fingernails into my skin. Her breath was coming in short, pained gasps, and I knew she was lost in me. It was erotic as hell to see her like this—to see her need for me—and I pushed harder, making her cry out.

Her eyes opened, and when she looked up at me, I was suddenly struck by how blue her eyes were. They looked like the summer sky, and I thought about how much I loved her, and how much I had missed her when I’d been away. I had come back from the Fae world unnerved by what had happened between me and Cali—and I knew I was going to have to sort that out.

But not now. Right now, every cell in my body was focused only on Ava. I knew my wolf had never been shy about his attraction to Ava, but now I had Greyson’s wolf within me. And while I could tell Greyson’s wolf didn’t feel that way for Ava, it didn’t matter—not to me. Because *I* was wild for her. *I* loved her, and that was more than enough to overcome any resistance I felt from Greyson’s wolf.

That only showed me how much I loved Ava, and how deeply I cared for her. It ran through me—threaded into my whole being.

Ava was shaking now, and I laced my fingers through hers, pushing her hands over her head.

“Not yet,” I commanded.

“*Xavier*,” she gasped.

“Not yet,” I growled. “I’ll tell you when to come.”

“Oh *god*,” she cried, her whole body trembling.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

“*Xavier!*”

I drove into her so hard the headboard slammed against the wall and rattled the windows. “*Come.*”

Ava cried out my name, unraveling beneath me.

I was gone. I felt myself exploding, and Ava’s name tumbled over my lips, a barely coherent word. My orgasm pushed me deeper into her, and she arched her back off the bed, driving me deeper still. Stars from unexplored universes exploded all around me in this visceral, primal, feral climax…

And then my phone chimed.

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Fifteen minutes after I got Greyson’s text, Ava and I were showered, dressed, and downstairs in front of the house, waiting for Greyson and Cali to show up.

We were still basking in the afterglow of sex, and Ava leaned into me, resting her head against my shoulder.

“Whatever this is about, I hope you’re not planning on taking another trip without me,” she murmured.

I wasn’t planning on taking any trips at all, but before I had a chance to answer, Greyson’s car pulled into the driveway.

He stepped out, and a moment later Cali pushed her door open. When she stood up, her eyes flicked down to my hand, which was holding Ava’s. I saw a look of sadness flicker across her expression, and my heart ached for a moment.

I hated that feeling—and Greyson’s wolf wasn’t making things any easier. But I couldn’t just drop Ava’s hand.

Greyson walked toward me, and Kendall followed behind him.

As she stepped toward the house, I realized I couldn’t take my eyes off her—and it wasn’t just because of her strange, purple eyes. There was something going on—something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Something was happening, and it was awkward and distracting. Like I needed something *else* to distract me.

I shook my head as Jay and Lola piled out of the back seat. I nodded at Jay, and he nodded back. It was good to see him.

“Why doesn’t everyone come inside,” I said, tipping my chin toward the house.

We walked inside. Jay and Lola dropped onto the couch, but Ava and I stayed standing near the doorway.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s going on,” I said, looking at Greyson.

He looked around at the group. “I’ve brought Kendall here because she’s an outstanding tracker—as we all saw during our pursuit of Adéluce and the Dark Fae mafia. And she’s agreed to help us find Swift.”

I stared at my brother for a moment, surprised. “Greyson, could I talk to you for a second?” I pulled my hand from Ava’s and gestured Greyson into the hallway.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“So Kendall just agreed to help?” I asked in surprise.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I cashed in a favor.”

I shook my head. “But—why did you even ask her? We don’t need Kendall. We’re werewolves—we’re excellent trackers by nature.”

Greyson frowned at me. “Why are you opposed to getting some extra help? We both want our wolves back, don’t we?”

“Come on, man,” I said, frustrated, “if we really needed help, I could have called in people I trust—like Mikah and Gabe. Who are also excellent trackers, by the way.”

Greyson looked annoyed. “I don’t know why I’m getting pushback on this. You know we already have Big Mac working on this, so I know you don’t mind some of this work getting outsourced. And it’s not like we’ve never used a contractor before…”

I was barely listening as Greyson made his case, and I realized I’d tuned him out because I’d been watching Kendall, tracking her every move through the doorway. She was talking to Cali at the moment, and I could swear that she kept stealing glances over at me too. And when she did, I felt something…strange. A kind of pull deep within me that I couldn’t even begin to explain.

“Xavier?” Greyson asked.

When I turned to him, he was looking at me expectantly. He had clearly just said something to me that required an answer.

“Listen, you might trust your wolf to Kendall, but I still have my reservations about her. I always get the feeling that girl is hiding something.”

He sighed. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. She’s proven herself to be trustworthy to us over and over—”

“I know that,” I snapped. “It’s just a feeling I have. And she’s practically a stranger. Are we really going to trust her when both our wolves are at stake?”

Greyson pushed a hand through his hair. “Why are you being such a dick about this, Xavier? She’s only here to help us find Swift, not perform the magic herself.”

“Fine,” I grunted. “Whatever.”

But inside, I was *not* fine, and it was *not* whatever.

As Greyson walked back into the living room, Ava stepped toward me, her voice interrupting my thoughts. “What were you and Greyson talking about?”

“What?” I asked, startled.

“You look pissed,” she noted. She tipped her head. “Not that it’s a bad look on you, but still.”

“Do you think Kendall’s here because she pities me or something? Because if that’s why, then I hate this whole thing even more,” I said.

“I don’t think anyone is here because they pity you,” Ava said. “Everyone’s just here to help.”

“So you think this is all fine?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I think you’re kind of blowing this out of proportion. And Greyson told you he was bringing her, so it shouldn’t come as a total surprise.’

I grunted, but I didn’t answer. I was distracted again, watching Kendall as she leaned over to look at one of the paintings on the wall.

Ava frowned. “What?” She followed my eyeline, looking over at Kendall. “If you didn’t want Greyson to bring her, why didn’t you say something when he texted you?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered.

“I just don’t get why it suddenly matters to you now who Greyson brought with him, unless…” She stopped suddenly. Her eyes widened for just a moment, then narrowed. “Unless—Xavier, are you…*jealous*?”

**Episode 5471**

**Ava**

I looked at Xavier as I waited for an answer to my question, watching closely for any reaction that might run counter to his words, but he just laughed.

“Are you joking, Ava?” he asked.

I didn’t answer right away. I didn’t know how far I wanted to push this. I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it. With everything else we had going on, I really didn’t want to upset Xavier, but—at the same time—I did want to know what was going on with his sudden obsession with the purple-eyed Kendall.

It wasn’t like Kendall wasn’t hot. I had eyes, I knew how every guy—and some of the girls—in the pack watched her whenever she was at the pack house. And she was smart and strong. But this wasn’t the first time Xavier had encountered her, and he’d always been indifferent to her before. So what was up with his sudden interest?

He must have read some of the confusion in my face, because his smile slid away.

“Oh shit, you’re not joking.”

I shook my head. “No. I see the way you’re looking at her. What’s going on? Just tell me, X.”

He ran a hand through his head with a frustrated sigh. “Yeah, this is kind of…weird. I guess I do feel something strange about her. I wish I could explain it.”

“Maybe you should just try,” I suggested. “You know, with words.”

He was quiet for a moment, thinking hard. “The only thing I can think of is that it has something to do with Greyson’s wolf.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised. That was genuinely not what I’d been expecting.

He shrugged. “The only thing I can tell you for sure is that—whatever’s going on—it’s not me. I never felt a draw to her before. This is *not* how I feel about the woman.”

I took this in, thinking it over. I believed Xavier—I had never noticed his interest in Kendall before, and it was definitely something I would have noticed. But why would *Greyson’s* wolf be interested—if that was the right word for it—in Kendall? Greyson was mated to Cali. Xavier was already mated to me *and* to Cali, so he had enough going on. But what was happening with Greyson?

My mind spun. Could there be something going on between Greyson and Kendall that I hadn’t known about? That might explain why Kendall was here—and why Greyson wanted her here.

And if this was so, was there a way I could use this information to my advantage?

I shot a glance over at Kendall, who was standing near the fire. She looked benign, but I knew better, and I decided I was going to keep an eye on the situation.

Then I looked over at Cali, across the room, wondering if she was aware of this connection between Kendall and Greyson’s wolf. That was another thing I could look into.

Cali had suggested that she and I try to work together—to try to keep our mutual distrust on the back burner while Xavier and Greyson recovered their wolves. So maybe now would be a good time to check in on her.

Cali looked a little surprised but smiled cautiously as I walked over to her.

“I’m glad everyone’s working together,” she said, looking around approvingly. “The sooner we settle this whole wolf-swap switch-up, the better it’s going to be for everyone.”

“Yeah, about that…”

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I think you were right,” I said, though the words nearly stuck in my throat.

Cali looked suspicious. “Right about what? It’s not every day you agree with something I said.”

I forced myself to return her smile. “Maybe not, but I think it makes sense to keep our…” I paused, trying to think of the right word. “…*differences* at bay for now. Until everything with Xavier and Greyson’s wolves is worked out.”

Cali looked relieved. “Yeah, I think so. I know this”—she gestured between us—“might be awkward, but I know we both want what’s best for Xavier and Greyson.” She stuck out her hand.

Hearing her pair the two brothers together—like they were her matched set—made me want to smack that smile right off her face. The reality was that I didn’t give a shit what happened to Greyson. Only in so far as the status of Greyson’s well-being at the moment might affect Xavier. And my only concern was Xavier and getting his wolf back where it belonged.

But Cali was looking at me, and I had a strategy, so I gave her a quick handshake, letting go as quickly as possible.

“This doesn’t mean we’re going to be friends,” I warned her.

She laughed, probably thinking I was making a joke. Fine, let her think that. The more casual I could make this conversation, the better chance I had at getting some information.

“So,” I started easily, “what do you know about Kendall and Greyson?”

Cali’s eyes went wide. “What?” she asked, looking baffled. “What do you mean? What about them?”

I gave a quick shrug. “Oh, I don’t know. I guess I just don’t really get why Greyson felt like Kendall needed to be a part of all this. And,” I added strategically, “I know Xavier isn’t thrilled at having her around.”

Cali hadn’t been expecting this question, and blood rushed into her face. “Oh, well…” She cleared her throat. “There are a couple of reasons for it. You know, Kendall’s helped us before, with the Dark Fae mafia and that trouble we had with Chessa. She’s a really good tracker, and I know—”

“And she’s also a magnet for trouble,” I added.

“Trouble,” Cali repeated, looking more uncomfortable.

“Yeah, trouble. The Dark Fae mafia came after me right around the time that Kendall first showed up, remember?” I reminded her.

Cali looked shocked. “Wait—are you seriously suggesting that was *Kendall’s* fault?”

I didn’t want to push Cali too far too quickly, so I held up my hands in surrender. “I’m not suggesting anything.”

“So what *are* you saying?”

“I’m just pointing out the facts,” I said reasonably. “And that I think it’s strange that Greyson *insisted* that she should be a part of this. I wanted to talk to you about it because I thought maybe you would have some insights into what was going on. Like maybe Greyson had some other reasons for recruiting her that I didn’t know about.”

Cali stared at me. “Reasons such as?”

“I can’t even begin to imagine,” I said, trying not to smile. I shrugged. “Anyway, just something to think about, right? Well, talk to you later.”

“Yeah, later,” Cali said vaguely.

This time my smile was sincere as I turned and headed back to Xavier, feeling gratified that I had effectively planted a seed of doubt in Cali’s mind. I walked by Greyson, who was standing with Kendall, speaking quietly, and I was interested to see how close they were to each other.

“Hey,” I said when I stepped back over to Xavier.

“Hey,” he said, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

“I have a question.” I nodded over to Greyson and Kendall. “If Greyson’s wolf is inside of you, is it possible Greyson himself feels something more than a professional interest in Kendall? Like, if it’s not his wolf pulling him toward her, it’s something else, right?”

Xavier looked over at his brother for a moment, then shook his head. “Listen, Ava, don’t go around stirring up any trouble.”

But there was something in his eyes that answered my question: Yes, it *was* possible.

I knew it, and I wasn’t surprised. How could I be? I’d felt the connection myself. Earlier, when Xavier and I had been in bed together. I knew Xavier’s wolf was hot for me, but even with Greyson’s wolf in him, Xavier loved me. I saw it in his eyes. I felt it in the way he touched me and made love to me. I knew it.

My thoughts were interrupted when Kendall stepped to the center of the room and looked around.

“After looking into it, I’ve come to believe that Swift is in the High Desert area,” she said.

I frowned, skeptical. “The *High Desert*? I thought he was fishing. How is he fishing in the High Desert?”

Kendall turned her purple eyes to me. “Just because he left a note saying he was going fishing doesn’t mean he’s gone fishing. That’s pretty basic.”

I didn’t like her attitude, and a flash of anger surged up in my chest. Narrowing my eyes, I took a step toward her and lowered my voice. “And just because you’re here to help, doesn’t mean you’re *just* here to help.”

Her own eyes narrowed. “What are you saying?”

Kendall was tough shit. I knew that—we all knew that. But so was I, and I wasn’t going to let her intimidate me.

“I’m just wondering why you’re really here,” I said. “Are you here because Greyson asked you for help, or are you helping because you like Greyson?”

**Episode 5472**

I looked over at Ava and Kendall, who looked like they were having a pretty intense conversation. I didn’t know what it was about, but I could see the tension passing between them like electricity.

“I really hope having Ava along isn’t going to be a problem,” I muttered, leaning toward Lola.

She smirked. “Now why would you expect any other outcome, Cali? This is Ava we’re talking about here, right?”

“I know,” I said with a sigh, “but we just had a conversation, and it felt like we agreed to settle our differences.”

“Really?” Lola asked, looking shocked.

“Well, okay, maybe more like we agreed to push them aside for the moment,” I admitted, “while we try to get this wolf-swap thing straightened out.”

Lola scoffed as she looked at Ava across the room. “And you believed her?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I think it’s probably in Ava’s best interest to get this all worked out with the least amount of drama. And we both know Ava’s all about self-interest.”

Lola chuckled. “Well, I have to give you credit for your insight on that.” She looked over at where Ava and Kendall still stood. “There is one thing I’m still unclear about.”

“What?” I wondered.

“Why is Kendall here, exactly?” she asked.

I suppressed a frustrated sigh. “Yeah, that question seems to be coming up kind of a lot. Even Ava was asking about it.”

“Yeah, well, that makes sense. It is kind of weird, right? Like…*why*?”

“It seemed to make sense to Greyson,” I said. Then I quickly added, “And it makes sense to me, too. I mean, Kendall did help us a lot with that situation with Chessa and with the Dark Fae mafia. She’s a really good tracker.”

“Uh-huh,” Lola said slowly. She shifted her gaze to Kendall, who was walking over to Greyson. “Yeah,” she said, though her voice was laced with barely concealed skepticism, “I’m sure those are *all* the reasons.”

Greyson spoke to Kendall for a moment, then turned and walked over to Jay.

I frowned after him, then turned my frown on Kendall. With Lola’s skepticism and Ava’s insinuations and maybe even my own doubts, I was really starting to wonder if there was more to Kendall being here than Greyson had admitted to. I wasn’t ready to buy into Ava’s very obvious implications, but…now Lola was commenting on it, too? Had she noticed something as well?

“Hey,” Lola said quietly, leaning into me again, “how do you think she knows?”

“Knows what?” I asked.

Lola tipped her chin toward Kendall. “How do you think she’s so sure she knows where Swift is?”

I didn’t know the answer to this, and apparently Lola wasn’t speaking as quietly as she thought she was, because Kendall looked over at us and cleared her throat.

“Just so everyone knows,” she announced loudly, “I don’t have an exact location or anything. I only know that Swift is in the vicinity of the High Desert.”

Lola shrugged with her “in for a penny, in for a pound” look. “Okay, I get that you don’t have his GPS coordinates or anything, but how do you even know that he’s in the desert?”

Kendall shrugged one shoulder. “I used data from CCTV, traffic cam footage to follow his plates, and credit card and ATM withdrawals,” she rattled off calmly. “It really wasn’t hard.”

I squirmed a little, almost wishing I wasn’t hearing any of this. None of it sounded particularly ethical—or strictly legal.

Lola looked annoyed. “I could have done that too,” she huffed to me. “Hacking is *my* thing, you know.”

“That kind of hacking is technically a crime, so maybe it’s best you didn’t do it,” I pointed out.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s only a crime if you get caught, Cali.”

Jay walked over to us, and he put his arm around Lola’s waist, pulling her close. “Hey, you can hack me anytime, babe.”

Lola rolled her eyes again, but she was smiling. “I already have,” she said, bumping him with her hip. “I know all your secrets, remember?”

Jay leaned in and kissed her. “Of course I do. You’re so sexy when you play spy, Lola.”

“Oh my god,” I groaned, half laughing. “Please go get a room.” I was teasing, but I was actually really glad to see Jay and Lola looking so happy.

“Okay, listen, I don’t want us to get too wrapped up in the details,” Greyson said, looking around at everyone. “The point is that we’re getting what we need—and quickly.” He looked over at Xavier and nodded. “The sooner we get our wolves back, the sooner we can all go back to normal.”

Lola snorted a laugh. “Yeah, *normal.* Whatever *that* is.”

I laughed too, trying to use that to push away the negative thoughts that bubbled up inside my brain. “Greyson is right,” I said with more confidence than I felt. “As long as we know what we’re doing and get what we need, it doesn’t really matter who is helping.”

Greyson nodded and clapped his hands together. “Okay—let’s all get ready to head out.”

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Twenty minutes later, I was sitting on Greyson’s back, holding onto the dark fur of Xavier’s wolf as we wound our way through the woods. Kendall was leading the way, and we were heading for the High Desert.

*Greyson?* I mind linked.

*Yes, love?* he answered immediately. *Are you okay?*

*Yeah, I’m okay*, I said, wrapping my arms around myself. I was the only one wearing a parka, but I was glad I had it. The winter wind was cold as it swirled around us. *I was just thinking about where we’re going. I’ve never been to the High Desert. What’s it like?*

*Well, it’s a desert*, he started.

I snorted a laugh. *Can you say a little more about it?*

I could hear him laughing. *I don’t know. It’s a desert, a lot like any desert. But it’s at a higher altitude than most—which explains the name.*

*Right. That makes sense*. I thought for a moment, then asked the question that had been nagging at me. *Is it safe?*

He didn’t answer right away, which made my heart rate kick up for a moment. *I don’t expect that we’ll encounter any trouble*, he said, *but it’s hard to say for certain. Regardless, I think it would be best if you stuck close to me.*

*Of course*, I said quickly. I had no problem with that idea. That had been my plan anyway. And Greyson was right—it was hard to say for certain. *Even if you’re not expecting trouble, it seems like the Redwood pack is good at finding trouble when and where you’d least expect it.*

Greyson chuckled. *That’s true.*

*Anyway, it feels good to be with you*, I said, holding onto him tighter.

*It feels good to be with you, too, love*, he said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the flash of Ava’s wolf. She had been running beside Greyson the whole time, and it was annoying the hell out of me. I was sure it had to do with Xavier’s wolf, but it was still very irritating, and I really wished she wouldn’t stay so close to us. We were out in the middle of the woods, and there was nothing but room to breathe, but I somehow felt totally claustrophobic. Having Ava so close felt smothering, and I wished she would give us a little space.

I tried to ignore her and looked up ahead toward where Kendall was running out in front. She was still leading the way, and as I watched her long, powerful strides, I felt a twinge of uncertainty. She was a beautiful wolf, and she moved over the rough terrain as though it was a wide-open field—so smoothly it almost looked like ice-skating. Seeing her power and grace, it was hard not to feel a little jealous. And that feeling only reignited the doubt about Kendall I’d felt when I’d spoken to Lola.

I gritted my teeth. I was *not* going to go there. There was no point. I’d meant what I’d said. As long as we got what we needed—and Greyson and Xavier were able to get their wolves back—it didn’t matter who was helping.

But I was curious about something.

*Hey, Greyson, how did Kendall get this information about Swift?* I asked.

*I’m not sure*, he admitted*. I suppose she must have some connections to the police, who have access to that kind of data. Maybe she called in a favor or two.*

I took that in. I remembered Ava mentioning Kendall and the Dark Fae mafia. *The human police?*

*Yeah, maybe*, Greyson said.

My thoughts were on the Dark Fae mafia. *Do you think it’s possible Kendall called in some favors from connections on the* other *side of the law?*

Greyson began to slow down, and I could feel his body growing suddenly tense. *What the hell are you talking about?* he asked, sounding frustrated and defensive. *Do you really not trust me?*

**Episode 5473**

**Greyson**

I could feel Cali’s reaction before she even spoke. Her body tensed, and she tightened her hold on my neck, and I immediately regretted snapping at her.

*I hope you’re not serious, Greyson*, she said, and I could hear the quaver in her voice. *Of course I trust you. How could you ever question that?*

*I’m sorry, love*, I said quickly. *I know you do. I don’t know why I…* I shook my head, fury with myself coursing through me. What had made me do that? Why had I just snapped at the woman I loved more than anything else in the world? I had gotten so defensive, so quickly. What had made me react that way? Why would I do that to Cali?

Something told me the answer to all those questions was the interloper within me—Xavier’s wolf. I ground my teeth, feeling frustrated all over again. I’d thought I had that pretty much under control, but clearly, I’d been fooling myself.

The worst of it was the knowledge that it was that kind of harshness that had caused the rift between Cali and Xavier. Because Adéluce or no Adéluce—Xavier had been cruel to Cali. His reasoning might have been sound, and I knew he thought he was doing what was best, but he had *hurt* Cali. He had nearly broken her heart.

And now, here I was, responding to her in that sharp, harsh way, and risking doing the same thing.

I dropped my head and increased my speed. I *really* hoped Swift was going to be able to fix this fucking wolf swap before I lost even more control over Xavier’s wolf. Struggling to contain this force within me was the last thing I needed.

*I’m really sorry, love. I shouldn’t have snapped. I really didn’t mean it. I don’t want to make excuses, but having Xavier’s wolf in me is throwing me off*, I told her. I didn’t want to shift the blame, but it was really the only explanation I had.

*I understand that*, Cali said quietly.

*And listen, I get why you’re worried about how Kendall got her information on Swift, but try not to let it concern you. Kendall has her ways, and the most important thing is that we shouldn’t let that—or anything else—come between us.*

*I understand that too*,she said, just as quietly. *But please don’t do that again.*

I knew I had hurt her. I could hear it in the quietness of her voice. She sounded wounded, and it hurt my heart to hear. I had apologized, and it was all I could do, but I knew it wasn’t enough. An apology was nice, but I knew it didn’t heal the sting.

*Love, listen to me, when this is all over—and everything is back to the way it should be—we’re going to go on our trip*, I promised her.

*Yeah?* she asked.

*Yeah, the one I was talking about. It doesn’t have to be London—we can go anywhere you want. Paris, Rome—Clearwater, Florida.*

That made her laugh, and I could feel her soften a little.

*London sounds pretty exciting*, she admitted. *I’ve never been. Which is funny, when you think about it.*

*What’s funny?* I wondered.

*Just that I’ve been to the Fae world, but not to Europe*, she said. *That’s funny.* *I pretty much haven’t been anywhere outside of Minnesota and Oregon.*

*Is there somewhere you’ve always dreamed about going?* I asked her.

She laughed. *Everywhere.*

*Everywhere?*

*Yeah, everywhere. I’ve always dreamed about traveling.* Cali’s voice took on a dreamy note. *When I was a kid, I used to read about all the places I wanted to go when I grew up. I wanted to eat at a café in Paris, tour the architecture of Buenos Aires, and see the nightlife of Shanghai and Tokyo. I wanted to see the pyramids of Egypt and ride a camel through Cairo.* She laughed to herself. *I didn’t totally understand that Cairo was a major city.*

*There might be some camel options*, I said with a chuckle.

*Honestly, I’d be happy going anywhere, Greyson*, she said thoughtfully. *Even Clearwater, as long as I was with you.*

I felt my heart squeeze tightly as she spoke. I knew just how she felt. It didn’t matter where we were or what we were doing—if I was with Cali, I would be happy. I would be happy spending the rest of my life going nowhere farther than the porch of the pack house as long as I could be with her.

*Well, I’m going to plan a trip when we’re through this*, I assured her. *You think about it, okay? Wherever you want to go, we’ll make it happen. Whether we end up in Iceland or Dollywood*.

Cali laughed, and I could feel her hold on me relax.

The path sloped upward, and I felt my muscles starting to burn. We’d been running a long time, and I looked up ahead at Kendall, who was out front, leading the way. I felt my mood darken as I looked at her long, sure stride. This trip with Cali might never have happened if Kendall didn’t come through and lead us to Swift. I trusted her tactics—as much as you could trust anyone who used such questionable tactics—but I still had my doubts.

And the stakes here felt really high. If Xavier’s wolf was already causing me to be short with Cali and act so much more impulsively now, who knew what would happen down the line, the more entrenched his wolf became inside of me?

It wasn’t like Xavier was a threat—not exactly. I knew Xavier’s wolf wouldn’t hurt Cali. If anything, having Xavier’s wolf inside of me had made me see how much my brother was still in love with her. But our wolves were so different, and his wolf fought against me instead of fitting within me, the way a wolf should.

After another ten miles of steep terrain, Kendall skidded to a sudden stop. All the other wolves did the same. Jay skidded into Lola, for which he earned an eye roll.

Looking around I could see the questioning looks on the other wolves’ faces, and I looked over at Kendall. *Please tell me we’re not lost.*

She scoffed. Hardly. *But we do need to shift back to our human forms*, she said.

I crouched down and Cali slid off my back to the ground. She landed lightly, and as she stepped away, I immediately missed the feel of her arms around my neck. Then, with the echoing cracking of bones, I shifted to my human form. Taking the cue, the others did the same.

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked, looking around. “Why’d we stop? Why are we shifting?”

“Why don’t you keep your goddamn voice down,” Kendall suggested tartly. “We’re close.”

“Close to what?”

Cali cleared her throat. “Maybe everyone should put on some clothes,” she suggested delicately.

I looked over at her, then past her to Ava, who was standing nude in the patchy snow. Her body was long and lithe, and her dark hair a stark contrast to the creamy paleness of her skin.

Hang on—

I pulled myself up short. Why the *fuck* was I checking out *Ava*?

And when I looked over at her—heart pounding—I realized she was doing the same thing to me. I could see her eyes tracking up and down my body.

And I hadn’t been imagining it when it felt like Ava had stuck unusually close to me during the trip over.

I quickly turned away, furious with myself.

It was because of Xavier’s wolf, I assured myself. That *had* to be the reason. Of course it was. What else could it be?

Yet another extremely good reason for purging this foreign wolf from my body.

Everyone had carried packs with them and quickly got dressed, pulling on jeans and sweatshirts. I was deeply relieved when Ava pulled on her clothes, and I stopped feeling that damned magnetic pull toward her.

Kendall looked around. “Okay, follow me,” she said, waving us all forward.

She started on a downward-sloping wooded path. As steep as the climb up had been to this hilltop, the path was just as steeply sloped down. Jay slipped again, once again catching Lola in the back of the heels.

“Come on, man!” Lola complained.

“Sorry,” Jay said, getting to his feet again and dusting the dirt and snow off his jeans.

Up ahead, I saw the path open up. Then I frowned. Did I hear *music*?

As we reached the bottom of the path, I looked around, stunned. This was *not* what I had expected at all. The woods were gone, and a vast expanse of desert opened up before us. Music, the shouts of people riding on bikes, laughter, and the smell of wood smoke filled my senses. Looking around, I saw campers, vans, tents, and strange metallic sculptures that seemed to rise up from the desert earth.

“What the hell?” Lola muttered.

“Um…” Cali started, looking around in puzzlement. “Did Kendall just lead us to *Burning Man*?”

**Episode 5474**

**Xavier**

I snorted a laugh at Cali’s question. “It sure as hell *looks* like Burning Man.”

Looking around, I saw crowds of people wandering around the open sand plains, in various stages of dress—and undress. It made me wonder if it was actually as necessary for us to get dressed as Cali had made it seem. But these people weren’t werewolves, so I figured any regular humans walking around basically naked in the middle of February were doing it at their own risk.

There were a lot of bonfires around—the flames dotted the landscape—so maybe that was why people thought they could get away with it. The smell of weed was *really* strong, and there were other, more noxious smoke smells mingling in the air.

“Unbelievable,” I muttered, shaking my head.

“Why does this shit only seem to happen to us?” Ava murmured, gazing around at the bizarre scene in front of us.

I gave Kendall an accusing glare. “You’re sure Swift is here?”

Right away I felt Greyson’s wolf rearing inside me. He didn’t like the way I was speaking to Kendall in that accusing tone, but I tried to ignore it.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Kendall said.

Anger and irritation rose up in my chest, burning at the base of my throat, and I didn’t even try to push the feelings away. I knew Swift was into all this new-age, hippy-dippy bullshit, so I shouldn’t have been surprised he was at an event like this, but it still pissed me off. It just seemed obnoxious that we had come all this way to find the guy, and now that we were here, we were still going to have to search to find him.

“Fine,” I snapped, “let’s go find him then.”

As I started toward the festival, Ava fell into step beside me. Greyson, Cali, Lola, Jay, and Kendall followed behind me.

As we got closer, the music grew louder, but over it, we suddenly heard a voice:

“Hey, my dudes, gals, and pals, how’s everyone today?”

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I spun around to see a short guy standing behind me in jeans and a puffer jacket. Over his jacket he was wearing a green vest that declared he was “*GETTING DESERT HIGH*.”

I looked down at the guy’s hand on my shoulder, then at the guy, and my gaze must have been icy enough that Puffer Jacket slowly moved his hand away.

He cleared his throat, looking slightly nervous. “Do you have your tickets, gang?”

“*Excuse* me?” I asked.

“Tickets?” the guy said, raising his eyebrows. “Or wristbands?”

“We don’t have any,” Cali said. “We didn’t know—”

“How do we get them?” Greyson asked.

The guy sucked in a breath in a way that made his teeth squeak, and it occurred to me that I hated this guy more than anyone I’d met in a while—and I’d met some pretty bad dudes recently.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” the guy started, looking *delighted* to bear bad news, “but this event is *completely* sold out.”

I stared at him for a moment, then at the orange cones that were the “entrance” to the festival, then around at the wide-open desert all around us. “Okay, and what exactly is stopping me from literally just pushing past you?”

Cali stepped next to me, close enough I could feel the heat emanating from her. “We would *never* do that,” she said quickly to the guy in the vest. “He’s just kidding. We’re actually here looking for a, uh, friend of ours. We really just need to talk to him really quickly, and then we’ll be on our way out.”

I ground my teeth. I could see Cali was trying to be diplomatic, but I didn’t see the point. The way I looked at it, the best thing we could do would be to knock this guy out and head straight into this festival thing. I was itching to do it, but something was holding me back*. Greyson’s wolf* was holding me back.

I swallowed a groan. Screw this fucking wolf.

I was about to step forward and move Cali out of the way when Kendall stepped toward Puffer Jacket. I noticed she’d adjusted her shirt, so her cleavage was visible, and I could see the edge of a snake tattoo winding up the soft skin from the inside of her shirt. I actually had never realized she had tattoos. Probably because I generally didn’t pay any attention to her.

But now I couldn’t take my eyes off her as she flipped her hair and smiled coyly at Puffer Jacket. “Hey, I have our tickets right here. Sorry, they’re a little forgetful.” And she leaned toward the guy to whisper in his ear. “We already got the party started on the way out here. Can you forgive us? For me? Pretty please? With a cherry on top?”

And then she giggled. She actually *giggled.* I had never before heard Kendall giggle, but she was pulling it off. It was so strange—like she had become a completely different person. With her low-cut, cropped shirt, her eyes, and now this wide-eyed bambi thing she was doing, she could pass for any hot party girl I’d run into over the years.

And she was *flirting* with Puffer Jacket. Leaning toward him, giving him a money shot of her boobs. Something about the whole thing rubbed me the wrong way.

Puffer Jacket, however, looked like he was being rubbed the *right* way. His face had flushed bright red, and he nodded. “Y-Yes! O-Of course,” he stammered. “Just a misunderstanding. Let me scan those tickets.”

Cali turned to Greyson and smiled, looking relieved. Lola looked pissed, but Jay looked more neutral.

I, on the other hand, was seething. I looked back at Kendall, who was still putting on a full show for Puffer Jacket, who was falling all over himself.

Ava nudged me hard in the ribs.

“Ow,” I bit out, looking over at her. “What?”

She raised an eyebrow. *Is it happening again?*

*Is what happening again?* I asked.

*The jealousy?*

*No*, I said flatly.

*I think she likes your brother.*

I glanced over at Greyson, then back to Ava. *Why would you think that?*

*Because she got really hostile when I asked her.*

My temper flared again, and I was about to demand what the hell she meant by *that*, but just then Puffer Jacket stepped to the side, unblocking our way past the cones.

“You’re all set. Enjoy!” he said, his eyes on Kendall.

“Thank you,” Greyson murmured to Kendall as they walked in.

I ground my teeth and grabbed Ava’s hand. “Let’s go.”

As we passed through the cones into what I supposed was the festival proper, I looked around. The place was packed. There were people everywhere and so much smoke filling the air, it was almost hard to see. It was going to be a pain in the ass to find Swift—no matter how good any of us were at tracking.

“So how are we going to do this?” Cali wondered, looking around.

“We should split up,” Greyson suggested.

“Good idea. Let’s do that,” I said quickly. And I didn’t give Greyson a moment to add anything more before I grabbed Ava’s hand and pulled her off, driving us into the meandering crowd.

I walked for a while with Ava in tow, not slowing down until we were deep in the crowd. Music blared from speakers set up every few feet, and the bass was strong enough that it made the ground quake beneath our feet. Everyone around us was moving to the music, dancing while they drank and smoked and rubbed up against each other.

When we were far enough away, I wheeled around to look at Ava. “What do you mean you asked Kendall about Greyson?”

“What do you mean? I asked her about Greyson.”

“Why?” I demanded.

She sighed. “Because we want to know?”

“What are you—”

“Kendall has an angle, X,” she cut in. “We just don’t know what it is yet.”

That she might have been right only pissed me off more. “Just don’t stir the pot right now, Ava,” I said, shaking my head. “I just want to get my wolf back, and I don’t need any of this bullshit weirdness with Greyson and Kendall. I don’t want to deal with it.”

“Fine, fine,” she said with a shrug. “Anyway, it’s not like she would tell me if she did like Greyson.” She looked around the festival, taking in the massive crowd. “Where do you want to start looking for this guy?”

“Hmm?” I asked vaguely. I’d only been half listening. Now that the idea was in my head, I couldn’t stop thinking about Kendall, and how there might be something going on between her and Greyson. I felt the weirdness echoing in Greyson’s own wolf, and I knew that’s where this was all coming from—whatever *this* was.

Then my thoughts went to Cali. If this was how Greyson felt about Kendall, then what about him and Cali? What did this mean for the two of them?

**Episode 5475**

**Tabitha**

I walked around my room, gathering my things. It didn’t take long—I didn’t have much. But the room was large—everything at Cali’s grandmother’s house was large. *House* wasn’t even the right word for this place. *Estate* was more like it. It was massive and sprawling, with courtyards and ballrooms and hallways leading into what looked like eternity.

I had never in my life even seen a place this opulent, never mind stayed in one. Even on my travels, when I was looking for my sister with Gabriel and Mikah. The rugs were deep, the drapes on the windows thick velvet, the sculptures dotting the hallways cool marble, and I could feel the zing of magic everywhere I turned.

Well, *until* I turned. The magic was obviously interrupted whenever I was around.

I stopped in front of the many-paned window and looked out at the bright day outside. I thought of Adair, who would be heading out there with Artemis, heading to some distant mountain town so they could spread the message of what they’d discussed during the peace talks—and the news that the Light and Dark Fae had been reunited again.

I tipped my head, thinking about what this might mean. I didn’t know enough about Fae politics to really know for sure. Only that Adair had been pulled back into his position as the heir and head of the Mauvais family by Celeste—so I didn’t know if this marriage between Artemis and Kastian would actually work.

I thought about what Artemis had done and wondered whether—had I been in the same position—I would have been willing to sacrifice my life to a loveless marriage in the hopes of gaining peace.

I didn’t know the answer to that question, but even asking it made my stomach clench with anxiety.

Looking down at the empty pack in my hands, I gave my head a little shake. I needed to focus, so I walked over to the dresser and grabbed a shirt, shoving it inside just as the door behind me opened.

I whipped around and was relieved to see Adair in the doorframe. But when I saw his face, my relief drained away.

His face was thin and greyish, and he looked complexly exhausted. He stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him, and collapsed into one of the wing chairs near the fireplace. He leaned his head back with a sigh.

I dropped my pack on the dresser and walked over, perching on the arm of the chair.

But that wasn’t close enough, apparently, because he reached for me and pulled me into his lap, wrapping his arms around me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Just let me,” he murmured, burying his face in my hair as his hands slid up my back, pulling me even closer.

I felt heat flood through me, and I smiled, snuggling into him. For a moment we just sat there together in silence, completely absorbed in each other.

Finally I leaned back so I could look at his face, which had some of its color back. I trailed my fingers down his cheek, feeling the roughness of jaw beneath my fingertips. “Are you sure you want to do this,” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he asked, sounding almost drowsy.

I shrugged. “You ran away from this life.” I looked around. “From all of this.”

He sighed and tightened his grip on me. “I know this, but what else am I supposed to do? Celeste has made Artemis the heir.”

“Yes, which frees you up *not* to be,” I pointed out.

He grimaced, and I stared at him, marveling at how his face remained so handsome even in an expression of discomfort.

“I know. And if it were up to me, I would already be back in the human world with you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “*But?*”

“But I can’t get my brother out of my head,” he finally admitted.

“Kadmos,” I breathed.

He nodded, his eyes shifting away from me. “I can’t just leave Artemis in this position alone, even if I don’t want it. I feel… I feel that I owe it to my brother to look out for her. She is his only daughter—his only child. The only piece of him left.”

He stopped speaking, and as he looked into the fire, I could see that his eyes had gone bright. And I understood.

“I get it,” I said softly. “I mean, it’s complicated, and it doesn’t make total sense to me, but if you feel like this is what you need to do, then I support you, Adair.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice husky.

I burrowed down, getting as close as I could to him without actually climbing inside of him. When I leaned my head on his chest, I could feel his heart beating against my cheek.

“For the record,” I went on, “I think it’s really kind that you’re helping her. You’re doing a good thing. Maybe even for all the Fae world.”

Adair let out a harsh laugh, the sound echoing through his chest. “Yes, that is just what I wish to do. And when has the Fae world ever done me any good?” He was quiet again, and I felt his hand on my head, stroking my hair. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to talk to you about this before I did it. I know you must be worried about Dani,” he said.

“I am,” I admitted, “but I also know that Dani is safe with the Redwood pack. I don’t want to be separated from her for long, but…” I shrugged. “We’ll see how everything goes.”

I felt him shake his head. “I won’t keep you here longer,” he said, and his voice was filled with frustration. “I should have sent you back with the others. This place isn’t kind to humans, magic or not.”

I looked up at him, meeting his gaze. “Then it’s lucky I have you, isn’t it?”

As I held his gaze, I could feel heat spreading through me, moving like wildfire. I leaned in and pressed my lips to his.

His hands were in my hair in an instant, grasping tightly and pulling me closer, deepening the kiss. I could feel his hunger and his need in the kiss, and I answered, opening my mouth as his tongue pushed in.

Hands on my hips, he lifted me lightly and turned me to face him, hooking my leg up so I straddled his lap. I kissed him feverishly, holding tightly to him. Being with Adair like this always felt strangely weightless, and my instinct was to hold tight to keep from flying away.

But there was something else, too—a frantic energy to the way we held each other. It was like we could feel a clock ticking somewhere, counting down our time together.

I moaned as his hand slipped under my shirt, the contact against my skin intoxicating. His hand moved up, brushing the undercurve of my breasts, and I pushed my hips into him, wanting more.

“What are you doing to me?” he demanded, trailing kisses down my neck.

I arched back as his kisses reached my throat, but that wasn’t enough for him, because he grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it off.

I had just ducked out from under it when the door swung open.

With a startled gasp, I grabbed my shirt back from Adair and held it over myself, covering my breasts, my face flushing with embarrassment. But when I saw who was standing in the doorway, my humiliation bloomed like a flower.

It was *Celeste*, and she was glaring at us.

I made a move to jump away from Adair and our *extremely* compromising position, but he kept his hands on my hips, holding me in place.

Celeste’s eyes were cold as ice as she took us in. “Oh, yes. Your little…human.” Uninvited, she strolled casually into the room. “Of all the things you could do, Adair, I swear. You had to go and get yourself a human plaything. Absurd.”

Adair glared right back. “It appears you have forgotten how to knock, Celeste.”

She spun around, shocked. “And why should I knock on the door of my *husband’s* room? You need to hurry and focus on what is truly important here. Not playing around with a *human*.”

She spat out the word like a curse, and Adair gave a menacing chuckle.

“Insult her one more time, and I promise, you won’t like the outcome, Celeste. Mark my words. But,” he said briskly, “you are right, and I cannot deny it. There is much to be done before we leave.”

He eased me gently off him and helped me to my feet, standing in front of me so I could dress again. Then he turned, not bothering to adjust his shirt that I’d fumbled open as we’d kissed, and smiled at Celeste.

“After all,” he went on, “you and I have to get divorced before we leave.”

**Episode 5476**

I looked into the crowd, a little thrown by how quickly Xavier had taken off with Ava. The two of them had disappeared into the crowd in a heartbeat, at the merest suggestion of splitting up. It was like Xavier hadn’t wanted to be stuck with us.

“So who’s going with who?” Lola asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked around the festival. It stretched out on every side. It was huge, and I had no idea where to start. I didn’t even know Swift that well—certainly not well enough to have an idea of where he might be.

“So—from the looks of this place—it doesn’t look like *fishing* is the reason Swift’s here,” I noted.

“*If* he’s here,” Lola muttered to herself. She shook her head as she looked over at Kendall. “I really hope your intel was right, or else you just let that loser at the door look down your shirt for nothing.”

Kendall’s eyes flashed dangerously, but Greyson stepped in before anything escalated. “Okay, Jay and Lola, you go that way,” he said, pointing. “Kendall and Cali, you come this way with me.”

I frowned, feeling a little bothered that he’d said Kendall’s name first.

Then I gave my head a shake. I was being ridiculous. Who cared whose name he said first? I was just being paranoid, and I shouldn’t let Ava’s comment get to me. There was no meaning in the order in which Greyson’s said names. Anyway, we were all going together. It wasn’t like he had sent me off with Jay and Lola while he and Kendall went off alone.

Greyson glanced at the time on his phone. “We’ll look for an hour, and then check back in.”

“What should we do if we find Swift?” Jay asked.

He thought for a moment. “It might be best not to approach him.”

“Then what are we even *doing* here?” Lola huffed. “Isn’t the whole point of being here to find this guy so you and Xavier can get your shit together?”

“I think Greyson’s right,” Kendall added. “Swift is a wildcard, and we don’t know how he’s going to react to being found. He said he was going fishing and disappeared without his phone. We have to consider that it’s possible he doesn’t want anyone to know he’s here.”

“Fine,” Lola agreed grumpily.

Jay looked at his phone. “An hour?”  
 Greyson nodded. “Yeah, and then we’ll meet back here. If we haven’t found him by then, we’ll regroup and go from there.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jay said, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

Lola coughed and waved her hand in front of her face as a cloud of smoke lazily wafted by. “Ugh, there’s so much freaking smoke here. It’s hurting my eyes.” She swallowed. “And it’s so dry. What is up with this place?’

“It’s called a desert?” Kendall said waspishly.

Lola’s eyes narrowed, and I felt my stomach drop. I knew Lola well enough to recognize the danger of that look, and I started to get worried that relations between Lola and Kendall were about to worsen.

“Hey, I’m sure we can find something to drink around here,” Jay said soothingly, obviously also seeing Lola bristle.

He was just starting to lead her away when there was the sound of beating drums, and we all stopped in our tracks. Just in front of us, a procession moved slowly by, blocking our path toward the rest of the festival.

It was like a parade, and I watched it, feeling a little unnerved. There was such a strange vibe to this whole festival. The people parading by were wearing costumes sewn of bright colors, some with feathers and sequins, some with lights attached to the inside of their clothes. Some weren’t wearing costumes, just jeans and sweatshirts, and dancing along to the beat of the drum. And then there were some wearing no clothes at all. Some wore body paint, but others were just fully nude.

Within the larger procession, there were smaller groups, and a group of thin men walked by, all carrying small gongs they hit in a strange, hypnotic rhythm. Another group of people came by with long, flowing dresses, dancing and whirling like pinwheels in the wind.

Then another group of people wandered by, just smoking weed.

The place wasn’t exactly my scene, but everyone looked like they were having a really good time, and it was hard not to enjoy the festival atmosphere.

Greyson stepped next to me. “Maybe we should have brought costumes,” he said quietly.

I pressed against his side with a smile. It was a fun place, but I was really glad I wasn’t facing it alone. “I’m glad you’re here,” I said quietly. “I wouldn’t know what to do without you.”

He slid his arm around my waist. “We should come back next year. You can dress as a Fae, and I’ll come as a werewolf.”

This made me laugh. “I don’t think it’s quite the same as a Halloween party.”

“I don’t know,” he said, looking around. “It doesn’t look like this place has a lot of rules.”

As another group of dancers passed us, one of them broke away and stepped toward us. He was dressed as what looked like a steampunk Viking, with a long tunic and layers of leather armor on his chest and arms. He wore goggles on his head, and he headed straight for Kendall.

He grabbed her hand and tried to pull her forward. “You should be dancing! This is a celebration!”

Kendall laughed but pulled her hand back. “I’m good, thanks.”

The Viking turned to the rest of us, gesturing for us to join him. “Come,” he said, waving us forward. “The parade is for all of us. Anyone can join. Come, dance!”

Jay and Lola smiled at the guy, who had a dark red beard and intense green eyes. He was looking at all of us, but his gaze kept going back to Kendall, and it was obvious to me why he’d come over to begin with.

She was still laughing, but when I glanced up at Greyson, I saw he did not look the least bit amused.

“We’ve got something to do,” he said coldly to the Viking. “We’re not here to dance. You should go back to your group.”

The guy looked unbothered by Greyson’s coldness. He had a leather pack strapped to his waist, and he started pulling out bottles of water, which he handed around. “Enjoy, enjoy,” he encouraged, then rejoined the parade.

“Thank god,” Lola said, opening her bottle of water and quickly chugging it down. “I thought I was going to die,” she gasped, crumpling the bottle.

I shot a look at Greyson. “You should try to be more relaxed,” I told him. “That guy was just having some fun. And Kendall didn’t seem to mind.”

“I didn’t mind,” Kendall chimed in, “and it probably wouldn’t hurt for you to try to do a little more to fit in, so we don’t draw suspicion, Grey.”

*Grey.* When I heard her call Greyson by that nickname, I immediately stiffened. She hadn’t said anything *technically* inappropriate, but it felt so strangely intimate to use a nickname like that. I didn’t even call him that, maybe only if he was making me breathless or something. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from snapping at her, *His name is Greyson.*

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. I needed to remember that we needed Kendall for this. Or at least that’s what Greyson thought. So I kept my mouth shut.

I opened the water bottle and took a small sip. The water tasted a little strange, but it *was* dry here, and I *was* thirsty, so it felt good to wet my throat. The air was thick with smoke—both from people smoking weed and from the bonfires. I glanced around, hoping we’d be able to search for Swift somewhere that wasn’t in such close proximity to the fires. Though there probably wasn’t much we could do about the weed.

I didn’t like the smoke anymore than Lola did, but I kept my mouth shut about that, too. Everyone was too tense to be starting trouble.

The procession seemed to go on and on. There were people waving ribbons and a couple of acrobats doing cool balancing tricks as they walked. It was fun to watch, and we waited until the procession passed by. When the last weed smoker had walked by, Greyson started out, leading us into the festival.

But as soon as I took a step, I knew something strange was happening. The ground felt suddenly strange under my feet. It was bouncy, like I was walking on jelly. I looked quickly around to see if anyone else had noticed this, but no one else looked as if they felt anything unusual.

I tried to push the feeling to the side. Maybe I was just tired—it was a long journey out here.

I took another cautious step. The jelly feeling remained. And then, overhead, the sky began to shift. It had been a slate blue when we’d arrived, but now—looking up—it was turning bright turquoise. I watched, stunned, as it shifted to green, then pink, then purple.

Then, with a sinking feeling, I realized what was going on. “Oh shit,” I breathed. “I’m hallucinating.”

**Episode 5477**

**Greyson**

Cali swayed on her feet, and—moving on instinct—I stepped over to her, catching her in my arms just as she fell. Thank god. Given how many people were zooming around this place, not paying attention to anything but their own high, she could have been trampled in seconds if she’d fallen.

Holding her up, I pulled her into my side. “Cali? Can you hear me? Don’t worry, love, I’ve got you.”

When she didn’t respond, I felt my stomach clench. What was going on with her? Her eyes were open, but she looked distant and spaced out, and I immediately began to worry. This hallucination episode had come out of nowhere. There hadn’t been any warning, and I wasn’t even sure if she could hear me.

Lola stepped to Cali’s side. “Cali? Is it the *due destini*?” she asked, looking worried.

Still, Cali didn’t answer, but she blinked and swallowed, looking like she was fighting through something, trying to focus.

Lola looked up at me. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. Though I couldn’t help but notice that Xavier wasn’t with us, and Cali had told me the hallucinations worsened when Xavier wasn’t around. That was why he’d had to come to the Fae world with us. I wondered if that’s what was happening now, and why this one had come on so suddenly.

I hated the idea that Cali needed Xavier around, so this kind of thing didn’t happen. And I couldn’t help but remember that she hadn’t mentioned having any episodes when she was separated from *me* in the Fae world. I’d been gone for days when Cenwyn had been holding me prisoner in the arena, and Cali had been fine in my absence. Which meant that being away from Xavier caused issues for her, but she was just fine being away from me?

No. I gave my head a shake. I needed to stop thinking like that. I was being crazy. Besides, Xavier hadn’t been around the night before. He’d gone to the Samara pack house and slept there. So if being separated for even a short time had a negative effect on Cali, wouldn’t she have had some kind of hallucinogenic episode yesterday?

My head was spinning, and it was starting to feel like my thoughts had no internal logic to them. I tried to push them all aside as I shifted Cali so that I bore her entire body weight.

“She needs some air,” I said.

“There’s a chair,” Jay said, pointing to an abandoned camp chair on the sand.

I looked down at her. Her head was drooping, and her brown hair fell into her face. I pushed it back and saw she looked pale and clammy. “Cali? Love? Can you hear me?”

Still, she didn’t answer.

*Cali? If you can hear me, say something.*

There was no reply, and I felt my heart hammering in my chest, wondering how deeply gone she was. I looked around, wondering if this place had a medical tent. I wasn’t sure how they were going to treat a hallucination caused by an ancient curse, but I felt like I had to do *something.*

Then, finally, Cali groaned. “I’m okay,” she muttered. She didn’t sound great, but at least it was something, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

I moved her to the camping chair Jay had pointed out and carefully lowered her into it. I crouched in front of her and pushed her hair back. “Cali? Can you see me?”

Her eyes blinked open, and I stared into them, shocked. Her pupils were so dilated that her irises looked nearly black.

“What the fuck is going on?” I asked aloud. “Cali?’

“I’m seeing things,” she murmured.

“What things?” I asked her.

“My sister,” she said quietly. “I’m—I’m trying to talk to her, but I can’t get to her. I’m…I’m in the Fae world,” she said, frowning.

“What is going on?” I asked.

“It was the water.”

“What?” I looked up at Kendall, who had spoken. She was looking at the bottle of water the Viking had handed her, and she held it out to me. “The water has shrooms in it.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I asked. I took the bottle and looked at it myself. And there, in the fine print, below the “Bottled in Canada” information was the “Contains Psychedelics” disclaimer. “Fan-fucking-tastic.”

“She really didn’t drink much of it,” Kendall noted, “so it shouldn’t be too bad a trip.”

Lola snatched the bottle from my hands. “*Shrooms?* For real?”

Jay pulled the bottle away from her. “I don’t think so. You just chugged your own bottle, Lola. We’re lucky you’re not singing Broadway ballads naked from the back of a bicycle right now.”

“Well, maybe later,” Lola said with a wink.

“I’m fine,” Cali said. She shook her head, blinking fast. Her eyes were focused now, which I supposed was a good thing. “It feels good to sit and just let everything settle.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “But you should go look for Swift.”

“I’m not going to leave you,” I said, shaking my head.

“Come on, Greyson. That’s why we’re here. I’m not going to let you stay here and babysit me because I accidentally took shrooms. Jay and Lola can stay with me while you and Kendall go look around. Once I feel better, we’ll go too,” she said, nodding to Jay and Lola. “Just call us if you find anything.”

I wanted to protest—and Xavier’s wolf definitely wasn’t into the idea. I felt a surge of Xavier’s protective instinct for Cali, and it reminded me of my own. I didn’t want to leave Cali alone in this place, especially not when she wasn’t totally with it.

“I don’t know—” I started, but Cali shook her head firmly.

“*Go*,” she insisted. “Find him. The faster we find him, the faster we get out of here. So go look. Please. Don’t lose time because of me.”

I still wasn’t certain, but Jay put a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, I’ll be here, man,” he said quietly. “I’ll look out for her. Lola and I both will. We’ll get her some real water, and she’ll be fine. We’ll catch up with you as soon as we can.”

“Yes, exactly,” Cali said. “That sounds perfect. Let’s do that—” She stopped, and her eyes suddenly went wide.

It looked as though she was staring at something behind me, and I swiveled around quickly. But there was nothing there. When I looked back at her, she had closed her eyes again and leaned back in the chair.

“Cali?” I asked cautiously.

“I’m okay. Just go, okay? We’ll catch up.”

I wanted to tell her no way, that I wasn’t going anywhere, but I knew Cali too well to think she would just give this up. She would keep fighting me, and we would go round and round until she convinced me.

So I sighed and let myself be convinced. I leaned forward and dropped a kiss on the top of Cali’s hair. “Fine. We’ll go look. But I’ll be back soon.”

She nodded. “Okay. Back soon. Sounds good.”

I stood and looked at Jay and Lola. “If anything happens—*anything*—call me. Got it?”

They both nodded.

“We will,” Lola assured me.

“Don’t worry,” Jay said. “I won’t take my eyes off of her.”

“Your *eye*,” Lola corrected. She grinned but stopped when she saw the severe look on my face. “I’m taking this seriously.”

“Okay.”

“Come on, Grey,” Kendall said. She nodded into the festival. “If we’re going to go, let’s go.”

I took one last look at Cali, then followed Kendall into the crowd.

Now that the procession was over, we were able to go the way we’d initially intended to go—east.

“There’s a map over there,” Kendall said, pointing ahead to a sandwich board with a hand drawn map tacked to it. “Let’s figure out where we are.”

We walked over to the map, which I examined closely. The festival took up a huge section of desert, and it looked as though the place was divided into five high zones, each of which had different attributes listed on the map:

Zone 1: Gifting (giving and accepting): High on Gifts

Zone 2: Decommodification: High without Want

Zone 3: Radical Self-Expression: Creative High

Zone 4: Radical Self-Reliance: Bootstrap High

Zone 5: Immediacy: High on the Now

I looked at the list, but none of the labels made much sense to me. “Any ideas?”

Kendall pointed to zones three and five. “If we’re going to find Swift anywhere, it’ll be there.”

“How do you know that?” I wondered.

She turned her purple eyes on me with a shrug. “Because I did my homework, Grey. Not that you gave me much time to put together a profile on this guy.”

“What kind of a profile?”

“Purchases, search history, work experience, income bracket—the usual,” she said casually, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I chuckled and shook my head. “Well, I guess there are some perks about working for MIB.”

She didn’t seem to appreciate the joke and shot a glare in my direction. “So which do you want to check first?”

**Episode 5478**

I felt like I was watching a movie scene play out in front of me as I watched Greyson walk away from me. He disappeared into the crowded festival before I could say another word, with Kendall at his side. It felt so unreal and bizarre. I frowned after him, my head spinning. The festival had been strange, but I couldn’t quite remember if it was supposed to be *this* weird. I suspected the drugs must be making it weirder, but I wanted to get a second opinion.

“Is that a giraffe smoking a pipe?” I asked, leaning over to Lola and pointing to the giraffe smoking a pipe standing five feet in front of us.

Lola looked over to where I was pointing. “No.”

“So the giraffe is there, he’s just not smoking a pipe?” I asked. I wanted to get all my facts straight.

Lola crouched down and looked into my eyes. “I need you to listen very carefully, Cali. There are no giraffes. I need you to try to relax, okay?”

The giraffe was still there—and still smoking—but I decided to believe her for the moment. So I nodded and closed my eyes, but I opened them again when I heard someone calling my name. The voice was familiar, but surprising, and I looked around for the source.

“Alex?” I said, shocked when I saw him. Almost positive I wasn’t imagining him, I got to my feet, though my legs swayed alarmingly beneath me. “Alex! What are you doing here?”

“*Alex?*” Lola looked around, confused. “Where is that prick? I’ve been dying to talk to him. And by *talk to him* I mean *kick his ass*.”

I pointed a shaking finger. “He’s right there,” I said, surprised she couldn’t see him. “He’s walking right toward me.” I hadn’t seen him in ages, and he looked big. Like he’d been working out.

Lola grabbed my shoulders as I began to tip forward. “Cali, you’re still hallucinating. It’s the drugs, not Alex. He’s not here.”

I frowned, baffled. “He’s not?”

“No, which is a very good thing, because if he was, I’d take him out.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. I blinked, and the image of Alex disappeared.

“I need you to try to clear your mind, okay?” Lola said. “Don’t think about giraffes, and don’t think about Alex.”

It was like I was processing information on a ten second delay, because it suddenly registered that Lola had just mentioned drugs. “*Drugs?*” I asked her. “What drugs? What are you talking about?”

“*What?*” Lola asked, sounding just as confused. “Are you serious?”

Then I remembered. “Oh fuck. The psychedelic water. Mushroom water.”

For some reason this struck me as hilariously funny, and I started to giggle.

Lola frowned harder. “What’s so funny?”

That only made me laugh harder. “That’s the thing,” I said, doubling over.

“What is?”

“I have *no idea* why I’m laughing!” I told her between peals of laughter.

“*Okay*,” Lola said gently. She put her hands on my shoulders and carefully guided me back into the camping chair. “Let’s just get this all out of your system.”

The laughter was dying out, and I took a few deep, ragged breaths.

Then a question occurred to me, and I looked over at Lola. “Why aren’t *you* tripping?” I asked her. “You drank the whole bottle of water.”

“Lola’s a hybrid werewolf-vampire,” Jay reminded me. “That kind of thing isn’t going to affect her like it will you.”

“That’s not even a little bit fair,” I huffed, irritated.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Just sit still, okay?” She waited until I nodded, then turned and stepped over to talk to Jay. At least—I thought it was Jay. The figure was Jay-shaped, but I supposed I couldn’t be completely sure.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. I wondered if I could use any of my magic to help get the drug out of my system a little faster. My mind was mushy and spinning like an uneven top, I still knew even trying that would be dangerous. My magic might just make things worse, and besides—doing magic in front of all these humans? They would realize I was a Fae.

“You’re right about that,” a voice said.

My eyes snapped open.

“Oh shit.”

I was no longer in the desert, and Lola was nowhere to be seen. I was in a forest that crackled with magic. And standing in front of me was my grandfather, Innes.

“How did you get here?” I gasped.

He raised an eyebrow. “I suppose I should ask you the same question, young lady. Didn’t you mean to come here?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Not that I mind seeing you,” I added quickly. “But it wasn’t my mother’s tea that brought me here this time. It was this water I drank. It was laced with psychedelic mushrooms. So this was an accident. You should know that I *never* do drugs,” I added vehemently. It felt very important that I was clear on that.

My grandpa smiled at me. “Caliana, I do not care how you got here. What’s of highest importance is that you are here. Now,” he said, looking me over, “I know that you have become quite skilled with your magic.”

I began to smile, then paused, a question flashing through my brain. If Grandpa Innes was in Fae limbo—and knew that I had developed my magic—then did that mean he knew the news of Artemis?

“Have you heard about my sister? Do you know she is now married to one of the Dark Fae nobles?” I asked.

He nodded. “I do, indeed. I like to keep a close eye on my family.” He shook his head. “I am sorry Hera almost poisoned you.”

“That was an accident,” I said hurriedly. “She actually meant to kill Kastian—”

“I know all this too,” Grandpa Innes said mildly.

I chewed my lip. “I’m a little worried about Artemis,” I admitted. “Not that I fear for her safety, but I just wonder if she did the right thing. Will this marriage really bring peace?”

He heaved a heavy sigh. “That, I cannot tell you. I wish I could see into the future and tell you the answer, but I am limited to only the past and present. But I can tell you this—I believe in Artemis, the same way I believe in you, Caliana.”

I felt a proud warmth bloom in my chest as he spoke. But I had to be honest.

“*I* was supposed to be the one to bring peace through this marriage, but Artemis took it on herself,” I told him, with the burden of guilt I always felt heavy on my shoulders.

He nodded, his expression understanding, hearing all I wasn’t saying. “I think you would have brought peace as well, Caliana. But perhaps it was Artemis’s fate that led her to do it. Perhaps your destiny lies elsewhere. Perhaps here, in the human world.”

I considered that. “I hadn’t thought of that,” I said honestly. I opened my mouth to ask more, but before I could say another word, my grandfather shimmered. He began to fade away, along with the Fae forest all around us.

An instant later, a harsh cacophony of sounds and smells pressed in on me and I opened my eyes to find myself back in the desert festival.

“Oh god,” I groaned, shaking my head to clear the remaining fogginess.

“Eat this,” Lola commanded, shoving a hot dog in front of my face.

“What?” I asked, recoiling automatically. “Why?”

“Because it’s food,” she said, taking a bite of her own hot dog, which she’d smothered with sauerkraut and mustard. “And you need something in your stomach. Why are you shrinking away like I just offered you a live snake? Who doesn’t like hot dogs?”

I stood up, mostly to give myself some space from the hot dog Lola kept pushing at me. But I was pleased to notice that I could actually stand without swaying this time. I was encouraged enough to take the hot dog, which Lola had only added ketchup to.

“I guess I am hungry,” I admitted.

She nodded. “How do you feel?”

“A little better. I think the mushrooms are wearing off.”

“That’s what they do,” Lola said, finishing up her food.

I took a bite of the hot dog, which was pretty good for festival food. Or maybe I was just really hungry. I looked around. The festival looked as crowded as ever, and the smoke just as thick.

“Since I’m feeling better, maybe we should start looking for Swift on our own,” I suggested. “What do you think?”

“Sounds good to me,” Jay said, starting on his second hot dog.

I turned to Lola, who raised an eyebrow. “I have a better idea.” And before either Jay or I could ask what it was, Lola took off running. An instant later she disappeared into the massive, moving crowd.

**Episode 5479**

**Greyson**

In my opinion, the Creative High zone seemed like a likely place to find Swift, so we headed there first.

“Swift’s store is all kinds of weird,” I mused as we walked through the new zone, looking around at the booths set up with vendors selling their dream catchers and crystals. “He’s got all this kind of new-age type stuff. Do you think he could be working here? Selling some of his stuff?”

Kendall shrugged. “I guess he could be.”

I considered this as we walked. “But maybe not. It’s kind of unlikely, given the kind of guy Swift is,” I noted. “Doesn’t seem like a real go-getter. Still, stranger things have happened.”

“True enough,” Kendall muttered.

“But these do seem to be Swift’s people,” I said, looking at the men with long hair and beards and the women all wearing flowing skirts and scarves. “I could see him really thriving here.”

We walked a while in silence, then Kendall looked over at me. “She’ll be okay, you know. Cali.”

I looked at her, surprised. “I know. Thanks,” I added. I might have sounded a little short because Kendall raised an eyebrow at me.

Then she turned a corner and started down another lane lined with booths. “The artist zone,” she said, by way of explanation.

I looked around and saw that—sure enough—there were easels out at almost every booth. There were also a *lot* of people walking and sitting and lounging—completely topless. This wasn’t something totally unusual for werewolves, but it was surprising to see humans behaving this way.

“Weed!” a guy shouted from his booth as we walked by. “Weed for sale!”

Kendall snorted and almost started to laugh, but she bit her lip, stopping herself. “Right, as if he needs to market himself that hard.”

That caught me off guard, and I started to laugh too.

A woman walked toward us. She wore furry pink boots, a pink tutu, and a giant rainbow wig. She was wearing a backpack and had some kind of tube sticking out from the top that spewed a thick, pink fog.

She walked right between us, and as she passed, Kendall and I were completely enshrouded in the fog, which smelled sickly sweet, like cotton candy, and felt strangely sticky as it settled on our skin.

Kendall groaned. “God, I’m going to need a shower after all this bullshit.”

I couldn’t help but agree.

We looked around at the artist booths. There seemed to be a lot of people doing many different kinds of artwork. But the thing that everyone had in common was that they were all as high as kites.

There were some people painting the desert landscape or abstract pieces in oils or watercolors. But as we walked on, I saw there were people doing more…*exotic* work. There were artists who used their own naked bodies instead of brushes. We were approaching a woman who stood naked before a small audience of onlookers. She had a large canvas laid out on the desert ground before her, and as I watched, she squirted a measure of paint into her palm from a tube, then proceeded to rub the blue paint all over her body.

“I’ll need a volunteer for this next part,” she said. “Someone to make love to me while we imprint the experience on canvas.”

Her audience was made up mostly of men, and every one of them raised their hands enthusiastically, but she looked past them and locked eyes with me.

“What about you, handsome?” she called, beckoning me over. “Why don’t you come over here, and let’s see what we can create together,” she said.

“Um, no thanks,” I said, caught off guard. Then I paused and took a step toward her. “But actually, do you happen to know a guy named Swift? We thought he might be around here. He’s a friend of ours, and we’re looking for him.”

The woman poured some lavender paint into her palm and rubbed it suggestively across her breasts as she answered me. “I don’t know anyone called Swift. But you *sure* you won’t change your mind about the painting? We can do it any way you want,” she offered, reaching out her bright purple hand to me.

“Still no,” I said, shaking my head, and I kept walking.

“I’ll do it!” one of the other guys cried.

“Me!”

“Come on! You said I was next!”

The desperate pleas faded as we walked, and next to me, Kendall seemed to be working hard to keep from laughing. “What? You don’t want to make sex art, Grey?”

I snorted a laugh. “No, not exactly on my bucket list.” I looked over at her. “You?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged a shoulder. “There’s not much I wouldn’t try.” She glanced over at me, and her gaze lingered on me for just a moment. Then she looked forward and pointed at a tent just ahead. “Maybe we should try in there.”

She picked up her pace, and I followed her inside the tent, which turned out to be a kind of tea house, with dusty beanbag chairs thrown everywhere. The tent was huge—bigger than it looked from the outside, and I saw that there were even private rooms ringing the main chamber, with tent flaps for doors.

“We’re going to have to check all of those,” I muttered to Kendall, nodding toward them.

She nodded in agreement and as we walked deeper inside, I was hit with that sweet smell again— the pink fog. It was even stronger inside the tent, and it made my eyes water.

“Hello,” a low voice said. But there was something strange about the voice. It was as though it was a recording that had been slowed way down. “I know just what you’re after.”

“What?” I asked, blinking hard, trying to get the sticky smoke out of my eyes.

I felt a hand on my arm and then the pull of someone leading me. One of the tent flaps opened, and before I knew it, Kendall and I had been pushed into one of the small, private rooms.

There was a small table, low to the ground. There were pillows of all sizes and a variety of blankets. It was cozy and private and very, very intimate.

“What the hell?” I muttered, looking around in surprise. When I looked at Kendall, I could see that she looked just as shocked as I felt.

I turned and finally saw who had spoken and led us in here—the host, a small, bald man, who smiled up at us.

“Enjoy!” he said brightly. “I’ll be back to take your order.”

And then he was gone.

I stared after him for a moment, wondering how in the world we had ended up in this little room.

“I’m not drinking anything from this place,” I said, shaking my head, trying to clear it.

“Yeah, probably not a great idea,” Kendall agreed.

I looked at the closed tent flap and rubbed a hand over my eyes. “We should have asked that guy if he knew Swift.” I shook my head. I didn’t know why I *hadn’t* asked. That was why we were here, after all, but I hadn’t thought of it. It was like my brain had gotten suddenly sluggish.

“He’ll be back in a second,” Kendall reminded me, dropping down to sit amongst the pillows. “We can ask him then.”

I nodded, though I could tell I was moving slowly. I felt strangely lethargic, so I sat down too, sinking into the soft pillows and blankets.

Kendall and I sat silently for a moment. I was strangely aware of the rate of my own breathing…and hers.

Then there was a voice from outside the tent flap. Someone passing by, mid-conversation:

“—and then I told the guy that I couldn’t eat pickles anymore.”

“Why not?” another voice asked.

“Why not? I can’t believe you would even ask me that! You have to open your eyes, man! I stopped because I’d realized the fundamental humanity of the cucumber!”

I felt my eyes widen. I looked over at Kendall, who stared back. Then she started to giggle. She threw back her head and laughed. The sound was contagious, and I started to laugh too.

“*The fundamental humanity of cucumbers*,” she gasped out, wiping tears from her eyes. “I swear, Oregon is the weirdest place I’ve ever been.”

“Where else have you lived?” I wondered, getting my breath back.

Kendall shook her head. “That’s classified, Grey.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course.”

When she shifted among the pillows, her knee brushed against my thigh. She looked down, but didn’t move away, letting her knee linger against my leg.

I felt my heart rate tick up. This made my head spin even more as I leaned forward. “When you first came to Oregon, you read up on me, didn’t you? The same way you read up on Swift.”

Kendall’s eyes rose, meeting mine, and I stared into the deep purple depths. But she didn’t say anything.

I grinned, knowing the answer was yes. “And what did you find out about me?” I asked. “What did it say in my MIB profile?”

She tipped her head. “It says that you’re a werewolf, highly unpredictable.”

I snorted.

“And highly dangerous,” she went on. “A former Rogue turned underground fighter turned Redwood pack Alpha.”

I nodded. That all tracked. “That all it says?”

A smile played at the corner of her lips. “That’s all I’m going to tell you.”

I couldn’t seem to take my eyes off her lips as she spoke. It was like I had never seen a mouth form words before, and I was fascinated. “So even though I’m so dangerous and so unpredictable, you’re still here, huh?”

Kendall was close. Closer than ever. I didn’t know when we’d gotten so close, but she was practically in my lap now.

I felt warm and dizzy, and everything felt strangely fuzzy at the edges. The world had lost definition.

“Oh, you’re not as dangerous as you think you are,” she said with a breathy laugh. “Don’t flatter yourself, Grey. I’m not scared of you.”

I laughed, my eyes meeting hers. “No?” She shook her head, and I leaned closer. “Yeah, well, you don’t scare me either, *Kendall King*.”

Her breath caught when I said her name. It was like both of us stopped breathing. I wasn’t completely sure who moved first, but suddenly her mouth was pressed against mine, and we were kissing.

**Episode 5480**

**Xavier**

I was getting pretty sick of all this new-age bullshit. I didn’t like it when Swift had tried to push it on me, and I liked it even less when Carlson Greene tried to peddle it. And this dumbass festival was really pissing me off. I had seen enough crystals and protection beads to last me a lifetime.

“I’m so fucking done with this place,” I muttered, glaring around. “It pisses me off that we even had to come here. Like, what if Kendall just led us here on some wild-goose chase?”

“You shouldn’t blame Kendall,” Ava said, glancing around at the faces of people in the crowd. “Or anyone else for that matter.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean,” I snarled at her.

She stopped and turned to face me, taking my chin in her hand. “It means that if you hadn’t gone into the Fae world for your precious Cali, none of this would even be happening.”

I looked at her for a moment, startled by how candid her answer was. I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised that she was still upset I’d left. I kind of liked that she felt jealous, but I was also a little tired of dealing with it.

She shrugged. “It’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? You don’t have anyone to blame here.”

“Cali asked *me* to go,” I pointed out. “Not the other way around.”

She dropped her hand from my face. “I don’t want to argue about this anymore, X. I’m just trying to ask some questions about the situation, and you haven’t exactly been very forthcoming about you and Cali since you’ve been back.”

“I’ve been back for all of one day. And without my wolf, which has been pretty distracting, no less.”

“Fine,” Ava said, shaking her head. “Fine. All I want is my mate back. *All* of him. Wolf and all,” she added.

“Then we need to find Swift,” I growled. “That’s the only way any of that is going to happen.”

We started walking again, looking around at the slowly moving crowd.

“Has anyone actually confirmed that Swift knows how to do this wolf-swap thing?” Ava wondered. “Like, what if we do find him, and he has no clue?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “It’s an unknown. But since Big Mac seems to have thrown in the towel on figuring it out, Swift isn’t just our best bet, he’s our only bet.”

“Great,” Ava muttered.

We passed into a new zone, and into a crowd of people all wearing long dusters. They looked like cowboys, and they gathered together, chanting something I didn’t understand. We pushed through them, smelling the reek of very strong weed.

“How does anyone get anything done around here?” I wondered.

Ava looked around. “Maybe we should try to find a less crowded part of the festival. I need some fresh air.” She gave a rueful laugh. “It’s kind of sad I can’t find any of that in the middle of the desert.”

“Yeah, okay. Let’s get out of here. That way,” I said, pointing us south.

As we moved south, and away from the chanting crowd, Ava drew a deep, relieved breath.

I looked around. “I wonder if I would have better luck tracking Swift if I had my wolf back,” I said. “Though, if I had my wolf back, I wouldn’t be looking for Swift.”

“That’s true,” Ava said softly.

I looked over at her, and it occurred to me that even if things were back to normal—and my wolf had returned to me—I knew there would be a lot of shit I would still have to deal with. Ava was right—I hadn’t been fully open with her. We had never resolved anything. She knew I was still in love with Cali.

And what did that mean for us?

I shook my head. I couldn’t deal with this—not right now. Right now all I could think about was finding Swift and praying he could fix this wolf-swap thing. Then I could turn my attention to Ava and Cali. In the meantime, it was probably for the best that Ava and I were off on our own—I didn’t like the weird feelings I was getting whenever I was near Kendall.

I still didn’t know what they meant, exactly. I only had a nagging suspicion that there might be something going on between her and Greyson. Though that seemed improbable. I couldn’t imagine Greyson ever doing something like that to Cali.

I mean, it wasn’t like Kendall wasn’t smoking hot. She was. Objectively so. And a total badass. And if Greyson *were* to wander off in Kendall’s direction, that might clear a path for me to regain Cali’s trust. But then again, there was Ava to think about.

Shit. I had to stop thinking about it. *All* of it.

And I wasn’t going to say anything to Greyson about any of it—as tempting as it was. I couldn’t base such a huge accusation on nothing more than a weird feeling. And—truthfully—since the wolf-swap, *everything* felt weird in some way. Nothing I felt seemed completely reliable.

As the smell of stinky weed faded, I was able to pick up another scent on the wind. This one was equally annoying, but also familiar.

“Hang on,” I said to Ava, putting a hand on her arm to stop her.

“What is it?” she wondered.

I took a deep breath, then nodded, certain. “It’s Swift’s scent.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yep.” I hooked left and powered through a small knot of people with Ava hot on my heels.

Almost immediately we ran into another group, these people on decorated bikes.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered, annoyed. I stood still, letting the bikes pass by.

“Hello there.” A tall guy in a leather jacket and blond bun braked, stopping right in front of Ava. He leaned back in his seat and eyed her, slowly looking her up and down. “How about a ride,” he said, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

My hackles immediately went up, and I went into defense mode.

“I don’t think I have the time,” Ava said with a rueful chuckle.

“Come on, sweetheart, sometimes you gotta make time,” the guy said. He didn’t move, and with the other bikes passing us on all sides, he was boxing us in, making it impossible for us to move. This was intentional, and my hand curled into a fist. I figured I could just deck this asshole, and Ava and I could continue on our merry way.

But Ava laid a hand on my arm. *I got this.*

I looked over at her. I knew she could handle herself, but that wasn’t the point. Man Bun was hitting on *my* mate—right in front of me—and he should pay the price.

I wanted for the instinctive anger to surge up in me, but, to my surprise, nothing happened. And I suddenly knew exactly why—it was Greyson’s fucking wolf.

Ava leaned toward Man Bun, giving him a small, intimate smile, and it instantly made my blood boil to see it aimed at anyone besides me. “Just because I can’t, doesn’t mean I don’t want to,” she said coyly. She shook her long dark hair back from her face. “But maybe I could catch up with you later?”

It was obvious it was just a ploy to get him to leave, but it made me sick to watch.

The guy looked at Ava once more, taking his time, then nodded. “Yeah, later. I’ll find you.”

She smiled again. “Not if I find you first.”

Seething, I watched the guy ride away. He should be leaving with blood on his lips, not that shit-eating grin.

I looked over at Ava, who had threaded her way out of the bike parade and started walking again. “Did you do that to make me jealous?” I asked her.

“What?” she asked, looking over at me in surprise.

“Maybe as payback for you thinking I was jealous about Kendall and Greyson?”

She shook her head. “We didn’t come here to fight, X, or to raise suspicions. We came here to get your wolf back. Stop acting jealous. That guy wasn’t that hot, and you need to pick up Swift’s scent again.”

I stared at her in wonder for a moment. Then I laughed. “You always know how it is, don’t you, Ava?”

She flashed a smile at me. “Always, X. Now find Swift.”

I shook my head and took a deep breath. There, on the edge of the breeze, was the scent. “That way,” I said, nodding to the left.

As we walked, the scent grew stronger and stronger. We kept going until we hit a flat patch of sand. Sitting in a semicircle was a group of guys, seated, all holding fishing poles.

Ava stopped and stared at them in shock. “What the *fuck*?”

I stopped next to her. Of all the things we’d seen today, this had to be the strangest sight. I had no idea what the hell they were doing, but I did recognize the guy we’d come for, so I marched straight over to Swift.

“*Hey!* Asshole!” I shouted. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Swift turned around as though I had shouted his name. But when he looked up at me, I could see only confusion in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said, frowning. “Who are you?”

**Episode 5481**

**Greyson**

We were kissing. Kendall and I were *kissing*.

No—not just kissing. Kissing wasn’t an evocative enough word for the explosion happening between us. Kendall and I were trying to *devour* each other.

I couldn’t believe it was happening…but my head was spinning, and I couldn’t get either thing to stop.

With the feeling that I was sinking into the floor, I pushed my tongue between her lips, and hers parted against mine. I slid my tongue in, tasting the cherry jam and honey of her mouth. My hands moved of their own accord as I reached for her waist, pulling her tight against me. I clutched her to me, and she pressed herself closer. My whole body reacted to her nearness and her scent and the feel of her shape against mine. My whole body—but not my wolf.

It was Xavier’s wolf, I remembered, and he was *not* happy about this.

*What about Cali?* he seemed to ask. *What are you doing?*

The question tugged on something in the back of my mind, but my head was swimming. Drugs? Didn’t I accidentally take some drugs?

The thought was so fuzzy that it was easy to shove those nagging thoughts away. What I wanted was right here in my arms.

*Be honest with yourself*, a dark voice said. *You’ve craved this. You’ve craved* her*.*

I kept kissing her.

Shifting on the pillows, she stood on her knees, moving closer to me. She pulled my shirt free from my jeans and slipped her hands inside, running them up my chest, then around to my back.

I could feel the soft dig of her nails on my back, and it drove me crazy. I wanted more—I wanted it *all*. Her smell was overwhelming—sweet with a hint of sharpness. She felt hot and powerful in my arms, like holding a bolt of lightning. It was sexy and terrifying at the same time, and my grip tightened on her.

She liked this and made a satisfied moaning sound into my mouth.

God, my whole body felt hot and tight, like I was going to explode at any moment. My hands slid up her ribs, under her crop top as I teased the softness of her breasts. She gasped, but her breath blended with mine, so I couldn’t tell the difference between my exhale and her inhale.

Only one thing was clear in my mind. We were two beings that needed to become one. Every inch of her skin seemed to hold miracles, and I wanted to discover them all.

Rational thought was gone. I was consumed by want, and that we were surrounded by people seemed like the least important thing in the world. I slid a hand down, feeling the supple curve of her ass.

“Oh *fuck*,” she moaned, and threaded a hand into my hair, pulling hard enough I hissed.

The world narrowed down to this—Kendall and her lips, her body, and her hands. Everything else in the world was a faded memory.

“*Fuck*,” she breathed again, arching back so her hips pressed into mine.

“There’s an idea,” I slurred, easing down to her chest and kissing the soft skin of the top of her breasts.

The world around us continued to swirl as I ran my hand up her leg, grasping above her knee and pulling her closer. She understood what I was doing in an instant. She straddled me, closing any remaining space between us.

Faintly, something like an alarm starting going off in the back of my mind. This wasn’t right. I shouldn’t be doing this—right?

The alarm sound got louder, and I shook my head, unable to pinpoint where it was coming from. What was that? Was it in my head? Or outside?

“We should stop,” I murmured, kissing my way down her neck. “You have to tell me to stop.”

She leaned in and bit my earlobe. “If you stop, I’ll kill you with my bare hands.”

I groaned and—grabbing her hips—pulled her down hard into my lap. I pulled her in for another kiss, driving my tongue into her mouth as I mapped her body with my hands. I flipped her, pushing her down on the pillows before stretching long on top of her. I pressed into her, crushing her body with mine.

She purred with pleasure and pulled me down. “*More*,” she moaned and wrapped her legs around my waist. She had just started to grind against me when she let out a shocked, pained gasp.

My head was spinning like a top, but this cleared my mind for a moment. What were we doing like this? What was going on?

Head spinning, I pulled back, blinking, bracing my hands on either side of her. “Kendall?” I asked, confused. “Are you alright?”

She shook her head, like she was trying to wake up. “I—I don’t know. I think I rolled onto something.”

“What kind of something?”

“I don’t know. Something sharp,” she said, her voice barely audible.

I pulled myself to sitting, then pulled her after me, frowning. “What do you mean?”

She put her hand on her back, near her waist, and when she pulled it away, I saw that her palm was smeared with blood.

“Shit, you’re bleeding.”

But she didn’t appear to be listening to me. She didn’t appear to be listening to anything. She was staring, transfixed, at the blood on her hand. Her eyes were wide, and when I looked, I saw that her purple eyes were nearly black. Her pupils were so dilated they nearly took over her whole iris, leaving only a thin rim of purple visible.

“Kendall? Are you okay? What did you roll onto?” I asked.

But she didn’t answer me. I didn’t even think she heard me. She just kept staring at the blood.

Then she started to whimper. It was so unexpected I was sure I was imagining it. But when she began to breathe hard—nearly hyperventilating—I knew I wasn’t just imagining things.

“It’s okay, let me just see what happened—” I started, but when I reached for her, she yanked herself away from my hands, as though she was terrified that I was going to hurt her.

“No!” she cried and skittered away from me. She huddled into a corner, pulling her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around her legs. It was like she was trying to fold in on herself.

When I got closer to her, I could hear that she was crying.

“Mom,” she wailed quietly. “Dad? Where are you? Mom? I’m all alone. Please, please, please don’t let them hurt me! No! *Please!* Don’t hurt me too!”

I crouched down next to her. My own head was still spinning, but I tried to focus on her pale, terrified face. “Kendall? Can you hear me?”

“Don’t let them find you,” she whispered to herself. Her eyes were open, but a million miles away as she stared forward. “Keep quiet. Don’t let them find you. Just stay quiet. Don’t let them find you. Keep quiet!”

“Kendall!” I said, putting a hand on her shoulder. I just wanted her to see me—to notice I was there so she knew she wasn’t alone, but this was the wrong move.

With a terrified gasp, she jerked away from me, backing away. But she was already in a corner of the large space, so there was nowhere else to go. Her eyes darted around as she tried to further curl into herself.

The music in the tent changed, and the new song began with a deep, thumping beat. This seemed to only agitate Kendall even more, and her eyes looked past me, like she was scanning for an exit. I thought of the size of the festival outside, and how if she ran away—high as a kite and scared out of her mind—how hard it would be for me to find her again. Nearly impossible. And how vulnerable it would leave her.

I’d never thought of Kendall as vulnerable, but I’d never seen her like this.

I put my hands on her shoulders, forcing her to look at me. “Hey! Listen to me! Kendall! Whatever’s happening to you, you need to snap out of it. Now!”

Nothing happened.

I gave her shoulders a rough shake. “Kendall!”

I didn’t know what I’d done, but it seemed to do the trick. She finally met my eyes, and when she did, I saw that she had come back to herself. She looked normal again, and her pupils had already started to shrink.

“Grey?” she murmured, looking baffled.

“Yeah,” I said, with a relieved breath. “Yeah, it’s me. I’m here with you. You’re okay.”

She blinked in a vacant sort of way. “Where—where am I?” she asked, looking around.

“We’re at a party. At that festival. Remember? Are you okay?” I asked.

“*Okay?*” she repeated, like she didn’t understand the question.

“Yeah. What the hell just happened?” I demanded.

Her eyes changed again. They didn’t get vacant this time, but they got angry.

Purple eyes flashing, she got quickly to her feet. She looked around, then stormed over to where one of the waiters stood. She grabbed the guy by the lapel and gave him a brutal shake.

“Kendall!” I called, but she ignored me, glowering at the waiter.

“What was it?” she demanded.

“What?” the guy asked, looking baffled by her anger.

“What did you do to us?!”

**Episode 5482**

“Lola!” I screamed, chasing her through the thick festival crowd. “Lola! Where are you going? What are you doing? You’re acting ridiculous! Come back!”

But she didn’t come back. I struggled to keep up with her as she threaded her way through the crowd. I kept my eye on her, though, and saw that her arms were flailing, and her feet seemed unsteady beneath her. It was clear Lola was still high as hell, and I didn’t understand why.

I was coming down from the drugs myself, so what was up with Lola? Maybe she’d had more to drink than I had? I really didn’t know.

Lola kept running, and I finally realized where she was heading. She was making a beeline for one of the stages, where a band was playing. For a moment I thought she was going to join the knot of people moshing in front of the stage to the deep bass rhythms of the band, but she edged around them and—to my shock—pulled herself up onstage.

Then, before anyone could stop her, she grabbed the microphone from the lead singer—a tall guy with long brown hair who looked too surprised to say anything.

Feedback squeaked through the speakers as Lola stepped to the front of the stage, looking hard at the crowd.

“What are you doing?!” someone yelled.

“Let Dust Cloud play, crazy lady!”

“We came here for the music!”

Lola ignored the shouts from the crowd and squinted into the distance. “*Swift!*” she shouted. “Swift?! Are you here?! We need your help with our wolves!”

My eyes went wide with shock, but before I could do anything, Jay sprinted past me, launched himself onto the stage, and grabbed Lola around the waist, wrestling the microphone from her hand before she could say anything else.

Thank god.

There were a *lot* of humans in this place, and it would be extremely bad to make this the moment we exposed the existence of werewolves to them.

But the lead singer of the band—Dust Cloud, apparently—started to laugh, looking delighted. “Hell yeah! We’re a bunch of wolves here!” He grabbed the microphone back from Jay and howled into it.

The crowd went nuts for this and howled right back at him. And at a signal from the lead singer, Dust Cloud broke into a cover of “Hungry Like the Wolf.”

This was a huge hit with the crowd, and the dancing began again.

When Jay managed to subdue Lola enough that he could pull her off the stage, I ran over to them.

Jay looked worse for wear—he was breathing hard, and his eyepatch was askew from the tussle onstage. He pushed Lola into my arms. “I’m going to go get her something to drink.”

“Make sure it’s not drugged,” I called after him as he walked away. Then I turned to Lola. “Are you okay?”

Lola didn’t answer—she was too busy trying to wrench out of my grip and reaching for the stage.

“Oh no, you don’t. Lola! Come with me,” I commanded, and dragged her away from the jumping, dancing crowd.

I pulled her behind the back of a vendor’s tent, and away from the crowd and the music, Lola’s face changed. Her eyes went blank, and she doubled over, bracing her hands on her knees.

“Lola? Are you okay?” I asked, worried by the sudden change.

Lola was breathing hard, and she coughed. She coughed again and put her hand up to cover her mouth. When she took her hand away, it was smeared with blood.

“Oh, my god!” I screamed. My heart raced, and I looked around, wondering where the hell Jay was.

*Greyson?! Can you hear me? Xavier?! Anyone! Can anyone hear me? Lola’s in trouble! Please come help me!*

But there was no response through the mind link.

I looked down in horror as Lola heaved again, coughing up even more blood. She spit on the dirt at our feet, staining it red.

“Oh god, that drug in the water must be deadly for wolves,” I murmured. I put my hand on Lola’s back, feeling the painful heaving of her body as she continued to cough.

“Cali?!” Jay called.

“Jay! Over here!” I cried desperately.

Jay casually walked over, holding a couple of bottles tucked into his arm and eating a hot dog. “Hey, why are you hiding back here?”

“Jay! Are you okay?!” I demanded.

He frowned at me. “What?” he asked through a mouthful of hot dog and bun.

“You drank the water too, and you’re a wolf, not a hybrid. How are you not sick?” I asked.

“Um, I feel fine,” he said, shoving the last of his hot dog in his mouth. “What are you talking about?”

He had another hot dog on the tray in his hand, and as he went to pick it up, I snatched it from him. “You ate hot dogs!”

“Yeah,” he said slowly, “but not, like, a lot. Like three. Which isn’t that many.”

I shook my head. “No, that’s not what I’m saying. You ate multiple hot dogs, and you feel fine, so I’m thinking for a werewolf, a lot of food might counteract the drug—or at least dilute it. One helped me, but I’m half-Fae, so as a hybrid, maybe she needs more.” I patted Lola’s shoulder. “Lola, you need to eat this other hot dog.”

Lola shook her head as she coughed again.

Jay’s eyes went wide as he watched his mate spit a mouthful of blood into the dirt at her feet. “Oh shit. Lola! Just eat the hot dog!”

He grabbed it from me and held it to Lola’s mouth, but she groaned and pushed it away.

“Don’t want it,” she slurred.

“Lola! Eat the dog!” Jay bellowed, holding the hot dog against her lips.

Finally, Lola took a small bite, though she kept her eyes closed.

“Now chew it!” I shouted, feeling desperate.

Lola groaned. Her eyes were still closed, but I had a feeling she was rolling them. “Stop,” she muttered. “I know how to eat a hot dog.”

Jay kept pushing, and after a few minutes Lola had eaten the hot dog and about half of another. Her eyes blinked open, and she took a deep breath, looking almost normal again.

“Whoa, I’m feeling better,” she said, giving her head a little shake. “Thanks.”

Jay still looked worried. “I didn’t want to risk bringing you any water, and the only other thing I could find was this energy drink,” he said, holding out a bottle of antifreeze-colored liquid.

Lola took it, looking horrified. “This looks disgusting.”

“I know, but you need to drink something,” Jay reasoned.

Lola sighed but shrugged and opened the bottle. She took a long pull, then winced at the taste. “It tastes worse than it looks. I’m never doing drugs again.”

“Yeah, same,” I agreed. “Those hallucinations were intense. No, thank you.”

Jay looked around. “We should start looking for Xavier and Greyson. This place is so giant, we’re going to need to regroup.”

I nodded and pulled out my phone. I dialed Greyson’s number, but he didn’t pick up. I looked down at my phone with a frown. He wasn’t responding to the mind link, and now he wasn’t answering his phone. I was starting to get worried.

“If we can’t find them, maybe we should try looking for Swift,” I said, nervously biting the corner of my lip.

“You’re looking for Swift?”

I looked over quickly as a man stepped smoothly beside me. He was older—maybe in his fifties or sixties, though it was hard to tell. He was thin with long, stringy hair.

“Um, yeah,” I said warily. “We are.”

His eyes looked at me hungrily. “I could take you to him, but it’ll cost you.”

I frowned. “And how do you know Swift?”

The man smiled, showing that he was missing one of his front teeth. “Oh, I was just with him. We were smoking hookah and feeling the energy of the universe just a minute ago, right in that tent over there.” He pointed to a tent about twenty feet away.

I looked over at Jay, who shrugged. When I glanced at Lola, she still looked a little out of it, but she nodded.

“Fine,” she said, her voice raspy from all the coughing, “if you lead us to Swift, we’ll pay you. But you’re not getting a cent until we see him.”

“Of course!” the man said, smiling widely. “I wouldn’t expect anything else. Right this way.”

Jay, Lola, and I followed the thin man toward the tent he’d pointed to. The tent was dusty, and the top sagged, but I figured we didn’t have much to lose. If Swift wasn’t here, we’d just keep looking.

But when I pushed the front flap aside, I looked inside and realized the tent was completely empty.

Whipping around, I glared at the old man. “What’s going on here?”

The thin man was already stepping toward me, and with a swiftness that shocked me, he wrapped his arms around me, holding a switchblade to my neck. “Festivals like this ain’t cheap,” he said, shaking. “So give me all your money!”

**Episode 5483**

**Xavier**

“Do you *really* not know who I am?” I asked.

Swift blinked up at me, his eyes wide and blank. “What?”

“*What?*”

“Did you just say something, man?” he asked.

I blew out a frustrated breath. Swift was high as a jet plane, and this whole conversation was going nowhere fast. Of course this fucker knew who I was. He was just too high.

Ava stepped next to me and grabbed Swift’s arm. “This is bullshit, and we don’t have time for it. We need you, so let’s go.”

Couldn’t have said it better myself.

Swift’s eyes widened. “Hey! Pretty girl! I like your style, but let’s just calm down, okay?”

Her blue eyes narrowed in a way I knew meant trouble. “I am *not* your pretty girl, asshole. And we don’t have time for this.”

“Why not?” Swift asked, his words slurring together. “What’s the hurry? We’ve got all the time in the world, pretty baby.”

“Hey, don’t fucking talk to her like that,” I growled.

A muscle in Ava’s jaw twitched at Swift’s endearment. “If you lost your memory due to all the drugs I’m sure you’ve taken, then we’ll help you get it back. Maybe a kick to your nuts? Surely you don’t need them, but we need *you* to help *us* first.”

Swift’s smile went crooked. “I’m always in a helpful mood, but I just need to finish fishing first,” he said, pointing to the fishing poles.

I rolled my eyes. “Fucking hell, man. This is a tent. You’re not actually fishing, you know.”

Swift frowned at me, looking offended. “What are you on, man? We’re in a boat on a beautiful lake. Can’t you see it? Open your eyes!”

Ava made a low growling sound, obviously deeply annoyed at the direction of the conversation. And I couldn’t say that I blamed her. This was ridiculous.

Swift looked between us and shook his head. “You two are obviously tense. You need to relax.” He leaned toward me, pulling my shirt so he could whisper into my ear. “Hey, man, maybe you and this beautiful girl could go play some slutty mini-golf. That really helps people relax.”

I frowned at him. “Play what?”

Giggling, Swift pointed out of the tent flap and—sure enough—in the distance I saw what had to have been the slutty mini-golf. There was a full mini-golf course out on the sand, complete with the mini mountain range and windmill. And strolling among it was a bunch of half-naked people holding mini putters and getting *very* cozy with each other.

“Yeah, maybe later, man,” I said with a sigh. “Right now I really just need to talk to you.”

I was really sick of having Greyson’s wolf inside of me. It was like having an annoying houseguest who refused to leave, and I was over it. I just wanted my wolf back.

I grabbed Swift’s arm to lead him out of the tent, but the guy pulled himself from my grasp with enough force that he stumbled back.

“Hey, chill out,” one of the other hippies said, getting to his feet with a frown.

Fucking great. This was exactly what I needed. To get into a dusty altercation with a bunch of stoned hippies.

“Don’t worry about it. We have business with Swift,” I growled, and grabbed for him again.

But the hippies *did* seem worried about it. Five of them stood up and stepped in front of the tent flap, blocking my exit.

“We need Swift here,” one of them said. He had red hair, a long red beard, and eyes that were all pupils.

“For what?” Ava demanded.

“We need him for our fishing team,” another guy said. “Swift’s an integral member.”

“Oh my god, that’s not even a thing,” she snapped, clearly at the end of her rope.

But this was the wrong thing to say to a group of drugged-out hippies who clearly took their fishing very seriously.

“Hey!”

“Yeah, what the hell do you know, girlie?”

One of the hippies who hadn’t spoken looked pissed and flexed his thick arms in a menacing way.

Shit. I did *not* need this to unravel into some kind of hippie vs werewolf brawl, so I stepped forward, in front of Ava, who’s eyes were flashing dangerously.

“Hey, listen, we’re not here to ruin anyone’s fishing day,” I said, trying to sound reasonable. “But you have to calm the fuck down and stop talking to her that way, or we’re going to have a problem. Got it?”

*You need to calm down*, I mind linked to Ava. *I know they’re being assholes, but there are a lot of them, and we don’t have time for this. Let’s just get Swift and get out of here.*

Behind me, I heard Ava sigh heavily. But when she stepped next to me again, I saw that her face had changed. She was smiling a coy smile up at the largest hippie and gazing at him with manufactured admiration.

“Can we borrow Swift for just a little while?” she purred. “We just need him for a *little* bit. We’ll even leave his fishing pole, so we don’t mess up your…*team*.”

The largest hippie’s eyes had gone wide, and a couple of the others had started to look hungrily at Ava. Her little act seemed to have done the trick, and they all nodded.

“Okay, you can take him,” the guy with the red beard said.

“But you have to leave his fishing pole,” another hippie put in emphatically.

She batted her eyelashes. “Sure thing.”

I managed to not roll my eyes at her obviousness and turned to carefully extract the fishing pole from Swift’s hands.

“What are you doing?” Swift asked, looking baffled by everything going on around him.

“Don’t worry about it,” I muttered.

“But how are we doing it?”

“Doing what?” I asked irritably, trying to pry his fingers from the fishing pole.

“How are we walking on top of the lake?” Swift asked, looking around in wonder.

“Fucking incredible,” I muttered. This guy was so freaking high, but it seemed like a waste of time to try to reason with him. “We’re wearing special shoes, man. And so are you. Watch.”

As I pulled Swift to his feet, his face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Whoa!” he said, looking delighted. “Whoa! Look at me! This is amazing! Guys, watch me!”

The hippies had settled back into their seats and didn’t seem to notice as we led Swift from the tent.

Swift was walking with his arms out on either side of him, as though he was walking across a tightrope. He wobbled as he moved and giggled, muttering, “Walking on water! Fucking amazing!”

Ava shot me a look. *This guy is so high. How is he supposed to help us when he’s like this?*

*I know, he’s totally fucked. Let’s just start with getting him out of here.*

We led Swift out of the tent, and when we were a few feet away, Ava looked over at me.

“Okay, so what are we going to do with him?” she asked.

I looked over at Swift with a sigh. Now that we’d stopped walking, he was moving in small circles, weaving on his feet.

I pushed a hand through my hair. “Maybe we just have to wait for whatever he’s on to wear off, then he’ll recognize us.”

Ava eyed Swift. “Judging from how high he is now, waiting it out could take forever. And who’s to say he’s not going to take more drugs in the meantime? Look where we are,” she said, flinging her arms out, indicating the whole crazy festival around us.

She wasn’t wrong, but I shook my head stubbornly. “Let’s just keep an eye on him then.”

“You mean *kidnap* him?” Ava asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Isn’t that what you were practically suggesting?” I asked. “Just think of it as…keeping an eye on him.”

Swift stopped walking and frowned. “Fishing is boring.”

“You got that right,” I grumbled.

His face lit up again. “I want to play mini-golf!”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I muttered as Swift took off toward the course he’d pointed out earlier.

But I went after him, Ava following behind.

When we reached the course, instead of grabbing a putter from one of the bins near the first hole, Swift ran onto the course toward the mini windmill and climbed inside.

“What are you doing, man?!” a short guy groaned. He had just been about to make his shot into the windmill.

“You’re upsetting the flow of the course,” a grey-haired woman in a tube top complained.

They looked annoyed, but they moved on, leaving Swift to do whatever he was doing inside the windmill.

“Hey!” I barked, walking over to it. “Come out of there.”

“No!” Swift yelled back. “I’m staying. I’m Don Quixote!”

Ava looked pissed. “He fought windmills, Swift. He didn’t hide inside of them.”

“Then I’m Sancho Panza!”

“What an idiot,” she muttered. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Yeah, *that’s* the problem, Ava. His shaky grasp of literature.”

“Well, it doesn’t help,” she grumbled.

We stood there for a moment, staring at the windmill.

“What should we do?”

Ava shrugged. “Smoke him out?”

“Come inside!” Swift called to us. “You come in here!”

I shook my head. “We really don’t have time for this, Swift. I need your help to get my wolf back. Remember? You’ve done that before. Now we need you to dig deep into this hippie-dippie shit you’ve got going on and do it again.”

There was a long pause. Then Swift answered in a voice that sounded strangely clear and sober:

“Join me and find the answers you seek…”

**Episode 5484**

**Greyson**

I needed to do something, and fast. Kendall looked furious, and it looked as though she was seconds away from attacking this waiter, who stood a head shorter than her. Her purple eyes were big and wild, and—as I watched—her long nails grew even longer.

Holy shit—was she *shifting*?

I needed to act fast before she did something stupid—like wolf-out in front of this whole festival. I couldn’t let that happen. But could I make sure it couldn’t? My head still felt fuzzy, my limbs sort of heavy, like I was moving through molasses.

Still, somehow, I stepped over and wrapped my hands around her waist. “We’re fine here,” I said, dragging her off the waiter. “Sorry about…all this.”

Looking shocked, the waiter scurried away, and I turned my back on the staring crowd and faced Kendall, still holding onto her.

“Hey, Kendall, look at me,” I commanded.

Her eyes were flashing, but they still looked far away. She was still high from whatever the hell that mist had been. I gave her a little shake.

“Kendall. I know you can hear me. There was something in that mist. We aren’t in our right minds,” I said. “Look at me. Just look into my eyes. It’ll be okay.”

And finally, after a moment, she did. She blinked and her eyes met mine. She looked startled, like she hadn’t realized I was there.

“Greyson?” she murmured. “What are you—what happened?”

“I think you were hallucinating. You started to bleed, and it freaked you out. You were practically crying. Saying something about your parents, I think?”

She winced at that and shook her head. Then she put her fingers to her lips, like she was remembering. She looked up at me, her eyes wide with shock. “Wait—did we—what did we—*oh shit*.”

Slowly, it dawned on me exactly what had happened before the blood. Everything started to come back to me. I cleared my throat.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling very uncomfortable.

I had kissed Kendall. Hell—I had more than just kissed her. That made it sound like I gave her a peck on the cheek, and that was not what happened. I had been on top of her, feeling her up and shoving my tongue down her throat in the middle of a fucking festival.

My head spun as I remembered her smell and the feel of her beneath me. What the hell was *that*? Cali hadn’t even crossed my mind.

What the fuck was wrong with me? What man did that to his girlfriend? To his mate?

There was a knot at the pit of my stomach, but I shook my head. “We were drugged. It had to have been that mist—it wasn’t our choice.”

Kendall gave me a hard look. She shook her head like she was trying to process what I was saying. “Yeah, I think you’re right. Let’s just get the hell out of here. This whole place is messing with my head.”

She started to move toward the door of the tent but tripped over a pillow and stumbled. I caught her arm before she fell. Was she feeling as heavy-limbed as I was?

“Let’s just hang on for a second,” I said. “Wait for the worst of it to wear off.”

Kendall yanked her arm from my grip and her purple eyes flashed angrily again. “I’m *fine*,” she snapped. “I don’t need a fucking babysitter, Grey.”

I gritted my teeth and grabbed her arm again. She didn’t like it, but I didn’t care. She was still altered. Still high. I wasn’t going to just let her wander away, lest we wanted what happened with the waiter to happen again.

She was angry, but I suspected at least part of it was because of what I had seen from her when she was hallucinating.

I looked down at her. “Are you really okay, Kendall?”

“It’s none of your damn business,” she snapped coldly.

I sighed. “Maybe it’s not. I’m just trying to make sure you’re okay and that you’re not still being affected by those drugs.” I put my hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. I wanted to see if they were still dilated, but she leaned away from me like she didn’t want me so close.

“Stop it,” she commanded. “Stop trying to take care of me. I’ll deal with my own shit, just like I always have.”

I couldn’t miss the trace of bitterness in her voice, and I sighed again, but decided to just let it go for now. Just because I wanted to help her didn’t mean that she would accept it. Or even need it. She was right about one thing—she did always handle her own shit.

Stepping away from me, she straightened her clothes, which had gotten slightly askew from our make-out. She tried to smooth her hair, but that was a lost cause. That was too tousled, and even without a mirror, she seemed to know it.

Finally, she sighed and dropped her hands, giving up.

“I should have known better than to come here so unprepared,” she said in a frustrated voice. She looked around at the raging party and shook her head. “I’ve trained for so many situations with the MIB, but I just didn’t see this coming. I’m failing my own training right now.”

“This wasn’t an MIB mission,” I pointed out. “You weren’t in the mindset going in. Anway, you’re allowed to do things differently than your training indicates.”

“When I became an agent, I promised myself that I’d never lose control of things ever again. I swore it to myself.” Her eyes flashed, but this time I recognized that she was furious with herself.

“We were drugged, I don’t think you were even in your right mind to fall back on your training.”

She shook her head. “I just need to be stronger. I need to be better than this.”

I frowned at her. “Is that what being an MIB agent means to you?”

“Of course,” she said, not looking at me. She shook her head. “You just don’t get it, Greyson.”

“Then help me understand,” I said. I put my hand on her arm and pulled her around so she would finally look at me. “What even made you become an agent in the first place?”

She looked at me for a long moment, then stepped closer, her eyes practically sparkling. “I could ask you the same thing.”

I leaned back, away from her. “What are you talking about?” I asked. “I’m not with the MIB.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she said. She narrowed her eyes. “Why did you become an Alpha?”

I was taken aback by the intensity of the question, but I tried to answer honestly. “Because I thought it was the right thing to do. The only thing I *could* do to protect the people I cared most about.”

My brothers. My pack. My mate.

My heart twinged again at the thought of Cali. What I’d done was so fucked up—drugs or not. I did understand where Kendall was coming from. I should’ve been stronger and able to resist whatever they’d done to me.

I should’ve never kissed Kendall.

“And?” she pressed, her eyes never leaving my face.

“And what?”

“And is it? Is it still the right thing to do?”

My head was still fuzzy from the drugs, and maybe that was why I answered more honestly than I intended to. “Sometimes it doesn’t feel that way.”

She looked surprised. “Why not?”

“I’ve been forced to make some hard decisions,” I admitted. “Sometimes there have been times when my love for my mate has been at war with the right choice for the pack. Sometimes I wonder if my love for her made me neglect the pack. I want to do both well, but I feel like I am falling short. A lot. There were times when I considered giving it up—just letting someone else take over. But now my brother joined the Samara pack, so I don’t think about it anymore. I could never leave the Redwoods without a good Alpha replacement. If I ever decided that leaving was what I really wanted.”

Kendall didn’t speak, and in her silence, I thought for a moment about the feelings talking about this brought up for me. We had our problems, my brother and me, but deep down I knew that Xavier was the only other wolf I’d ever trust to take over the Redwood pack.

But I wasn’t going to tell Kendall that. I’d already said too much. It had to be the drugs that made me so chatty.

I cleared my throat, wishing I hadn’t said anything at all.

Kendall stayed quiet for another moment, then spoke quietly. “I don’t believe you could ever fall short, Grey.”

I looked over at her in surprise. “Thanks.” I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. It was such a nice thing to say. Supportive, even. It was strange.

She looked up at me, meeting my eyes. “But I know how that feels.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded. “It’s how I feel sometimes.”

Now I was really shocked. I couldn’t believe Kendall would ever say something so vulnerable. First she was nice, and now this? It was all so unlike her.

Suddenly there was a gasp from the crowd around us, and I looked over to the tent flap. A massive man stood in the entryway to the tent. His shoulders were so wide I wondered if he’d have to turn sideways to get inside, and his hands looked like two cement blocks on the ends of his arms.

They were both balled into fists.

Behind him stood the waiter Kendall had attacked, and as I watched, the waiter pointed to the two of us.

Well, shit.

The burly guy took one step forward and grabbed my arm in a vise-like grip. “You need to go,” he growled. “*Now.*”

**Episode 5485**

The old man’s blade hovered beneath my throat, and my whole body went into panic mode. My heart rate ticked up and my head started to spin. My arms and hands tingled with magic as the terror of the situation set in.

But I gritted my teeth and forced myself to think. I knew I needed to get away, but I also knew the old guy was deranged. I had to be careful. Using my magic was a tempting idea—the festival crowds were a little thinned out here, but there were still hundreds of people around. I didn’t want to expose my abilities here, out in the open…

I tried to take a step away, but the guy held me fast.

He twisted his head around, and I caught sight of his eyes, which were completely bloodshot. They were wide and furious, and I could tell in an instant he was in some kind of pharmaceutical rage. It seemed so clear, now that I was looking at him. How had I not noticed that before?

I tried again to pull away from him, but his arms tightened around me. He was so thin he was nearly gaunt, but he was freakishly strong, and the arms around me were as solid as iron bands.

“Going somewhere?” he demanded, sounding like a demented clown.

“Let me go!” I said, squirming in his grasp.

“Money! *Now!*” he shrieked.

Should I just use my Fae magic and hit him with a blast of energy? *That* would get him off my back in a hurry. Surely we could come up with some excuse… Everyone was high, weren’t they?

But as it turned out, I didn’t have to. Her own eyes flashing with fury, Lola reared back and *lunged* at the guy, sinking her teeth into his neck.

The guy let out a shocked scream and tried to swipe at her with the knife. But in doing so, he let go of me, so I reached out and grabbed his wrist, stopping him from going after Lola. I yanked the knife from his hand as Jay threw himself at Lola.

“Lola!” he yelled out. “*Stop!*”

There was a moment of complete chaos as all four of us tussled—I was holding the knife, trying to keep it away from the bandit’s grasping hands. Lola was going after the guy, and Jay was trying to get the guy away from Lola’s furious clutches. The old man was struggling against her, but Lola had her hands on his skinny arms, her teeth in his neck, and she looked *determined*.

She also looked hungry, and my anxiety rose when I saw the look in her eyes. With her altered mindset at the moment, I was worried she might do something really horrible to this guy. I didn’t like him—he’d threatened me with a knife for goodness’ sake—but I didn’t want Lola to *kill* him.

I reached for her, but powered by the engine of her rage, Lola shoved me, knocking me to the ground. I hit hard but managed to pop back up just as Jay finally managed to unlatch Lola from the guy.

Pale as a sheet, the guy dropped to the ground, unconscious. He hadn’t looked great when he’d approached us, and now he looked even worse. *Especially* with the bleeding puncture marks on his neck.

Lola wiped her mouth. “He was going to hurt Cali,” she said breathlessly, without a trace of apology.

Jay sighed as he looked down at the guy. “Okay, but what are we going to do with him now? He looks—bad. Like he was just attacked by a vampire.”

Lola and I stared at Jay.

He rolled his eye under our disbelieving gaze. “You know what I mean.”

I looked down at the guy, rubbing my arms where he’d held me tightly. “Do you think he actually knew where Swift was, or was he just messing with us?”

Lola snorted. “He was obviously just messing with us. He was going to rob us no matter what, then he heard us talking about Swift and took a chance.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.” I sighed. “But *now* how are we going to find Swift?”

We all stood for a moment, looking down at the unconscious bandit at our feet. Finally, Jay bent over. He grabbed the scarf the guy wore around his neck and pulled it up, wrapping it around the guy’s head, making it look like a fashion accessory, rather than us trying to hide an attempted murder. Then, with a groan, he picked the guy up and threw him over his shoulder.

“Come on,” he grumbled.

Lola and I exchanged a surprised look as we followed after Jay.

But we had only gotten a couple of steps before a woman in an official festival t-shirt and an orange safety vest stopped in front of us.

“And what are you all doing?” she asked, looking at the man over Jay’s shoulder.

Shit. We were caught.

I felt my shoulders tense, but Jay just laughed.

“Oh, you know how it is,” he said casually. “Our friend just passed out. We’re just taking him to get some water.”

The woman eyed Jay suspiciously. She didn’t look like she bought his story, and my mind spun, wondering if we were going to have to make a run for it.

Then—unexpectedly—the woman’s face broke into a smile. “That’s real nice of you all. He’s lucky to have friends like you. There’s a bar over there,” she said, pointing. Then her smile grew conspiratorial, and she leaned closer to me. “Ask them for their *special* lemonade for something extra.”

I forced a smile. “Oh, okay. Great. Thanks. I’ll definitely ask for the *special* lemonade.”

The woman grinned. “You didn’t hear it from me! But you won’t be sorry.”

I nodded and, giving Jay a push, hurried away.

As the guy over Jay’s shoulder really didn’t need a drink, and we *definitely* didn’t need any special lemonade, we passed by the bar without stopping.

A little farther on we came upon a group spread out across a sandy expanse of ground. There were blankets spread out, and someone was strumming a guitar. There was a group of hippies sitting together, smoking a hookah.

“This looks like as good a place as any,” Jay muttered, leaning over to drop the bandit onto one of the blankets.

I bent and felt for a pulse. He had one, and it felt fine.

“How does he look?” Lola asked, stepping closer.

“Fine,” I said, pulling away his scarf and surprised to find that he did look fine. “Now that I look at him, he looks about as good as he did when he held a knife to my throat. He just looks like he passed out.”

“Which he did,” Lola pointed out.

“Yeah, after you drained his blood.”

Lola shrugged.

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s get out of here, before someone says something.”

We hurried away, and I prayed no one had seen our faces.

“So, what now?” I wondered, looking around at the crowded festival.

Jay shrugged. “Either we go looking for Greyson and Xavier, or we go looking for Swift.”

I sighed. “I’m worried about finding Greyson and Xavier again, but if we don’t find Swift soon, then what was the point of even coming here?”

Lola glanced around. “Should we split up again—”

“*NO!*” Jay and I yelled in union.

Lola held up her hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, fine. Geez, it was only as suggestion.”

The wind kicked up, and I pushed a lock of hair out of my face.

*Greyson? Can you hear me? Greyson? Are you there?* I called out through the mind link.

Still nothing.

I heaved an annoyed sigh. Was it that he was too far away to hear me through the mind link, or was he just ignoring me?

I pulled out my phone, determined to try that again. But when I dialed, there was still no answer from Greyson. I was about to dial Xavier’s number when a woman sprinted past me. She was immediately followed by six other runners, one of whom rammed into my shoulder, jostling my phone from my hand.

It dropped to the ground. “Shit,” I muttered, and as I picked it up, I glared at the steady stream of people jogging past.

Lola reached out and grabbed a girl with tight black curls. “Hey, where’s everyone going?” she asked. “What’s going on?”

The girl giggled. “There’s a super hot guy naked on the windmill at the mini-golf course. We’re going over to see him.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Of course there is.” She looked around. “This fucking place.”

“Tell me about it—” Jay started.

“I want to go see him!” Lola finished.

“*Lola!*” Jay exclaimed, astonished.

I started walking after Lola, looking down at my phone, which had dirt embedded in the case.

“Um, ladies, where are we going?” Jay called. When we didn’t stop, he followed after us, grumbling in an annoyed way.

We walked a little way, then I felt Jay stop in his tracks.

“Oh, *holy shit*,” he muttered.

“What?” I asked, finally looking up from my phone. I looked at Jay, who pointed. I followed his point to the mini-golf course and felt my stomach drop.

Because—standing on top of the mini-sized windmill—stood Xavier Evers, wearing only his underwear.

**Episode 5486**

**Artemis**

I leaned back on my pillows with a gusty sigh. I was tired—my whole body was tired—but I wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t like I’d been doing any actual work on this trip, but I just felt exhausted.

I was tired of traveling. Part of me wished it could be over, but another part of me understood what we were doing. This trip—long as it was—was important for creating peace. Vital, even.

Embersy was a crucial place for trade in the Dark Fae territory, and it mattered that Kastian and I visited. We needed to be accepted and embraced, so this mattered.

I knew that the Fae courts had approved of our marriage, but would any of the Fae outside the courts feel the same?

Rubbing my eyes, I felt the surreal nature of that question in my bones. I had grown up outside the Fae courts. Hell—I had grown up like a feral fox. I’d been as far from the Fae courts as it was possible to be, and I didn’t know if a gesture like a royal visit was going to resonate with anyone.

I shook my head wearily. I used to like traveling, but this was different. I really didn’t like being a politician. Nothing about the elaborate planning and performance of it fit me well.

And I still had my worries. Worries about all of this—the wealth, the influence, and especially the power—all going to my head. Changing me in some way I might not notice right away. I could tell how everyone responded to me, leaping into action whenever I said a word. I was constantly surrounded with attendants who would act the moment I stirred, asking what I wanted and if they could do it for me.

I knew they were only trying to help, but it was strange and sometimes felt completely overwhelming. Sometimes I just wanted to take a piss without having to explain to fifteen consorts what I was doing.

This was just not the life I had envisioned for myself.

I stared upward at the top of my tent, glad at least that we had stopped for the time being. We were making our way into the mountains, and tonight the attendants had set up tents. But these weren’t the tents that the Redwood pack had stashed in a far corner of their basement. These tents were massive and elaborate, made of bright white fabric that was strong, but still managed to let in the evening breeze. These tents had windows and entrance vestibules. *These* were tents fit for royalty. Which made sense, because I—suddenly—was royalty.

Flipping onto my side, I looked out the window into the falling twilight. I could still remember my old life in the Fae world, when I would stay at an inn, or more often up in a tree for the night. I would scurry up and find a thick branch, trying to make use of what I had and hoping it wouldn’t rain.

A shadow appeared outside the tent, and a moment later Kastian stepped inside.

He looked me over. “Don’t you think it would be easier if we stayed in the same tent, wife?”

I glared at him. I knew he was trying to flirt with me, but it didn’t work, and I refused to give him so much as a smile in response.

He was objectively attractive. I had seen that the first time I’d met him. He had a strong jaw and soft, kissable lips, but I just didn’t feel anything for the guy. No temptation at all.

“No,” I said flatly, “we won’t be doing that.”

Kastian shrugged. “Well, you better hope no one finds out we’re in separate tents. What will the Fae think?” He smiled when he saw my frown deepen. He had made his point, which was the reason he had come in. “Sleep well, Ari.”

He left before I could snap back, and I pushed my head back onto the pillows. My thoughts went to Rishika and Marius. Who cared about the Fae? What would *they* think if I let Kastian stay in my tent?

They were behind the royal caravan, secretly following us. I knew this, and I wished I could be with them—wherever they were—instead of here, alone.

But I knew that wasn’t an option. If anyone found out that Rishika and Marius were following us, they could be in serious trouble.

Even knowing this, I stood, stepping to the window and looking into the sparse trees on the mountainside, wondering if I could spot them.

“Artemis?”

I looked behind me to see that Celeste had stepped into the tent. “Yes?”

She looked at me, then past me out the window. Her eyes narrowed, as though she suspected what I might be up to. “Remember your role, Artemis. You are here to show everyone that the Dark and Light Fae are now united.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I know. You have told me this no less than a *dozen times*, Celeste. I get it.”

She pressed her lips into a tight line. “If I say it often, it’s because it’s important. I worked very hard to get you into the position you are in, Artemis. If it fails, I will be deeply, *deeply* unhappy.”

*Unhappy* was an interesting word in its understatement. Judging from the look in her eyes, if this failed—if I failed—she was going to be pissed.

I shook my head. “Nice try, Celeste, but you don’t have the power to threaten me anymore.” And without waiting for a response, I turned and walked away, out of my tent.

Just outside my tent, I saw Adair standing with Tabitha. They were working together, struggling to put up their own tent.

“I’m not good at any of this camping stuff,” Tabitha sighed as she picked up a corner of the tent.

Adair grinned at her. “And that’s why you have me.”

I smiled at the two of them. I was glad that they were happy together, and that Adair was finally getting his divorce from Celeste. But seeing them together also made me yearn for the people who I cared about, and who cared about me.

Adair and Tabitha were so involved with their work that they hadn’t noticed me, and I stepped back, slipping away without saying anything to them.

There was forest just beyond the clearing where the tents were pitched, and I stepped into the trees. The woods were quiet, and I figured it would be nice to have a little alone time.

Or some time to *not* be alone.

I looked down, reaching back to my days as a tracker as I looked out for any signs of footprints.

They weren’t hard to spot, and when I found what I was looking for, I followed the prints deeper into the woods.

Rishika stepped out from behind an ancient oak when I drew near. “I knew you’d come when you got bored,” she said with a smile.

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I’ve been bored for hours.”

“I can imagine,” Rishika said sympathetically. “You’re meant to fight and track and hunt, not be a diplomat.”

I gave her a curious look. I knew her memory wasn’t completely back, but right now it felt as though it was. That was exactly the kind of thing the old Rishika would have said.

I looked around. “Where’s Marius?”

“He went to refill our water stores,” she told me. “He said we might not keep following the river as we traveled, and we were going to need fresh water.”

I nodded. “That makes sense.”

Then Rishika and I both fell silent. Now that we were alone, I realized I felt a little awkward. It was the way I’d been feeling around her ever since her memories disappeared. I still hoped she would get them back, and spending time together would help that…wouldn’t it?

“You’re shivering,” Rishika said. She stepped toward me and rubbed her hands up and down my arms, trying to warm me up.

“Oh, I’m okay,” I said, but I felt a tingle of excitement race down my spine at Rishika’s touch.

She slowed the movement so she was stroking my arms, and when she looked at me, she stopped completely. Our eyes locked for a moment. There was the hum of electricity between us, and—because she wasn’t moving—I leaned in and kissed her.

She was still for a moment, then leaned into me, too. She wrapped her hand around the back of my head and gave in, deepening the kiss.

And it felt *amazing*. I slid my arms around her waist, remembering how things used to be between us. Kissing her thrilled every nerve in my body, but thinking of how we used to be made my heart ache, so I tried to push the thought away. I sank deeper into the kiss, pulling at Rishika’s clothes, until I heard someone behind me cough.

Pulling quickly away, I whipped around, expecting it to be Marius back from the river with the water.

But it wasn’t the bounty hunter—it was my uncle.

Shit.

“Celeste is looking for you, Artemis,” Adair said quietly. “You should come back to the camp before she comes out looking for you and finds…this.”

I nodded and straightened my clothing, throwing a quick look at Rishika as I followed Adair through the woods and back to camp.

As we reached the edge of the trees, Adair stopped me.

“You should be careful, Artemis,” he said solemnly.

“With what?”

“With Rishika and Marius,” he said frankly. “Marius isn’t well liked amongst the Fae, and neither are werewolves.”

Anger and disappointment rushed into my chest. “What are you trying to say?”

He gave me a long, hard look. “Send them away.”

**Episode 5487**

**Xavier**

I couldn’t believe this. I honestly couldn’t believe I was actually doing this in the middle of a damn stoner festival. This was *not* the way I’d imagined my day turning out. This wasn’t the way I’d imagined my *life* turning out.

But Swift had been insistent.

“You must be touching nature!” he hollered at me from the ground. “You must take your clothes off to be closer to nature!”

I looked down at him. He was staring up at me, still half inside the mini windmill, his eyes wide and wild. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t told this guy to go fuck himself when he’d suggested this stupid stunt. I’d thought about it, but I was just too desperate for his help, and now look where I was.

“Can I come down now?” I called to him.

“*No!*” he barked back at me.

“No, I think I get what I’m supposed to have learned. This was…great. Thanks, but I’m going to come down now,” I told him, looking over the side to check what would be the easiest exit strategy. I was a fucking werewolf—how much closer to nature, or naked, did I really need to be?

He shook his head emphatically. “You still have your clothes on. You must disrobe fully! You must be completely nude in order for this to work!”

“Nope,” I said firmly. “That’s *not* going to happen. I have to draw the line somewhere with this bullshit—and it’s there.”

Below me, Swift looked angry. “You asked for my help! You said you needed it, and yet you refuse to accept it!”

I frowned down at him. Was this just Swift being a freaking weirdo? Or was it possible he was still high as a kite and just fucking with me for fun? I wasn’t sure that he really understood what was going on with my wolf and Greyson’s. I should’ve just listened to my gut and taken the guy out of here.

I looked past Swift and saw that a crowd had gathered to see this absurd show. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

When I glanced down again, I saw Ava standing next to the windmill, looking up at me, smiling.

“Are you enjoying this?” I growled down at her.

She looked unbothered by my tone. “Yeah,” she said, nodding. “A bit, but I think that’s enough.”

Phones were out. I was being recorded and would probably be on Instagram before I even got down. A few people had started to catcall. I felt like a fucking piece of meat, and I wanted to cover up, not take more off.

The strange thing was that it wasn’t like I was uncomfortable being naked. I was used to it—I was naked all the time and never gave it a second thought. But that was when I was around the pack. Being like this in front of humans was totally different. And very weird.

Looking out at the crowd again, my stomach dropped when I spotted Cali running toward me.

“Xavier! what are you doing?” she called up to me, looking shocked.

I swallowed a groan. This was just going from bad to worse. “Well, we found Swift. Now I’m just trying to get him to trust me so he’ll come with us.”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure it’s working,” Ava added. “He’s way too set on whatever the hell he’s trying to have Xavier to do to be ‘close to nature.’”

Lola and Jay had followed after Cali, and now I watched as Lola took out her phone and started recording.

“Fucking great,” I muttered.

“Take it off!” she shouted up at me. “Give the people what they came for!”

This elicited a cheer from the crowd.

“Take it off!”

“Give us the money shot!”

“I came here for meat, so let’s see it!”

“Holy shit,” I muttered, shaking my head with disgust.

Someone had begun to chant, “*GIVE US THE MEAT!*” and now the whole crowd had picked it up.

*This is fucking bullshit.*

Swift waved his arms over his head. “Don’t listen to them! Listen to me!”

“*Give us the meat!*”

“You have to shed your emotions and let the spirit take you!”

“*Give us the meat!*”

“Don’t let inhibition hold you back!”

“*Give us the meat!*”

Honestly, I just wanted to punch the guy. And every pervert in the crowd, staring up at me, yelling at me to take off my underwear. All of this just felt like a huge waste of time. All I wanted was my real wolf back so I could think straight and stop being so fucking confused all the time.

It was hard enough to have two mates and feel pulled apart in that way. But now I was pretty certain Greyson’s wolf was also being pulled toward Kendall, and that was really fucking with my head. I had no idea what was going on with those two, and I couldn’t get anything out of Greyson about it.

I was actually a little pissed with him, thinking about how he was betraying Cali. But I also knew I couldn’t tell Cali about Greyson’s wolf being attracted to Kendall. No matter how much I didn’t like knowing it myself, telling Cali would only hurt her, and I couldn’t do that. I would protect her with everything I had—especially after everything I’d already put her through.

“Where is your head?!” Swift bellowed up at me. “You are slipping! You are becoming distracted!”

I blew out a frustrated breath as I adjusted my footing on the top of the mini windmill. “Everything around this place is distracting,” I muttered.

“Watch the windmill!” Swift yelled. “Keep your eyes on the windmill! That’s what we’re doing! To feel nature! Let the spirits commune with you! Open yourself up! Be reachable! You must commune with your true spirit!”

I frowned down at him, wondering if this was him starting to make an iota of sense. “Are you talking about my true wolf?”

“Just do it!” Swift barked.

I rolled my eyes, but not sure what else to do, I watched the windmill. I watched as the fans went round and round until I started to grow dizzy. My eyes started to blur, the blades of the fans melding together. The crowd was still chanting and catcalling and hooting up at me, but as I focused on the whir of the windmill blades, those sounds faded until they were nothing but a dull roar in my ears.

“Connect with your true partner!” Swift called to me, but his voice sounded strange and far away, like he was yelling from a great distance.

“My true partner,” I repeated, my voice a murmur.

“Connect with the one you’re truly meant to bond with!”

*True partner. Truly meant to bond with. True partner.*

I kept my eyes on the blades of the windmill until a face formed. For a moment I thought it was Cali.

My heart thudded, and I moved to reach out to her, but before I could, the rest of the figure formed and when she turned, I saw the long, dark hair and bright blue eyes.

It was Ava.

The figure of Ava stepped toward me, a small, intimate smile on her face. She wrapped her arms around me, holding me tightly, then tipped her head up and kissed me.

“I’m your true partner, Xavier,” she whispered, her voice like a breeze in my ear. “Not Cali.”

I stared at her in wonder. “Wait, is this a sign?”

Her smile grew. “We’re mates, Xavier. Of course it’s a sign.”

She kissed me again, and this time she slid her hand into my underwear. Her hand tightened around my cock, and I pushed my tongue into her mouth.

“Oh god, *Xavier*,” she murmured against my lips.

“*Ava*,” I breathed, feeling myself harden in her hand.

I was already next to naked, so I went to work on her clothes, but as I pulled off her shirt, she gave a terrified scream.

“Ava?” I asked, my heart thudding in my chest. “What’s wrong?”

Her only answer was another scream of pain.

“*Ava!*”

And when I leaned back to look at her, I realized that her skin was dissolving into a sticky, smoking liquid.

“Ava!” I bellowed. “*Ava!* What’s happening?!”

But she could only shake her head. She clung onto me as the smokey liquid traveled across her skin, turning the softness into sizzling goo.

“Oh god, what’s happening?”

“Xavier!”

I looked up to see Cali running toward me. She had scaled the windmill in an instant and was at my side. She reached out to help Ava, but all she caught was handfuls of the sticky, burning liquid. “What’s happening?!” Cali screamed.

“I don’t know!” I shook my spinning head.

“What’s happening to *me*?!”

My stomach plummeted as I whipped around to look at Cali. She was looking down at her hands, where the remains of Ava were smeared across her palms. But then I realized the goo was spreading up Cali’s arms, turning *her* skin to the sickening goo.

*No, no, no, not her too.*

*I can’t fucking lose her.*

“No!” I reached for Cali as she dropped, pulling her toward me. But even as I held her, I could feel her solidness turn liquid. “No! Cali, *no*!”

“Xavier!” she whimpered. She clutched onto me tightly, tracking the goo down my arms. “Xavier! Listen to me! You could lose us both!”

And then I wasn’t holding anything at all.

**Episode 5488**

**Greyson**

“Come on, man, we’re just trying to have a good time,” I started, trying to reason with the huge guy. “We’re not trying to start any trouble. My girl just got a little strung out. You know how it is.”

The giant man remained unmoved by my appeal. “You get out of here. *Now!*” he roared. He was still holding onto my arm and, grabbing Kendall with his other hand, he dragged us both to the edge of the tent and launched us outside.

He’d shoved hard enough that both Kendall and I stumbled forward and hit the rocky fairground. Kendall had been less steady than me to start, so she rolled a couple of times before she lay still on the ground, looking up at the sky.

“*Great*,” I growled, getting to my feet and trying to slap the dust off my clothes. “This is just *great*. Now we’ve just lost our lead on Swift.”

Frustrated, I looked around. The place was swarming with people, but I didn’t see any faces I recognized.

*Cali? Can you hear me, love?*

I waited, wondering if she could pick up my mind link, and wondering if anyone else had found anything on Swift in this damn place. But there was no response.

That wasn’t exactly surprising. I was probably too far away from either of them, wherever they were. I remembered how far Kendall and I had walked to get here, and I shook my head—this place was freaking massive.

I pushed a hand through my hair, feeling anger pulsing through me. It was hot, and I was tired and hungry and frustrated as hell. We’d only come to this cursed festival to find Swift so Xavier and I could switch our wolves back, but it didn’t feel like we were making any progress. Now I’d been thrown out of the creative tent—and away from the best lead we’d had all day—and I felt like I was just messing shit up more and more.

I really wanted this to be over. I didn’t like playing host to a strange wolf inside my subconscious. Xavier’s wolf was just as stubborn as he was, and the whole thing was really confusing the hell out of me. The wolf within each werewolf acted on instinct—the most primal part of a person—and I didn’t like being privy to Xavier’s instincts. Specifically, I didn’t like feeling those moments of attraction to Ava because of Xavier’s wolf. And I really didn’t like how badly I felt for my brother now that I’d experienced the misery of being torn between two mates.

I didn’t know where the Kendall bit factored in.

Still, even in the small moments I’d felt a pull toward Ava, I’d felt upset and conflicted. I really wanted to be with Cali, but Xavier’s wolf also wanted to be with Ava. He wanted both of them at the same time. A greedy motherfucker.

It sucked, and I didn’t think I’d fully realized before how hard it must be to love two people so completely.

Looking over at Kendall, who was still on the ground, I felt the rumbling of a strange kind of conflict in my chest. It wasn’t what I felt for Cali, but it was…something.

I frowned. Wait—*what?* What the hell was that?

It wasn’t something. It was *nothing*. I was just confused because I had been thinking about Ava and the double-mate situation with Xavier. And I was still probably coming down from my high. I gritted my teeth—I needed to get my head on straight. Fast.

There was nothing between me and Kendall. Period. Only a drug-filled kiss.

I reached out a hand and pulled Kendall to her feet. “We need to figure out where everyone else is,” I said, pulling my phone from my pocket.

But when I looked down, I saw that I was on five percent battery. I dialed Cali’s number, hoping I had enough to get through, but the screen went black before the call connected.

“Dammit,” I muttered. I looked over at Kendall. “Can I borrow your phone?”

She handed it to me without a word, and I dialed Cali’s number. She didn’t answer, so I sent a text:

*It’s Greyson. We’re trying to find you. I’m outside of the creative tent if you’re nearby. Text back at this number.*

I handed the phone back to Kendall. “I think we should stay around here in case Cali and the others come looking for us.”

“Okay,” she said, then dropped down to sit on the ground again.

I looked at her closely—she still seemed a little out of it. The drugs were probably still working their way through her system. I felt the same way, but it was strange to see Kendall looking less than one hundred percent ready at all times.

She must have felt me staring at her because she looked up at me. “I’m exhausted,” she said. She pushed a hand through her hair. “It’s like my brain has been pulled in too many directions today.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I said, dropping down to sit next to her. “I think the best thing we can do is get back home and hydrate.”

She nodded, then pulled her knees into her chest and rested her chin on top. And I realized how incredibly sad she looked.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She didn’t respond.

I leaned over and bumped my shoulder against hers. “If you want to talk about it, we totally can. No judgments. You know a little about how messed up my dad was, so I would never judge anyone for having a messy family.”

Looking over at me, she shook her head. “No, it’s not that.”

“Not what?”

“My family was amazing. I had the best parents growing up. They were really supportive, really loving. And I have a little brother.”

“Do you?” I said, surprised. It wasn’t like I’d thought Kendall had grown up in a pumpkin patch or something, but I guess I had just never imagined her with siblings.

“Emery,” she said with a smile. I’d seen her smile before, but this was different. This was without her usual sardonic twist. This was just a happy smile, and it made her look younger somehow. “He’s in college. Studying architecture.”

I took that in. “Does he know about you being in the MIB?”

“No, probably not,” she admitted. “But he’s the reason I joined.”

“What do you mean?”

“So I could put him through college,” she explained.

“Why aren’t your parents helping?”

Her face fell, and she dropped her chin onto her knees again. “Because my parents are dead.”

Shit. I felt like kicking myself. I hadn’t known that, and now I wished I’d never brought it up. “What happened?” I asked quietly.

She took a shaking breath. “They were murdered.”

I stared at her in shock. *Murdered?* Suddenly I remembered what she had been whispering in the tent when she’d been hallucinating. She’d been begging someone not to hurt her too.

My head spun with a bunch of new questions. Had she actually *seen* her parents die? I’d always thought that my mother had been dead and was lucky that she wasn’t. But everything had happened when I was a baby—I hadn’t been there. Not really. And my father…he was an entire other story.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmured, unable to think of anything else.

She shook her head. “I’m fine. I was weak then, but I’m not anymore. I made sure of that. Now I’ll be able to protect myself and Emery.”

I stared at her for a moment. Her perfect creamy skin and her dark hair. The narrow set of her strong shoulders and her eyes. Goddamn those violet eyes. I never got tired of looking at them. They were downcast now, and before I could stop myself, I reached out and cupped her cheek, lifting her face so she was looking at me again.

“You’re definitely strong,” I told her quietly. “Even before I really knew you, I knew enough to be impressed by you.”

Her face softened into a small smile, and she gazed back at me.

I felt so drawn to her, and I found myself leaning toward her.

Holy shit.

*No.*

I dropped my hands from her face and leaned quickly back. What the *hell* was I doing?

Kendall shifted slightly over and angled her body away from me, looking just as uncomfortable as I felt.

There was a long beat of silence where we sat there, not speaking, not looking at each other, but very, *very* aware of each other. I could feel it in the air—like lightning was about to strike.

When it grew strong enough that it was nearly unbearable, I chanced a look at her. “Maybe we should…”

She looked over. “Should what?”

I was a goddamn Alpha, why was I suddenly so afraid to speak?

I cleared my throat again. “Maybe we should talk about what happened. Before. Because of the drugs.”

She gave her head a very quick shake. “It was nothing.”

But it wasn’t nothing. Especially considering I’d almost kissed her *again* just now. I could see Kendall didn’t want to talk about this, but I couldn’t just let this go. I needed to figure this out. I wasn’t going to let this—whatever *this* was—get between Cali and me.

I turned so I could look straight at her. “We can’t ignore what just happened—”

“Yes, we can,” she snapped, jumping to her feet. “That’s exactly what we can do, actually. It was stupid, it was because of the mist, it doesn’t *matter*.”

I got to my feet. “Kendall—”

“Grey, *stop*,” she said, looking angry. “I don’t want to talk about the kiss.”

“*What did you just say?*”

Whipping around, I found Cali standing directly behind me.

**Episode 5489**

“What kiss?” I repeated.

I looked back and forth between Greyson and Kendall, who both suddenly looked very, *very* squirrely. They weren’t looking at each other, but there was something happening. I didn’t know exactly what it was, but it made my stomach knot.

But this wasn’t the time to think about whatever was happening here, so I pushed the thoughts—and the pain—away.

“Cali, I—” Greyson started, but I held up my hand to stop him speaking.

“I got your text,” I said shortly, remembering with a pang that it had come from Kendall’s phone, “and I came to get you because Xavier’s having a psychotic break on the windmill at the mini-golf course.”

“*What?*” he asked, baffled.

“You need to come quickly,” I said, turning on my heel and marching back the way I came.

A moment later Greyson caught up with me and fell into step beside me.

“Cali, listen, about what you just heard—”

“Stop,” I said, shaking my head firmly. “I really don’t have time to hear it right now, Greyson. Not now. Xavier needs us.”

Greyson set his jaw. He looked like he wanted to say something more, but I started threading through the crowd and managed to shake him off.

My mind reeled as I jogged along. I told Greyson I didn’t have time to think about it, but all I could think about was what I’d just heard Kendall say. A *kiss*? What kiss? Who kissed?

I gave my head a shake. Maybe it wasn’t what I thought. Maybe I was just stressed and overreacting. Maybe…

*Maybe you never should’ve trusted her.*

No, I couldn’t think like that right now. I tried to shake the feeling off. I needed to trust Greyson, but I also knew we needed to focus on the actual crisis at hand—and that crisis was Xavier.

When we finally reached the mini windmill, Greyson looked up at Xavier in shock. “What the hell?”

Xavier was still standing at the top of the windmill in his underwear, clinging to one of the blades.

“Ava!” he bellowed. “Ava! Cali! *Cali!*” Then, as we watched, he dissolved into terrified screams.

“What the fuck happened?” Greyson asked as we walked closer, not taking his eyes off his brother.

“Ava said Swift sent him up there, and then he just started freaking out,” Jay told us when we reached him.

Greyson looked over at Ava, who was pale and tense. “Swift?”

Ava nodded, looking grim. “Yeah, we found him. But no matter what I say to Xavier, he’s not answering me, either verbally or through the mind link. It’s like…” She shook her head. “It’s like he can’t see or hear me. It’s like he’s somewhere else.”

“This day just keeps getting better and better,” Greyson muttered under his breath.

He stepped toward the windmill and found a foothold. It was a mini windmill, but still stood ten feet high, so it took him a moment to get to the top, but when he did, he stepped over to where Xavier stood, hugging the blade of the mill.

“Xavier?” Greyson said quietly. “It’s Greyson. Can you hear me?”

“Cali!” he cried, looking horrified. “We have to save Cali!”

“No, Cali’s fine,” Greyson said, trying to keep his voice even. “She’s right there. She’s standing on the ground.”

“Ava? Where is she!”

“She’s worried about you, man.”

But—like Ava had said—Xavier didn’t seem to hear Greyson. His eyes flashed in Greyson’s direction, but he didn’t seem to see his brother.

“Greyson!” I called up. “Can you get him to come down?”

Greyson shook his head.

“No, I don’t think so.” He thought for a moment. “I’m going to try something drastic.”

I frowned and was about to ask what that drastic move might be, but Greyson didn’t give me the chance. He pulled his fist back and punched Xavier, landing a blow so hard Xavier let go of the windmill and plunged off the side, landing hard on the ground.

“Oh my god! Xavier!” I screamed, rushing to his side. “Are you okay?”

The crowd that had gathered earlier seemed to have dispersed in the face of what appeared to be Xavier’s real crisis, so now it was just Lola, Jay, and Ava who crowded with me around Xavier’s still form. His eyes were closed, and he didn’t move as we all drew near.

“*Oh god*,” I gasped. “Xavier? Can you hear us?”

Xavier’s eyes fluttered. He moaned and moved a tiny bit. “Cali?” he murmured.

I bent closer. “I’m here,” I said quietly, tears in my eyes.

He opened his eyes, and when he looked at me, I could see that he was actually seeing me.

“Thank goodness,” I breathed, reaching for his hand.

Ava strode over to the entrance to the windmill and grabbed Swift, who was climbing out. “What the *hell* was that?” she demanded.

Swift also looked a little more like himself as he tried—unsuccessfully—to shake free of Ava’s grasp. Less high now, more focused. “I was simply trying to connect Xavier to his inner desires,” he said, by way of explanation.

Ava only looked angrier at this. “Yeah? Well, it didn’t work, because he was freaking the fuck out, in case you missed it.”

Swift frowned. “Yes, well, you know… I may have gone about it in the wrong way.”

“Can we just get out of here?” I asked. “I don’t think this place is good for any of us.” I held tighter to Xavier’s hand and—along with Jay on his other side—helped him get to his feet.

“Yeah, we’re going, and you’re coming with us,” Ava said, still holding onto Swift.

He managed to look indignant. “What about my fishing?”

“You can go fishing another time,” Ava snapped, somehow understanding whatever the hell that was supposed to mean.

With Xavier propped up on Jay’s shoulder, we headed back the way we came and out of the festival grounds. Greyson led us into the trees and to a secluded clearing, far enough away from the festival and campsites around it that we were completely alone.

“We can shift here,” he said, and the sound of the cracking of bones echoed through the trees as everyone shifted to their wolf form.

Ava insisted on carrying Swift, which meant that Jay had to carry Xavier. So I was left riding on Greyson’s back.

I climbed on stiffly and he took off, running at a quick clip toward the pack house. We were quiet for a long time—at least ten or twenty miles. My mind was spinning with everything I’d seen and heard, and I was trying to process it in a way that didn’t make my whole chest ache with pain.

*Are you okay?* Greyson asked.

*I’m fine*, I answered quickly.

Greyson sighed. *Come on, Cali. It’s me. I can tell that you want to say something. I know we got…cut off earlier.*

What was I supposed to say to that?

*Please*, Greyson said quietly. *Just tell me.*

He sounded hurt. Maybe as hurt as I felt. How could that be? What did that mean?

And suddenly I couldn’t stop myself from asking the question I really wanted the answer to. *Did you really kiss Kendall?*

I was praying that he’d laugh and tell me that I’d completely misunderstood, but when he was silent in response, my stomach sank. It was like I already knew the answer, but I still felt blindsided when he finally spoke.

*Yes.*

I tried to take a breath, but it was like all the oxygen had been pushed from my lungs. *But—why?*

*It was the drugs*, he said.

*What drugs?* I demanded, my chest slightly unclenching. I knew there had to be an explanation.

*There was this strange mist when we were looking for Swift. It hit both of us, and we were totally out of it. I wasn’t myself, but I never should have let it happen. I’m so fucking sorry, love.*

I nodded, trying to breathe through the aching pain coursing through my body. I knew I should try to let this go. I knew the drugs at that festival had been powerful. I’d experienced some of them firsthand.

But I couldn’t help but feel a little surprised. Kendall? He’d really kissed *Kendall*?

Maybe I was naïve, but I just hadn’t seen that coming. Lola had sort of warned me, though, hadn’t she? When Kendall had first shown up to the house to talk to Greyson, Lola had said she’d hate for that to be Jay. Had I really just been a fool? Had I practically thrown Greyson into her arms?

I let my thoughts spin out as we continued running through the trees. Had the drugs tapped into some kind of subconscious desire of Greyson’s? Was there something inside of Greyson that had…*wanted* to kiss her?

I racked my brain, trying to figure out if I had missed something, but I just couldn’t come up with anything. I hadn’t expected this between the two of them. If anything, I’d thought their relationship was kind of frosty.

And I’d even liked Kendall.

There was a lump in my throat as we arrived back at the Redwood pack house.

Everyone shifted to their human forms and headed to the house. But when Greyson let me slide off his back and shifted to his human form, neither of us made a move to go inside.

We lingered on the dry winter grass, watching as the rest of the party shuffled Swift inside.

When they were gone, Greyson turned to me, a pained look in his grey eyes.

“Cali—”

“Greyson,” I interrupted. This was all I’d been thinking about on the run home, and now I had to know once and for all. I looked up into his eyes. “Are you attracted to her?”

**Episode 5490**

**Greyson**

I wanted to lie. I *wished* I could. It would be so much easier if I could just tell Cali, *No, of course I’m not attracted to Kendall.*

But that wasn’t an option. I’d built a relationship with Cali based on trust, and I didn’t want to screw that up, no matter what the consequences. If I didn’t tell her now, it would only build more lies and resentment. I didn’t want *that* more than I didn’t want to tell her.

I took a deep breath. “There’s no good way to say this… I’m attracted to her.”

Cali’s eyes went wide. She wrapped her arms around her torso, hugging herself, and nodded. “All right then,” she said quietly. “Thanks for being honest.”

Then she started walking past me, going to follow the rest of the group inside, but I caught her arm and turned her gently around so she was facing me again.

“Cali, wait. Can we talk? Please, love?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine, really. There’s nothing to talk about.”

I knew that was a lie. Her eyes were teary and her voice thick with pain. She was trying not to cry, and it tore my heart in two. *Fuck.* I wish none of this had ever happened.

“I would never have kissed Kendall if it hadn’t been for the drugs,” I told her.

“I know,” she said quietly.

I was relieved to hear her say that. At least that meant she still trusted me.

“But,” she went on, “you are still attracted to her. Even without the drugs. Even if you don’t act on it, that’s how you feel.”

I looked at her for a long moment. I wasn’t sure what to say to that. “I—I can’t help being attracted to her, but it’s not something I would have ever acted on like that. You *know* me,” I said, reaching for her hands. “You know I would *never* do that to you.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” she said, giving her head a small shake. “And I know it’s wrong and hypocritical to be upset about something like this. But when the whole double-mate thing happened with Xavier and Ava, that just took everything out of me.” Tears gathered in her eyes, turning them liquid as she looked up at me. “And look how that turned out. I’m just so scared that this is the beginning of me losing you too, Greyson—”

“*No*, don’t say that, love. You won’t lose me. I’m right here with you. I’m not going anywhere. I only want to be with you,” I said, grabbing hold of her and pulling her into my chest.

She began to cry, and I felt the warm tears on my skin. I felt fucking horrible about what happened and how it was tearing her up. I couldn’t believe that the drug we’d encountered had somehow tapped into whatever weirdness there was between Kendall and me. It was unsettling.

And while what happened between us didn’t feel resolved, I knew it had to be. I hugged Cali tighter as she cried. It just *had* to be. There was no way in hell I was going to lose the woman in front of me because of some weird *vibe.*

“Cali! There you are!”

Cali and I pulled apart and looked over to see Lola on the porch. She looked out across the lawn and frowned when she saw us.

“Wait, why is Cali crying?” she asked, walking over.

Cali pulled away from my chest and wiped the tears away. “I’m not crying. I’m fine, Lola,” she said.

Lola looked at her, then glared at me. “What did you do?” she demanded, stepping close to me and getting up in my face.

“It’s nothing,” Cali said, pushing her away.

“You don’t need to protect me, Cali.” I turned to Lola. “Something happened between me and Kendall at the festival. We kissed. It never should have happened, and I’ve apologized to Cali.”

Lola looked shocked. “I’m sorry, what the *hell*? Did Kendall drug you on purpose so she could hit on you?!”

“What? No, of course not. It wasn’t like that,” I said with a frown. “You were at that festival—there were drugs *everywhere*.”

Telling Lola had felt like the right thing to do a moment ago. She was worried about why Cali was upset, after all. But now I regretted it. I didn’t like how Lola was inserting herself in this conversation with Cali.

“So you *wanted* it?” Lola demanded.

“*No*,” I said firmly.

Lola glowered at me, looking furious. “I always thought there was something weird about that Kendall. She wears way too many crop tops for a school administrator. And those abs, that hair, the cool tattoos…” She shook her head. “It just doesn’t add up. Anyway, don’t worry, Cali. I’ll make sure Kendall doesn’t try to make a move on Greyson again.”

“Wait, what?” Cali asked. “What are you going to do?”

Lola shrugged. “You know me. I’m like a freelance detective at this point.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

She glared at me. “It means that I’m good at digging up dirt on someone’s past.”

My whole body reacted to that. Given the very small amount I knew about Kendall, what Lola was suggesting couldn’t be good. Kendall was MIB. If Lola dug too far into Kendall’s past, what was she going to find? Kendall had likely lived many lives due to being an agent. Lola wasn’t stupid, she’d start to put some shit together.

“Don’t you worry about it,” Lola said, grabbing Cali’s hand and pulling her toward the house. “I’ve got you, girl.”

Cali and Lola headed up the porch steps. Cali paused for just a moment to look back at me, then disappeared into the house.

Frustrated, I started after her. I hated that our conversation had gotten cut off like that. We had barely scratched the surface and hadn’t been able to discuss anything. Everything felt up in the air, and it was even worse than before.

I was angry at myself, but disappointed too. I was a fucking *Alpha*. How did those drugs affect me like that? How had I let that happen? It was fucking unacceptable.

As I reached the porch, Xavier came out of the house and down the steps.

“Greyson, there you are. I think we should try to sober Swift up before we try to get him to do anything else. I don’t want to end up on the top of the house or some shit because he’s still high,” he said with a glance back at the house.

I nodded. “And what about you? Are you good now or what?”

“Yeah, fine,” Xavier said dismissively.

I raised an eyebrow. “Yeah? What was that windmill thing?”

“*Nothing*,” Xavier said gruffly. “Don’t worry about it. I’m fine now. And thanks for punching me, by the way,” he added, looking annoyed. “You couldn’t have done something a little more—I don’t know—subtle?”

I shrugged. “Well, it seemed like it worked.”

He snorted. “Maybe I’ll just test the method and punch Swift. See what happens.”

“It’s an idea,” I said. “Otherwise we’re going to need to give him a couple of gallons of coffee and maybe a few hours of sleep.”

Xavier frowned, looking annoyed. “I don’t like waiting. I wanted to get this wolf shit fixed. Now, if possible. Especially after what happened.”

I nodded. “Let’s go inside and regroup. We’ll figure out what to do.”

“Okay. I want to check on Ava and Cali too,” Xavier said.

I considered telling Xavier that Cali could probably use some space right now, but I kept my mouth shut. It really wasn’t my place right now. And—as much as I hated to admit it—if anyone could comfort Cali right now, it was Xavier.

But when we walked into the house, the first thing we heard were raised voices, coming from the kitchen.

I strode quickly over and found Lola up in Kendall’s face, looking pissed.

Oh fuck me.

Lola’d said she’d do detective work, not get in Kendall’s face in *my* pack house.

“—and you forced your way into this group, and no one wants you here! You don’t belong!” she shouted, right into Kendall’s face.

“Lola! Stop!” Jay yelled, pulling out her arm.

Kendall’s face was stone cold as she listened, but that seemed to just rile Lola up more.

“Did you hear what I said?! *You don’t belong with us!* Just go back to being a Rogue!”

I started forward to pull her away, but Cali beat me to it, running past me and grabbing Lola’s arm.

“Lola!” she said before pulling her best friend out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

Jay followed them, and I rubbed my hand down my face, feeling completely frustrated.

“Greyson,” Kendall barked.

I looked up to see her glaring at me. She tipped her head, indicating the laundry room. I followed her in, and she reached past me and closed the door behind me with a snap.

“What the *fuck* was that?” she demanded, rounding on me.

I stared down at her. “I told Cali about the kiss between us, and Lola inserted herself into the conversation and found out.”

Her purple eyes flashed dangerously “This is *exactly* why I didn’t want to talk about it. It was *nothing*, and now you’ve created all this stupid drama for nothing. We were *drugged*, Grey. It wasn’t anything.”

“You’re right. It *was* nothing, but I had to tell my mate, drugs or not.” I shook my head. “I never should have let things go as far as they did.”

Kendall gave me a long look. Her face was emotionless, but her tone was icy when she spoke. “If Lola keeps digging into my life, she might find out who I am. And that could get in the way of my work.”

I pushed a hand through my hair. “I won’t let it come to that. Lola’s a lot of bark, not a lot of bite.”

Kendall stepped toward me, shortening the distance between us, so she could look straight into my eyes. “You’re misunderstanding what I’m saying, Grey, so I’m going to make it very clear,” she said. “You better keep her from finding out who I am. If Lola digs, Lola’s dead. And if I lose my position with the MIB, I’ll make sure you lose this pack too.”

**Episode 5491**

**Xavier**

I paced the small study near the door, frustration burning through my chest. I was so freaking pissed at Swift. I was pissed at the whole situation. I hated being in this position—where I couldn’t solve my own problems. And I was pissed that I had to depend on Swift to help Greyson and me get our wolves switched back.

*If* that was even possible—a fact we had yet to confirm.

I wasn’t feeling all that confident about it, and the more I thought about it, the more anxious I got.

Obviously, I thought that if anyone could do it, it would be Swift. That was why I’d dragged myself into that cursed festival and tracked the asshole down. I wouldn’t have done that if I’d had no hope it was going to work.

And Swift had had some successes in the past with werewolf shit. He’d helped me and Lilac with our wolves. That was why I’d thought he was the best person to get ahold of for this situation.

But I was still edgy as hell. Especially since the guy was a complete mess at the moment.

“Xavier, you need to calm down,” Ava said. She was perched on the edge of the desk, watching me as I paced the room.

“No chance of that,” I muttered.

“We just need to get Swift to talk,” she said reasonably.

“Talk about *what*?” I growled.

“Get him to tell us what he might know about your situation. And if he can’t help, then we’ll figure something else out.”

I knew Ava was right—obviously she was right—but now I had other concerns.

“I still don’t know what was up with that windmill shit,” I muttered, running a hand along my jaw and feeling the rasp of a five-o’clock shadow on my palm.

Ava eyed me for a moment. “You want to tell me what you were seeing up there?”

I dropped onto the small couch in the corner with a sigh. “It’s insane.”

“What was it?”

I looked over at her. “I saw you and Cali melting.”

“*Melting?* What the hell does that mean?” she asked, looking shocked.

“I know. I told you it was nuts,” I said, pushing a hand through my hair. I didn’t even want to talk about it. I felt like an idiot, and I hated that I’d screamed like a lunatic while standing on top of a windmill, half naked, in the middle of a freaking festival.

“What do you think that was about?” she asked.

“Hell if I know,” I grunted. “I still wonder if Swift just did all that shit to pull one over on me. I actually kind of hope that’s what it was,” I said with a hollow chuckle.

“What do you mean?” Ava asked.

“It would make me feel better because I do *not* want to think that weird vision actually meant something. It was too freaky to even consider.” I thought for a moment. “But if I’ve learned anything, it’s to never discount weird shit, because even worse stuff can happen if you just ignore the signs.”

I knew that to be true, and I’d lived—and barely lived—through too much to ever underestimate the freakish power of the supernatural world again.

Ava looked at me for a moment. Then she slid off the desk and crossed the study, dropping down next to me on the couch. She was close enough her whole body was pressed to mine. It felt good—warm and safe.

She took my hand and looked into my eyes. “I’m fine, you know. Whatever you saw on that windmill—I’m fine. You can see it yourself, right?”

I nodded. She was fine, whole, with her smooth skin completely unmarred by sizzling wax or acid or whatever other freaky shit my subconscious had come up with.

“Yeah, I can see it,” I said in a low voice.

She stroked her fingers over the back of my hand. “I’m not melting or disappearing or anything.”

“I know,” I said softly and cupped her cheek in my hand. It felt good to hold her. Reassuring. “I just don’t ever want to see you hurt.”

“I know,” she breathed. She moved her hand, so it was covering my hand on her cheek.

We were intertwined, and it felt good. It felt right.

Her blue eyes blazed, and she leaned toward me, pressing her lips to mine.   
 “I have to admit,” she said, speaking against my lips, “I’m kind of relieved.”

I pulled slightly away. “Relieved about what?”

“Relieved it was me you saw in that vision.”

I frowned. “Hang on, are you saying you’re *happy* I saw you melting and writhing in pain?”

She smiled. “Okay, I didn’t know about the writhing part. And I’m not happy about the vision, I’m just glad your inner-self—the part you’re not even fully conscious of—still sees me as your true mate.”

“Is that something that worries you?” I asked with an ache in my heart.

Her blue eyes looked suddenly liquid, and she nodded. “Yeah, I worry about it. Now and then. You know how it is, with the back-and-forth and everything—”

“I know,” I murmured and leaned forward and kissed her again, silencing her worries, and hopefully putting them to rest.

She kissed me back, opening her mouth as I slid my tongue in, and responding by pressing herself against me.

My body heated, all my blood rerouting southward. I pulled away. “Let’s go find a bed.”

Ava nodded enthusiastically, and we both got to our feet. We headed out of the office and directly up the stairs. Though I no longer lived here, I certainly knew where the spare bedrooms were. And that was where I led Ava, pulling her by the hand as I jogged down the hallway.

I pulled her into a bedroom and shut the door, kissing her hard as I pushed her into the door.

“I want you,” she moaned.

“I know,” I murmured back and kissed my way down her neck. I took my time and spent a moment just for me, breathing in the scent of her, letting her fill my senses. It stirred desire within me, making my whole body thrum with want.

She ran her hands up into my hair, digging her nails in as she dropped her head back against the door. The sound of her heaving breath was so erotic, for a moment I thought I was going to come right there. I caught both of her hands with one of mine and pushed them up, trapping her hands above her head as I plunged my tongue into her mouth. She tangled her tongue against mine, making soft purring sounds in the back of her throat.

Heat raced through my body—I was ready for more. I pushed my hips against hers, pinning her against the door. She lifted her feet and wrapped her legs around my waist. The sudden proximity to her sex made me nearly lose my mind, and I swiveled around and tossed her on the bed.

She pushed herself back and looked up at me with heavy-lidded eyes. She crooked her finger, calling me closer. “I need you,” she breathed, her voice heavy with want.

I didn’t need to be asked twice. I pulled off my boxers and climbed onto the bed. I stretched myself over her, hovering just above her.

She moaned and arched up, pushing her hips against mine, and my cock twitched. When I slipped my fingers into her, she was slick with want, just as ready as I was.

She moaned as I circled my fingers, and just when she was starting to shiver, I grabbed her hips and flipped her over, pulling her on top of me.

She straddled me and slid onto my cock in one graceful move, moving so fast I barely registered what she was doing until pleasure flooded my senses.

“*Fuck*,” I breathed, feeling her all around me.

She shook her long hair out as she rode me slowly, taking her time. She was breathing deeply, and I could see she was disciplining herself, putting off her own climax as she brought me closer and closer to mine.

She had completely enveloped me, and I closed my eyes, just letting myself feel *everything*. I reached up and grabbed her breasts, which made her suck in a ragged breath.

“*Oh god*, *Xavier*,” she moaned.

I drove into her harder, making her moan louder. I could feel the pressure building as I drew closer and closer. I felt like I was about to burst wide open.

“*Ava*,” I breathed. “Oh *fuck*…” And then it was happening. Stars exploded behind my closed eyes.

Ava tightened around me, finally giving in, which only intensified my own climax.

“Xavier!” she moaned as she rocked on top of me.

My breath came fast and hard, and I waited until I could breathe again, then opened my eyes. Ava was looking down at me with a smile. She was still gently rocking, riding the tail end of her own climax, and when she finally stilled, I pulled her down into the crook of my arm.

She hummed with satisfaction as she snuggled into me. Contentment nearly dripped from her, but as my afterglow faded, it was replaced with a gnawing worry.

I knew Ava had tried to reassure me, and she was probably right, but I just couldn’t stop thinking about the vision I’d had at the festival. Ava had *melted*. Cali had *melted*. What if that hadn’t just been some drug-induced illusion?

What if that had been an omen?

**Episode 5492**

Showered and changed after the dustbowl of the festival, I walked down the stairs to the first floor. I could feel myself gritting my teeth and tried my best to relax. I’d spent my whole shower trying to ignore the intrusive thoughts and feelings about what Greyson had just told me about Kendall. I was trying to keep a very calm exterior, especially since Lola was still at a ten about the whole thing.

Lola had been skeptical from the start about why Greyson had asked Kendall to come along at all. Now we knew, I guess…

*No, the attraction isn’t why he asked her to come. Don’t make things up, Cali. He would’ve told you.*

I pushed the thoughts away and walked briskly into the living room. The best thing for me to do right now was just to find something to keep myself busy. I needed something to do with my hands and my head until Swift woke up and we could deal with getting everyone’s wolves back into the right bodies.

There were a handful of discarded coffee cups left by various members of the pack, and I gathered them into my arms as I moved through the room. I straightened couch cushions and threw one of the fleece blankets onto the back of the couch. I stepped out of the living room and glanced into the study, just to make sure it was tidy.

It looked fine, but I noticed there was a large pile of unopened mail on the desk.

I walked over and started to sort through it.

Halfway through the stack, I came across a very thick envelope. It was addressed to the Redwood pack in a beautiful, looping script, and I knew it was from Lucian even before I saw his name on the envelope. When I opened it, I found an elaborate invitation for his wedding to Elle.

I sighed as I looked at the lace insert and the creamy linen paper. I had really wanted to be able to celebrate Elle’s wedding, but right then, I just didn’t have the emotional bandwidth to deal with it.

So I slipped the invitation back inside the envelope and set it aside.

I knew it was ridiculous, but I had to admit I was a little jealous. I would love to be able to do something as normal as have a wedding and invite my friends to celebrate with me.

But I knew that was a foolish hope because I had no idea *who* I would want the groom to be. As frustrating as it was, that was how I felt, despite the fact that Greyson and I were officially together.

Xavier, on the other hand, was committed to the Samaras and—therefore—to Ava. Maybe.

Honestly, I was still just as confused as ever about what had happened between Xavier and me while we were in the Fae world. We’d gotten so much closer. My trust with him had built up again, that was for sure. But only to get us…where? He’d seemed so clear about wanting me back, and now that we were in the human world, he was back with Ava.

*That should be a good thing*, I told myself. *Less confusing that way. And you’re with Greyson.*

But both of my mates were confusing me right now. And maybe all that confusion was the reason that, whenever I thought about a wedding, I couldn’t fully picture the face of the man I’d want waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

I tapped my finger on the envelope. Was I just going to have to live with this *due destini* misery for the rest of my life? When would things get any less complicated?

Then again, the fact remained that I might just go mad from it. I might not even remember the *due destini* at that point, if I didn’t fully understand reality.

And with that very comforting thought, I left the study and headed to the kitchen.

“Hey!”

I turned to see Violet, Dani, and Charlie run into the kitchen.

“What’s up?” I asked, leaning on the sink.

“Some guy is throwing up all over the downstairs bathroom,” Violet said, looking disgusted. “I think he said his name was Swift.”

I gasped. “*What*?”

“Yeah, we thought we should let you know,” Dani added.

“Dammit,” I muttered and headed toward the bathroom.

I found Swift on the tile floor, looking pale and a little green.

Torin was with him, laying a cool washcloth over his head.

“Well, I guess he’s awake,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. I looked up at Torin. “Is there anything wrong with him?”

“No,” he said. “Nothing but a massive hangover.”

“Great,” I muttered. I popped my head out to the front porch, where I’d seen Lola sitting with Jay. “Lola? Can you brew some of your coffee?”

“Sure can!” Lola called back.

Lola’s coffee would definitely wake Swift up in a hurry. And it had the added benefit of being kind of a punishment too, because Lola’s sludge always tasted *awful*. And I was looking to dole out some punishment. I was still pissed at Swift for what he’d done to Xavier—whatever it was that he had done.

Along with Torin, I helped Swift to his feet.

“Wash your face,” I commanded, pointing toward the sink.

Swift meekly did as he was told, and when he was finished, Lola came in with a cup of coffee, which she handed to me. I handed it to Swift, who looked at it with distaste.

“What is this?” he slurred.

“Your medicine,” I snapped. “Drink up.”

He didn’t look like that idea interested him, but when he caught a glance at my face, he brought the cup to his lips. He took a long drink and sputtered, then his eyes popped right open.

“Well, that worked,” I said grimly.

“Okay, okay, I’m awake,” he croaked, handing the coffee back to me. “And my head is killing me.”

There was a big part of me that wanted to ignore his complaint, but in the end, I sighed and pulled open the medicine cabinet over the sink. “Here,” I said, shaking a couple of painkillers into his hand.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“We need your help,” I told him.

Swift sighed. “Yeah, wrong wolves, wrong Alpha. I got it. Come on,” he said and gestured for me to follow him.

We headed to the kitchen, where he ran water from the sink and ducked his head under it, using his drink to wash down the painkillers. Then he stood straight and looked around.

“Where are the wolves in question?” he asked.

“Would you go get Greyson and Xavier?” I asked, turning to Violet.

She nodded and took off to find the Alphas.

“So how were the wolves switched in the first place?” Swift asked.

“It happened when we passed through the portal from the Fae world,” I told him.

“Ah,” he said, nodding.

Greyson walked into the kitchen first, followed by Xavier, who glared at Swift. Ava came in behind him. Greyson was wearing jeans and a blue T-shirt, and someone must have loaned Xavier and Ava clothes, because they were both dressed as well.

“Okay,” Swift said, turning to look at Greyson and Xavier, “since the switch happened in the Fae world, we’re going to need to use a Fae element to make any changes to it.”

Torin had come in behind Ava, and he stopped forward. “I’m Fae. What do you need?”  
 “What do you have?” Swift asked.

“Other than actual Fae,” he said, with a glance at me, “not much from the Fae world.”

“What about a Fae triangle?” I suggested.

Torin shook his head. “We would need three Fae for that, and that’s really more for catching things like spirits or ghosts. Not wolves.” He thought for a moment. “But we could make a fairy ring.”

“That could work,” Swift said. “And then I’m going to need some herbs. A shit-ton of them.”

“Which ones?” I asked.

Swift grabbed the pad of paper and pen we kept on the fridge for shopping lists and scrawled down a long list.

When he handed it to me, my eyes widened. “I don’t even know if Big Mac would have all these ingredients.”

Ravi, who’d been in the kitchen when everyone had walked in, stood up from the table. “I can go ask her.”

I handed him the list, though I doubted Big Mac was going to be crazy about the idea of helping us, and Ravi headed toward the front door.

“Come on, let’s go make a fairy ring,” Torin said.

Everyone but Swift followed him out the back door and across the dry winter lawn toward the forest. As soon as we’d reached the trees, Torin set about to gather stones, which he set up in a circle.

I watched him with a tinge of sadness. The last time we’d made a Fae triangle, Artemis had been with us. But now she was in the Fae world, and I still felt responsible for that.

Torin took his time with the stones, and he was just finishing up when Swift walked into the trees, holding what looked like a giant pot of steaming tea.

“We ready?” Swift asked, looking around. “You get my herbs?”

I was saved from answering by a pop and looked over to see Big Mag standing in front of me. Apparently, Ravi had talked her into giving us the herbs *and* blipping over to deliver them, because she held up a linen bag.

“Fresh herbs,” she said, holding out the small bag.

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, stepping forward and giving her a hug.

She looked annoyed, but she withstood the demonstration of affection. “Always at the service of the packs, I suppose,” she muttered.

Swift took the small sachet and emptied the herbs into the steaming teapot.

I looked at him, then glanced over at Greyson and Xavier. I knew my mates felt sure that Swift was their best chance to fix their wolf swap, but I had my doubts. I wasn’t sure he really knew what he was doing. And how did we know he wasn’t still high?

“Come, come,” Swift said, waving everyone forward.

I stepped around the circle of stones Torin had created. Xavier, Greyson, and Torin did the same.

Swift poured the tea into two cups and handed one to Greyson, then the second to Xavier.

“Close your eyes,” he commanded.

We did, and he began to chant. The sound was low and melodic, almost like a song, though I couldn’t distinguish the words.

I wondered if this was actually going to work. I couldn’t see anything, but I also couldn’t hear anything happening.

Then there was a thud, quickly followed by a second, and my eyes flew open to see that both Xavier and Greyson had fallen to the ground.

**Episode 5493**

**Greyson**

I was chasing a wolf through the forest. Not just any wolf—it was my wolf. I kept calling to it, but it didn’t come back to me. It didn’t even turn around to look at me, no matter how many times I cried out for it. I ran faster, but I couldn’t seem to get any closer.

“*Greyson*.”

The voice was only a whisper, but I stopped and turned. Cali was just behind me, and she stood in the midst of the trees, with Xavier’s wolf at her side.

“Cali, what are you doing here?” I asked, breathless from my run. “Is this because of the fairy circle you and Torin made?”

But Cali didn’t answer. Instead, with one last look at me, she turned and walked away, Xavier’s wolf still at her side.

I started after her.

“*Greyson!*”

Another voice.

I turned and found Kendall behind me. She stood next to a large oak tree, with my wolf by her side.

She raised a brow. “Which do you want?”

I frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

And without answering me, she too turned and started walking away, with my wolf at her side.

I looked at her for a moment, then turned to watch Cali’s retreating figure. I glanced at the wolves at each of their sides, and I felt completely torn, not sure who I should go after.

Then I looked forward and found myself facing Xavier. He stood before me, my grey wolf at his side.

I looked down and saw that Xavier’s dark wolf stood next to me.

I called out to my wolf.

Xavier did the same.

But instead of moving toward us, both wolves turned and began to run away.

I called out again and took off, chasing my wolf again through the woods.

“Stop!” I called. “*Wait!*”

I was running as fast as I could, but the grey wolf was like a shadow in the dark woods, and no matter how hard I ran, I just couldn’t seem to catch up.

I pushed myself harder as frustration raged through me.

“Come *back*!”

And then I woke up with a start.

I was lying on the forest floor, and Cali was kneeling next to me, looking terrified. When I sat up, she gasped in relief.

“Oh god, Greyson, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m… I’m fine,” I said, trying to shake the dizziness from my head.

I looked next to me and saw Ava helping Xavier to his feet.

“What happened?” I asked, looking back up at Cali.

“We were doing the wolf-swap ritual. Swift gave you that tea, we all closed our eyes, and then you and Xavier both passed out.”

“Oh, shit, that’s right,” I said, trying to marshal my thoughts. “Did it work?”

Cali shook her head. “We don’t know. But Swift seems to think it did.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” Xavier said, brushing dried leaves off his jeans. He looked over at me and—understanding—I nodded and got to my feet.

“Okay. Let’s shift.”

And with the sharp crack of bones, we both shifted.

Even before I looked down at myself, I saw the disappointment in Cali’s eyes, and my stomach dropped. I glanced at Xavier and saw my own grey wolf staring back at me.

Fuck. All those bells and whistles and it didn’t work.

*Dammit*, Xavier snapped. *Let’s shift back.*

We shifted back, and I was just reaching for my clothes when I heard a sharp gasp.

I turned to see Lucian.

I had no idea how long he’d been standing there, but he looked horrified. “What *happened* to you two?” he asked. “And your *wolves*?!”

*Shit.*

This was *not* something I wanted anyone else to know about. Especially not a gossip like Lucian.

This was bad.

“What are you doing here?” Cali asked him.

“I came over to *personally* invite Greyson to my bachelor party. And Xavier too, so this would’ve been fortuitous,” he said haughtily. “The wolves in the house told me I might find the brothers out in the woods, but instead I find *this*! How could you not tell me about this, Greyson?” he demanded. “*Me!* Your best friend!”

Ava snorted a laugh, but when Xavier glanced over at her, the smile disappeared from her face.

“Lucian, let me explain what’s going on—”

Lucian held up a hand to stop me. “I think it’s best if we address this formally.”

“Formally?” I repeated.

“I will call the Alpha Allyship to convene. My house! One hour from now!”

And with that, he turned on his heel and stormed into the forest, in the direction of his land.

“This is great,” I muttered, pushing a frustrated hand through my hair.

I looked over at Xavier, who just shrugged.

“We can’t just ignore this. It’s Lucian. We have to go to make sure he doesn’t do or say anything too wild. We need to keep this close,” he said, nodding after Lucian. “It would be really bad for everyone if outsiders heard about this and decided our packs were open for attack.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” I nodded in agreement. “I’ll do whatever I have to do to protect my pack.”

“Me too,” Xavier said quietly.

I turned to Swift. “Do you have any other ideas to get us to switch back?”

Swift frowned. “I might, but I’d need to go back to my place and gather a few of my supplies.”

Big Mac stepped forward. “I’ll blip him where he wants to go. I need to go to town anyway to pick up a few things.”

“Great!” Swift said with a grin. “I’ve always wanted to travel like that. I’ve heard about it, but I’ve never done it.”

“Buckle up,” the witch said ruefully.

Swift went over to stand next to her, and in the blink of an eye, they were gone.

Xavier and I gathered up our shredded clothes. and we all headed back to the house.

I went right upstairs to change, and I was mostly dressed when I heard a knock on my door.

“Greyson?” Cali’s voice came through the door. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, pulling a new T-shirt over my head. I opened the door. “I’m just tired. I don’t feel like I’ve had a moment to just sit since we went to the festival.”

Cali nodded and walked into the room. She looked sad.

“Shit, I’m sorry, love, I know we still haven’t really talked about what happened there,” I said, with a pang of guilt.

“No, it’s okay,” Cali said quickly. “There’s time for that later. I don’t want you to worry about that right now.”

“But it’s hurting you,” I said, taking her hand and pulling her to the bed, where we both sat. “And I hate that.”

Cali looked at me for a moment, then leaned forward and gave me a soft kiss. “I’m right here, Greyson,” she said quietly. “And I’ll be here when you get back from Lucian’s. I love you.”

I rested my forehead against hers for a moment, letting myself breathe. “I love you,” I said, relieved by her response. I was glad she was willing to wait to talk—and that she was willing to talk at all.

Standing up, I dropped a kiss on the top of her hair. “I’ll see you soon.”

She nodded, and I walked downstairs.

Xavier was standing at the door, holding his car keys. “You ready for this bullshit?” he asked, looking tense.

“I guess.”

Xavier drove to the Vanguard estate, and my sense of dread increased as we pulled into the circular drive. I was *not* looking forward to this.

When we walked into the manor, a pack member led us into one of the large rooms off the great entrance hall.

Mace was there, standing alone. Lucian was nowhere to be seen. When Mace saw us, he walked over, his footsteps echoing on the marble floor.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Lucian made me come over, he was acting like there was some huge problem.”

“This is a nightmare,” I muttered.

“What is?” Mace demanded.

I had just opened my mouth to fill Mace in when someone cleared their throat sharply.

We all looked up to see Lucian at the far end of the room. There was a staircase, leading from a balcony down to the ground floor, where the rest of us stood. Lucian stood at the top of the stairs, and he smiled when we looked over.

“Good,” he said imperiously, “we’re all here.”

I stepped forward. “Lucian, let me explain—”

As before, Lucian held up a hand to stop me speaking as he came down the steps and joined the three of us.

“I have called the Alpha Allyship together to discuss a very grave matter.”

Xavier looked like he was fighting not to roll his eyes.

“We must decide,” Lucian went on, “if Greyson and Xavier are even Alphas anymore if they no longer possess their true wolves!”

**Episode 5494**

**Xavier**

I stared at Lucian in shock. “What the hell, man?” I asked. “Are you seriously questioning our Alpha worthiness because of some weird shit that’s happening with our wolves? Shit we couldn’t control?”

I was pissed, but Lucian looked unfazed by my frustration.

“Yes, I am,” he said in an annoyingly calm voice. “And this is not just some *weird shit*, as you say. I’ve never even heard of something like this happening, and this kind of wolf switch is disorienting. It could be destabilizing enough that it could affect our whole region.”

“Give me a break,” Greyson muttered.

“You certainly know what I’m talking about,” Lucian said pointedly. “It makes the Samara and Redwood packs vulnerable, which in turn makes both the Vanguards and the Blue Bloods vulnerable too. And I think we need to deal with this through official channels.”

“*Official channels?*” I repeated in disbelief.

“This isn’t the way to deal with this, Lucian,” Greyson growled.

Lucian gave him a cool look. “This feels like an *official* concern, and that is how I am treating it. I am sorry, Greyson, even though we are best friends, I have a duty to my pack and all our packs. I must do what I must do.”

Glancing over at Greyson, I caught him rolling his eyes at the *best friends* bit.

“But I realize I am not the only one who should make this decision. I am willing to listen. Mace, what do you think?” Lucian asked, looking over at the Blue Blood Alpha.

Mace looked surprised, like he wasn’t expecting to be asked. He glanced nervously at me, then at Greyson, and I was suddenly worried that Mace was going to side with Lucian. There was a tense moment where Mace didn’t say anything at all, and I wondered what an official investigation into Greyson and me might look like.

Finally, Mace spoke. “I don’t think we need to escalate this,” he said with a shrug.

I let out a sigh of relief. Thank god for that, at least.

“Fine!” Lucian snapped with a scowl. “I’m sorry for being worried. Forgive me for *caring*!”

“Oh my god,” Greyson muttered, rubbing a hand over his tired face. “Okay, Lucian, maybe we should have told you and Mace about what’s going on. I can accept that it *could* affect your packs—however minute that might be—but we’re taking care of it. That’s what we were trying to do when you found us in the woods. Anyway, I know you’re dying to do it, so just ask your questions about what’s going on. We don’t know everything, but we’ll answer as best we can. And then that’s going to be the end of the discussion, okay?”

“Fine,” Lucian said with a pout. He gathered himself. “Why did this happen? And could it happen to other Alphas? Is it catching?”

I stifled a groan. “We don’t know why it happened, and it’s certainly not catching. I don’t think it could happen to anyone else.”

“Well, what happened?” Mace asked.

“It happened when we were all coming back from the Fae world,” I explained.

“Oh, thank god,” Lucian breathed. “My beautiful lover isn’t a Fae, so that will never happen to me.”

Greyson glared at him, and Lucian noticed.

“I’m just saying that I’m glad it wasn’t some completely random occurrence,” he said, backtracking quickly.

“Okay, if we’re done here, I’m leaving,” I said and turned to walk out.

“Wait!” Lucian called.

I turned to look at him. “What?”  
 He smiled brightly. “You’re still coming to my bachelor party, right?”

Was he fucking serious? I was furious. Lucian had never been able to read a room, but it had never pissed me off more. I was feeling so fucking weird about this whole wolf swap, and pissed Swift hadn’t been able to fix it, and now Lucian was acting like we were all best friends, even after he tried to get our packs taken away?

Tossing my keys to Greyson, I headed out the manor and had shifted before I hit the frozen ground outside. I ignored Greyson calling after me and just took off. I didn’t want to talk to my brother right now, I didn’t want to talk to Lucian, I didn’t want to talk to Mace. I didn’t want to discuss the wolf swap, or what had happened at the festival with that embarrassing windmill shit. I wasn’t about to have a heart to heart with anyone. I just wanted to be alone, and I wanted to run. That was what made me feel good and in control, so that was what I did.

I took off, heading into the forest surrounding the Vanguard land.

But as I ran, I realized that even this felt off, because I was running as Greyson’s wolf.

That made me even angrier.

Running as my wolf had always been one of my favorite things, and now it was just making me feel like shit. Just like everything else.

Shaking my head, I turned in the direction of the Samara pack house. I needed to check in with the pack now that we were back. Though there wasn’t going to be much of an update.

Suddenly, I became aware of something. It was faint, but I could hear the sound of running paws, and I realized there was another wolf running in the woods with me.

When I realized this, I felt a strange pull within me—I wanted to be closer.

Looking around, I caught sight of the wolf and realized it was *Kendall*.

I growled as I felt Greyson’s wolf veering so I could draw closer to her. It was something I wasn’t even fully aware of doing, like I was moving on autopilot. It was that ridiculous pull toward Kendall again. What the hell was up with this?

*What are you doing here?* I snapped through the mind link. *Are you monitoring us or something?*

Kendall glanced over at me. *You fucking wish. I was minding my own business and heading home, and you randomly show up. I should ask if* you’re *monitoring* me*. Do you even know how far from your pack house you are?*

I didn’t know, and when I looked around, I was surprised to see how unfamiliar the woods looked. I’d been so in my head that I hadn’t been paying attention as I ran, and I was nearing the university. While it wasn’t technically her land, *I* was the one running on Kendall’s territory.

I gritted my teeth. *Listen, I don’t want to see you, so why don’t you go somewhere…away from me.*

Shock flashed in her purple eyes as she looked over at me. *How about this—why don’t you fucking go home, Xavier. You’re on* my *running trail, for the record. You don’t need to be here. We don’t have business anymore.*

*I don’t have time to argue with you*, I snapped.

*Then don’t*, she shot back.

I shook my head. This whole thing was so disorienting. I was really thrown off, because as much as I wanted to take her advice and just get the hell away from her, Greyson’s wolf’s will was powerful, and he wanted to be close to Kendall. As much as I wanted to, it was hard to just go.

She sped up. *I am on my way home, man. I* have *to run this way. Again, why don’t you just go home?*

I growled, the sound low in my throat, and she looked over in surprise.

*Are you seriously* growling *at me?* she asked in disbelief.

I sped up to keep pace with her. Greyson’s wolf just wanted to be near her. And there was something else—a desire to pounce. Not to attack, just to be close. And that made me even more pissed off.

I slowed to a stop and shifted back to human. I was sick of the desires of Greyson’s wolf thundering through my head.

Kendall shifted as well and turned to look at me, her eyes flashing.

We were both naked in the cold air. I noticed again the snake tattoo on her bicep that curled onto her collarbone. She had a few others too.

She narrowed her eyes until they were two angry purple slits. “What the hell is your problem?” she demanded.

What the hell *was* my problem? It was a reasonable question without an answer. I wanted to shout or bellow or kick over a tree—something to let out this awful tension growing inside of me. I was in my human form again, but Greyson’s wolf was still with me, and I could feel him. I could feel him pacing around, growling, and snapping, angry that I’d shifted back to my human form and taken the control back. In human form, the wolf usually retreated, but right then, it felt as though Greyson’s wolf just didn’t want to let go of me.

When I moved, it felt automatic, like it was completely out of my control as I strode toward Kendall, grabbed her upper arm, and pulled her into a kiss.

**Episode 5495**

I walked up the stairs and stopped at the top. But I couldn’t remember why I had gone up in the first place, so, frustrated, I turned and walked back downstairs.

I was waiting for Greyson to get back from the Vanguard estate and felt anxious that he’d been gone for so long. I really hoped Lucian wasn’t making too much trouble—we really didn’t have time to deal with any of it.

Back downstairs, I walked into the living room, where I found Lola on the couch with her laptop balanced on her lap. She was typing furiously, but when I walked in, she looked up.

“Oh, good, you’re here. I’m finding a *ton* of dirt on Kendall.”

I sighed and dropped into the seat next to her. “Didn’t you go digging into Kendall’s past before? Haven’t we been down this road already?”

“Yeah, we have, and don’t forget what I found,” she huffed. “Little Miss School Administrator had ties to the Dark Fae mafia—*remember*?”

“Yeah, I remember,” I said, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear as I snuggled into the corner of the couch. “But I don’t think we can blame Kendall for her ex being a criminal. She doesn’t control what other people do.”

Lola dismissed this argument with an airy wave of her hand. “Come on, Cali, grow up. If I was able to find that, there’s no telling what other secrets she’s hiding, right?”

I didn’t know that I totally agreed with her on that, but I leaned forward and looked at the computer screen. “So what *have* you found?”

“Well, I did an image search on Kendall, and I found this old, grainy photo of her from a newspaper. It’s of a girls’ soccer team that won some kind of championship.”

I squinted at the photo. Lola had zoomed in on one of the girls. “Okay? I guess that could be Kendall. But it’s so grainy.”

“It came up as a match with eighty-three percent accuracy,” Lola argued.

I frowned. “Okay. But if this *is* her, what does it tell us? Nothing, other than she used to play soccer.”

“But wait,” Lola said, navigating away from that tab.

I leaned back with a sigh. “Lola, maybe cool it on the research. I know we were weirded out that Kendall came and then…the kiss with Greyson, but I just kind of want to drop it.”

Lola looked up at me, her eyes a little crazed. “But we *have* to know what she’s up to, Cali.” She shook her head disapprovingly. “You shouldn’t be so trusting, you know.”

“I don’t trust her,” I admitted. “I trust Greyson.” I paused, thinking about the drugs Greyson said had affected his judgment. And I suddenly wondered if Kendall had been involved in giving them to him. I just couldn’t think of any other explanation for Greyson’s behavior. “But if she did something to Greyson—”

The front door swung open, and Greyson walked into the house. He dropped a set of keys on the table by the door and walked into the living room.

“Hey.”

Lola snapped her laptop shut.

Greyson eyed her suspiciously. “What are you doing?”

Lola set her jaw. “You’ll thank me for this when I’ve figured out if Kendall is a harpy or a witch or something, Greyson.”

“Lola,” Greyson said, his voice stern, “I’m telling you right now as your Alpha, stop looking into Kendall.”

“But, Greyson—”

“Stop, Lola,” he said, louder now. “This is between me and Cali. End of story.” Then he turned on his heel and strode quickly out of the room.

Lola looked shocked. “Okay, that was a bit harsh,” she said quietly.

I looked at Greyson’s retreating figure, wondering if his outburst had anything to do with what happened between him and Kendall, and how he felt guilty about it.

But he was right about one thing at least.

“Lola, I think he’s right,” I said, looking over at my friend. “Just stop digging. I can talk to Greyson, and I can handle Kendall if she’s up to something.”

Lola sighed. “Fine—*for now*. But you say the word and I’ll start the research again,” she promised.

“Thank you,” I said, giving her a quick hug. “You’re a good friend.”

“Tell me about it,” she muttered.

Then I stood and went to find Greyson.

He was upstairs, in his room, pacing in front of the window, and he turned to look at me when I walked in.

“I know I shouldn’t have yelled at Lola. I’ll apologize to her. Xaiver’s wolf just gets me so…” He gave a frustrated growl. “…hotheaded.”

“I know, it’s not like you,” I said, sitting on the corner of the bed. “And I think Lola would appreciate an apology. She was just trying to help. She’s protective of me—and of you.”

Greyson gave me a long look. “I can’t tell her why, but she *has* to stop digging. I don’t want us involved.”

I nodded. “If you say so, then I believe you. I trust you.”

He stopped pacing. “Thank you,” he said quietly. He dropped onto the bed and sighed, looking completely exhausted.

I edged over to where he was sitting and squeezed his shoulders.

He moaned and closed his eyes as I rubbed his neck.

“We should talk, huh?” he said.

I hesitated for a moment. “If you’re up for it,” I finally responded.  
 He sighed. “Cali, I want to be honest with you.”

“Good, because I want to know everything,” I said, still rubbing his shoulders, which felt tight under my hands. This was the question I didn’t want to ask, so I figured I’d start with it. “Tell me how you feel about Kendall.”

He didn’t answer right away. “I do feel a weird pull toward her sometimes,” he admitted. “I can’t claim what I feel is nothing, but I don’t want to claim it’s something it’s not, either. A strange pull toward someone could mean a lot of things.”

“Okay,” I said when he didn’t go on.

“But what I know in my heart is that I only want you,” he said, his voice low. “You are my only true mate, love, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

I sighed. “I know that. And I trust you, but I can’t help but feel insecure about all this double-mate stuff. After all, Kendall is a wolf too. And what if your attraction to her is stronger than your mate bond to me? What about… What about when Rowena saw another branch coming off of you?”

It hadn’t been long ago that Rowena was testing the integrity of the mate bond between me, Greyson, and Xavier…

I gulped. Rowena had seen Xavier’s connection to Ava and to me. There hadn’t been anything concrete for Greyson, but that branch… Was it possible that she was…more to him somehow?

He turned around and looked at me, his grey eyes stormy. “*No*, Cali. Don’t even think that for a second,” he said emphatically. “Bond or no bond, I love you with all my heart, Cali.” And he leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine.

His hands ranged down my shoulders, then my arms, then tightened around my waist.

“Love,” he whispered against my lips, his voice so soft I’m not even sure his mouth moved.

But I didn’t have time to respond, because his right hand moved over and opened up the button of my jeans. Reaching down, he slid his hand into my panties and then slipped into my sex.

I gasped as heat rushed through me. I could feel how aroused I was, and apparently Greyson could feel it too, because he pushed me back on the bed, sliding his body over mine.

“I want to show you how much I love you,” he said, rubbing his fingers in small, tight circles.

He put his lips back to mine, the kiss deep and dominant, full of love and passion.

My heart thudded, and heat pulsed through my veins. His tongue in my mouth and his fingers in my core were driving me insane. I wriggled out of my jeans and my panties, then wrapped my legs around his back, pulling him closer.

When he entered me, I nearly screamed. I rocked against him, and he grabbed hold of me, holding me close. I could feel his love for me in every touch, every kiss. The way he made love to me nearly felt like an apology, but I was too breathless to tell him that I forgave him.

“Greyson,” I panted. “Oh god, *Greyson*!”

He gripped me harder, his fingers digging into my flesh. He drove into me and pushed me over the edge.

He followed after, shaking as his orgasm overtook him. “*Cali*,” he moaned.

My heart was racing, and I was still seeing spots in my vision, but I held onto Greyson as he pumped into me, slowly coming to a stop.

When he dropped down to the bed again, breathing hard, I snuggled into him.

He pulled me close and kissed my forehead. “I love you,” he breathed.

I waited as my heartbeat slowed. But as it did, my thoughts picked up steam. I wished I could stay in the afterglow of our amazing sex, but my thoughts went to what Greyson had just told me about the pull between him and Kendall. Greyson had said it was nothing, but I just kept thinking about it.

On that day in the river, I had died, if only for a split second. What had that started?

I thought again of Rowena, and what I’d felt when she’d said about the branch coming off of Greyson.

What did it all *mean*?

**Episode 5496**

**Xavier**

Greyson’s wolf was *elated*. I could feel how much his wolf wanted Kendall. It was a deep, primal need. The kind that wasn’t fully realized yet. The wolf inside me rejoiced as I pulled her closer still.

Kendall must have felt it too, because she kissed me back, slipping her tongue against mine.

It was a strange feeling, as though my body wasn’t my own at that moment. Like I was being powered and operated by a completely separate entity. I had never personally felt attracted to Kendall, but now she was in my arms, and I was kissing her, and there was a strange, fated link between us. Like this moment had been a long time coming. Like it had always been meant to be.

But at the same time, my brain was still *my* brain, and I knew I didn’t want to be doing this.

*STOP*, my mind screamed, and I pulled away from Kendall. I jerked back and let go so abruptly that she stumbled back a few steps.

“What the *hell* did you just do to me?” I demanded, wiping my mouth.

She looked shocked for a moment, then recovered enough to scowl and wipe her lips with the back of her hand. “Are you *kidding* me? *I* didn’t do anything, asshole. *You* came on my running route, *you* followed me, and then *you* kissed me.”

I was going to have trouble denying any of that, so I didn’t even bother. I just glared at her. “Why is your wolf calling to Greyson’s?” I shot.

She shook her head. She was trying to go for a dismissive look, but doubt flashed across her expression. There was something there—she felt it too.

What the hell was going on here?

My mind instantly went to Cali, and how hurt she would be if she understood the primal need Greyson’s wolf had for Kendall, and my scowl deepened. “Listen, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay the fuck away from my brother.”

Without waiting for her to answer, I shifted back to my wolf form and started to run. Greyson’s wolf resisted—he wanted to stay close to Kendall—but I gritted my teeth and kept going.

My mind raced as I sprinted through the trees. What the *hell* had just happened? *Why* had I kissed her? It was like I was temporarily out of my own body. Like I didn’t know what I was doing and couldn’t control myself.

Like when I’d been on the windmill at the festival.

Anger surged through me. I didn’t like feeling out of control, and I needed to figure out why this kept happening to me. Was I under some kind of spell?

I couldn’t discount that possibility, not after all the magic that had been used on me over the past year or so.

But that didn’t feel quite right, because it didn’t feel like it had been *me* who’d kissed Kendall. It was someone else. Or some*thing* else. More specifically, Greyson’s wolf.

That worried me, too. What had Greyson been up to?

When I finally got back to the Samara pack house, Ava was sitting on the front steps, waiting for me. She stood when she saw me running out of the trees and watched as I shifted back to my human form.

“What happened with Lucian?”

I shook my head. “It’s nothing. Just Lucian being Lucian.”

I walked up the stairs and into the house, with Ava at my side.

“Xavier!”

“There he is!”

“Hey, Alpha!”

I ignored the greetings from the Samaras and headed right for the stairs. I went straight into my room and pulled open a drawer, yanking out a pair of jeans to put on, thinking about the last set of clothes I’d shredded when I’d shifted at the Vanguard manor.

“You’re in a horrible mood,” Ava noted, leaning against the doorframe.

“Yeah, because of what happened with Swift,” I said darkly. “Or what *didn’t* happen.”

“No.” Ava gave me a once-over. “It’s worse than before. Something else happened. Was it something with Lucian?”

I considered saying yes. Just because it would be easier, and I didn’t even know what I would tell her about Kendall. I was still confused as fuck about it myself.

But Ava frowned. She stopped toward me and took a deep breath. “Wait, there’s a scent…”

“What scent?” I asked quickly.

Her frown deepened, like she was trying to place it. “A scent of another wolf on you.”

She stepped closer again, and I backed up. I didn’t want her to smell me. I kicked myself for being a fucking idiot. I should have gotten into the shower as soon as I’d walked in. I glanced toward the bathroom, wondering if there was still time.

But it was too late. She looked up at me. “Why do you smell like *Kendall*? *Everywhere?*” she added pointedly. “Did something happen?”

I sighed. There was really no point in trying to hide this. Ava was as good an observer as anyone I knew, and if I didn’t tell her, she was just going to figure it out. Then she’d be even more pissed because I didn’t come out and tell her.

“Yes,” I said, yanking on a T-shirt. “It’s Kendall.”

Ava narrowed her eyes dangerously. “Why were you with Kendall after leaving the Vanguards’?”

I sat on the edge of the bed, figuring I might as well tell her the whole story. “Lucian was being an asshole—you know how he is—and I was frustrated and just took off. But I’m running in Greyson’s wolf, so it’s like I’m running blind out there. I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going, and I ended up near the university. I ran into Kendall. Greyson’s wolf went fucking crazy when I saw her. I was trying to get away, and I just…” I shook my head. “I ended up kissing her instead.”

Fire sparked in Ava’s blue eyes as I spoke. I knew how territorial she was about me, so I quickly added, “I swear to you, I didn’t initiate the kiss. Greyson’s wolf did. Honestly, that’s how it happened.”

Ava shook her head. “I fucking knew it,” she said quietly. “I could tell she was defensive when I asked her if she liked Greyson.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, pushing a hand through my tousled hair, “you called it, I guess.”

“Do you think…” Ava looked at me quickly, her eyes widening. When she spoke, it was more cautiously than was characteristic, and I could tell she was choosing her words carefully. “Do you think Greyson and Kendall are hooking up?”

I shook my head firmly. “No, of course not.” I looked up at Ava. “Greyson wouldn’t do that to Cali.”

Ava lifted an eyebrow and gave me a wry smile. “Are you sure? I don’t know. You know better than anyone else that when your wolf wants someone else, it’s hard to stop yourself.”

I glared at her. “That’s a huge accusation, Ava.”

“Yeah, it’s also a possibility,” she countered. “Especially since his wolf is so drawn to Kendall, as you also know better than anyone.”

I considered this information. She was right about that. “I wonder if I should tell Cali what’s going on,” I said, thinking aloud.

“You should talk to Greyson first,” Ava said firmly. “It’s his wolf. If something’s happening, he needs to tell Cali himself. Otherwise, Cali’s not going to forgive him for this. And if you tell her, you’ll just look petty.”

I nodded. She was right about that too. If I told Cali about this, it would just look like a ploy to get her to trust me again. That was what I wanted, but I didn’t want to gain her trust by trying to hurt her.

A question occurred to me, and I looked curiously up at Ava. “Why are you trying to help Cali’s relationship so badly?”

Ava laughed, her smile lighting her face. “Because if Cali isn’t with Greyson, she might come after you.”

Her honesty surprised me, but I shook my head. “You don’t need to worry about that kind of thing right now.”

I wasn’t sure if that was entirely true, but everything with Ava was complicated, and I didn’t want to make anything worse.

“*Right now*?” Ava repeated skeptically. “I don’t need to worry about it right now?”

Good god. It was hard to talk to someone who paid attention all the time.

“You know what I mean.”

She looked at me for a moment, then nodded, apparently deciding she was going to accept this. “Anyway, this isn’t about me, for once. This situation is actually really serious. If there’s a bond between Greyson and Kendall—even just their wolves—that means something big.”

“You think so?” I asked, surprised.

She nodded. “What if it affects the *due destini* somehow? We can’t just mess around with this shit.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You need to talk to your brother. Now.”

**Episode 5497**

**Artemis**

I took a deep breath, trying not to let my anger get the best of me. Adair was reasonable, so I just needed to explain—rationally—where I was coming from.

“I can’t send them away,” I told him. “I want Marius and Rishika to be with me. They’re good for me. They ground me. They’re my…” I cast around for what exactly they were to me. “My advisors, of sorts.”

Adair was clearly not moved by this argument and shook his head. “You have an advisor, Artemis. It’s me. And as your advisor *and* your uncle, I am telling you that you need to send them both away. Having Marius and Rishika hanging around now isn’t in your best interest. Or in theirs. Not right now, at least.”

“And what about Tabitha?!” I bit out. This was kind of a low blow, and Tabitha hadn’t done anything to me, so I hated roping her into this argument, but I felt like I was being backed into a corner. “I like her, Adair; she’s a nice person, but how is it any different for you to have her at your side all the time? Tabitha is human, so it’s not like she belongs here either.”

Adair was almost always mild-mannered. Even in tense situations, he rarely raised his voice or got mad. But his eyes flashed as he looked at me. “Tabitha isn’t part of this, Artemis, and I will thank you to leave her out—”

“How is she not part of this?” I demanded. “She’s human, she’s with you, and that alone creates tension between all the Fae—”

“Don’t try to make this about me,” Adair snapped. “I am telling you right now, Artemis, you need to get rid of Rishika and Marius. Send them back to your grandmother. Hera will look after them. She’ll make sure they get what they need. And I’ll tell you now, I am not going to ask again.”

He turned on his heel and strode quickly away, leaving me glaring after him. I’d never actually had the experience, but I felt as though I was a child who had just been lectured by a parent.

I wasn’t in a hurry to get back to camp. I was steaming mad, so I walked around the clearing, kicking stumps and loose rocks for a while. But I was wearing thin satin shoes, so every time I did this, it hurt my feet; after twenty minutes I just headed back to camp.

Celeste was waiting for me when I got back.

“There you are,” she said.

I tensed for a moment, worried she was about to ask me where I had been. I should have thought of a believable excuse for why I’d just dashed away from camp and where I had been, but I’d been too mad at Adair to do any of that.

Luckily, Celeste didn’t ask.

“I need to talk to you about what’s going to happen next,” she said, walking toward me.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Adair seems to be working with me today, albeit begrudgingly,” she said, her voice cold, “but it’s something. And we have worked on an agenda for the next few days.”

“An agenda?” I repeated, wondering how my life had come to the point where people were working out an agenda for me.

“Yes,” she said briskly, not noticing the misery on my face. “We are going into the mountain towns tomorrow, and I want you to be prepared.”

“Prepared for what?” I asked.

Celeste looked at me from the corner of her eyes, like she wasn’t sure if I was being serious. “You and your groom will be meeting with the local leadership, both of the town and those who run trade in and out. You and Kastian have been charged with the vital task of showing everyone that there is peace and unity between Dark and Light Fae, and that they also need to start working together to bring the two sides together throughout the land, both politically and economically.”

I nodded robotically. I knew nothing about anything Celeste was talking about, so I wasn’t sure how I was going to convince anyone of it. *Politically and economically?* What was she talking about?

“The point of all of this is to open up trade and improve communication between these small outlying towns,” she went on. “Now, we have sent an advance party, and they have already spoke to some local leaders, and they have agreed that there will even be a parade—”

“A what?” I asked, shocked.

“A *parade*. In your honor,” Celeste said, like I was an idiot.

There was a time not too long ago where I hadn’t even seen a parade. It certainly hadn’t been part of my upbringing, not being a dirt-poor orphan in the Fae world. And certainly there were no parades with the Kollector unless him showing off his “treasures” counted. But I had actually seen a few in the human world. There was one on New Year’s Day that I thought was especially interesting, where all the cars had been made of flowers.

I wanted to ask Celeste if anything was going to be made of flowers, but I managed to keep my mouth shut.

“There will be fanfare, Artemis,” Celeste said, giving me a keen look. “Fanfare you must be ready for.”

“What about Kastian?” I asked, knowing I sounded petulant. “Doesn’t he have to be ready for this nonsense?”

Celeste’s mouth went tight. “Of course not,” she said primly. “He will already be ready since he was raised for this. But *you* on the other hand…” Celeste gave me a sweeping glance and managed in just a look to tell me that I was falling short. “You must now shed your past identity as an assassin and a hunter and all-around urchin and become a diplomat.”

My head ached from how tightly I was clenching my jaw. But I didn’t argue. There was no point. I hated this, but I knew I had to agree. At least for now.

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When night fell, I was back in my tent, pulling on the nightgown that had been packed for me.

I looked down at the thing—it reached to the floor and was dressed with silk ribbons and hand woven lace. I could count on one hand the times I’d worn a nightgown. Until I’d stepped in for Cali at that damn wedding, I’d never even *seen* one.

Celeste had been right—this might have been the life Kastian was born for, but I had a lot of adjustments to make.

I looked out the window with a sigh. I really wanted to go see Rishika again, but I knew I couldn’t. I had promised Adair I’d be careful, and I didn’t want to give him another reason to tell me that she and Marius needed to leave. The best thing I could probably do was not rock the boat.

So I yanked back the coverlet on my bed and climbed in. I stared up the ceiling and slowly—very, very slowly—my eyes started to close.

I was in the forest, alone. It was cold, and a freezing mist surrounded me. I drew my arms close, trying to warm up, but the mist was growing thicker.

There was movement up ahead of me, and I squinted toward it, trying to see what it was.

My heart leapt—it was Rishika and Marius. They were together, walking deeper into the trees.

I started running, following them. They stopped when they heard my voice, and I ran into Marius’s open arms.

He embraced me and caressed me, his hands traveling across my body. Then he leaned forward and kissed me. The kiss was deep and searching, but when I pulled back for a breath, I realized I wasn’t kissing Marius any longer—I was kissing Rishika.

She looked at me hungrily, then pulled me back into a kiss, tangling her fingers in my hair.

I was panting by the time I pulled away and looked between them. The mist was still gathering, obscuring the trees. The forest smelled of damp earth, and I shivered in the cold.

“What are you two doing out here?” I asked.

“Why choose?” Marious asked.

“What?”

“Yeah, why choose?” Rishika added.

I frowned. “What are you talking about? Choose between what?” My head spun. “Between being the leader of the Fae and being one of them? Between my position as a diplomat and you two?”

They didn’t answer, but as I looked at them, I realized they were drifting into the mist in opposite directions.

I started after Rishika, then stopped and turned toward Marious. I took a step toward him, then stopped and looked in Rishika’s direction.

I wanted to go after them…but which one of them?

I woke with a gasp, but I didn’t sit up. I couldn’t. There was a hand over my mouth, pinning me down. Another hand held something to my neck, and the sharp coldness of the object told me it was a knife.

A quiet, dangerous voice spoke: “Don’t move.”

**Episode 5498**

The sun hadn’t fully risen when I opened my eyes. My room was dim and quiet, and I squinted into the light of my phone as I peered at it. I knew it was Wednesday, and when I squinted at my lock screen, I saw that it was February twentieth.

Shaking my head, I looked up at the ceiling. I couldn’t believe the month had gone by so quickly.

I rubbed my eyes. I hadn’t slept well, so I pulled myself out of bed with a groan. I stumbled into the shower, then out again. I pulled out jeans and a warm sweater and yanked them onto my body. I had hoped a good night’s sleep would help clear my mind, but I’d had strange, uncomfortable dreams, and now I felt even more exhausted than I had when I’d fallen asleep last night.

I needed caffeine, so I headed to the kitchen. And when I walked in, I was surprised to find Big Mac at the counter, drinking a cup of coffee.

“Good morning,” I mumbled. My shower had been fine, but not fully effective in waking me up.

“Is it?” Big Mac said waspishly, looking me over.

I sighed. Was she *ever* in a halfway decent mood?

I cleared my throat and pulled a mug from the cupboard next to the fridge. “What are you doing here?” I asked, dropping a tea bag into it and filling it with hot water from the kettle on the stove top.

She looked down into her cup. “Sabine and I thought we should be on-call for this wolf-swap situation you all have gotten yourselves into. Sabine is worried about Greyson.”

I nodded and wrapped my hands around my cup. “Yeah, I can imagine. Where is she now?”

“She’s probably talking to Greyson somewhere, mother-son stuff, you know how it is,” Big Mac said. She had a cinnamon roll on a plate in front of her, and she took a bite. “She wanted to check in on him. See how he’s doing. Get his thoughts on life.”

“Right.” I poured a squeeze of honey into my tea. I would have liked to have found them—to say hi to Mrs. Smith if nothing else—or to check in on Greyson myself, but I didn’t want to interrupt any mother-son conversations, so I didn’t ask where they were.

“Have you had any thoughts on solutions to this problem?” I wondered, taking a sip of my tea.

She shook her head. “I already told you, I don’t have anything that can help with this. It’s just not in my wheelhouse. I don’t know anything about wolves or how they get switched around.” She shook her head. “For the life of me, I still can’t figure out how you all figured out a way to mess up something like this.”

“They didn’t—” I started, offended on Greyson and Xavier’s behalf, but Big Mac spoke over me.

“You’re just going to have to wait for Swift to get back to you.”

I looked darkly into the depths of my swirling cup. “I don’t want to trust Swift again. Everything he’s done so far seems to be doing more hurting than helping.”

“Well, you need to learn that you can’t always depend on me for this kind of stuff. I’m only one witch,” she said, looking frustrated.

“I know, Big Mac, but we really need your help. You’re the only one we can really trust right now. *Please*, if you can think of anything that might help.”

She gave me a sour look. “What did he say? Swift?”

“He said we needed to have access to the Fae world to fix this.” A thought occurred to me as the words came out of my mouth. “Maybe I should go back through the portal.”

“No way.”

I looked over to see Greyson standing in the doorway of the kitchen, shaking his head.

“Why not?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Not for this. Not until we figure out how to fix this thing.” His expression was dark. “I don’t want to do anything that would accidentally make anything worse.”

I sighed with resignation. “I guess that’s true. I just hate not having a plan, and I’m worried about you.”

“I know,” he said. He walked over and dropped a kiss on the top of my head.

Mrs. Smith walked into the kitchen and straight over to Big Mac, giving her a hug.

“Well, I guess we have no choice but to wait for Swift,” I said. I looked over at Mrs. Smith. “How’s wedding planning going?”

Big Mac groaned and made a face that made it crystal clear she was completely over the wedding planning process.

Mrs. Smith just smiled. “Despite all the delays, it’s actually going really well. And we can’t wait for our big day, can we?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “I’m a bundle of joy,” she said. “I still think we should’ve just eloped.”

“It’s going to be great to celebrate something for once,” I said.

“A celebration?” Torin walked into the kitchen, his eyes bright. “Should I cook?”

I laughed. “We’re talking about Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s wedding.”

“Oh.” Torin looked a little disappointed.

“Maybe you can help advise us on our wedding favor,” Mrs. Smith offered, taking pity on his devastated look.

“Oh, yes!” Torin said, a ray of sunshine once again. “I have so many ideas. Come on!” He held out his hand, and he and Mrs. Smith walked into the dining room as Torin spoke quickly.

I smiled after them, thinking that it was nice that some of us could focus on happy things.

I wished everyone could relax like that. I wished I could. But that wasn’t in the cards at the moment. I was just too worried.

Greyson must have been able to see this on my face. “Love, if you’re worried, I can call Swift. Check on his progress. See if he’s come up with anything.”

“You can?” I asked excitedly. “Yes! Do that. I mean…” I stopped myself. “I don’t want to put any pressure on Swift. Or on you. I know this is affecting you a lot more than it’s affecting me.”

“I don’t mind giving him a call,” Greyson said. “I want a solution too. I’ll just see what he’s been up to, and I don’t mind putting pressure on him.”

I nodded and took another drink of my tea as Greyson pulled out his phone. He dialed the number, and I heard when Swift picked up.

“I wanted to know how things were coming along,” Greyson said.

I could hear Swift’s answering voice, but I couldn’t make out any of the words.

“Uh-huh,” Greyson said, nodding. He frowned. “No, I don’t think that’s… Yeah. Yeah. No.” He shook his head.

If I had hoped to try to piece together Greyson’s half of the conversation, I was sadly out of luck.

Finally, Greyson shook his head again. “No, that won’t work.” He paused. “I don’t care. Find another solution.”

He ended the call and looked up at me.

“Well?” I said expectantly. “What is it? Did he find an answer?”

Greyson shook his head.

“It sounded like he found *something*,” I pressed.

Greyson’s mouth was tight. “It’s not something that will work for us.”

“Greyson,” I said firmly. I put down my tea and grabbed his hand, pulling him around so he was looking right at me. “You have to at least tell me what Swift said. Or tell Xavier. This concerns his life too.”

His expression was stormy. “Xavier will have the exact same reaction I do.”

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

When he still didn’t answer, I reached for his phone.

“Fine! I’ll just call Swift back myself.”

Greyson pulled his phone away but sighed, giving in. “Swift *did* find a possible solution. But he’s not sure it will work, and the risks are too high.”

“What’s the solution?” I asked quickly. “No matter the risks, we should probably give it a try, right?”

“Swift said that he thinks if Xavier and I part from each other, and go far enough away, then our wolves will not like the distance from their true selves and be forced back into their proper place.”

“Well, that’s an idea,” I said. “That’s so easy. What’s the big risk there?”

“You’re worried about Caliana, aren’t you?”

I spun around. I had almost forgotten Big Mac was still in the kitchen, but she was still there, watching Greyson with a curious expression. “What?”

“I mean, of course I am,” Greyson said heavily in answer to Big Mac’s question.

“Worried about what?” I asked, looking between the two. “What’s wrong with…” I trailed off.

I realized what they were both talking about. It was me—I couldn’t be physically apart from either of my mates, or I risked going mad. That was why Xavier had to come with us to the Fae world, causing this whole problem to start.

So if Greyson and Xavier had to be apart from each other, that meant I couldn’t stay close to both of them at the same time. And if I couldn’t be near them…

Did that mean I would start to hallucinate again?

**Episode 5499**

“Okay, listen.” I took a deep breath as I tried to frame my argument on the fly. “I get that there are dangers, that I could go mad if I couldn’t be near both of you at the same time—”

“No big deal or anything,” Big Mac muttered sarcastically, taking another bite of her cinnamon roll.

I shot her a glare. “—but given what we’re dealing with here, I really don’t see another way. And if it works, then it’ll have been worth the risk, right?”

“Cali—” Greyson started.

“Besides, how long could this actually take to make your wolves stressed enough that they go running back to their rightful home?” I wondered. “It can’t be that long. I’m sure I could last a few days. We have to try it—”

“No!” he nearly shouted. “No, we’re not going to risk you like that.”

“I can handle it,” I assured him.

Just then the back door opened, and Xavier and Ava walked in.

“Hey.” Xavier looked between Greyson and me with a frown. “What can you handle?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Greyson snapped.

“Greyson just got off the phone with—” I started, but Greyson spoke over me.

“We are *not* discussing this,” Greyson growled.

“Not discussing what?” Xavier asked.

I turned to Xavier, hoping he’d see reason. “Swift found a possible solution for the wolf swap.”

“He did?” Xavier looked surprised and pleased. “Great! When can he do it? What is it?”

“It’s really simple, actually,” I said, ignoring Greyson’s warning growl. “You and Greyson just have to be far enough away from each other that your wolves get stressed enough that they freak out and run back to where they belong—into the right person.”

“Oh, no.” Xavier shook his head without hesitation. “No way. That’s not going to work.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“Because that would mean you’d have to be apart from one of us,” he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “And we’re not doing that.”

“Exactly,” Greyson said.

“But if it helps you get your wolf back, shouldn’t we at least try?” Ava asked, looking over at Xavier.

That seemed to annoy Greyson, but I grabbed his hand.

“I agree with Ava,” I said.

“That’s a first,” Ava said wryly. She looked back at Xavier. “You heard her. That means you can’t just ignore this.”

Xavier shook his head again. “No. I don’t even know why we’re talking about this—”

“We’re not,” Greyson muttered.

“I’m not going to risk Cali going mad for us,” Xavier said firmly.

“Come *on*,” I pleaded. “It’s not like something like that would happen immediately. Maybe… Look, I can hold out for as long as we need. Why can’t you two trust me to do this for you? You’re always putting yourself at risk to help me, so why can’t I do the same thing for you?”

“No,” Xavier said.

“Absolutely not,” Greyson said.

It was clear neither of them was going to budge, and frustration flooded through me. I spun on my heel and stormed out of the kitchen.

I wasn’t just frustrated—I was *mad*. I was angry that neither of my mates would listen to reason about this. They needed to get their own wolves back—for everyone’s safety—and we’d finally found what might be a solution, and they wouldn’t even consider it. And why? Because they just kept trying to protect me.

It was cold, but I needed to walk off my anger, so I grabbed my coat and headed outside, slamming the door behind me.

When I made it down the porch steps, I heard the door open behind me and saw Ava coming after me. She was wearing a thin white T-shirt and no coat. Obviously, she didn’t need one, being a werewolf, but I hated that she looked so cool when I was bundled up in my parka.

I stopped in my tracks as she stepped toward me, shocked that she had followed me.

Ava held up her hands. “Truce, okay?”

I nodded. “You think they’re being irrational too, right?”

“Of course,” she said with a shrug. “You’re not some delicate flower. You can handle some shit. Plus, if you go mad, who would know?”

I narrowed my eyes, but Ava just laughed.

“I’m kidding,” she said.

I sighed. I knew she wasn’t, but that was the least of my problems. “Things must be really dire if you and I are on the same side of this.”

“You got that right,” she muttered. She looked back at the house. “Shouldn’t they see that?”

I followed her gaze and stared up at the house, thinking hard. “Maybe you could trick Xavier into going abroad.”

“Out of the country?” Ava asked. She looked intrigued.

“Yeah. I still have those tickets to London. Maybe I should try to take Greyson out of the country,” I mused. It could be fun, actually. I knew why Xavier and Greyson were worried, but the idea of disappearing to London for a few weeks kind of appealed to me.

But Ava shook her head. “How would I get Xavier through security and onto a plane without him noticing? He’d refuse, and I don’t think you’re allowed to take unconscious passengers through the security line.”

“Yeah, that might be a problem,” I was forced to admit. “Greyson would never just go on an airplane without knowing what was happening. Especially not now, when he knows this is a possibility.”

Ava crossed her long arms over her chest, looking determined. “I think we just need to divide and conquer.”

I nodded. “That probably makes the most sense. I’ll talk to Greyson if you’ll work on Xavier.”

“Okay,” Ava agreed. “They’re being idiots, but we just have to make them see this is the only way forward.”

“Right.” I looked down when my phone buzzed with a text. I pulled my phone from my pocket and saw it was a message in the crew team group text.

I silenced my phone and slipped it back into my pocket. I loved those guys, but now was not the time. I had more important things to think about at the moment. Like getting my mates their wolves back and not going insane in the process.

But I felt my phone buzz again with another message.

“Just answer it,” Ava said irritably, glaring at my pocket. “I’m going to go see if I can talk some sense into Xavier.”

“Okay, let me know how it goes,” I called after Ava’s retreating form.

“Yeah, sure thing,” she threw over her shoulder as she disappeared back into the house.

With a sigh I pulled out my phone again and unlocked it. I saw immediately that I had missed thirty-seven messages in the crew group chat. And as I scrolled down through the messages, I was shocked to see that they were all about me.

*Where are you?*

*Cali girl, where you at?*

*C-Town, are you coming to practice? We need you.*

*Cali, this is getting really serious. Why have you missed so many practices? We operate as a team, but we need the whole team to show up for each other.*

*Are you ever coming back???*

My stomach sank as I looked through the messages. I’d had my phone on silent for days, and I hadn’t been checking messages or keeping up with the crew team. But as I scrolled through their texts for the first time, I felt really bad. I’d clearly been letting them all down.

I was about to text back that I’d thought Lola told them I’d be away because of a family emergency, but as I continued to scroll back, another story emerged.

*I talked to Coach, and he said the school’s pissed, Cali. You’ve been missing too many assignments, and you didn’t submit a family death or emergency form to be excused.*

*Yeah, I heard the same thing. I have a friend who works as an intern in admin, and she said you’re failing, girl! What’s going on with you???*

As I kept scrolling down, the messages got worse and worse. Until I finally reached the message that made my heart stutter to a stop:

*Cali! What’s going on? Coach says you’re on academic probation!*

I started a text, but halfway through, I realized there was way too much information to try to put into a text.

So, with shaking hands, I dialed Gael’s number.

“Cali? Is that you?” he asked when he picked up.

“Yeah, it’s me. I just saw the text thread. What’s going on?”

“That’s what *we* want to know!” he said. “Where the hell have you been?!”

I winced. “I’m sorry, I had some stuff I had to deal with,” I told him. “But what’s this about me on academic probation?! Reading it in the group chat is the first I’ve heard about it.”

“Oh, you’re not on probation anymore,” Gael said.

“Oh, thank god—”

“No, you’ve missed so many classes that your attendance is shit. You’re failing everything. Cali, you’re getting kicked out of school.”

**Episode 5500**

**Greyson**

Big Mac leaned across the counter toward me. “Listen, Greyson, I get that you’re hesitant, but Cali is right about one thing—this sounds like it might be a viable solution for your problem, and it might be worth giving it a try—”

“*No*,” I said firmly. “No, I’m not going to do it. I won’t put Cali at risk.”

Xavier leaned against the wall, looking thoughtful. “I wonder if there’s any way to stop the issue with Cali, just for a few days.”

Big Mac shot him a dark look. “If there was an easy solution to stop her going mad, then we would have done it before she went to the Fae world. You seem to be forgetting the only reason *you* went on that little Fae road trip was because Cali would have gone mad if you’d stayed back.”

“Dammit,” I muttered, pushing a hand through my hair. I *did* remember that very painful decision, but I also remembered how badly Cali had been affected by the distance from Xavier, and how much she’d suffered until we found a solution. “That’s what I’m talking about,” I growled. “And I’m not letting anything like that happen to her again.”

Big Mac thought for a moment, drumming her fingers absently on the countertop. “There is one other person who might have a solution.”

“Who?” Xavier and I said at once.

“Vander,” Big Mac said. “But no one I know has heard from them in ages.”

I stood straight. “Then I’ll go find them. They’re the nature god or whatever. We’re surrounded by nature. They must be somewhere close by.”

“I’m going with you,” Xavier said with a nod.

“Hey,” Ava said, walking into the kitchen. She looked at Xavier. “We should talk.”

“I don’t have time,” Xavier said. “We’re going to find Vander.”

Ava’s face registered surprise. She glanced at me, then back at her mate. “Are you going with Greyson?”

I frowned at the back of her head. Why was she asking it like that? It was like she didn’t want us to go together—or like she didn’t want me to be alone with my brother. But why would that be?

“Ava, we’ll talk later, I promise,” Xavier said, pulling off his sweatshirt and handing it to her. “This is important.”

She balled the sweatshirt up, looking annoyed. “Fine. Do whatever you want.”

“We shouldn’t be gone long,” Xavier said as he headed to the door.

I followed him, and outside we pulled off the rest of our clothes and shifted into wolves.

As we headed into the forest surrounding the pack house, and then into the mountains, I was *really* hoping we’d be able to find Vander—and another solution to this problem.

Running in Xavier’s wolf felt like wearing someone else’s clothes, and I hated it. I had always loved being in my wolf form and appreciated the way my thoughts would narrow down to their most important elements, but this was misery.

Though, I had to admit that running next to Xavier made me feel slightly less awkward. Maybe his wolf felt more comfortable, and I felt more comfortable being so near my own wolf. In any case, it wasn’t quite as bad as it could have been.

The switchbacks were tough, and I struggled to understand Xavier’s wolf’s instincts, but we finally made it to the top of the peak.

I shifted to my human form and looked around. It had been cloudy at the pack house, but we had made it high enough that we were above the low-hanging clouds, and the weak winter sun was shining.

I took a deep breath of the thin air. “Vander!” I shouted.

My voice echoed off the neighboring peak.

“Vander? We’re looking for you!”

Xavier looked around. “Hang on, didn’t Artemis once call Vander somehow?”

“How the fuck should I know?” I asked.

Xavier bent and plucked a blade of thick grass from the scrub at our feet. He blew on it, making a weird vibrating whistle.

There was no response.

“Do it again,” I urged.

Xavier whistled again, and an instant later, Vander appeared directly in front of us.

Startled, I took a quick step back. “Vander,” I breathed, relieved to see them.

Vander looked at us evenly. “You called me—what do you need?”

“We’ve got a situation here, and we were wondering if you might be able to help us out,” I said. “Xavier and I passed through the portal from the Fae world back into the human world, and when we did, somehow our wolves got mixed up. So now I have Xavier’s wolf within me, and he has mine. It’s caused a lot of problems and has the potential to cause more, and we can’t figure out what to do. We hoped you might know.”

Vander had listened to my speech, but when I finished, they shook their head. “None of that has anything to do with nature, so why would I have a solution for you? Why don’t you go back through the portal and see if that fixes it?”  
 “Yeah, that’s what Cali suggested,” I said.

“Well, she might be right,” Vander said. They considered for a moment. “Or she might not be. Maybe it would just mix you up even more somehow. Like creating a half-wolf, half-man or something else against the laws of nature.”

I cringed at the thought. “There was another solution,” I offered.

“I thought we weren’t going to consider that,” Xavier growled.

“I just want to get Vander’s opinion on it.” I turned to Vander. “Do you think going far away from each other—and our wolves—would work to get them to return to their own home?”

Vander considered this for a moment. “It could,” they said thoughtfully. “Everything in nature is about balance, so if you intentionally upset the balance even more, nature might seek to naturally right itself again.”

My heart sank. I had wanted to hear what they thought, but I was frustrated to hear that Swift’s most recent idea might be our best solution. I had hoped Vander would just laugh it off as a ridiculous idea. After all, it had come from Swift, who was kind of a ridiculous guy.

“Okay,” I said heavily. “Thanks, Vander.”

Vander nodded. There was a rushing sound, and a strong wind blew up. But this was a warm wind, maybe one Vander had summoned from somewhere south. It was hot and dry, and it grew in intensity until there was a whirlwind forming just over where they stood. An instant later, it had turned into a full tornado. It touched down around Vander, enveloping them in the swirling winds. Then—an instant later—it was gone, leaving nothing behind but Xavier and me rubbing dust out of our eyes.

I turned to Xavier. “Well, this is bad. I don’t think we can do this.”

Xavier shook his head. “I’m not going to put Cali at risk for us.”

“As her mates, we definitely have to protect her.”

He nodded, but there was a strange look on his face.

I tensed, expecting a fight. I really hated fighting with my brother over Cali. And—honestly—I’d thought we were past that. We’d done plenty of that in the past, but the three of us had been through so much together. I’d thought we’d come to a peace of some sort.

“What is it?” I asked. “Is this about me asking Vander about Swift’s idea? Do you think I’m not being a good mate to Cali?”

Xavier shrugged. “That’s for you to answer.”

He started to turn away, but anger flared within me at his obvious dismissal, and I grabbed his shoulder roughly.

“What’s up with you?” I demanded. “You’ve been acting weird since the house. Ava too. Are you pissed at me about something? Is that why Ava didn’t want you coming out here with me?”

Shock crossed Xavier’s face. Which I figured was reasonable. I was usually the calm brother, while he was typically the hothead, so he was taken aback by my anger.

The realization of that rage—and where it came from—flared up, making me feel like shit. I released Xavier’s shoulder with a shove.

Xavier shook his head. “You’ve got it all wrong, man. Ava was asking if we were going together because she *wants* us to talk. That’s the problem.”

I glared at him. I was even more confused, and it made me angrier. “What are you talking about? What do you and I need to talk about?”

Xavier sighed. He glanced around the mountaintop. Now that Vander’s tornado had died down, the air was cold and still. It was beautiful, but Xavier looked like he wished he was anywhere else.

“Listen,” he finally said, “I didn’t want to know any of this, but your wolf is letting me into all kinds of weird shit about you, and it’s really confusing me. So I’m just going to stop with the bullshit and ask you straight up.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What are you talking about?”

Xavier looked at me, his eyes sharp and defiant. “Is Kendall your mate?”

**Episode 5501**

**Xavier**

*Is Kendall your mate?*

The words hung in the air between us. I stared at my brother carefully as I waited for the answer to my question, waiting for his face to reveal anything about his answer. I figured I knew Greyson well enough to tell if he lied.

I was watching so close I could see his expression go from shock to anger.

“What the *hell* are you talking about?” he demanded. “We both know I’m mated to Cali. *You’re* the one with two mates, remember? Not me.”

He was glowering at me, and it was clear I’d really pissed him off. I couldn’t blame him for that, but I did want an answer to my question, so I tried to keep calm to prevent our face-off from escalating to an actual fight.

“It’s not my mate situation that’s in question right now, Greyson. I’m asking about you and Kendall.”

“Ask me about it again and you’ll be sorry,” he snarled at me.

I stepped back and surveyed my brother. Everything about him looked tense and angry—ready to pounce.

“Are you *threatening* me?” I asked in disbelief.

“I am telling you not to pursue this line of questioning, or you’re going to find out,” he snarled.

I looked at him for a moment. “You’ve really been acting like a dick, Greyson. You’ve been short, getting pissed off over nothing. What’s going on with you?”

“You mean I’ve been acting more like you?” he snapped. “Maybe it’s because I’m stuck with *your* wolf, Xavier. Did you ever think of that?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Are you saying that you’re acting like a total asshole because of my wolf?”

Greyson shrugged. “How else do you explain it?” He gestured toward me. “Let’s get real, man. The proof is right there.”

A cold wind whipped around us as we stood on the mountaintop where Vander left us, but I barely felt it. I was trying to dig down into what Greyson had just said to me. He had been acting like a downright jerk—he’d been irritable and short-tempered, he kept flying off the handle at the slightest provocation. In short, he was acting like a hothead. Which was…kind of the way I was usually described.

I tried to not let his comments get into my head, but I could feel myself starting to spiral. Was I really that miserable to be around? Was I really such a jerk?

Greyson shook his head, looking annoyed. “Forget it. We’re just going to have to get used to this until we figure out how to get our rightful wolves back.”

I nodded, but I was only half-listening. Greyson was unbearable to be around lately, and the idea that it was *my* wolf that was turning Greyson—someone who was usually fairly levelheaded—into a short-tempered douche was freaking me out. It was unnerving, like I was a kind of poison or something.

I tried to be rational about the idea. Yeah, Greyson might be reacting to the effect of having my wolf with him, but wasn’t it possible he’d be reacting the same way no matter *what* wolf was in him? It wasn’t like I was having a great time with his wolf in me. It was unsettling to have a strange wolf with me. It screwed with my instincts and made me feel constantly on edge.

And besides, wasn’t it possible that my wolf was feeling out of place and deeply uncomfortable in Greyson’s body?

“We’re just going to have to do our best to keep both wolves under control as best we can until we can get everything settled,” Greyson went on.

“What makes you think it’s going to be so simple?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he snapped.

“I mean, I’m mated to both Ava and Cali at the same time. Sort of outside the *due destini* triangle. And it’s possible that whatever is happening with you and Kendall is similar in some way—”

“There’s no connection between me and Kendall!” Greyson bellowed. “What you have with Ava is because Ava died, and you were able to make a mate connection with Cali, and then Ava came back to life. And that’s *not* what’s going on with Kendall.”

I stayed quiet, letting Greyson yell. It was weird watching him behave like this, and I couldn’t help but wonder if it really *was* my wolf that was causing him to be so agitated.

“Fine,” I said, holding up my hands in surrender. “Forget I said anything about Kendall.” I didn’t think I was wrong about this, but I also knew there was no point in pushing Greyson any further. It was clear I wasn’t going to get him to admit anything without it coming to blows between us.

It actually felt kind of strange, backing off like that. Usually the thought of duking it out with Greyson wouldn’t have bothered me in the slightest. I wondered if that was his wolf affecting me.

Whatever—this was too thorny a problem to face at the moment. Right now, I needed to pursue another avenue, and I knew just what it was. If I couldn’t get any information on this current I’d felt running between Greyson and Kendall, then there was only one other person I might be able to talk to.

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I followed Kendall’s scent through the woods. I started with where I’d…*encountered* her and followed it from there. It was taking me close to the CCU campus. I wasn’t thrilled. I didn’t want to see her after that kiss we’d had in the forest, but I didn’t see that I had much of a choice. I *had* to get to the bottom of what was going on.

As I ran, I tried not to think too much about how combative Greyson had been. Or, more specifically, how it might have been my wolf that had made him act so…unpleasant. Was it really possible that it was because of my wolf? And was it possible that’s the way I acted too?

It couldn’t be, I assured myself as I ran through the trees. If I was always so miserable to be around, then Cali never would have wanted me, right?

That thought comforted me for a moment, until I realized that while Cali was still mated to me, she was no longer *with* me. She was with Greyson now. And I was with Ava.

When I reached campus, I shifted back to my human form and pulled on the clothes I’d carried with me in a backpack. I’d brought along the backpack so I could blend in on campus—I figured the clothes would help with that too.

I headed toward the administration building, but when I reached the hallway leading to Kendall’s office, I slowed down. There was a figure standing in the doorway of her office, speaking in a hushed tone.

I stopped and stayed still, listening closely. But even using my wolf hearing, I could only catch snatches of what the person was saying.

I frowned, listening as hard as I could. There was something about sending her files. They must mean sending Kendall files.

When the guy stepped away from Kendall’s office, he started down the hallway toward me. I turned away, not wanting him to see me or notice that I’d been eavesdropping. I pretended to be a student looking at my phone, and the guy passed by without pausing.

But as he passed, I looked up in the glass window just in front of me. It allowed me to briefly see his reflection as he passed by.

I frowned as I watched him disappear around the corner. There was something really familiar about the guy, but I couldn’t place him.

“Are you here for office hours?  
 Kendall’s voice startled me, and I fumbled with my phone for a minute.

I turned to look at her.

Her expression changed from something cool and professional to annoyance when she saw it was me. “Oh.”

As I looked into her purple eyes, I felt Greyson’s wolf react to her, confirming my suspicions. Greyson could deny it all he wanted, but I had his wolf inside me. And I knew there was *something* between Kendall and him.

Kendall raised an eyebrow, waiting for a response, and I gestured down the hall, where the guy had disappeared.

“Who was that guy you were talking to?” I asked.

“Why is it any of your business?” Kendall countered.

It was a smart-ass answer, which made sense, because Kendall was a smart-ass. I was vaguely aware that in a different moment—and maybe with my own wolf inside me—I might have responded aggressively to this. Maybe snarled or growled—maybe even threatened.

But for whatever reason—maybe because of Greyson’s wolf—I just let it go.

She leaned against her door and crossed her arms over her chest. “Well? What do you want, Xavier?”

I’d come all the way here for answers, so there didn’t seem to be any point in beating around the bush. So I just asked her bluntly: “Are you mated to my brother?”

**Episode 5502**

I was starting to have some serious doubts about my decision as I drove toward campus. I wasn’t sure if bringing Lola with me was the best idea. Though I *was* grateful to have the support of a friend. Because I was *freaking out*. I was trying not to freak out, but I was freaking out. *Academic probation, kicked out, failing*. The words kept running through my head as I turned into the campus parking lot.

“I thought you were supposed to be signing into my online classes while I was in the Fae world so my teachers wouldn’t know I was absent! Apparently my attendance record is in the gutter,” I finally said, trying to keep my voice calm. I was trying not to get angry with Lola for dropping the ball.

“I did!” she insisted. “But I didn’t know about any of your missed assignments. Or the tests.”

“You didn’t hear them mentioned in class?” I pressed.

Lola gave me a strange look. “I didn’t stick around to listen to your classes, Cali. I signed in and then went on with my day. I wasn’t taking notes for you. And there’s nothing I could have done about the crew team. I couldn’t have just signed away your absence from that.”

I pulled the car into a parking space with a sigh. “I know. I know you’re right, Lola. You did everything you could to help me. I dropped the ball, not you,” I said firmly, more to myself than to Lola. “And now it’s time to face the music.”

We got out of the car, and I headed straight for the boathouse.

Just before we reached it, I grabbed Lola’s arm to slow her stride.

“Hey, listen, when we get inside, you need to stay calm and let me do the talking.”

“Sure. Stay calm. Got it,” she promised.

I nodded, and then burst into the boathouse. “What the *hell* happened?!” I demanded, looking around, completely forgetting my own advice.

The crew team stared at me for a long, shocked moment.

“*That’s* what we wanted to know!” Bear finally said, stepping toward me. “Where the hell have you been?!”

“She has been attending to some very important things in her personal life, and I will thank you to not—” Lola started, narrowing her eyes.

“It’s okay, Lola,” I said, putting my hand on her arm again. I turned back to Bear. “I told you guys, I had to deal with some family stuff. I told you about that.”

“Yeah, we know, Cali. We remember, but you weren’t just not at practice for weeks on end. You dropped off the face of the earth.”

“Coach has pretty much written you off,” Gael said, shaking his head at me.

My stomach dropped. “Written me off? What does that mean?”

Gael looked over at the other guys, then back to me with a gusty sigh. “Coach is already having tryouts for a new coxswain.”

I had been fired up when I stepped in, but when I heard this news, I deflated. “Tryouts? For a new coxswain? Already? I wasn’t gone that long, was I?”

Bear frowned. “Who knew your tiny shoes would be so hard to fill.”

I glanced down at my feet. “My feet aren’t that small.” Then I shook my head. That wasn’t the issue, and I needed to focus. “Okay, so what am I going to do?”

“This really isn’t fair,” Lola pointed out.

“What do you mean?” Gael asked.

“Cali was dealing with a *real* emergency. She’s in a protected class. Her rights are being violated. I’m going to give that coach a piece of my mind!”

“*No!*”

The entire team reacted at the same time, and Lola took a step back, looking wounded.

“I’m just trying to help,” she said in a hurt voice.

“Listen, it seems like the crew team is the least of your problems here at school, Cali,” Schmiddy pointed out.

“What do you mean?” Lola asked.

He shrugged. “I mean that from what I’ve heard, Cali’s in hot water with her classes, too.”

I groaned. “I’m screwed, aren’t I?”

“Hey, come on, that’s the wrong attitude,” Codsworth said, stepping toward me and clapping my shoulder hard enough that I stumbled sideways. “That doesn’t sound like the Cali we’ve all come to admire.”

“What do you mean?” I muttered, getting my feet back under me.

“You’re a *fighter*,” he said. “And we need you to keep fighting.”

“*Why?*”

“Because you’re the best coxswain we’ve ever had,” he said with a smile.

Rodrigo walked over and wrapped me in a hug. “And we’ll do whatever we can to let Coach Ludwig know we still want you, now that you’re back.”

I wrapped my arms around Rodrigo. “I really appreciate all the support, guys, but I really doubt that it’s going to be enough to convince him to give me another chance. Never mind the administration.”

“Well, just wait until they hear from me—” Lola started.

“*NO!*” everyone—including me—screamed at Lola.

Lola glowered around the boathouse.

“So, what are you going to do?” Gael asked.

I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear as I thought quickly. “I don’t know. I guess I can appeal the academic probation or something? I don’t know. I’ve never actually been in this situation.”

Lola grabbed hold of my hand. “Come with me,” she said, and pulled me out of the boathouse.

“What are you doing? Where are we going?” I demanded as she dragged me toward the main campus buildings.

“You’ll see,” she said under her breath.

But when we reached the quad, I pulled my arm from her grip. She had pulled me halfway across campus, and it was high time for some answers.

“Enough, Lola,” I said. “Tell me what you’re doing!”

“I have a plan,” Lola said, taking my hand again and pulling me, though this time with slightly less force.

“What kind of a plan?” I asked skeptically. “I feel like I should remind you that your plans don’t always work out for the best.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, shocked.

“Do I need to remind you about your ‘banging it out’ advice with Xavier and Greyson and the *due destini*? That turned out to be *not* helpful in the least.”

Lola waved a hand, dismissing this. “I can’t believe you’re even bringing that up. This is different.”

We were just outside the administration building now, and I was starting to get really nervous. I looked over at Lola and was startled to see a determined look on her face.

“What do you think you’re going to do in there?” I asked her, nodding toward the building. “What do you think you can do, Lola? I mean, the truth is that I screwed up. I stopped showing up for classes and practices. I’m failing because I didn’t do the work, and I’m just going to have to face the consequences. Maybe if I just own up, they’ll take pity on me or something.”

“Trust me,” Lola ground out. “I know what I’m doing. I studied law.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You studied *law*? When precisely was this? Did I miss the chapter of your life when you went to law school and passed the bar?”

“I took a pre-law class,” she muttered, her eyes on the administration building.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh my god, Lola. You took a single class? That’s *studying law* for you? When did you even take it?” None of this was filling me with much hope for what could be done.

We walked into the building, and I looked around at the high-ceilinged entryway. The place was warmer than outside, but still cool, and decorated in muted greys. There was something about it that made me feel like I was in trouble.

But Lola headed doggedly forward, going straight up the stairs, following the signs that led to the Dean of Students’ office.

As we got to the second floor, and the dean’s office, I grabbed Lola’s arm, trying to get her to slow her hurrying steps.

“What are you doing?” she snapped at me.

“I don’t think we can just waltz in, Lola,” I said in a whisper. “Don’t we need an appointment to see the dean?”

Lola brushed this off. “That’s just for regular people.”

“And what are we?”

“This is an emergency,” she said insistently.

My face flushed with embarrassment as Lola breezed past the dean’s assistant, dragging me behind her.

The assistant got to his feet and called after us, but Lola ignored him as she burst into the office.

The man behind the desk looked up at us with a shocked expression, which quickly hardened into a scowl. “What are you doing? Where’s my assistant?”

“I—I’m so sorry,” I sputtered. “We’ll get right out of here—”

“Your honor!” Lola shouted, glaring at the dean. “You cannot expel Caliana Hart!”

The dean looked between the two of us for a moment. “*Who’s* Caliana Hart? And who are you?”

I cleared my throat nervously. “I’m Caliana Hart.”

“And you?” the dean asked, turning to Lola.

Lola puffed out her chest like a peacock. “I am her lawyer, and this is a complete miscarriage of justice!”

**Episode 5503**

**Artemis**

My heart thudded hard against my ribs. I could feel my body going into panic mode, but I fought against it. I needed to stay aware, and I needed to fight back.

I reached up and grasped the hands on me—the ones covering my mouth and holding a knife to my throat. I struggled to break the grip, but I knew I needed to be careful. One slip and I could slit my own throat.

I fought hard, but whoever it was that was holding onto me was strong, and I couldn’t break free.

The hand pressed hard against my mouth, and I was left with only one path forward. I opened my mouth so a couple of fingers slipped in, then I bit down as hard as I could.

The person screamed and jerked back, releasing their injured hand.

I jumped to my feet and grabbed the knife hand in the dark. I twisted the wrist, using my body for momentum, until I heard a satisfying crack. The person moaned with pain, and I used that moment to step back, rear up, and kick the knife from their hand.

I heard when it clattered to the ground and breathed a sigh of relief.

But that relief was very temporary, as the next instant the intruder lunged at me, catching me around the stomach and pushing me back. This knocked the wind out of me, but I sucked in a ragged breath and moved quickly, fighting to keep my feet under me. The last thing I wanted was to go down and be at the mercy of whoever the hell this was.

The person’s arms started to close around me, but I spun out of their grip and circled behind them. I grabbed the injured hand and twisted it until it cracked again, then shoved the figure into the wall of the tent.

The person snarled and pushed back, moving quickly and efficiently, and before I knew it, I was on the ground. They had pinned me down and were hovering over me.

I looked up, squinting into the darkness, but I didn’t recognize the angry face only inches from my own.

“What do you *want*?” I demanded, still fighting to free my arms from his grasp.

“Why are you coming to Embersy?” the intruder demanded, ignoring my question entirely.

I shoved at him, but he was solid as a rock, and I couldn’t break free. “It’s no secret. Kastian and I are doing a honeymoon tour of the villages to promote peace between the Dark and Light Fae,” I recited as I actively struggled for my life.

The intruder’s face darkened into an angry scowl. “Nonsense,” he hissed. “That is the bullshit they wish us to believe, but no one does. Everyone knows there will never be peace between Dark and Light.” He tightened his grip. “Why are you *actually* here?”

Suddenly, it was as if time stopped. My whole body was tingling with pain and panic, this intruder had me pinned beneath him, and I was completely vulnerable to whatever was going to happen next, but I actually let myself pause and consider the question.

What the hell *was* I doing here? I knew how I had made each choice that had gotten me here, to this exact moment, but when I looked at it as a whole picture, it was actually very fucked up.

The reality was that the only reason I was really here at all—in this tent, and in the Fae world in general—was to find my father. But I wasn’t going to tell this guy that. As an intruder trying to murder me, it really wasn’t any of his business.

“I’ve already *told* you why I’m here,” I said, trying to lace my voice with threat. “And you are signing your own death warrant if you don’t release me.”

“Interesting you speak of death warrants,” he said with a cold laugh. “Because I’m the one with other options.”

Below him, I watched as his eyes shifted over to where the knife lay abandoned on the ground near us. He looked back down at me, and when he noticed me noticing the knife, his eyes went wide. There was a beat of stillness, and then we both lunged for it.

There was a ringing crash as he pushed me off and sent me crashing into the table next to my bed. The lantern that sat upon it fell to the ground, smashing the glass. The base rolled toward the wall of the tent, and the tiny flame that was always lit at the bottom of the lantern licked at the canvas walls, lighting them on fire.

I blinked the stars from my vision and grabbed for the first thing I could reach—it was the backpack I’d brought with me to the Fae world from the human world, and I always insisted on keeping it with me.

Swinging it with all my might, I aimed for the intruder as he went for the knife. He saw the blow coming and dodged, but I threw myself onto his back, tackling him to the ground.

We rolled toward the walls of the tent, which were now alight from the lantern flame.

Feeling the searing heat, we both scurried away to try to avoid the flames.

But the fire was spreading fast. Smoke was filling the tent, and I started to cough. So did the intruder.

My eyes were burning, and the smoke made my chest hurt every time I tried to take a breath, but I knew I couldn’t stop fighting. I *had* to get the knife.

But where the hell was it?

The smoke intensified the darkness, and I couldn’t see a damn thing as I looked around.

I was still holding my backpack, and I dug into it blindly. I knew I still had a few supplies in the bottom—including a pair of brass knuckles Rishika had given me. But just as I was reaching for them, the intruder appeared in front of me, looking like an evil spirit in the smoke.

And he was pointing the knife right at me.

I froze, with one hand still in my backpack, my brass knuckles just out of reach. I was coughing, my eyes were burning, and now I couldn’t even defend myself.

I backed up, but almost immediately I felt flames licking my calves through the stupid nightgown.

The intruder knew he had me cornered and smiled as he moved toward me, raising the blade so it pointed downward, right at the base of my throat.

“We don’t need your *peace*, princess,” he snarled.

He raised the blade, but before he could bring it down, the tent flap burst open, and when I looked over, I saw Rishika and Marius rushing toward me.

“What the hell—” The intruder spun around, only to get donkey-kicked in the chest by Rishika.

The guy gave a guttural grunt of pain and surprise. It was gratifying to see, and even more so when he stumbled back, losing his balance and sprawling on his back.

Marius—ever the opportunist—jumped onto the guy, rolling them both into the flames.

“Marius!” I screamed in horror. I rushed to my bed and yanked the blanket off my cot. I covered both men with the blanket, trying to smother the flames.

When the fire had stopped licking up around the edges, Rishika reached down and grabbed the intruder’s leg and hauled him out from under the blanket. He made a move to scramble back to his feet, but she kicked him back down and put her booted foot to his throat.

“One more move like that, and I’ll crush your windpipe,” she hissed, the threat in her voice making even me shiver.

Marius threw the blanket off and got to his feet. He looked himself over, and when he saw there was still a little flame burning on his sleeve, he casually dampened his finger and put it out.

His arm was still smoking when he put a hand on my shoulder. “Hey, are you okay?”

I took a deep breath and assessed the damages. I was rattled, and my heart was still beating a million miles an hour, but nothing was hurting or seemed to be broken. “I’m okay.”

Then Marius and I both turned to look at the guy still squirming under Rishika’s foot.

“Who are you?” I demanded, looming over him. “And who sent you?”

“Artemis! Are you all right?! What in the devil is going on?” Kastian bellowed as he rushed into the tent. “I smelled smoke, and I…”

He stopped mid-sentence as he looked around, taking in the guy on the floor beneath Rishika’s boot, the smoking tent, and Rishika and Marius. I could see him trying to put the pieces of this chaotic picture together, and failing that, his eyes narrowed dangerously.

His hand went automatically to the knife at his belt. “What are you doing here?”

**Episode 5504**

The dean leaned over his desk, giving both Lola and me an even glare. “Allow me to remind you, Caliana Hart, and your lawyer,” he said, not bothering to hide his contempt as he looked at Lola, “that this is my office, and in no way a courtroom. Nobody is on trial here, and if your so-called lawyer keeps this up, I will have both of you expelled.”

Lola scoffed loudly. “You’re bluffing.”

The dean narrowed his eyes. “The only one who is bluffing is you,” he said coolly. “You are not a lawyer, and because you are unfamiliar with the law, allow me to inform you that it is a crime to impersonate a lawyer without a license to practice law.”

Lola seemed to sag as he said this, her confidence deflating in front of my eyes.

Also gone before my eyes was any chance of us getting out of this. I needed to fix this before it went anymore off the rails.

But then Lola spoke again.

“If you do anything to expel this student,” she said, gesturing to me, “you are going to be sorry.”

I groaned. This was not how I had hoped to fix this. “I’m really sorry—”

The dean got to his feet. I hadn’t realized how tall he was, or how imposing standing behind a desk made a person seem. And the guy was *angry*. His eyes were narrowed and shooting sparks all the way across the room to us.

“Are you *threatening* me?” he asked in a deadly, dangerous voice.

“What I am saying is that you—” Lola started, but she stopped talking when I kicked her in the shins. “Hey! Why’d you do that—”

“I just want to be sure that I understand this clearly,” the dean said, still in that low, terrifying voice. “You two young women burst into my office, one of you pretending to be a lawyer, and now you are *threatening* me? Is that correct? Did I miss anything?”  
 I swallowed hard, my whole body burning with embarrassment, and I squirmed under the dean’s accusatory glare.

I nodded. “Yes, well—yes, you do have that right. But what you should understand is that I had a family emergency—”

The dean held up his hand for me to stop speaking. “*Enough!*” he bellowed. “Alexander?!”

The next moment, the assistant we’d bypassed on our way in stood in the doorway. He looked at Lola and me for a moment, then up at his boss. “Sir?”

“Why did you let these two into my office?” the dean demanded.

Alexander’s face flushed. “They ran right past me. I tried to stop them, but—”

“I want these women—Caliana Hart and…” He looked expectantly at Lola.

She raised her chin, defiant until the end. “Aaliyah Spillane,” she announced. “But my friends call me Lola.”

“And Aaliyah Spillane to immediately be put on academic probation while the board decides about their *expulsion*!”

Alexander made a note in the small notebook in his hands, then opened the door, eyeing Lola and me. It was obvious it was time for us to leave—past time, really—and I grabbed Lola’s hand and pulled her from the office.

“Cali! I didn’t—” Lola started, but I silenced her with a look.

“Just shut up!” I hissed as I pulled her down the stairs and back out of the building.

When we got outside, I stood for a moment, letting the cold February wind cool off my burning face.

Lola cleared her throat. “Listen, Cali, that didn’t go the way I was expecting it to. I thought he was going to believe that I was actually a lawyer. I guess…” She looked uncomfortable. “I guess I did just make things worse for you.”

I held up my hand to stop her. “I can’t even speak to you right now, Lola.”

“Okay, but I really was just trying to help,” she said quietly.

I felt my heart soften. “I know you meant well,” I said with a sigh, “but that did not go well at all, and I think now we’re both screwed.”

She shrugged. “Yeah. I know.”

I shook my head. I needed to get a little distance from Lola. No matter what her intentions were, she really had made things worse, and I needed to not be around her for a while, so I didn’t vent all my frustrations onto her.

“Listen, take the keys. I’ll see you back home,” I said, pulling the keys from my pocket and pressing them into her hand.

“But how will you get home?” she asked.

“I’ll get a ride,” I said quickly. “Just…go.”

Lola looked crushed. “Okay.” She took a step away from me, then stopped and turned back. “Are you sure I can’t just—”

“Please, Lola, just go,” I said with a shake of my head.

She sighed and shuffled off.

I rubbed my eyes as I looked around campus. What the hell was I going to do now? And who was I going to ask for a ride home?

I started across campus, walking aimlessly. But all the pathways circled back, so I eventually ended up back in front of the administration building. My head was spinning as I thought through what had happened with the dean, and what I could possibly do to fix it. I wondered if there was an appeal process, and if I could do extra credit for the classes I’d been missing. There were about a million thoughts in my head as I walked aimlessly toward the admin building.

But I stopped when I saw Xavier walking out through the doors.

“Hey!” I called, shocked to see him. I waved. “What are you doing here?”

Then I felt the lightness in my chest fade as I wondered if he had heard what happened and come up to campus to help me.

I rushed toward him, feeling my chest tightening with sobs, and he automatically reached for me and wrapped me in his arms.

I laid my head against his chest, wishing I could stay like this forever—safe and warm and shielded from all trouble.

But he finally pulled back and looked down at me. “Hey, what’s wrong?” He put his finger beneath my chin and lifted it so I was looking into his eyes. “You can tell me anything, Cali. You know that, right?”

I did know that, and I had just opened my mouth to explain what happened when I noticed that he looked troubled too. His blue eyes were stormy, and his expression was dark.

“Are *you* okay?’ I asked him.

He shook his head, brushing off the question. “I asked about you. Why are you upset? I didn’t even know you were coming to campus today.”

“It might be my last trip, actually,” I groaned. “It’s all that time I missed while we were in the Fae world. I missed a bunch of classes and work and tests. I’m being put on academic probation, and I think I’m about to be expelled.”

Xavier looked stunned. “What happened?”

I shook my head, not even sure where to begin. “The dean is really upset with me. And—honestly—I probably deserve it.”

“I doubt that,” Xavier said loyally.

I took a shaking breath as I fought not to cry. Talking about it seemed to make everything that was happening feel a lot more real. “I mean, it’s one thing to disappoint the crew team—which I’ve totally done—but what am I going to tell my parents if I get expelled? I know they’d like me to finish school if I can. I mean…” I shook my head. “I think they would. At least I’m not under the same pressure with them as Lola is with her dads.”

“Your parents love you, Cali,” Xavier said gently. “I’m sure they’ll understand. We’ve all been under a lot of pressure lately. There’s been a lot of stress and tension. It’s been hard to concentrate.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said shakily.

“Maybe if you can just explain all that to the school—if there’s a board or whatever you can talk to—maybe they’ll drop everything against you. Let you have another shot. I bet they will. I mean, it’s a school. You missed some classes—you didn’t commit a crime.”

I nodded. He was right, and I tried to absorb his confidence about the matter. My mate was telling me that everything was going to be okay, and I wanted to let myself believe him.

“I wonder if it would do you any good if I went to speak to someone in administration. You know, vouch for you or something,” he ventured.

I smiled through the tears gathering in my eyes. “Do you know anyone in administration?”

A frown crossed his expression, and he glanced back at the building behind us. “Maybe,” he said quietly.

I was curious about who that person could be—and how he knew them—but before I could ask, his phone buzzed.

He pulled it from his pocket and glanced at the screen.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Greyson,” he said with a frown. “He wants me to come back to the Redwood pack house.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Hell if I know,” Xavier said with a shrug. “But we should probably find out.”

**Episode 5505**

**Greyson**

I wanted to throw my phone against the wall. I managed to hang onto it, but why the *fuck* wasn’t Xavier answering me?

I could see that he’d read my text message. It was amazing that even without his own wolf as the demon on his shoulder, Xavier still managed to be a total dick.

Pacing the living room took the edge off, but it wasn’t enough. I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin, and I had a strong desire to shift and take off on a run.

I stopped pacing and thought for a moment, struck by that sudden thought. Running was Xavier’s thing. Whenever my brother was stressed or pissed, he liked to vent his feelings by running. I’d always preferred the weight bench or a punching bag, but right now, the idea of disappearing into the woods for a while was pretty compelling.

Stopping in front of the window, I looked out at the grey day. Where the fuck had my brother gone? After we’d argued—the argument that had nearly come to blows when I flew off the handle—he’d taken off, and I hadn’t seen him since.

Maybe my wolf had urged Xavier to back off after Xavier had accused me of having two mates.

I felt my mouth twisting into a bitter smile as I remembered the look of mock concern on Xavier’s face. There was no way he really cared. So what was his motive?

Was that all just an attempt to push a wedge between Cali and me, so I’d move away from her? Stop being her mate? Did Xavier really think that I could somehow sever my mate bond with Cali so that I could be with Kendall?

Sure, Kendall had a certain appeal—and there was clearly something between us—but there was no way she could ever be my mate. *Ever.*

I’d meant what I’d said to Cali—if it hadn’t been for the drugs at the festival, I never would have acted on my attraction to her. Period.

My phone buzzed in my hand, and I looked down, hoping it was Xavier calling me back.

But it was Kendall.

I froze and stared at her name on the screen. I wondered if I should pick it up, but I was too curious about why she was calling to let it go to voicemail.

“Hey, why are you—” I started when I answered the call, but Kendall didn’t wait for me to finish asking my question before she started speaking over me.

“Your brother was just here.”

This stopped me. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“Hey,” she snapped, “don’t get mad at me. I’m just trying to give you a heads-up. And tell you that you better keep your eye on Xavier.”

Alarm bells clanged in my head. “Why is that?”

“He saw me talking with one of the MIB agents.”

I went tense. “Does he know about you?”

“I don’t think so, but for everyone’s sake, it better stay that way. And you better make sure it does,” she said, a warning note in her voice.

I sighed. I’d already had to get control of Lola’s freelance “investigation” into Kendall’s past, and now I was going to have to do the same with Xavier. Which was going to be harder. But I was taking Kendall’s threats—stated and implied—seriously.

There was something else, too, but I hated to ask it.

“Did…Xavier ask you anything?” I asked hesitantly.

Kendall didn’t answer for a long moment. “He wanted to know if you and I were mated.”

“Fucking hell.” I knew it. Of course he’d asked that. It was what I’d been afraid of, and he’d asked Kendall. Why couldn’t Xavier keep his fucking nose out of my business?

Kendall must have wondered the same thing, because she added, “You better keep him in check. Or I’ll have to do it. And once I do, there’s no turning back.”

I gritted my teeth. “Got it,” I said shortly and ended the call. There was nothing else to say, and we both knew it.

I was angrier than ever. I started pacing again as fury raged through me. I was pissed at Xavier for not minding his own goddamn business and pulling Kendall—of all people—into his little hunt for clues.

“Fuck,” I hissed, pushing a hand through my hair. I looked down at my phone again, but Xavier still hadn’t called back.

For some reason, realizing that Xavier felt like he could just completely ignore me really pushed my buttons, and I hurled the phone across the room with a yell.

Unfortunately for Ravi, he chose to walk into the living room at exactly the same moment.

“Whoa!” He reached up a hand and, with lightning-fast reflexes, caught the phone before it hit his face. He looked at me in shock. “What the hell, Greyson?”

My heart was beating fast in my chest, and I forced myself to take a breath. If that phone had hit Ravi with the force with which I’d thrown it, he would have been in serious trouble.

“I’m sorry, Ravi,” I told him. I shook my head. “I’m just—I’m just frustrated with Xavier. I didn’t see you coming in.”

I had a sneaking suspicion that this outburst—along with all the others before it—had to do with my brother’s wolf pacing around inside me, pissing me off at every turn. I was sick of this and couldn’t wait until my own wolf was back where he belonged.

Ravi still looked unnerved, but he handed my phone back to me. “You need to relax, man. Maybe take a break or something? You want to go for a run? I was thinking of heading out in a bit.”

I shook my head. “No, thanks. I appreciate it, but I’m waiting for Xavier.”

Ravi gave me a wary look, like he didn’t think this was a good enough excuse for not taking care of the energy that was obviously making me nuts, but he shrugged. “Okay. Well, I’m not going out just yet, so let me know if you change your mind.”

He walked out of the room and disappeared up the stairs.

I started to pace again, but I stopped and forced myself to sit down. The pacing wasn’t doing me any good—it was probably making me more agitated.

Xavier’s wolf was driving me up the wall. No wonder Xavier was always such a hothead. It was like his wolf needed obedience school or something.

My troubled train of thought was interrupted when the front door opened. I jumped to my feet and headed to the front hall, where Xavier was coming in the door, followed by Cali.

Seeing them together, I felt an immediate stab of jealousy, but I tried to shove that aside.

“Hi,” Cali said, stepping toward me and wrapping her arms around me in a hug.

I could see from her face that something was wrong, and, given that she’d come in with Xavier, I wondered what he had done to make her upset.

I turned to ask him and found him staring at me expectantly.

“Well?” he asked. “What’s up? What was so important?”

I narrowed my eyes. “You sure as hell took your time getting here. If you knew it was important, why didn’t you respond to my texts?” I growled.

Xavier eyed me warily. “Well, I’m here, aren’t I?”

I glared at him. I wasn’t really sure where to start. I needed to talk to him about his obsession with Kendall, but I couldn’t do that in front of Cali. She was already upset about something, and there was no need to make it worse. Anyway, she couldn’t know anything else about Kendall—*especially* not that she was MIB.

“We need to see Big Mac,” I growled at Xavier.

Cali and Xavier both looked surprised—and slightly hopeful—at the words.

“Why?” Xavier asked.

“Let’s go find out,” I said, and I nodded toward the kitchen. I started walking, and they followed me without another question.

When we reached the kitchen, Big Mac sat scowling at the counter, while behind her, Torin and my mother were huddled together at the table, poring over a stack of cookbooks.

Big Mac stood up when she saw us and pointed toward the den. “In there.”

The three of us followed her in, and she closed the door behind us.

“There’s a big problem with the wolf switch,” she said, turning to look at us.

I felt Cali flinch at this, and I put a comforting arm around her, pulling her to my side.

“A big problem?” Xavier asked, his voice tense. “Yeah, no shit. Greyson and I have the wrong wolves in us. I’d definitely call that a big problem.”

Big Mac glared at him. “Besides that.”

“What is it?” I asked,

“I did some magical tests, and I realized something important.” She looked between Xavier and me. “If we don’t fix your wolf problem soon, the swap will become permanent.”

**Episode 5506**

My stomach knotted painfully at Big Mac’s words. *Permanent?* Big Mac was right. This was a problem. A *big* problem. The last time I’d even speculated about the swap becoming permanent, both Greyson and Xavier had responded with such strong—and negative—reactions. And now to hear it from Big Mac as a real possibility was shattering. This was the last thing any of us needed right now.

“Wait, just to be clear,” I started, praying I had simply misunderstood the witch, “you’re saying that if we don’t do something to solve this immediately, there will be no way to swap their wolves back to their rightful place?”

Big Mac glared at me. “Caliana, do you happen to understand the meaning of the word ‘permanent’? Yes, the swap would be final. Irreversible. That is what we are discussing.”

“Fucking hell,” Greyson muttered, shaking his head in frustration.

That didn’t do much to settle my nerves.

I’d been devastated about the threat of expulsion I was facing at school, but now—thinking about Greyson and Xavier never getting their wolves back—none of that felt especially important now.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Xavier snapped at Big Mac. “Cali’s not stupid, there’s no need to talk to her like she is.”

“Well, it bears repeating, if nothing else,” she said, giving us all an even look. “I did some research—”

“What kind of research?” Xavier asked warily.

Big Mac didn’t like to be questioned, and she glowered at him. “I used a few spells to run some tests—many of which you wouldn’t begin to understand, even if I took the time to explain—and from everything I’ve learned, unless you do something to reverse what’s happened, there’s a very strong likelihood that your wolves will remain where they currently are.”

Xavier looked stricken. “What, exactly, is the likelihood?”

“I’d put the chances at a hundred percent.”  
 He took a step back, like she’d just slapped him.

“When?” Greyson asked.

She shrugged. “I can’t pinpoint it. It could happen anytime.”

Greyson and Xavier kept talking—they were demanding more answers—but I was only half listening. My mind was spinning. This was bad. Really bad. Ever since my mates had swapped wolves after coming back from the Fae world, things had been strange. Off. Everyone had been tense and on edge. Even when we got home, it didn’t feel exactly like home. Everything felt slightly off-kilter.

And—selfishly—I spent a moment wondering if the wolf swap becoming permanent would affect me, because of my connection to each of them through the *due destini*. Would my spiral toward madness increase if I didn’t make a choice? But how could I choose *now*? If I chose Xavier, I would have him in body, but have Greyson’s wolf. And it would be the same if I chose Greyson. This seemed even more confusing than ever.

I could feel myself starting to spiral. I was worried for Greyson, for Xavier, and for myself. Big Mac wasn’t presenting any options—only bigger and bigger problems. There didn’t seem to be any solutions.

And then I remembered that there was one.

I looked up at Greyson, who was shaking his head, looking furious.

“You know what?” he snapped, putting up his hands. “Just forget it. I’m not listening to any of this shit anymore!”

This was odd for Greyson. Even when he got upset about stuff, he was usually willing to at least listen, but now he was turning to walk away.

“Hang on!” I called out, grabbing hold of his hand.

He turned to look at me. “What?”

“There *is* something we can try,” I said.

Big Mac and Xavier, who’d been talking over each other, stopped. All three of them looked expectantly at me.

I took a deep breath. “I was thinking about what Swift said. We need to separate.”

“No,” Greyson said immediately, shaking his head. “I already told you, it’s too risky.”

“Not doing it,” Xaiver confirmed.

“Yeah, it’s a risk,” I said, refusing to back down, “but isn’t *not* doing it also a risk?” I turned to Big Mac. “You said that unless they swap wolves back soon, things will become permanent.”

Big Mac nodded. “Yep,” she grunted. “It’s just a matter of time.”

I turned back to Xavier and Greyson, who both looked angry and fearful. “So how is that less risky?” I demanded. “We do nothing, and your wolves are switched forever? That’s crazy. Think about what that would mean. But if we do like Swift suggested and separate for a while—”

“If we do that, then there’s a good chance you’ll go mad, Cali,” Greyson said, cutting me off. “That’s a matter of time too. And I’m not willing to take that time, or that chance.”

“Maybe the decision isn’t yours to make, Greyson.”

Greyson, Xavier, and I turned to Big Mac, who was eyeing us beadily.

“What does *that* mean?” Greyson asked.

“It means, maybe it’s not your choice.” She shot a sharp look at Xavier. “Or yours. Maybe the choice belongs to Cali,” she said, looking unbothered under Greyson and Xavier’s combined glare.

I gave her a small smile, grateful for her unexpected support. It didn’t happen often, but for once she and I were in agreement.

“That’s what I’m saying,” I said. “Greyson and I can use our tickets and go to London.” I looked up at him. “It’s not exactly the vacation we were looking for, but it’ll solve this problem, and that’s good enough for me.”

Xavier shook his head, looking pensive. “What about school, Cali? With everything going on…”

I gave him a half smile and shrugged. “I mean, if they expel me, it won’t matter anyway, right? The crew team already hates me and probably has a replacement, so what else is there to lose?”

Greyson frowned. “You’re getting expelled? Why?”

This was clearly news to him, and I felt bad—I hadn’t had a chance to tell him anything that had happened during my visit to campus.

I sighed. It felt like too much to get into at this moment. “I’ll tell you about it later. Right now, I have to go pack for London, and I suggest you do the same thing.”

And without waiting for a response, I turned and headed out of the den. I didn’t want to stick around. I knew if I did, Xavier and Greyson would try to talk me out of it.

As I headed toward the stairs, I wondered if I could find my passport. I hoped so. It was funny, really, because I could travel through portals to the Fae world without needing one, but if I was going to get on a plane to London, I was going to have to show some documentation.

I headed upstairs and went straight to my room. I thought my passport was in my desk, and I started searching the drawers. I heard a creak of floorboards and turned to see Xavier stepping into my room. He shut the door behind him.

I crossed my arms across my chest defiantly. “If you’re here to try to talk me out of going, don’t bother.”

He took a step toward me. “I—” He hesitated. “I’m worried.”

“You don’t have to be. If Swift is right about this, then the wolf swap will be solved.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m not thinking about the wolf swap, and I’m not worried about me. Or Greyson.”

“Then what are you—”

“I’m worried about *you*, Cali,” he said, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. “I’m worried about what will happen with the *due destini*.” He shook his head. “Do you really think Greyson or I are willing to risk you losing your mind?”

“But I’m not!” I insisted. “I’m really not. And if we can get everything back—”

Xaiver took another step toward me. He put a hand to my face, lightly brushing my cheek. “I know you love me, Cali. I know you’re putting on a brave face, but it’s just not worth it to me.”

I struggled for a moment, feeling the electricity from his hand on my skin. “But you heard what Big Mac just said,” I pressed. “If we don’t do something, it could be permanent. It’s *going* to be permanent. There will be no going back.”

He nodded and took another step toward me, moving even closer. “There’s always another way,” he said softly. “We just haven’t found it yet.”

I felt my cheek heating beneath his hand, and my heart was racing. It was a strange feeling, made even more intense by the fact that he wasn’t just Xavier—he was part Greyson too. It was confusing and overwhelming and very, *very* powerful.

I looked down, just for a break, but he lifted my chin so my eyes met his. He opened his mouth as though he was going to say something. His gaze fell to my lips…

Was he going to kiss me?

**Episode 5507**

**Greyson**

I stood in my room, resentfully throwing clothes from my dresser into the duffel bag I’d hauled onto my bed. I wasn’t even paying that much attention to what I was doing. How much did I really need to bring for a trip to London? I had no idea, but I supposed I’d come closer to the answer if I had any clue how long Cali and I would need to be there. Neither of us knew, and no one we’d asked—Swift and Vander or Big Mac—had given us any insight into how this separation thing was supposed to work. How far did we have to go, and for how long?

Would it be a day? A week? Would a month be long enough for our wolves to go running back to their rightful people? A year?

I shook my head as I lobbed a pile of socks into the bag. None of that was really going to work for me. How could it? There was no way I could be away from the pack for that long. And now that Rishika was away—still off doing whatever she was up to in the Fae world—I needed to be with my pack more than ever.

I had to admit that we weren’t under any grave threat at the moment—other than the imminent danger posed by Lucian’s bachelor party, that is. I also supposed that was the one upside to this whole thing, if I were in the mood to look for a silver lining. I didn’t want to go to his party, and I was sure Xavier felt the same way.

Knowing everything I did about Lucian, I was sure his party was going to be some kind of over-the-top affair that would drag on for an eternity. I suspected a multi-course meal, multiple costume changes, and at least half a dozen different location options.

None of that sounded remotely interesting to me. All I wanted was to be alone with Cali.

I pulled out a pile of jeans, then T-shirts, then sweaters. It was bound to be cold, and I wondered if I should bring a coat. I didn’t usually feel cold because werewolves ran hot, but I always tried to blend in. It wasn’t necessarily wise to stand out in a crowd.

I thought about what Cali had said about her being expelled from school. She’d said she would tell me about it later, but it had been Xavier who brought it up, so clearly, he knew about it, and I felt a little envious that he seemed to have insight into her life that I didn’t.

Annoyed—both about being left out of the loop and annoyed with myself for feeling jealous—I shook my head and walked into the bathroom. I threw all my toiletries into a bag, and when I walked back into the bedroom, I saw Cali standing in the doorway.

She had her own bag slung over her shoulder, and she smiled at me. “You ready?”

“No,” I said with a sigh, “but I guess we’re going anyway.” I tossed the smaller bag into the duffel and zipped it up.

Cali laughed, then the smile slipped from her face. “I’m sorry, Greyson. I know this isn’t how you meant for this trip to go.”

I didn’t like to see her frown, so I stepped toward her. As I did, I became aware of Xavier’s scent on her, which made the wolf inside me restless.

“I’m happy to spend any time with you at all,” I told her honestly. “As long as we agree on one thing.”

She looked apprehensive. “What one thing?”

“As soon as the wolves switch back, we’re on the next flight home,” I said firmly. “I don’t care if we have theater tickets or we just bought an apartment in Paris. I’m not going to risk your safety for a day longer than I have to. I know why we’re doing this, but once Xavier and I have cleared the possibility of being stuck with each other’s wolves for the rest of our lives, we’re getting our asses back here.”

Cali looked relieved—she must have been expecting me to say something else—and nodded. “Yeah, I can agree to that. Thank you for not arguing with me about going. And for letting me make my own decisions. I really appreciate it. I know that’s not easy for you as an Alpha.”

I pulled her close. “I love you so much, Cali. I would do anything for you. You know that, right, love?”

She leaned back so she could see me and smiled, reaching up to kiss me on the chin. “I do know that. And I hope you know the same is true for me. I’m not a werewolf, so I can’t totally understand what this must be like for you, but I can only imagine that being with someone else’s wolf all the time must be really hard. I can see it is for you. I suspect it’s even worse than you let on. Painful and confusing, too.”

I nodded. “Yeah, something like that,” I admitted. “But there is one thing I will never be confused about, and that’s how I feel about you. That hasn’t changed. And no matter what happens to me or my wolf, that never will.”

She gave me a final squeeze. “I know.” She stepped away and pointed to the duffel bag on my bed. “Now let’s go. Do you have your passport?”

I nodded. “It’s in my bag. You’ve got yours?”  
 She nodded. “And my headphones and a book for the flight. I’ll get snacks at the airport.”

We headed downstairs, where my mother was waiting by the door. She looked a little worried but smiled when she saw me.

“Carry all my love with you,” she said, giving me a hug. “Have a good time. And be careful.”

“I will,” I promised her. “Can I pick up anything for you and Big Mac while we’re there? It’s London, so they probably have good jams and teas. Anything like that?”

“*Oh!*” Torin said, his face brightening. “Yes! Jam! And tea! And lots of jam! Bring back as much of both of those as you can.”

“Okay,” I said with a laugh.

“I’m serious,” Torin said, more intensely. “As much as you can. Buy another suitcase. All my UK cookbooks talk about food to eat with tea, and I suspect what you have here isn’t the same.”  
 “I promise,” I told him.

I reached into the closet for my coat—so I could blend in—and grabbed Cali’s while I was in there. I helped her into it and gave her shoulders a squeeze.

“Ready?” she asked, and I saw her eyes were sparkling. It looked like she was getting excited to go, and I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Let’s go.”

We waved goodbye to the pack and headed outside. Xavier was standing by my car, waiting for us.

When we reached him, the three of us stood for a moment in awkward silence. It was clear we all understood what was at stake, so no one bothered to say it out loud.

Cali stepped forward and gave Xavier a hug. “Take care.”

“You too,” Xavier said, hugging her back.

Watching them, I felt that strange mix of jealousy and desire, knowing my wolf was in Xavier.

Xavier pulled back and looked at me. “I know she’ll be in good hands, even if those hands belong to you.”

Cali laughed a little, then reached up and kissed Xavier on the cheek.

I bristled at the sight of it. Cali hadn’t done anything like that in a long time, let alone in front of me, and I didn’t like it. Not one bit.

“Next time we all see each other, you’ll be back with your wolf,” she said to Xavier.

He smiled, then turned to me again, his smile dropping in an instant. “Don’t do anything stupid,” he warned.

“Yeah, same to you. Stay out of trouble, will you? If you do anything to hurt my wolf, I’ll kill you.”

“Same,” Xavier said flatly. “Also, if there’s any sign of…” He trailed off, but his eyes went to Cali, and I knew what he meant.

He meant if there was any sign of Cali losing it, and I nodded.

“I know.”

“Bring her back here immediately,” he finished.

“Yes. I will. I swear,” I promised. And I meant it. Xaiver and I didn’t have to say it out loud. I knew that on this, we were in agreement. We would both choose to suffer an eternity with the wrong wolves if it meant keeping Cali safe.

Xaiver nodded. He opened the door for Cali and shut it after her when she slid in. Then he stepped toward me. “And Greyson?”

I frowned. “Yeah.”

He leaned in. Cali was in the car, but he kept his voice down as he spoke. “When you get back, you and I are going to have a serious conversation about Kendall.”

**Episode 5508**

It was Thursday. I had to keep reminding myself. I’d had to look at my phone more than once to register that information. It was hard to remember. London was eight hours ahead of Oregon, and the time change was throwing me completely off-kilter.

But I was almost too excited to notice. I’d never been to London before, and as I pressed my face against the glass, taking in everything as we drove through the narrow streets, I didn’t even think about how badly I’d slept on the plane. Though that probably had something to do with the fact that I couldn’t remember the day of the week.

I looked around wildly as the taxi passed by Piccadilly Circus, heading toward our hotel. “There’s so much to see,” I murmured, trying to see it all—the buildings and the people and all the double-decker buses. “I just wish I’d had more time to plan before we came. Museums we could go to, shows we could see, places to eat. Though, I guess…” I glanced over at Greyson. “I know this isn’t exactly a vacation.”

He grimaced as he stretched his legs out in the back of the cab. “It’s fine,” he said, rubbing his knees.

He’d had a hard time on the flight. We’d left in such a hurry that we’d arrived at the airport just as the flight was boarding, so we hadn’t been able to upgrade our seats. Greyson had had to fold himself into a window seat that was way too small for him, while I took the middle seat. He hadn’t complained, but I knew he’d been uncomfortable.

“Are you doing okay?” I asked.

He smiled at me. “I was going to ask you the same question.”

His tone was light, but I could see the intensity in his eyes. He wasn’t asking me if I’d slept well on the plane—he wanted to know if I was losing my grip on reality.

I rolled my eyes. “No unhinged thoughts yet,” I said with a laugh.

He smiled back, but I could see the worry in his eyes. Part of me hoped the wolf swap would happen before we got to the hotel. Another part of me really hoped it would take at least a few days. It was kind of a selfish hope, because I knew Greyson and Xavier were worried about me, but the idea of spending some time in a foreign city with my mate was just too appealing to want to rush back home.

We’d been thinking about this trip for ages, and though I had to admit that the circumstances weren’t ideal, when were we going to have the chance to get away like this again?

Greyson smiled at me. He seemed to be reading my mind because he said, “When this is all over, we’re going on a *real* vacation.”

I sat back in my seat with a smile and a sigh. I knew we had stuff to deal with in the here and now, but I couldn’t stop myself from dreaming about a real vacation—a proper vacation, with plans and an itinerary and maybe even drinks with little umbrellas in them.

I knew I was giving myself over to fantasy. I knew I had to straighten out my situation at school before I made any big vacation plans. And that included figuring out how the hell I was going to tell my parents that I was facing academic probation—and possible expulsion from school.

Xavier was right, of course. My parents loved me and just wanted me to be happy, but I hoped they wouldn’t be disappointed in me. And I was absolutely *not* going to tell them how Lola had tried to cover for my absence, using my father falling into a coma as her excuse. There were just some things they never needed to know.

“Here you are,” the taxi driver said brightly as he pulled up in front of a tall building on a tidy street. “Queens Arms Hotel.”

“Thanks,” I said, slipping out of the cab as Greyson paid the guy.

Greyson grabbed both our bags, and we made our way up the steps to the hotel, which was clean and quiet. I walked up to the counter and gave my name to the woman working there, then shot a smile back at Greyson.

I was excited to get away—even for a short time—but I found Greyson looking behind him. He had his eyes on the well-appointed lobby behind us.

“Here’s your key,” the woman behind the counter said, handing me a key on a leather key chain.

“Thanks,” I said with a smile, then turned to Greyson. “What are you looking at?”

“I think someone followed us here,” he said quietly.

“What?” I asked in surprise. I didn’t want to make it too obvious, so I tried looking out of the corner of my eyes at the lobby to see who he was talking about. There were a couple of people sitting on the couches, but they didn’t look particularly suspicious. At least to me. “How do you know?”

Greyson nodded toward a man sitting in a wing chair. “I saw a guy wearing the same kind of orange sneakers when we arrived at Heathrow.”

I looked at the guy with the sneakers. Or I tried to. He was talking quietly on his phone, facing away from us, and I couldn’t really see his face.

“So you saw him at the airport, and now you’re seeing him at a hotel. I mean, I guess it’s a coincidence, but if it is the same guy, isn’t it possible that he’s just like us? Coming to London on a trip and happens to be staying at the same hotel?”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Without luggage? The guy doesn’t even have a backpack.”

I stole another look and saw that he was right.

But still I shrugged. “So? Maybe he’s just in town for a quick meeting?”

“Yeah,” Greyson muttered. “Maybe.”

But it was clear he didn’t believe me, and he kept his eyes on the guy in the orange sneakers.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing Greyson’s arm and pulling him toward the elevator.

I could see that Greyson looked very skeptical, clearly not willing to admit this was all a coincidence. I racked my brain, trying to think of a plausible reason why anyone would be following us—in London of all places.

But the only trouble I could think of—aside from the whole *due destini* thing, and the wolf-swap thing, both of which concerned no one outside our pack—was the trouble I was facing at school. And that didn’t make any sense. The dean might be annoyed with Lola and me at the moment, but I couldn’t imagine he was having me followed. I mean, what would he even be trying to prove?

I shook my head as we stepped onto the elevator. I needed to just let this go. My explanation about the guy made the most sense. He was just a fellow traveler, and we didn’t need to make it anything more. We both had enough to worry about. Of course we weren’t being followed.

But just as the doors were about to shut, the man in the orange sneakers slipped in.

Okay, that was a little weird.

Next to me, I felt Greyson tense. He grabbed my arm and pulled me behind him. He stepped protectively in front of me as the guy in the orange sneakers turned to Greyson.

“Hello. We’ve been expecting you,” the guy said in a quiet, accented voice.

I gasped. Holy shit. Greyson was right.

“Who are you?” Greyson snarled.

“I’m with MI9,” he said, his voice still calm and quiet. “Mysterious Incidents.”

Wait, was this was the British MIB?

There was a beat of heavy silence.

“*And?*” Greyson growled. “Do you need something?”

“I do not mean to alarm you,” he said. “Our agency is in the habit of monitoring foreign Alphas. We’ve had trouble in the past, you see. Issues with territories and all that. You understand.”  
 Greyson’s eyes were stormy as he glared at the man. “You won’t have any trouble from me.”

The man nodded. He was a tall man, thin, and wearing jeans and a blue puffer jacket. The orange sneakers being the exception, there was nothing remarkable about him. Brown hair, brown eyes—he seemed to blend into his surroundings, even here, on the elevator. I could see how a man like that would make a good spy.

His clothes make him look a little like a software developer or an accountant, but there was something steely about his eyes as he looked at Greyson.

“That’s good,” he said in the same voice. It might have been polite, if not for the edge of warning in it. “Because if you *do* cause trouble, just know that we’ll be watching.”

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open to our floor.

As Greyson and I stepped off, the man nodded at us.

“Enjoy your trip.”

**Episode 5509**

I gasped as Greyson turned and grabbed the guy by the collar of his puffer jacket.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Greyson demanded.

The man remained eerily calm. He looked as though Greyson grabbing him roughly was the most natural thing in the world—like he’d expected it.

“Are you really going to assault an MI9 agent on your first day in a foreign country?” the man asked mildly. He raised an eyebrow. “And here I was, thinking Alphas were smarter than that.”

I put a hand on Greyson’s arm. He was holding the guy tightly by the collar of his coat and looked like he might do anything. I’d noticed he’d been acting way more impulsive than normal since the wolf swap. No doubt a trait inherited from Xavier’s wolf. Yet another reason for Greyson and Xavier to get their wolves back to where they belong.

“Oh, I’m sure there won’t be any trouble,” I said with a forced smile, desperately trying to lighten the tension of the moment. “We’re just here to see the sights. No trouble on the itinerary.”

Greyson looked over at me, and I pleaded with him through my eyes, begging him to let the guy go.

He seemed to understand and finally released the guy, but not without a shove that sent him back a step.

“Stay out of my way,” he snarled at the guy, then put his hand at the small of my back and maneuvered me away from the elevator.

I let him lead the way toward our room, but I turned back and caught sight of the MI9 agent. He was looking at us with ice-cold eyes and didn’t look away as the doors of the elevator slid shut.

“Well, I guess you were right,” I admitted. “He was following us.”

“I’m not going to be celebrating about being right on this one,” Greyson muttered, looking angry as we passed door after door, looking for our room number.

I shook my head. “I guess I never thought an MI9 agent would have any interest in following us.”

“What?” Greyson asked, looking over at me. It was clear he hadn’t been paying attention to what I’d said.

“Do you believe what the guy said in there?” I asked.

“What did he say?” Greyson asked vaguely. He was completely checked out of the conversation.

“About other Alphas being trouble,” I reminded him.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard of it, so it’s a first for me. But I have heard there can be trouble when Alphas run into other Alphas. We can be really territorial.”

“Do you think he was telling the truth?” I wondered.

Greyson shook his head. “Hell if I know. But I’m going to keep an eye out, one way or the other.”

I nodded as we opened the door of the hotel. The room was nice—large and bright and airy. A weak sun was shining through the large windows—a rarity, the woman at the front desk had said—and we dropped our things with a sigh of relief.

Greyson looked longingly at the bed, but I grabbed his hand.

“We should go for a walk.”

“A walk?” he asked, surprised.

“Yeah, I mean, we don’t know how long we’re going to be here, so we might as well cram as much in as we can, right?”

He looked at me for a moment, his expression stern. But as he looked down at my excited face, he laughed, breaking the tension he’d been holding since we checked in. Hell, since we left the pack house.

“I guess you’re right,” he admitted. He gestured toward the door. “Might as well start now.”

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I had known *exactly* what I wanted to do, so I’d led us straight for it. Greyson hadn’t looked fully convinced, but that was okay. I was certain enough for both of us. Which was why—twenty minutes later—I was taking in the city of London from the top deck of a double-decker bus.

“—and there’s Big Ben,” I said, pointing at the enormous, stately clock. “They used a live feed of the bells of Big Ben as the intro to the BBC during World War II, but it turned out a German meteorologist was listening in and using the sound to figure out the weather in London. That helped the Germans determine if it was a good night to fly over. So the BBC had to switch to a recording.”

Greyson gave me a curious look. “How do you know that?”

I shrugged. “I read an article.”

He smiled, and I leaned into him. I was finally starting to relax. For the first few moments on the bus, I’d suspected everyone on it was an MI9 agent sent to follow us, but now I just didn’t care. I was with Greyson, I still felt sane, and I was determined to enjoy every minute of this trip.

The bus took us around Piccadilly Circus, where I looked at all the posters and decided which musicals I wanted to see if we had enough time. We drove by Buckingham Palace, and I took about a zillion pictures for Lola, who loved the royal family. We only passed by Kensington Gardens, but it looked so beautiful I vowed I would return soon.

And by the time we got off the bus and headed back to our hotel, I was feeling exhausted, but excited.

“This feels like a dream, doesn’t it?” I asked Greyson. “I just can’t get enough of this place.”

Greyson smiled indulgently. “It’s pretty great. But I’m still wiped from the flight. What if we rest for a while before we get dinner?”

“Yeah, that sounds fine. Can we get fish and chips?”

He laughed. “Brilliant.”

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The fog had rolled in, so as I walked through the chilly, nighttime streets of London, it felt like something out of a movie.

“I still can’t believe I’m here,” I said to myself as I looked around at the cobblestone streets and steep roofs of the houses. I’d always wanted to come to London.

As I reached the river, I wondered if I could convince Greyson to go with me on the London Eye. I knew he’d roll his eyes—it was such a touristy thing to do. But how many chances were we going to get? I knew we were here by necessity, but I was determined to make the most of our time. I had no idea when we were going to be able to come back. Life was so chaotic, and it seemed that nothing was guaranteed.

My heart beat hard at the thought, and I turned around, determined to go convince him to come back with me.

But as I started back to the hotel, I noticed that the streets seemed strangely dark. Darker than I remembered. Looking up, I saw a few of the streetlamps were dark—they’d burned out. Had that just happened? I couldn’t remember if they were on when I left the hotel for my walk.

I walked a little faster.

Maybe because of the darkness, I noticed there weren’t many people out and about. I didn’t like that and started walking faster still.

I slowly became aware of the sound of footsteps behind me, and my breath caught. Was that the guy from MI9? Was he stalking me? He’d threatened us before, in the elevator, so was he coming after me now?

I was tempted to turn to see if it was him—or maybe even confront him—but I talked myself out of it. Better to just get back to the hotel.

I was walking fast now, but so were the steps behind me.

Finally, I just dropped the ruse completely and started to run. Behind me, the steps took off. And as they did, I realized that they didn’t sound like footsteps—not feet in shoes, anyway. The way they hit the ground in a full sprint sounded more like paws, with claws making a sharp scrape with every step.

Shooting a look over my shoulder confirmed it—it was a wolf. A *wolf* was chasing me.

I screamed, but there was no one around to hear a cry for help. I veered into an alley, trying to lose the wolf, but he followed. I tried another turn, but I couldn’t shake him.

After three or four more, I realized I wasn’t just being chased—I was lost. I had no idea where I was, or where I was going.

I turned onto another street and stepped strangely, my foot off-kilter on the cobblestoned lane.

I fell hard, landing on my knees and hands. I could feel blood start to flow, and the wolf was closing in.

I turned around and gasped when I saw the wolf—I knew him.

“Greyson!” I breathed. “Greyson! It’s me! It’s Cali.”

But the massive grey wolf didn’t seem to hear me. It stalked toward me, baring its lethally sharp teeth. It was Greyson’s wolf, but it didn’t look like Greyson’s eyes. The eyes were glaring at me, rabid and angry.

And then it pounced.

**Episode 5510**

**Greyson**

I walked down the hallway, keeping an eye out for a sign that would lead me to the ice machine. Cali had been doubtful I’d be able to find one in England, but I was holding out hope.

She was back in the room, hopefully resting peacefully. I knew she was excited, but she was exhausted too, and I wanted her to get some rest.

I paused by a window in the hallway and looked out at the street below. The Queens Arms was a nice hotel in the heart of London. I really wished I could appreciate it more, but I was struggling. I was exhausted, but I’d come out to look for ice because I couldn’t sleep. I felt like shit after the flight—my head was killing me, and my stomach was a tight ball of anxiety. I knew Cali had wanted fish and chips for dinner, but I think it might have been a mistake for our first day. I enjoyed the food, but it really wasn’t sitting well for either of us.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose with a sigh. I wondered if I was coming down with something. I rarely got sick, but if that wasn’t what I was feeling, then what was it? What was making me feel light-headed and achy? Maybe a cold? Maybe the food or the flight? Or was it the feeling of being so damn far away from my wolf?

I knew Cali had wanted to come to London. It had made the most sense, what with having the tickets and everything. But now I was really wishing we were somewhere more remote—somewhere close to a forest or a lot of open land so I could take a run. Xavier’s wolf really wanted to let loose, but there was no way I could allow it while we were in the middle of a major city.

*Especially* not with British MI9 monitoring me.

On the way back from dinner, I’d already flagged a couple walking behind us as potential agents. I hadn’t said anything to Cali because I wasn’t even a hundred percent sure of that, but it was probably better to be safe than sorry, and I’d clocked them for the whole walk back.

I pushed a frustrated hand through my hair. Maybe this had all been a mistake. Maybe we’d just rushed into this separation idea without looking at other options.

My head was throbbing, making it hard to think. Maybe I shouldn’t have come on this trip. What if something happened to Cali, but I got too sick to protect her? I didn’t know what the hell was happening to me, but if I was feeling terrible, what about Cali?

Thinking of her, I glanced back down the hallway. When I’d left Cali, she’d been out cold, sleeping soundly in our bed. But I just couldn’t shake my fears—what if something happened to her? What if we stayed too long and she went mad?

These fears were cycling in my head like a whirlpool, and I gritted my teeth. I’d had enough. It had been less than a day, but I was sick of this. We were going back home. I’d let Cali talk me into this, but the risks weren’t worth it.

Figuring I would let Cali sleep a little longer, I headed downstairs to the lobby to ask about the ice machine.

“No, we don’t have anything like that,” the man behind the counter told me when I asked. He looked a little confused.

“Okay, thanks,” I muttered, then headed back to the elevator.

As I walked by a man looking into his phone, alarm bells began to ring in my head.

I looked back at the man, who looked up at me. He was *definitely* an MI9 agent. I’d bet my life on it. And I stared right back at him. Why shouldn’t I? I had nothing to hide, and if this asshole wanted to start something, I’d be happy to finish it.

The guy didn’t make a move on me as I stepped into the elevator, and he looked away, breaking eye contact, before the doors slid shut.

When I got back to our room, I reached for the key, but before I opened the door, I heard a sound that made my blood run cold.

“*No!*” Cali cried out on the other side of the door.

My stomach dropped, and I shoved open the door, nearly breaking it off its hinges in my rush to get inside.

I looked around for intruders, but there was no one there. Cali was still in bed, and she was thrashing around, murmuring, and nearly crying. She was having a nightmare.

Breathing a sigh of relief that she was safe, I hurried to her in the bed and pulled her into my arms.

“Hey, I’m here, you’re okay,” I said in a low voice, rocking her as I tried to soothe her.

She was crying in her sleep, and when she opened her eyes, she looked around wildly, clearly disoriented. And when she saw me, she gasped and pushed herself away from me. “No!”

“Cali,” I said, reaching for her again, “it’s okay. I’m here now. You’re safe.”

She was breathing hard, but as she looked at me, her breath began to slow somewhat. “Oh god,” she gasped, “Greyson. I had the most horrible dream.”

“What was it?”

She looked up at me, terrified. “Your wolf attacked me on the street.”

Her words chilled me to the bone. “Cali, look at me. I’m not attacking you, and I never, *ever* will. Okay? That was definitely just a dream.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I know. I know you’re right. It was just…really intense. It felt so real.” She looked up at me. “Why would I dream something as awful as that?”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly. I didn’t know, and I didn’t like it either. I had a theory, but I was reluctant to bring it up.

But I had to be sure.

I took a deep breath. “Do you think the dream was a consequence of the *due destini* and being so far away from Xavier?”

Cali’s eyes went wide. She clearly hadn’t considered that, and I watched as the possibility occurred to her.

Then she shook her head. “It was only a dream, right?”

I hated that I had to bring it up at all—I didn’t want either of us to be thinking about the possibility of her going mad—but I’d made a promise to keep her safe.

“Listen, I don’t think we should take any chances here. I’m ready to jump on the next flight back home if we have to—”

“No!” She shook her head. “No, Greyson, come on. We’ve been here less than a day. I want to try a little longer to see if your wolf will snap back to where it belongs. If I have a couple of nightmares while we wait for that to happen, then that’s fine. I’ll live with it.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I finally nodded. I dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “I’ll go get you some water.”

But when I stood up, I had to pause. Maybe I had gotten up too quickly, because I suddenly felt very dizzy.

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

I gave my head a little shake. “Yeah. I’m fine.” I took a step toward the carafe on the dresser and poured a glass of water. But when I started back to Cali, my steps faltered.

The room swayed around me, like I was on the deck of a boat in a stormy sea. I’d never felt vertigo before, but this must have been it, because I suddenly didn’t know which way was up.

The glass slipped from my hand and hit the floor, shattering.

And I followed after it.

Cali gasped. “*Greyson!*” She jumped out of bed and ran over to me. “Greyson! What’s happening?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t have an answer. What *was* happening to me?

A shockwave of pain hit me then. I doubled over, groaning like I’d been beaten.

*Greyson!*

It was Xavier’s voice. I could hear him calling me through the mind link. But how could that be? We were continents apart. It couldn’t be happening. There was no way.

But it was happening. I could hear him.

I tried to call back to my brother, but the pain was too much. I curled into a ball, feeling the broken glass beneath me digging into my shoulder.

Cali was calling to me, but her voice felt distant, like she was very far away.

The pain was nearly overwhelming. It felt as though something was being ripped from my body—like I was being turned inside out.

Suddenly, a wolf appeared at my side.

The form was wispy—almost invisible—but I could see it clear as day. It was Xavier’s wolf, and it had jumped out of me. It didn’t even pause before it turned toward the closed door and charged through it.

I tried to reach for it, but the wolf was gone in an instant, racing away into the night.

**Episode 5511**

**Artemis**

*What are you doing here?*

Kastian was glaring around with his dagger drawn, so I knew I was going to have to do something. I opened my mouth to answer his question, but before I had a chance, Marius spoke. “Isn’t it obvious? We’re having a threesome.”

My face flushed hot, and embarrassed, and I whipped around to glower at him. “*Marius!* What the hell is wrong with you?”

He just rolled his eyes. He looked pissed, which I supposed I could understand. He had just helped to save my life, and now Kastian was asking questions with a knife in his hand.

I looked over at Rishika, who hadn’t said anything, though maybe she was too busy keeping the guy wriggling beneath her foot under control.

“Looks more like a foursome, doesn’t it?” Kastian said, eyeing the guy on the ground.

“What the hell does it look like we’re doing?” Marius snapped, looking furious for the first time since he entered the tent. “Open your eyes! There was a fucking intruder in here who was trying to kill Artemis! We were fighting him off and saving her from death by fire.” As if to emphasize his point, Marius leaned over and stamped out a small flame that had just shot up from the corner of the tent.

Kastian’s eyes flicked down again to the intruder on the ground, subdued beneath Rishika’s foot. Then back to Marius. “That still doesn’t explain what *you two* are doing here. My wife is perfectly capable of taking care of a threat like this all on her own.”

I suddenly felt a rush of very strange feelings. I sort of weirdly appreciated the vote of confidence from Kastian. He didn’t sound like he was just blowing smoke; when he said he thought I was capable, he sounded like he really believed it. But I really hated it when he called me his wife. It was bad enough when he said it just to tease me, but now that he was saying it in front of others, I really hated it.

“They’re here because I asked them to be,” I said firmly.

“Why?” he demanded, looking shocked by this.

I wasn’t going to bother trying to tell him they were my shadow advisors. That explanation hadn’t worked on Adair, and I doubted it would work any better on Kastian. That was a loose definition anyway. “They’re here to ground me,” I explained. “To keep me from losing myself—”

“Losing yourself?” Kastian repeated, looking baffled.

“And—obviously—to be my bodyguards as well,” I added.

Kastian glanced between Rishika and Marius, looking at them with distaste. But when he stepped toward me, his face had reset itself with his usual teasing smile, though maybe it was a bit tighter than normal.

“Well, my sweet, I hardly need to tell you that they are not supposed to be here. A werewolf and a bounty hunter?” He shook his head. “You do love to collect little misfits, don’t you?”

I didn’t like his tone and narrowed my eyes. “And *you* need to back off, Kastian. I was trying to handle this on my own, but I was getting my ass kicked. I don’t know what would have happened if the werewolf and the bounty hunter hadn’t stepped in. This guy,” I said, pointing to the intruder, “came after me because of the alliance between the Light Fae and Dark Fae. So, he was after both of us, pal. And it’s just lucky for you that he stumbled in here and not into *your* tent first.”

Kastian’s eyes darted down to the figure on the ground, and I could see a flash of fear there. Apparently, this idea hadn’t yet occurred to him, but now that it had, he looked disturbed.

“You should be thanking the three of us, because we probably saved you, too,” I added.

The fear disappeared from Kastian’s eyes, replaced in an instant with anger. “Maybe if we shared a tent the way we’re supposed to, I could have been the one to help you fight this guy off,” he shot back.

Marius rolled his eyes. “You’re kidding right? Listen, Kastian, if you want to take credit for this, by all means, do it. Whatever helps your cock feel bigger.”

Color flared in Kastian’s face. “I don’t need any help in that department, thank you very much. And certainly not from a filthy lowlife such as you. Who knows where you’ve been, who you’ve touched—”

“Enough!” I said, putting up my hands to stop the conversation. “That’s *enough*.”

“We’re focusing on the wrong thing here,” Rishika said, and she leaned down to look into the face of the intruder. “We should be focusing on who *this* is and nothing else.”

“So, who is he?” Marius asked.

Rishika reached into the guy’s coat, flipping it open. She dug into the inside pockets, turning out everything she found onto the floor of the tent. It was trash, from the looks of it. Old apple cores and crumpled up papers.

“He’s got a necklace,” Rishika muttered. “With some kind of medallion.”

This piqued my interest. “What?”

Rishika ripped a chain from around the guy’s neck. When she handed it to me, my blood ran cold. I knew the symbol engraved on the medallion.

“Artemis?” Marius asked. “What is it?”

I didn’t answer him. My whole body felt like it had frozen as I looked down at the medallion worn by the man who had just attacked me.

Marius stepped toward me and looked at the thing over my shoulder. “What is that?”

I opened my mouth, but I couldn’t bring myself to say what it was. Not with Kastian here. But if I had been able to say, I would have told Marius it was the symbol of the Order of the Winding Thorn.

With everything that had happened since coming to the Fae world, I had almost forgotten about the Order. I’d been so wrapped up with the Fae courts, having Cali here to rescue me, and then this marriage to Kastian…it was like the information had been pushed all the way to the back of my brain.

But the Order was linked to my father’s disappearance. The event that had brought me back to the Fae world in the first place.

The first attacker had said, *So like your father.* The words were still emblazoned in my mind. *So like your father He fought to the end, too. But it didn’t help him, and it won’t help you.*

But that had been ages ago. I’d come so far, and then the trail had gone cold.

For a moment, my thoughts went back to that first assassin I’d met when I was on the wall of the Dark Fae court. They’d tried to kill me too, though I’d manage to fight that one off. My search had led me to Kastian’s grandfather’s grave and…

I looked up at Kastian then, but I had no idea what to say to him.

He looked annoyed. “Well?” he asked irritably. “What are you staring at?”

I didn’t speak, and my eyes went back to the medallion clutched in my bloody, dirty hands. I had once suspected Kastian’s involvement with the Order. The tattoo I’d seen on his back had been relatively damning evidence. And now, I was struck again, looking at this medallion by how the engraving was almost identical to the tattoo.

But that didn’t make much sense. It was clear Kastian had his own agenda, but—all things considered—he had never actually tried to kill me. And he’d gone to all the trouble to marry me. Why marry me when he could just kill me? That wouldn’t work. With me dead, his power in the Fae courts would be instantly diminished. He’d have no claim to anything, and it was clear as day that what Kastian really wanted was power.

Though, maybe that had been the goal the whole time. I gave Kastian a long look, then—acting on instinct—I turned to Marius.

“Grab him,” I said, jerking my head toward Kastian.

To his credit, Marius didn’t hesitate for a moment. “Gladly,” he said, and quick as lightning, he moved to Kastian, fast enough he caught the nobleman by surprise.

Marius swung, landing a jab to Kastian’s nose. Kastian stumbled back a step, then lunged. The two men grappled, fighting for control, but despite Kastian’s knife in the mix, it was clear that Marius had the upper hand. It was only a moment before Marius had pulled the knife away and had Kastian’s arms pinned behind his back and the knife to his neck.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Kastian bellowed, his eyes wide and furious. “Artemis! What are you doing?!”

I stepped toward him and held the medallion up so that it swung in front of his nose. “That’s what I’d like to know.”

“What?” he gasped, his eyes on the medallion.

I narrowed my eyes. “Now is the time for *me* to ask questions, Kastian. Tell me everything you know about the Order of the Winding Thorn.”

**Episode 5512**

Greyson staggered away from me. He moaned, his face going suddenly pale. His eyes were wide, and it was clear he was in immense pain.

“Oh god, Greyson,” I said, feeling my heart rate kick up. Something was clearly wrong.

He was lurching around, and I reached for him, trying to hold him upright, but he fought against me, trying to get away.

I struggled to help him. I was still trying to clear my own head of the dream I’d just had and the disorientation of waking up the way I had—jerked awake by a nightmare, in a strange room, in a foreign country. It was enough to make anyone disoriented, but I had to focus. I *had* to help Greyson.

“Greyson! Tell me what’s going on,” I said urgently, grasping onto him. “What’s happening? What’s wrong?”

“My wolf,” he gasped, his voice tight and strained. “My wolf.”

“Your wolf?” I asked, baffled. “Something about your wolf?”

“Xavier’s wolf,” he gasped.

“What about them?” I asked desperately. “What’s happened?”

Greyson pointed to the door of the hotel room. His hand was shaking, as though something was wrong with the door, but when I looked at it, the door looked completely normal. It was shut tightly, and I knew it locked automatically. So, what could he possibly mean?

“Is there something wrong with the door? I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

He swallowed hard, looking hunted. “We have to hurry,” he said, taking a staggering step toward the door.

And that was when it dawned on me. I couldn’t see the form of his wolf, but something must have happened. I could tell by Greyson’s reaction that he wasn’t imagining any of this.

He’d said *Xavier’s wolf*. Xavier’s wolf was in him, and now he was pointing at the door. So, did that mean the wolf had escaped?

My mind spun as I considered what this might mean. If we lost Xavier’s wolf—what would happen to Xavier? And how would Greyson be affected?

It wasn’t hard to remember how much Xavier had suffered when he’d lost his wolf before. It had nearly driven him out of his mind.

Greyson grabbed onto my arm and pulled open the door. We raced down the hall and, skipping the elevator entirely, headed down the stairs. We kept up our pace as we sprinted across the lobby, but when we reached the front doors, a large group of people in matching shirts was milling around, blocking the exit to the street.

My stomach dropped, and I looked around anxiously, wondering what the hell we were going to do. But even as I did, I caught sight of Greyson, and I could see at a glance that he was preparing to charge into the crowd. He was still pale, and now he was sweating, but it was clear that he was going to sprint into that tour group and let the bodies fly where they may.

“Greyson,” I hissed, grabbing hold of his arm. “Stop. Hang on.”

“We have to get out,” he said, fighting through every word. He didn’t yank his arm from my grasp, but I could feel how tense he was as I held on.

“Stop, *think*,” I said quietly.

“I *am* thinking, and the only thing that matters is—”

“Remember that MI9 is monitoring you,” I told him in an urgent whisper. “They said they were going to be watching your every move, so I need you to stop for just a minute. The last thing we need is for you to get hauled in for causing trouble with a bunch of humans in a hotel lobby.”

I could see that it was a fight to stop himself, but Greyson finally nodded.

“Fine.”

“Let’s just calmly work our way through them,” I suggested, and Greyson nodded tightly.

We waded into the tight knot of people. I saw from their T-shirts that they were visiting from Texas, and they all seemed *very* excited to be in the United Kingdom.

“Do you think we’ll get to see the palace?”

“I hope so!”

“I want to watch them change the guard in front of the palace.”

“It’s the guard in front of the tomb of the unknown soldier.”

“That’s in Virginia. The guards here are in front of the palace.”

“Which guard is Big Ben? I want to see him.”

Gritting my teeth, I let Greyson pull me through the crowd. I tried not to listen to the inane conversation around me and instead tried to look into the faces of the tourist group, trying to figure out who might have been sent to spy on us.

“The wolf is getting away,” Greyson snarled in a low voice, pushing past a woman trying to fit a sun visor onto her head.

“We’re getting there,” I assured him, giving his hand a squeeze. “Just hang on.”

And after another moment, we finally made it to the doors and burst out onto the sidewalk.

I looked around in wonder. Despite London’s reputation for being foggy and dreary, the sun was bright in the sky. The streets were crowded and busy with cars and double-decker buses, and people walking briskly along.

It looked like the perfect London moment—the kind I had dreamed of since we bought the tickets—but now I looked around in desperation. Greyson was unraveling, Xavier’s wolf was maybe lost, and I had no idea how I was going to look for something I couldn’t even see.

Greyson was frantic—I could see it in his face. His eyes were wide and wild, and his breathing was labored. I had never seen him like this, but I was sure it had to do with being without his wolf—or any wolf—for the first time. It was like he didn’t know which way was up.

He jerked my arm, pulling me down the sidewalk.

“Greyson!” I gasped, nearly barreling into a line of school children in prim uniforms, being led by a woman with a swinging ponytail.

I narrowly avoided running into the kids, but the woman with the ponytail gave me a very dirty look.

“Watch where you’re going,” she snapped. “These are children you just pushed into.”

“Sorry,” I breathed, shooting her an apologetic look as I hurried to keep up with Greyson.

When we rounded the corner, Greyson paused. He looked right, then left, then yanked my arm again as he took off to the right.

I sprinted, trying to keep up with him. I knew he would be faster without me, and I was tempted to tell him to just go on his own, but that didn’t sit right with me. He was behaving so recklessly, I felt like I needed to stay with him—and keep him out of trouble.

We raced along a narrow street until Greyson stopped suddenly and backtracked.

He looked wildly around. “*Dammit*,” he swore. “*Goddammit*.”

“What is it?” I demanded “What’s going on?”

“I lost him,” Greyson moaned, looking devastated.

My heart thudded in my chest. “We *lost* Xavier’s wolf?” I looked around at the empty street. It looked totally unfamiliar, and that’s when it hit me. We’d lost Xavier’s wolf. In *London*.

London was huge, and we didn’t know our way around. How could we ever find the wolf again? And how could I even help when I couldn’t see or smell the wolf?

“I know,” Greyson breathed. He looked out of breath and lost—it was strange to see.

“Is it possible the wolf is trying to return to Xavier?” I wondered.

“No idea,” he said, shaking his head.

I bit my lip. “Well, maybe we should let Xavier know what’s going on. It is his wolf, after all.”

Greyson didn’t answer, but I pulled out my phone to call anyway. I meant it to just be a phone call, but I pressed the wrong button, and when Xavier picked up, I saw that I’d connected through a video call.

“Cali?” he answered.

Xavier was shirtless on the small screen. He looked sweaty, he was breathing hard, and his hair was disheveled. For a wild, uncomfortable moment, I wondered if I had called while he and Ava were hooking up.

No, I couldn’t think about that. Not right now.

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked.

I looked over at Greyson, who was just standing in the middle of the sidewalk, looking all around for the wolf.

“We’ve had an…uh, incident,” I said, not sure what to call what had just happened.

“What does that mean?”

“Your wolf left Greyson,” I explain, figuring Xavier deserved to know the truth. “It looked really painful. And then he said the wolf ran away. We ran after it, but we’ve lost it.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Xavier breathed. He looked horrified.

“I’m sorry, Xavier, we ran after it, but—”

“No, the same thing’s happened over here.”

I was shocked. “*What?*”

Xavier nodded. “Greyson’s wolf just took off into the woods. I’m tracking him now.”

I nearly dropped the phone. “Wait, so both wolves are…*gone*?”

**Episode 5513**

**Xavier**

I clutched my phone hard, trying not to freak out. Or at least show Cali that I was freaking out. My brother had *lost* my wolf? My wolf was now lost on the fucking streets of London?

Yes, I had also lost Greyson’s wolf, but that felt completely different. I was at home. At least I knew that Greyson’s wolf couldn’t get too far. He was going to be easy to track through the woods. Relatively easy. But my wolf was lost in fucking *London*?!

“Xavier?” Cali said cautiously. “Are you okay?”

I was absolutely *not* okay. I didn’t like the look of alarm in Cali’s face, but there was no way to make any of this sound any less bad than it actually was. Having the wrong wolf had been a bad situation, but having no wolf at all was ten times shittier. I knew better than anyone what it was like to be a werewolf without a wolf, and it *sucked*. I never liked to even think of the time I had spent without my wolf. It was too fucking painful to remember. It had felt like being a stranger to myself.

“Come on, Cali!” Greyson yelled in the background of Cali’s call. “We have to go! Come on!”

She looked back at him, then again at the screen, her expression torn.

“Go with Greyson,” I told her. “Don’t worry about Greyson’s wolf. I’ll take care of things here.”

“But what about—”

“I’ll find him,” I assured her. “I promise I will. But make sure you and Greyson don’t let mine get away.”

Cali nodded. “We’ll do whatever we can. I promise too.”

Then the call ended.

As I stared down at the blank screen, I realized how much I missed Cali. I wished I could be with her. But I couldn’t dwell on that. Not now, when Greyson’s wolf had been painfully torn from my body and was now on the run. This whole situation was such a mess, but I needed to find that fucking wolf.

I realized with a wave of frustration that there was no wolf to shift into, so I was going to have to run in my human form as I looked. I was just starting out when I heard someone calling my name behind me.

I stopped and turned to see Ava running from the house. I looked at her for a moment as she approached, momentarily mesmerized by the easy way she moved. She ran completely effortlessly, her long legs covering the ground as her dark hair blew out behind her.

As she neared me, I saw she looked worried.

“Xavier,” she said, moving around the trees, “what’s going on?” She pointed to the phone still clutched in my hand. “Who were you talking to?”

I pushed a frustrated hand through my hair. “Greyson lost my wolf.”

“*Oh shit*,” she breathed.

“Yeah, basically,” I said bitterly.

She was quiet for a moment, then shook her head. “Well, I guess Swift wasn’t wrong.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I mean that if Greyson lost track of your wolf, it means that your wolf is out of him. And it can’t be a coincidence that both wolves have left, right?”

I could see how she might have landed there, but I shook my head, refusing to give Swift an ounce of credit for success. Not after what the hell was happening. “No way, whatever the hell is happening, it’s almost worse than having swapped wolves with Greyson.”

“How do you figure that?” Ava wondered.

“Because even though Greyson’s wolf was driving me fucking crazy, I was still a werewolf. It wasn’t my wolf, and it felt totally wrong, but it was still a wolf. Now I can’t even fucking shift.”

Ava dismissed this with a shrug of her narrow shoulders. “Come on, Xavier. We’re both great trackers even without our wolves. We’ll be able to find Greyson’s wolf no problem.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right,” I said. I shook my head. I was still disoriented from what had happened with Greyson’s wolf, and freaked out about my own, but just being near Ava seemed to ground me. This situation was seriously fucked up, but I was glad for her confidence. Especially right now, when I wasn’t feeling particularly confident on my own.

Then she added, “I’m not quite as optimistic about Greyson and Cali’s chances with your wolf.”

I groaned. “Did you have to say that?”

She shrugged. “I’m just thinking about London and—”

“Stop,” I told her, shaking my head. “I can’t think about that right now. I’m thousands of miles away, and there’s nothing I can do about that right now. I just have to trust that my brother will be able to track my wolf down and get it back. In the meantime, I have to do the same for him.”

Ava nodded. “Okay. Let’s go then.”

I looked around. “Where the hell should we start?”

Ava narrowed her eyes, taking in the shadows of the forest. “I think we should keep moving, whatever we do. The longer we just stand here talking, the farther Greyson’s wolf gets from us.”

“Yeah, okay,” I agreed.

We both started running through the trees, moving fast, but keeping our eyes open for any movement in the woods around us.

We ran a mile at a near sprint when Ava slowed, then stopped.

“What’s up?” I asked, wiping sweat from my forehead.

“I think we can go faster if I shift and you ride on my back,” she said.

I didn’t even have to think about it. I was a strong runner in my human form—we’d been running a six-minute mile before Ava stopped—but even still, I knew I was no match for Ava in her wolf form.

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

The cracking of her bones sounded loud in the cold, quiet air, and in half a second, Ava had shifted to her beautiful wolf form. Only her blue eyes remained the same, and she lowered her head.

I swung myself onto her back, and she took off, running so fast I had to hold her tightly around the neck to keep from sliding off.

As she ran, I had time to think, and I started to think about the last time I’d been without my wolf. That time it had been because of Ava.

My wolf had left me after Ava had killed my mother. I had hated Ava for it—even after I thought she was dead and gone. I’d hated her more than I’d even thought possible. It was as if the amount of love I’d felt for her before had transmuted into cold loathing, and it had been nearly overwhelming.

So, it felt particularly strange to be in this moment, all this time later, with Ava. Not just with her, but working with her and being helped by her, to find my brother’s wolf.

And as my love had initially transformed to hate, it had transformed again now. And this time it had transformed to more than just love. It was love, respect, and gratitude for everything she brought to my life. Including the Samara pack.

But even as I thought about how much I loved Ava, I also remembered how I had nearly kissed Cali before she left. I knew I should feel guilty about it—even if nothing had actually happened. The reason nothing had happened had more to do with Cali, who had broken the moment.

At the time, I’d been both upset and relieved that she had stepped away from me. But it had been complicated. Had it been my desire for Cali that had driven me, or had it been Greyson’s wolf? Or had it been both?

Those were complicated questions with no easy answers, and I just didn’t have the time or energy to think about them at the moment. I had to push all that aside until this task was finished.

Ava slowed. She didn’t stop, but her run was almost a jog.

*What’s up?* I asked.

*I’m having trouble picking up the scent*, she said. *It’s almost there, but I can’t find it.* She shook her head. *What do you want to do?*

I looked into the trees, desperate to see any sign of Greyson’s wolf whipping around a pine tree. But there was nothing. The woods were quiet all around us, the only movement was Ava’s rapid breathing beneath me.

I blew out my breath and forced myself to think. *I don’t think Greyson’s wolf is going to wander too far away from the woods. It’ll likely go back to Redwood land.*

*We’re on Redwood land now*, Ava reminded me. And I don’t see it. *So how do we get it back?*

*Just give me a second to think.*

Ava was quiet for a moment. *Maybe we go back to Swift. See what he thinks.*

“Fuck that,” I said aloud, shaking my head.

*Then what do you suggest?* she asked.

I felt ridiculous even as I suggested it. “Big Mac?”

**Episode 5514**

I was doing my best not to panic. I *wanted* to panic, but I knew it wouldn’t help anything. Xavier’s wolf would still be on the loose in the streets of London, and we would still have no idea how to find him.

So, I wouldn’t panic, but I still could not *believe* this was happening. It was a full-on disaster. Having both my mates swap wolves had been one thing. I knew it had been hard for them, but regardless, I was mated to their wolves, even if those wolves had been in the wrong body, so that had at least felt stable.

It had been difficult, but not nearly as catastrophic as this felt now. How was it going to work if both my mates lost their wolves permanently? Would it affect the *due destini*? Would it affect *me*? Would it accelerate a descent into madness for me?

The thought made me quake. I was so afraid of everything that could mean, but there was another, even worse thought hovering in the back of my mind:

What if the loss of their wolves drove my *mates* mad? I could accept my own fate, but if this had any effect on Greyson or Xavier, I would never forgive myself.

With a shaking breath, I looked around the narrow, shadowy alley up ahead. When I glanced around, nothing looked or felt familiar. I had no idea where Greyson had led us. I knew next to nothing about London, and I hadn’t even had time to make plans or do any research for the trip before we’d left. We’d been in too much of a hurry. Hell, I hadn’t even bought a map.

The only thing I knew about the place was what I had seen on television and in movies. And—looking around—I was pretty sure that the area we were in hadn’t ever been featured in any tourist recommendations. The lane was narrow and lined on either side with low, squat buildings. The buildings themselves were in disrepair, and as we walked along, I saw that several of the plate glass windows had been boarded over. The buildings were shopfronts, but they were almost all vacant, though a few people lounged in doorways, looking on.

In short, the place was shady as hell. Greyson and I were clearly outsiders here, and we seemed to be attracting long, suspicious looks from the figures looking on from the doorways.

My stomach was a tight knot of anxiety. Ever since we’d met the guy from MI9 in the elevator, I’d been worried that we were going to attract trouble. Now, as the figures in the doorways watched our every move, I was sure of it. Which wasn’t good—we had enough trouble as it was.

“What are we doing here?” I hissed at Greyson. “Let’s get out of here.”

Greyson shook his head. “Can’t.”

“Why not?” I asked, giving a guy standing beneath the awning of a closed laundromat a sideways glance.

“Xavier’s wolf came this way,” Greyson said.

“How can you tell?” I asked. I looked around and was unsurprised to see no sign of a wolf. I had no way of tracking it.

“I picked up the scent.”

“An invisible wolf has a scent?” I wondered.

He nodded. “Yeah, but it’s faint. Hard to track.”

“Why,” I muttered under my breath, “of all the places in London, would Xavier’s wolf choose to come into *this* dingy alleyway?”

“Hell if I know,” Greyson said quietly, his eyes darting around the cobblestone street.

We rounded a slight curve of the lane, and when I looked up, I saw a sign hanging over a door—a door that happened to be open. It looked to be one of the few storefronts on the street that was actually open. Music spilled faintly out, and the sign hanging over the lane said it was Frost Moon Tavern. The sign was wooden and swung slightly in the chilly wind. There was an image of a bloodred moon carved into it.

“You ever heard of this place?” I asked Greyson.

He shook his head. “No, never.”

“Any idea what we might expect?” I asked.

He looked at the sign for a moment longer, then shrugged his shoulders. “I guess we’re about to find out.”

He stepped to the door but stopped before he went in and looked back at me.

“What?” I asked curiously. “Scared to go in?” I joked. It wasn’t the time for silliness, but sometimes I used humor as my coping mechanism.

He looked tense and didn’t laugh at my poor joke. “I was just thinking you should go back to the hotel.”

“*Back to the hotel?*” I repeated in disbelief. “What are you talking about?”

He looked into the tavern. “I just don’t know what lies inside this door.”

I shook my head emphatically. “There’s no way I’m going back to the hotel without you. I’m not going to just leave you, Greyson. Get real.”

He looked frustrated, and started to say something, but he stopped himself and shook his head. “Just stay close, okay?”

I nodded, pleased he wasn’t going to argue with me. I could see that he wanted to, but he managed not to. Though I *was* kind of nervous about what we were going to find inside.

As we stepped into the doorway, his hand caught mine and held tightly.

“What?” I whispered.

“I’m picking up on a lot of werewolf scents,” he said quietly. “We’re going to need to be careful.”

“You got it,” I murmured in full agreement.

Just as we started to step through to the tavern, a large man wedged his way into the doorway, blocking our entrance.

He glared down at us. “Where do you think you’re going?”

I looked up into his eyes and was startled to see they were two different colors. They were also narrowed and staring beadily at Greyson, and then me. Though when he looked at me, his eyes lingered. They roamed down to my feet, then back up to my face, taking his time around my chest.

When he met my eyes again, I glared at him, daring him to try anything.

“I asked you what you two thought you were doing,” the man said again, in a voice so heavily accented for a moment I wasn’t sure he was speaking English.

“We’re meeting a friend. Inside,” Greyson said smoothly.

He started to move around the massive man, but the guy shifted his body, blocking us again, and shook his head.

“I don’t think so. I’ve never seen you two before.”

“We *have* to meet him,” Greyson snarled. He had been edgy since we’d arrived in London, but this was a whole new level. He looked like might explode at any moment.

But the guy didn’t move. “Well, why don’t you wait for your friend to leave? You can still meet him. *Out here*,” he said menacingly.

I felt anger flare up in my chest. There were a lot of things to be pissed about, but right now, all I was mad about was this guy, trying to block our way. Xavier’s wolf was on the loose, maybe inside this dive bar, and there was no way I was going to let this guy stop us from getting him.

“You have no right to not let us into this establishment,” I snapped angrily. “We have the right to enter any building we want—”

*Be careful, Cali*, Greyson warned through the mind link.

*Why?* I snapped, annoyed.

*He’s a werewolf.*

Shit.

As if to underscore Greyson’s point, the huge guy partially shifted, the sharp snap of bones making me jump unsteadily back.

Double shit.

The guy held up what had been his hand and was now his paw, complete with razor-sharp claws.

I took another retreating step back, but even as I did, I got mad at myself.

“Are you *threatening* me?” I demanded. “All we want to do is come inside for a drink. What the hell is wrong with that? This is a free country, isn’t it?”  
 The guy rolled his mismatched eyes. “God save us from the Americans,” he intoned.

“Cali,” Greyson said quietly, his voice a warning.

But I shook my head. I was pissed and sick of feeling like everything was completely out of my control. I’d been driven out of my home, we were spending our one vacation running through London’s shittiest neighborhoods looking for a wolf, and I couldn’t even help with that. I was sick of feeling useless. I wasn’t useless, and this jerk wasn’t the only one around here who could use his supernatural powers to threaten.

Without giving it another thought, I summoned my magical sword and raised it, pushing the tip right to the guy’s throat.

“There are two ways we can do this,” I said coldly, pressing just hard enough he could feel the sharp point against his skin. “Either you step aside, or we go through you. So, which is it going to be?”

**Episode 5515**

**Xavier**

I held tightly onto Ava as she sped through the woods in the direction of Big Mac’s house. I knew Big Mac wasn’t going to be thrilled to see us, but I was just hoping the cranky witch would be there when we arrived. I at least wanted to talk to her.

As we emerged from the woods into the clearing where her house sat, I was encouraged to see Big Mac standing on the porch. She had a basket in her arms, and it was filled with greenery of some kind, as though she was just returning from the woods. Maybe she had been gathering ingredients for her potions and tinctures. She looked up, annoyed, as we drew closer.

“What do you want?” Big Mac demanded, glaring down at us.

Ava slowed to a stop, and I slid off her back. As Ava shifted to her human form, Big Mac looked at her for a moment, then back at me.

“Well?” she asked, her eyebrow raised.

“Well what?” I asked back.

“Why are *you* clothed?” she asked. “Is today some kind of a special day?”  
 I ignored the mocking tone of her voice. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What else is new?” she snorted.

“Greyson’s wolf was pulled out of me, and then it ran off. I can’t find it.”  
 Mrs. Smith appeared behind Big Mac in the doorway of the small cottage. “What did you say?” she asked. “Greyson’s wolf ran off? Is Greyson okay?”

“I…don’t really know,” I admitted.

She blinked at me. “What do you mean?”

“Well, thanks to Swift’s fantastic advice, Greyson is thousands of miles away in London with Cali. So I don’t really know how he is. But I do know that he’s trying to find *my* wolf, under pretty similar circumstances.”

Big Mac groaned and shook her head. “Are you kidding me? I should have known something like this was going to happen. What a shitshow.”

“That might be true,” Ava spoke up, “but it is happening, and we need your help.”

Big Mac gave her a narrow look. “You *need* to put on some damn clothes, girlie, before you start asking for things.”

Ava went tense, and I could tell she was struggling to hold her temper. Luckily, Mrs. Smith saw that too and stepped in front of Big Mac.

“Please, MacKenzie,” she said quietly, “will you at least listen to what they’re saying to you.”

“This isn’t my—” Big Mac started, but Mrs. Smith spoke over her.

“This is my son’s wolf we’re talking about here.”

Big Mac seemed to take that in for a moment. Then, with a sigh, she looked back at Ava and me. “What do you want from me, then?”

“We came to see if you could help us get Greyson’s wolf back.”

Unsurprisingly, Big Mac looked deeply irritated by the request. But that didn’t bother me. She literally always looked pissed at me, so I didn’t have any problem withstanding her anger.

Finally she heaved a gusty sigh and put her basket down by her feet. “Okay, describe what happened,” she said, folding her arms over her chest.

“Ava and I were running patrols around the Samara land, just like normal. I wasn’t going faster or farther than I usually do, but I got really light-headed all of a sudden. I lost my balance, and then my whole body just seized up.”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean, *seized up*?”

I thought for a moment about the pain coursing through my body after I’d fallen over. It had hit like a truck, and I’d been wracked with it. It had taken my breath away.

“Something was really hurting,” I told her. “It was like my insides were burning, clawing to get out.”

Mrs. Smith gasped, but Big Mac made a grossed-out face.

“That’s visceral,” she muttered. “Go on. Then what?”

“Then I could hear Greyson. Through the mind link. I could hear him calling for me. And then—” I shook my head, remembering the painful, bizarre feeling. “Then I felt Greyson’s wolf being ripped out of me.”

Big Mac nodded. “And then?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “The next thing I knew, I was opening my eyes again. Ava was standing over me, but Greyson’s wolf was gone.”

“And did you try to find it?” Big Mac asked, speaking as though we were idiots.

“Of course we did,” Ava said sharply. “I was able to track it for a while, but the scent is faint, and I lost it in the woods. So can you help us get it back?”

Big Mac shook her head. Saying no was her natural inclination—she was glass half-empty when it came to werewolves—so I waited for her to speak.

“What does Swift have to say about all this?” Big Mac asked. “This was his crackpot idea, after all.”

“We haven’t asked him,” I admitted.

Big Mac’s eyes went wide. “You *haven’t*?”

“No!” I exploded. “Why should I? The way I see it, Swift is the whole reason we’re in this situation to begin with.”

Big Mac looked annoyed, and Mrs. Smith stepped forward and put her hand on her fiancée’s shoulder.

“MacKenzie, please. Greyson’s wolf is lost. Please think about what that will mean for him. I can’t imagine what my son would do without his wolf. It’s such a fundamental part of who any werewolf is. It would be as if you lost your magic,” she said gently.

This seemed to have some effect on Big Mac, and she nodded. “I know how hard this must be for you, Sabine,” she said in a more sympathetic tone than I’d ever heard.

This empathetic Big Mac threw me for a loop, but it sounded promising, so I went for it:

“Come on, Big Mac, there must be something you can do,” I urged.

Big Mac looked at me, then sighed. “Fine. Wait here for a minute.”

She picked up her basket and disappeared into the house. When the door closed, Mrs. Smith turned to me.

“How are you doing, Xavier?” she asked quietly. “I know this must be hard on you, knowing your wolf is lost somewhere out there. This whole situation with the wolf swapping seemed particularly cruel.”

“I’m okay,” I said, trying to downplay the panic I was feeling. “I just want to get this taken care of, but we’re figuring it out—”

“It sucks,” Ava cut in, her voice raw.

I looked over at her, and for the first time I saw the depths of the worry she was feeling. It was written all over her face. She must have been working to hold it together for me, because now that she was looking at Mrs. Smith, she looked devastated.

“It really sucks. It sucks for Xavier, it sucks for Greyson, and it sucks for me.” She stopped talking when I slipped my arm around her shoulder, pulling her close.

She looked over at me and nodded, understanding. There was no need to make this about us. Ava was right—it did suck—but Mrs. Smith was clearly worried about Greyson. After all, she was his mother.

Mrs. Smith nodded. She looked sympathetic, but distant, like her mind was somewhere else. She must have been worried about Greyson.

“Yes,” she said vaguely, “of course it’s hard on all of you.”

A moment later Big Mac re-emerged from the house. She was holding some kind of ancient-looking metal pot clutched in her hands. It looked heavy and she struggled with it.

Ava eyed the pot. “Is your solution to make stew?”

I squeezed her shoulders. There was no need to antagonize Big Mac when she had finally agreed to help us. Though—truthfully—I had been wondering the same thing about that pot.

The witch narrowed her eyes at us. “What I am holding is not a cooking pot—it is a vessel.”

I nodded, though I had no idea what she was talking about. “Okay.”

“You might be able to capture Greyson’s wolf in this vessel,” she went on.

I looked at the pot skeptically. “Okay, so say we do manage to capture the wolf inside that pot—I mean vessel—how the hell are we supposed to get it back into Greyson’s actual body?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes and made her way down the porch step toward us. “I suggest you tackle one of those tasks at a time. Why don’t you try to capture the wolf first, then go from there.”

She held out the vessel and Ava took it from her, hefting the heavy iron pot easily in one hand.

“How does it work?” she asked, examining the pot. “Does it come with instructions? How are we supposed to capture a wolf in here?”

Big Mac looked at her for a moment, then slid her eyes to me. “You’re both werewolves.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “So what’s the best way to lure a werewolf?”

**Episode 5516**

“Cali,” Greyson said urgently, and tried to grab for my arm to pull me back.

I shook him off. I wasn’t going to back down. I was sick of being pushed around, and how could we just walk away when we knew Xavier’s wolf could possibly be inside the tavern? We had to get inside to see.

A long, silent moment passed. The large man looked at me, then down at the sword pressed to his neck, then back at me. I had no idea what he was going to do, so I was surprised—shocked as hell, actually—when he broke into a grin.

“You’re a feisty one, aren’t ya,” he said with a chuckle. He shifted his clawed paw back to a human hand and stepped aside. This moved him away from the tip of my sword and also allowed us entrance to the pub. “Go ahead then, if you want to get in so bad.”

My breath was coming in short, quick bursts, and as I pulled my sword back, I took a deep breath, trying to calm the rapid beating of my heart. I’d been determined to see that moment through, but I hadn’t been sure how it was going to turn out. Now that it had passed, I was just glad I hadn’t had to use the sword after all.

Greyson raised his eyebrows at me and stepped into the pub. I went to follow him, but as I passed the large man—who I realized was the bouncer—he nodded into the pub.

“Careful in there, lass,” he said quietly.

I forced myself to smile at him, trying to look unbothered. But I was, in fact, *very* bothered. The guy now knew I was Fae, and that was a piece of information that could be dangerous in certain situations.

The door closed behind us, and I stood for a moment, letting my eyes adjust to the dim interior of the pub. The place was small and low-ceilinged. The walls were wood-paneled, making everything feel dark. It was packed, too, which startled me a little. It was, after all, the middle of the day.

I could feel the eyes of the bar patrons on me and Greyson as we stood there, looking around.

“Stay close,” Greyson said quietly. “And try not to draw attention to yourself, okay?” He looked down at me. “Any *more* attention, that is.”

I nodded. I didn’t regret pulling my sword—it had gotten us in here after all—but I could see that this was a place where I would want to keep my head down and my sword to myself.

*Anything?* I asked him through the mind link.

*As far as I can tell everyone here is a werewolf*, he told me.

*Okay…is Xavier’s wolf here?*

Greyson looked around. I could see the determination on his face, and I knew he was really concentrating, using all the senses he had to check. He was still pale, but at least he looked a little more alert, not as disoriented as he had seemed even a few minutes ago.

Finally he shook his head. *I can’t tell yet. We’re going to have to look around.*

I nodded. *What is this place?* I wondered. *Why are all these werewolves here?*

Even as I spoke, the meaning of what Greyson had just told me—everyone here was a werewolf—dawned on me. And I was suddenly aware that I was very, very out of place.

*I don’t know*, he murmured through the mind link, his eyes still scanning the pub. *It must be some kind of underground werewolf club or something. That would explain the muscle at the door.*

I glanced up at Greyson. He’d had a whole life as a Rogue before he’d come back to the Redwood pack and eventually become Alpha. That was before I met him. I wondered if that life had involved frequenting clubs like this one.

Greyson had enough to think about, so I kept my questions to myself and followed him as he began to move slowly through the bar. The tables were packed together, so all the curious onlookers got a good look at us as we threaded through them.

As we passed one table, a man unfolded himself from his chair. As he stood, I looked up…and up…and up. I had no idea how he had fit at the tiny pub table, because this guy was *giant.* He made the bouncer at the door look like a wisp of a man. He had wide shoulders, a thick neck, and tiny eyes. He was taller than Greyson, so—standing up—he towered over me.

A shudder passed through me as I looked up into his towering bulk. If the guy was this big in his human form, then what the hell was he like when he was in wolf form? I could only imagine.

I was starting to wonder if coming in here had been a mistake. Xavier’s wolf might be in here, but it might not be too, and we had no idea what kind of threats this place held.

When I realized the guy was staring hungrily at me, I looked away.

“What’s the matter?” the guy snarled. “Why don’t you look at me, girl? Don’t like what you see?”

Greyson had been moving ahead, but when he heard the man’s voice, he stopped and turned back.

I looked defiantly up at the giant man. “No, I *don’t* like what I see.”

The guy’s thin lips curled meanly. His eyes—already small—narrowed to slits, and he grabbed hold of my arm with his giant hand, gripping tightly. “Then maybe you need to be closer to Alpha Henson, baby.”

Greyson was at my side in an instant and shoved the guy, making the mountain of a man stumble back a step. “Get your fucking hands off my mate.”

Greyson hadn’t yelled, but the pub had been silent, and every eye had been on us, so Greyson’s outburst drew a lot of attention. I could practically feel the eyes of the other patrons on us. This was exactly what Greyson had warned me about when we’d stepped in. *Don’t draw attention to yourself.*

Shit.

This was exactly the kind of thing we didn’t want.

The guy—Henson—looked at Greyson. “She’s your mate then?” He gave a harsh laugh.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded.

Henson looked over at the bar. “Madge!” he called.

An older woman with a shock of grey hair turned around. “What d’you want, Henson?”

Henson pointed at me. “This bloke says she’s his mate! What do you think of that?”

The woman stared at me, her cloudy eyes fixed on me in a way that felt deeply unnerving. The look she gave me wasn’t a quick once-over—this was a penetrating stare. I felt my heart thud in my chest—it felt like she was looking into my soul.

Finally she raised her withered hand and pointed a shaking finger at me. “She’s Fae.”

Next to me. Greyson went tense. This was exactly what we didn’t want—or need—right now.

The old woman’s announcement caused a ripple effect of reaction, passing through the bar like a wave. There were murmurs and stares and a couple of gasps.

Shit.

Greyson grabbed my hand. “Let’s go,” he muttered.

I didn’t argue. I couldn’t get out of this place fast enough. If Xavier’s wolf was in here, it would have to come out at some point, and we could try to find it then.

We started toward the door, but halfway there I felt a hand on my shoulder. A second later someone pushed me, pulling me away from Greyson.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Greyson snapped.

There was something hard and uncomfortably hot on my hand, and I looked down in confusion. There was a handcuff on my wrist.

“What the hell?” I gasped. I whipped around and looked at the knot of people standing behind me. I couldn’t tell who had put the handcuff on my wrist—they’d been too fast—but they all looked angry and dangerous.

I looked back down at the handcuff. It felt like it was burning my skin, and it was doing something strange to my magic. Like I had been picked up and shaken like a bottle of soda or something, and I could feel all my magic churning inside of me.

Panicking, I tried to take a step toward Greyson, but another set of hands grabbed me around my waist and pulled me back, away from Greyson.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Greyson exploded, his grey eyes storm clouds as he glared around. “Let her go this minute!”

Henson stepped forward. Apparently, he was going to be the spokesman for this angry mob, because he shook his head. “Don’t think so. Your mate is mine for the night.”

The room tilted around me, and I swallowed down the bitter taste of fear that rose up in the back of my throat. He couldn’t be serious.

Henson glared at Greyson. “If you want her back, mate, you’re going to have to fight for her.”

**Episode 5517**

**Greyson**

Fight for Cali? Of course I would. Always.

I had no problem with the challenge—and not just because I loved my mate. I *did* love her, of course, and I would do anything to protect her. I was pissed too. But this all seemed so…primitive. Even for werewolves it seemed strange. Besides, this asshole Henson knew Cali was my mate. He had to know I would fight for her. And what kind of Alpha would take someone else’s mate?

This whole situation was severely fucked up.

I looked over when Cali rattled the chain attached to her handcuff. I knew what she was doing—she was trying to conjure her magic to fight back. It would have been a good idea, but nothing happened. That meant the cuffs were iron, which meant they were keeping her from her magic.

She grimaced as she tried to move her wrist in the cuff. If they were iron—and it looked like they were—it was likely excruciating. Pure iron was painful to Fae.

I looked back over at Henson, who was breathing hard. The asshole was a huge Alpha, but so what? I’d had more than my fair share of fighting bastards like this.

“So what do you want?” I asked.

Henson glared at me with his piggy eyes. “It’s easy, mate. Unless you defeat me, your little mate there is going to spend the night with a different Alpha.” He laughed. “Me.”

I bristled. I wasn’t scared, but I didn’t like the way he was talking. “She’s not going to spend one second with you.”

He laughed again. “Yeah? Prove it.” He tipped his head back, gesturing to the back of the tavern.

I squinted into the darkness, and when I saw what he was gesturing to, I nearly rolled my eyes. There was a makeshift ring in the back of the pub. Because of course there was.

“I will,” I growled at him as we walked toward it.

Another man pushed Cali along. Next to the fighting ring was an iron loop jutting from the wooden floor, and the guy with Cali attached her cuff to the ring, shackling her in place.

She looked up at me, terrified. *Greyson!*

*I’ll get you out of this*, I promised her.

*No, please don’t fight*, she pleaded. *I’ll figure another way out of this.*

*Love—*

*Greyson, I’m worried. Look at that guy. We don’t know anyone here. Who knows what that guy is going to do?*

I shook my head. I knew Cali was scared, but I didn’t see any other way out of this.

As I stood at the edge of the ring, I looked around, taking in the crowd. Everyone in the pub was gathered around, and as I watched, I could see people placing bets. Bookies were moving through the crowd, and when I listened to the chatter, most of the odds were on Henson.

I looked over at the guy, whose eyes were on Cali. “I’m not going to do shit until you let her go.”

Henson looked over at me. He looked confused, like he was having a hard time understanding what I was saying, and it occurred to me he probably wasn’t the brightest bulb. “What’s that, then?”

“I’m not going to fight until you release my mate from the handcuffs.”

Henson shook his head. “Not happening. We know she’s a Fae, and that means she’ll try to use her nasty little Fae magic against me if we let her go. The cuffs stay on. *Unless* you defeat me,” he added, laughing as though the idea was absurd.

The crowd cheered for him as he lumbered over the ropes marking the ring. Once inside he raised his arms up, goading the crowd into louder cheers.

I took one last look at Cali, who was straining against her shackles, and stepped into the ring myself. I was met with boos from the crowd, but I ignored them and looked around. I’d been in plenty of rings in my time, but this one was smaller than I was used to. I looked over at Henson, taking him in. I was trying to assess his weaknesses. He was bigger than me—there was no doubt about that—but I wasn’t worried. The guy was too big, and it was bound to slow him down. Anyway, I doubted anyone in this pub had more experience fighting in a ring than I did.

“There’s one house rule,” Henson said, swinging his arms to warm up.

“Yeah? What’s that?” I wondered.

He gave me an evil grin. “There are no rules,” he said, and swung a meaty fist toward me.

His hand probably weighed twenty pounds all on its own, but the punch seemed to be traveling in slow motion, so it wasn’t hard to dodge it. I followed up with a quick shot to the guy’s stomach. The guy doubled over, and the crowd went wild. The fight was on.

I circled Henson and got in two shots to his kidneys before he recovered. He feigned left, and I dodged, but he punched right, catching me in the mouth. I tasted blood immediately, but there was no time to dwell. I dodged another swinging punch and released my uppercut. This connected beautifully with his chin, making his neck snap back.

When he looked at me again, he looked a little spacey, but mad as a bull, and he charged at me. I tried to dodge, but the ring was too small, and he had me against the ropes in an instant.

“Greyson!” Cali screamed.

I brought up my knee and got the guy in the stomach again. This must have been his weak spot, because he doubled over again. This was my chance, and I landed a series of blows onto the back of his neck. He groaned and sputtered, but I knew I had him. I brought my knee up again, smashing it into his face.

He teetered for a moment, then fell to the floor, making the whole room rumble.

The crowd was gasping and jeering as I stepped back, away from Henson, who still lay on the ground. I retreated into a corner and spit a mouthful of blood onto the scarred wooden floor. The guy was down, so I figured the fight was over.

But then a sharp crack echoed through the close, hot air.

No fucking way.

I turned around to see the guy shifting. It only took a moment before there was a full wolf with me in the ring, growling and baring his teeth.

I started to shift—or tried—before I realized that I couldn’t. I was wolf-less. There was nothing to shift into.

*Fuck.*

I backed up until my back hit the ropes as Henson stepped toward me. His wolf was *huge.* Probably the biggest I had ever seen.

The wolf threw back his head and howled. This was an attempt to intimidate me, I could feel it. It worked on the crowd, who cheered and jumped, waving their betting tickets in the air.

But it only pissed me off. Cali was calling me, yelling and using the mind link. She was telling me to get the hell out of the ring, but I ignored her. I blocked out her voice, trying to focus on how the hell I was going to defeat this wolf.

It wasn’t fair that I couldn’t shift, but—as the guy had said—there were no rules.

I moved around the ring, keeping my eyes on the wolf. The guy looked like he was ready to make his move, and I didn’t want to turn my back for an instant. As I moved, I felt my legs ram into something. It was hard, and when I blindly reached down for it, I realized it was a wooden stool.

Suppressing a smile, I raised my eyebrows. “No rules, right?”

Henson’s wolf paused for just a moment, no doubt trying to figure out what I was doing. But it was just for a moment.

Then he lunged toward me, his lethally sharp teeth bared, coming right for my neck. As he moved, I grasped the stool and swung, brought it up over my head and sending it arcing down onto the werewolf’s head with every ounce of strength I had.

The stool exploded on impact, and an instant later the huge Alpha fell to the ground for the second time. Henson was out cold.

The crowd fell silent. I could feel everyone staring at me, but what the hell did I care?

I stepped over the unconscious wolf and toward Cali.

Before I could reach her, three guys stepped in front of me.

“What?” I barked.

One of the guys shook his head. “That was disrespectful.”

“*What?*” I snapped, floored.

“Why didn’t you shift?” another of the guys asked. “You should have shifted to fight.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I didn’t fucking need to. Obviously. And I won, so now you release my mate. That was the deal.”

But none of them moved.

The third guy spoke, shaking his head. “No way. She’s not going anywhere.”

**Episode 5518**

**Xavier**

Ava looked warily up at the house. “Why are we here?”

I sighed. “Come on, Ava.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand why we don’t go back to our own pack house. What are we doing that we couldn’t do there? Why do we have to be at the Redwood house?” she asked, her eyes scanning the big house, silhouetted by the grey sky behind it.

“Remember what Big Mac asked us? What’s the best way to lure a werewolf?”

“We lure him by coming here?” Ava asked. “How do you figure that?”

“Think about it,” I said. “The way I see Greyson’s priorities, it’s his mate, then his pack, then his family. Right?”

Ava shrugged. “I guess. I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about Greyson, but I suppose I can see that.”

“Well, I can’t lure him with his mate because Cali’s in London, so the next best thing is his pack,” I said, choosing to ignore the tick in Ava’s expression when I mentioned Cali being in London. “That’s why we’re here, and not with the Samaras.”

Ava thought for a moment, then she smiled. She reached up on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. “You know, even without your wolf, you still think like a wolf.”

“Thank you very much. So, it makes sense, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I think so. It’s probably our best bet, anyway.”

The door opened, and Jay stepped out of the house. He was followed by Lola, Ravi, Charlie, Violet, Lilac, Sage, and Zainab. Even Dani came down. They all came down the porch steps and headed toward where Ava and I stood.

I was glad to see Jay, though it made my chest ache a little bit. I wished—like I always wished when I saw the guy—that we could spend more time together. Like we used to.

“Hey, man. What’s up?” Jay asked. He stopped in front of me and glanced at the vessel in my hands. “Is that for Torin? He’s already got a soup pot.”

“It’s not to cook with,” I explained.

“What’s it for?” Lola asked.

“Supposedly to capture Greyson’s wolf.”

“*Greyson’s wolf?*” Jay asked, shocked. “What do you mean capture? What happened?”

“He decided to take an unexpected holiday too,” Ava said, by way of explanation.

Jay looked at her, then at the vessel. He frowned and stepped closer to me, speaking low. “Are you okay, man?”

“I’ve been better,” I had to admit.

Jay took this in. He still looked a little confused, but also determined. I could see it in his eyes.

“Listen, Xavier, I’ll do whatever you need. Just say the word.”

“Thanks,” I said gratefully.

Jay gestured to the pack behind him. “Same goes for the rest of them. We’ll do anything we can for Greyson and for you too.”

Behind him, everyone nodded, and I felt a swell of gratitude. Both for Jay, and for the support of the Redwoods—my former pack.

“Thanks,” I said gruffly. “I mean it.”

“So.” Jay looked around. “How are we doing this?”

Ava pointed to the woods surrounding the pack house. “We go in there.”

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When we had gathered everything we needed, Jay and the rest of the Redwoods followed Ava and me into the woods without question. We led them into the forest, toward the last spot where we’d picked up the scent of Greyson’s wolf. It just seemed like the best place to start. It took a little while to get where we needed to go, but no one complained, though they were all still in their human forms.

I was glad we were doing this—hell, I was glad we were doing anything—but I was edgy too. It felt awful to be without my wolf, and as we walked, I realized we were getting close to the Vanguard territory. A little *too* close for my liking. Just remembering how Lucian had freaked out when he’d come upon us in the woods with Swift was enough to make me want to keep him out of this. The last thing we needed was for the Vanguard Alpha to butt in. No matter what Lucian believed about their friendship, I knew his presence would only repel Greyson’s wolf.

“Here?” I asked, looking up at Ava.

She nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

Remembering Big Mac’s terse instructions, I set the vessel on the ground.

“Now what?” Jay asked.

“We’re going to form a circle,” Ava instructed.

“Do you have the bag?” I asked Jay.

He nodded and handed it to me.

I opened the bag and pulled out Cali’s grey sweater. She wore it all the time, and it was doused in her scent. Holding it, I was painfully reminded of her absence.

“What’s that?” Ava asked, nodding to the sweater.

“I asked Jay to bring it,” I said, snapping myself out of my thoughts about Cali. I braced myself because I had known this was going to come up, but I knew it was the right move. “I’m hoping we can use it to lure Greyson’s wolf.”

“Okay,” she said with surprising ease. “It’s like using Cali as bait.”

She seemed to take a little too much pleasure in that idea, and I rolled my eyes as I bent and placed the sweater next to the vessel.

When I stood, I scanned the familiar faces of the pack, gathered in a circle around me. The situation that brought us together was shit, and I would never have wanted it to happen, but I felt a real sense of pride that they had all gathered to help and support their Alpha. Even if that Alpha wasn’t me. And looking around, I knew the Samaras would do the same for me if I asked them.

I took a step back, joining Ava in the circle. “I think we’ve done it all,” I said to her.

“I think so,” she agreed.

We’d done everything we could to lure Greyson’s wolf toward us. Everything short of trying to contact Kendall to get her down here. I couldn’t be sure of what the hell was going on between Greyson and that purple-eyed enigma. It had been a sore subject when I’d brought it up to Greyson, and Kendall’s response hadn’t been helpful either, but I knew what I knew. I’d lived with Greyson’s wolf inside me long enough to know that there was no denying the pull toward Kendall.

No matter what Greyson said.

That *had* to have been the reason I’d kissed Kendall.

I looked sideways at Ava. She was certain there was something between Greyson and Kendall. She’d thought so for a while now, before I’d understood the pull Greyson’s wolf felt toward her.

But Greyson had denied it so flatly, it was hard to know what was going on.

Not that any of it really mattered—not now at least. We were trying to lure his wolf, and for the moment, it was probably best to leave Kendall out of it.

There were other considerations too: If there was something between Kendall and Greyson, I wouldn’t want Cali to find out this way. I knew she would be devastated. So, it was better to try this on our own.

The woods were quiet as we stood there, gathered in a circle, all staring at the vessel. I took Ava’s hand, and she gave mine a reassuring squeeze.

I appreciated the support, because I felt like a total dumbass standing there. I didn’t even want to think about what we all looked like, standing in a circle in the middle of the woods, doing nothing, waiting for something that might not even come.

But I had learned the hard way not to dismiss anything that Big Mac suggested to me. She was a mean witch and constantly annoyed, but she was good at what she did. And even though she swore she didn’t know anything about wolves, she’d been right a lot more often than she’d been wrong.

A cold wind blew up. Ava had gotten dressed back at the pack house in some clothes that Violet loaned her, so we were all wearing sweaters and sweatshirts. Not that the cold mattered much to us. But it was strange to just stand there.

Lilac stomped his feet. Sage cleared her throat. Lola looked up when a winter bird lifted off from a branch over our heads.

I was starting to get worried. What if nothing happened? What if this was all just a waste of time?

I looked over at Ava to ask her how long we should wait, but her eyes had narrowed.

“What?” I asked, but an instant later, I knew.

Everyone did. I could feel everyone tense as we sensed Greyson’s wolf.

The pack went still, as though everyone was holding their breath. I didn’t even need to ask everyone to stay in place, they just seemed to know.

The silence was suddenly broken by a long, low wolf’s howl.

Was this happening?

And if in answer to my unasked question, a wolf appeared in our midst, stepping cautiously out of the thick woods.

**Episode 5519**

Anger surged up in me. What the hell was going on? Greyson had beat that giant Henson fair and square. Anyone could see that.

I strained against the cuffs, wincing as I did. The iron was burning my skin, and it was hard to think around the pain. If I could just use my freaking magic, I could help Greyson out of this. But what could I do? The iron of the cuffs was negating my magic, making it impossible for me to do anything.

And the pain was growing every second; I knew that if I didn’t get out of this soon, it was going to overtake me. *Then* what good would I be?

I couldn’t give up. Greyson had fought to defend me, and I wasn’t going to ignore that. But the harder I tried to get myself free, the worse the pain got.

I tried to look over at him, but there was a knot of werewolves standing in my way, blocking him from view. I could only hear shouting, though I couldn’t hear what it was about—the noise of the crowd made it impossible.

The werewolf who had shackled me to the iron ring on the floor was sitting next to me. He was leaning forward, jeering with the rest of the crowd.

“Yeah! Take him down!” he yelled angrily. “We don’t need any foreigners around here!”

I kicked out, trying to get the stool out from under him, but that didn’t really work. The only thing I managed to do was hit my shin hard enough it throbbed.

He noticed, though, and glared over at me. “Hey,” he barked, tipping drunkenly, “quiet down. You just stay quiet while your boyfriend there gets the shit beat out of him.”

I opened my mouth to tell him to go to hell when something dangling from his belt drew my eyes.

The keys.

I reached for them, but they were just out of reach. Of course.

Thinking fast, I kicked the stool again. The guy frowned at me and staggered to his feet.

“*Hey!*” he snarled at me. “What did I just tell you?”

“Sorry,” I said, giving him a sweet smile. “I guess it was just hard to hear with all the noise.”

“Well, I’ll say it again,” he said. He stepped toward me, close enough I could smell the sickly-sweet scent of alcohol on his breath. “I told you to sit your ass down!”

“Sorry,” I said with a shrug. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” he slurred.

And, in answer, I brought my hands up, smacking him hard in the chin with the sharp edge of the cuffs.

The guy dropped like a sack of potatoes at my feet. He must have been more drunk than I even realized, because he lay completely still on the ground.

Desperately trying to ignore the searing pain in my arms from the impact of the blow, I dropped to my knees. It took a moment to fumble around with the clasp on his belt, but after a second, I had the keys. It hurt like hell to twist my wrists around, but I managed to get the cuffs unlocked and pulled my wrists free.

The pain disappeared almost immediately, and I sighed with relief.

Then I looked quickly around, wondering if anyone had seen me. To my additional relief, I realized that everyone in the place was so noisy and focused on what was going on with Greyson, no one had even been looking over.

I planted my feet and glared at the backs of the men blocking Greyson. I could feel my anger churning, fueling the magic that was building up inside of me.

Something about my stillness must have caught someone’s eye, because a guy with a face tattoo of a dragon looked over at me.

“*Hey!*” he yelled.

He started moving toward me, but I didn’t let him get two steps before I shot him with a blast of my magic.

He was blown back, slamming into the crowd, all of whom turned to see what the hell was going on. They looked dangerous, but I was past caring.

I raised my hands, ready to blast the rest of them. “Get the hell out of my way,” I snarled.

But they didn’t. Instead, they came toward me, closing in on me in a tight circle.

I summoned my shield and whirled it around, hitting everyone close enough to feel the edge of it. There were grunts and groans and cries of pain as werewolves were knocked right and left. They fell into stools and knocked over tables, sending glasses flying into the air and shattering on the floor.

There wasn’t anything about what I was doing that was subtle or strategic, but I didn’t give a rat’s ass. I just needed to get to Greyson.

I kept working with my shield, dispatching werewolf after werewolf until I’d cleared a path, but when I finally caught sight of Greyson, I saw he was locked in yet another fight. This time it was with two of the guys who had approached him, and one fully shifted werewolf.

“Shit.” I gasped, and, raising my hands, I blasted the werewolf with a shot of energy just as he was about to pounce on Greyson’s turned back.

Greyson’s hair ruffled as the energy shot past him. He turned around, baffled. “Cali?”

I held my shield up. “Who else?” Then I rushed toward him.

I had almost reached him when a large, snarling man blocked my path. He had half-shifted, so his legs and feet were wolf-like—hairy and strong—but I was past caring, so I decked the guy with my shield.

Two others had been rushing toward me, but when they saw their friend drop to the ground, they hesitated, eying me with suspicion and fear.

And that was when Greyson made his move. He lunged for me, grabbed my hand, and he powered into the crowd toward the door.

We had to fight our way through, but I was spoiling for one. I blasted in every direction, pushing back the crowd. I had my shield in the other hand, mowing people down as I went. Greyson was throwing punches right and left. I would have thought this would make people back away, but they just pressed closer.

Frustrated, I raised my hands and shattered a mid-air stool someone had sent flying toward us. “What is *up* with these people?” I gasped, breathing hard with the effort of fighting.

There was a loud growl behind me, and when I shot a look over my shoulder, I saw that the big-shouldered guy Greyson had fought—and knocked out—was back on his feet. He had shifted back into his human form, but he was glaring at us with murder in his eyes.

“*Come on*,” Greyson urged, pulling my hand.

I turned and focused on the door. It was right in front of us, and I surged toward it. But when Greyson put his hand to the ancient knob, it wouldn’t turn. The door was locked.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered. He jerked the knob again, but nothing happened. He slammed his shoulder into the door, but still nothing happened. The door was short, but it was thick. I had noticed that when we’d come in. Old and solid oak, the thing had to be six inches thick.

“Stop,” I said, pulling Greyson back.

“What are you doing to—” Greyson started to ask, but he listened when I raised my hands. With a blast of magic, the door splintered into a million shards.

The people in the pub screamed and hit the deck as the wood flew, and Greyson and I ran out onto the street. Greyson had his arm around me and was practically carrying me as we hurried down the street, but I didn’t protest. Even in his human form, he was a lot faster than me.

We ran without looking back until we got to the end of the alley—where we found ourselves on one of the busy commercial thoroughfares again. Only then did I allow myself to look back the way we’d come, but the alley was clear. The wolves hadn’t come after us.

I stood for a moment, breathing hard and shaking with adrenaline and fear. “What the hell?” I panted. “Why aren’t they coming after us?”

Greyson wiped his eye with the back of his hand. Something in the pub had hit him, and he had a cut on his temple. “They probably don’t want to draw any attention to that little club they’re running,” he said.

I looked at the cut by his eye, then noticed another one on his lip. That was the one from the fight. “Are you hurt?” I asked worriedly.

He smiled down at me. “Love, the only thing that’s hurt is my pride. I never should have allowed any of that to happen.”

“You were amazing,” I told him, reaching up to kiss his cheek.

“You were too,” he told me. He took my hand. “Come on, let’s get going. Try to blend in.”

That was going to be challenging, considering that we both looked like we had been in a bloody fight. We got a few curious stares, but I tried not to notice. I was mostly angry that we’d gone through all of that and hadn’t even been able to look for Xavier’s wolf.

I was just about to mention that when Greyson stopped suddenly.

“What is it?” I asked him.

He was staring straight ahead. “Xavier’s wolf. He’s right over there.”

**Episode 5520**

**Xavier**

“Everyone stay quiet,” I said, keeping my own voice low. I didn’t want to scare Greyson’s wolf—not now, when he was actually close. “Just stay still.”

The wolf took a step toward the circle. It eyed us warily, but then focused again on the sweater lying next to the vessel.

I wasn’t surprised to see that. That was why I had asked Jay to bring it along. I knew that we would struggle to call the wolf to us, but we’d have a better chance if there was some trace of Cali to do it. It was working, though I didn’t like it. I didn’t like that my brother’s wolf had been drawn to us because of a trace of Cali’s scent.

The wolf approached the sweater, then paused for a moment, sniffing the air.

Ava looked over at me. *Do it*, she said through the mind link. *Do what Big Mac said.*

I shook my head. *Hold on. It’s going to get closer.*

*Xavier—*

*The closer the wolf gets to the vessel, the better chance I have of capturing it*, I told her.

I held my breath. I wasn’t sure we were going to get another chance, and I really didn’t want to screw this up.

The wolf didn’t move. Time seemed to stretch as I stared at it, willing it to move.

Nothing happened.

I stole a look at the Redwood pack. They were as focused as I was and were staying still and quiet, just like I’d asked. I knew they wanted this to happen as much as I did.

Everyone seemed to hold their breath as the wolf moved a step closer. And then one more step closer.

I thought of the spell Big Mac had given me, reciting it over and over until I felt confident I had it down. Big Mac hadn’t exactly said so, but she kind of implied that if I screwed this up the first time, I might not get another chance to capture the wolf. And if I got the spell wrong, I might inadvertently cause something really terrible to happen.

I cursed in my head. *That* was why I fucking hated witchcraft. It was so much more likely that things were going to go wrong than work out. But what choice did I have?

None.

So, with a deep breath, I cautiously released Ava’s hand and took a step toward the wolf. I began to chant the spell Big Mac had taught me, keeping my voice so low even I could barely hear the words.

I was speaking under my breath, but the wolf’s ears perked up as soon as I began. It started to growl. My heart rate kicked up, but I couldn’t back down. I kept going, speaking quickly, trying to get the whole spell out. The wolf’s growl rose to a crescendo before growing to a snarl. I felt someone move behind me, but I didn’t turn around to tell them to stop. I couldn’t.

I kept my eyes on the wolf, listening as the snarl built, until finally, the wolf put back its head and howled. The sound echoed through the woods, bouncing off the trees and thundering through the cold air. Then it just stopped. The wolf appeared frozen, then the sight of it began to waver. In a moment, the wolf had turned transparent, and then—out of nowhere—the thing vanished completely.

No one moved. No one made a sound. I stood still, staring at the spot where the wolf had been, unsure of what the hell had just happened.

Ava stepped next to me, her blue eyes bigger than ever. “Where did it go?”

I wasn’t sure and was wondering the same thing, but I walked determinedly over the vessel. I didn’t know if what we had done had worked, but I had to trust in Big Mac.

Grabbing up the top of the vessel, I placed it firmly on, securing it in place.

When it was on tight, the Redwood pack members surged forward, crowding around.

“Did it work?” Jay asked.

“How do we know?” Lilac wondered.

“Maybe a bell rings?” Ravi suggested.

“I didn’t even see anything,” Lola said, frowning. “Did everyone else see something?”

I didn’t answer but picked up the vessel. I couldn’t see what was in it, but as soon as I picked the thing up, I knew—my brother’s wolf was inside. I could feel it.

“It worked,” I told the group. “We captured Greyson’s wolf.”

Everyone seemed to breathe the same sigh of relief.

“Thank god,” Violet said.

Ravi grinned. “I knew it would work.”

“I didn’t,” Sage admitted. “That was so tense.”

“That’s great, Xavier,” Jay said, smiling at me. “That was touch and go, but you did it.”

I grinned back at him, relishing this moment of victory with the Redwood pack. It wasn’t my own wolf back where he belonged, but recapturing Greyson’s wolf meant that I was one step closer to getting there. I just had to hope that Greyson was working as hard out in London.

“Thanks, everyone, for your help,” I said, looking around.

“Yeah, thank you,” Ava added.

“Fuck yeah, dude.” Jay clapped me on the shoulder, looking as relieved as I felt.

Ava smiled at me as she took the vessel from my hands. “I can’t believe how light this is,” she said in wonder. “I thought it was going to be heavier once we got the wolf.”

While everyone was distracted with the vessel and congratulating each other, I reached down and snatched up Cali’s sweater from the ground. I stuffed it quickly into the bag Jay had brought to the woods, then stood. When I did, I found Jay looking at me. When our eyes met, he raised a questioning eyebrow.

Still holding the bag in one hand, I took the vessel back from Ava. “It’ll comfort Greyson’s wolf,” I explained to him.

Jay nodded. “Sure,” he said, though it was clear he wasn’t buying this story.

But I didn’t really care whether Jay believed me or not. Cali’s sweater might not comfort the wolf, but it would comfort me.

“Well, I guess we’ll take off then,” Jay said, looking around, “if we did what we needed to do. You don’t need us for anything else, right?”

“No, that was it.”

“Just some casual witchcraft to catch a wolf,” Ava said.

I laughed at that, feeling light with relief. “Thanks again, everyone.”

The Redwood pack waved goodbye as they set off in the direction of their pack house. Ava and I turned in the direction of the Samara house.

“Do you want to ride?” Ava asked.

I shook my head. “It’s probably better to walk,” I said. “I don’t want to risk letting the vessel fall out of the bag. I don’t know if we could make that all happen again.”

“Sure,” Ava said easily and fell into step behind me.

That was true about the vessel, but I was also glad to have a moment to myself to breathe. The whole experience of losing the wolf in the woods had been a lot to take in, and now that that danger had passed, I wanted to take a moment and process.

I held Ava’s hand as we walked through the woods, glad to share this moment of quiet with her.

Then Ava broke the silence. “Why did you bring her sweater?”  
 I had *not* been expecting that question. I didn’t even know she had seen me shove the sweater into the bag.

“I thought it would comfort Greyson’s wolf,” I repeated, but it was clear that Ava didn’t buy this story any more than Jay had. I cleared my throat. “I really did bring it for the wolf.”

Ava’s eyes were assessing. “Is that the real reason?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I know you’re still in love with Cali. So, is that sweater more like a souvenir?”

I sighed. “I thought you were past that.”

“Past what?” she countered.

“What else do I need to do to prove to you that I love you, Ava?” I asked. “No matter what I feel about Cali, that doesn’t change how much I love you.”

She stopped walking and turned to look at me. The woods were quiet, the only sound a distant winter bird singing its song.

“Yeah, I get that,” she said.

“Do you?” I asked. “Because if you do, then why are you bringing it up now?”

She looked at me like I was missing something completely obvious. “Because it hangs over us, Xavier. I know you love me, but no matter what you do or say, it’s still there.” She gestured toward the bag that held the sweater. “*She’s* always there.”

“But she’s not,” I said, taking her hand in mind. “You are. You’re here, and I’m here. I’m with *you*.”

Ava was quiet for a moment as she took this in. Her eyes didn’t leave my face, and I had to fight not to squirm beneath her even gaze. It felt a lot like being read like a book.

“Yeah, you’re with me,” she finally said, “but for how much longer?”

**Episode 5521**

**Artemis**

Kastian was holding his bleeding nose with his free hand, obviously not pleased with the turn of events. The Dark Fae was so used to being in control that he seemed shocked that he’d found himself at our mercy.

He was struggling against Marius’s hold, trying his hardest to break free, but I knew that Marius was much stronger. Kastian had lived a generally soft life while Marius had been forced to use his strength to survive.

Marius was a fighter, a survivor, while Kastian had been handed almost everything he had on a silver platter.

When it came to physical strength, Kastian was no match for Marius at all.

I was working hard to keep from smiling at the sight of Kastian’s discomfort. I only wished that I’d been the one to clock him. I’d wanted to kick his ass so many times since we met that I would have truly enjoyed getting even a single hit in.

But I didn’t mind letting Marius have all the fun this time around.

“I’m going to ask you one more time, Kastian. Tell me everything you know about the Order of the Winding Thorn!” I hissed, getting in his face. “And don’t say that there’s nothing to tell, because I won’t believe it.”

Kastian was breathing hard, and his eyes were on mine, but he was in no hurry to respond. He was still busy fighting to free himself from Marius’s hold, and I noticed that Marius was barely struggling to keep him restrained.

“You really do want to do this the hard way, don’t you?” I said. I grabbed Kastian by the jaw and shoved the medallion right in his face. “Tell. Me. What. You. Know. Now!” I leaned in close until our noses were almost touching. “I won’t ask nicely again!”

Kastian’s face twisted in a sneer, and he spit on Marius who responded by gripping his collar almost tight enough to choke him.

“You do realize that things will only get worse for you from here if you don’t do what we want, right?” Marius added, wiping Kastian’s spit from his chin.

“Why would I know the first thing about some random story?!” he choked out.

I was getting angrier by the second, though Kastian didn’t seem to care. “You and I both know it’s not just ‘some story.’ You’re looking at the proof! The same symbol is tattooed on your back, Kastian! You cannot and will not convince me that you don’t know anything about it.”

“Good thing I don’t care what you believe!”

“Keep on stalling, and you’ll get another punch to the nose. And I won’t hold back this time,” Marius sneered.

Kastian smiled. “Do your worst, bounty hunter. You’re nothing more than a common thug. Roughing people up is all you’re good for. Far be it from me to keep you from exercising one of your only talents.”

“Cut the tough guy act, Kastian. You and I both know you don’t want any more fists flying at the pretty face of yours!” I said.

Kastian’s smile widened. “Aww, you think I’m pretty?”

“Stop it, and tell me what I want to know, now! The Order needs to be exposed. They kidnapped me when I was a child. Tore me out of my mother’s arms before they’d barely cut the umbilical cord. They took everything from me!”

I realized that I was shaking as I yelled at him. Even after all this time, I hadn’t completely processed the things that had happened, and now that I was so close to finding out the truth, I could barely stand to wait a second longer.

“They took my father and mother from me, and you think it’s nothing but a story?” I said.

I hadn’t realized that I had my hand on one of my daggers until I felt a light hand on my shoulder. I turned to look and saw Rishika standing behind me.

“Artemis, calm down.” Rishika’s voice was quiet but the sound of it hit me hard. It was a sharp reminder of just how much I missed her.

“I don’t know if you realize it, but we’re all running out of patience here,” Marius said to Kastian. “You’d better explain while you still have a chance, or another punch to the nose will be the least of your problems.”

Kastian sighed and rolled his eyes. “Has either of you even looked at the medallion?”

“Of course we have!” I snarled. “Do you think we’re stupid?”

“I won’t answer that question for the sake of my safety,” Kastian said. “But I suggest that you look again. Upon closer inspection, I think you’ll notice that the symbol on the medallion and my tattoo are not the same.”

I didn’t show it, but I was shocked to hear that. “You’re lying.”

“He is!” Marius said. “He’d say anything to get out of this without telling us the truth!”

“If I’m lying, another closer look at the tattoo and medallion would prove it immediately. They’re not the same. Yes, they both have vines and thorns, but that doesn’t mean that I’m a member of the Order. My tattoo is nothing more than my family’s signet.”

Kastian was nowhere near the most trustworthy person, but something about the tone of his voice made me hesitate.

Both Marius and Rishika still looked skeptical. I understood their reluctance to believe him. I wasn’t about to believe him, either. But he was right. Taking another look to compare the two symbols would expose the truth.

I gestured to Marius who roughly threw Kastian to the ground. Kastian groaned and cursed but stayed put.

“Watch it!” Kastian shouted as I used the dagger I’d wanted to stab him with to slice a hole in his shirt, exposing the tattoo on his back.

“You do know that I could have you all killed for this, don’t you?!” Kastian shouted.

“Do you think if we were worried about that we’d let you go so you could arrange that?” Marius snorted. “Give us a break.”

“In other words, shut up!” I said.

I leaned in to compare the tattoo to the medallion, and Marius leaned over to get a better look, too.

“They both have thorns,” Marius said.

“They do…but I think there’s some truth to what he’s saying. The two symbols are different. But does that really mean he isn’t a member?”

Kastian, his voice muffled by the cold ground, said, “It means that exactly. Let me show you.”

I stepped back, and Marius flipped Kastian over onto his back but quickly pressed his blade to Kastian’s neck. “Just a reminder that we’re in control here. Try anything and you know the rest.”

Kastian gave Marius a death stare, but he didn’t try to get away.

“As you know, my family is one of the most prolific Dark Fae families. You’d do well not to underestimate me.”

A root shot up out of the ground and slithered around Marius’s wrists and legs. Marius cried out as he struggled to free himself, but the roots were too strong. He was forced down to his knees, and the dagger dropped from his hands.

Rishika and I drew our weapons as Kastian rose calmly to his feet, keeping his hands up in a sign of surrender. “I’m only demonstrating,” he said. “My family has strong plant magic.” He pointed to his back. “Hence the tattoo. That’s all it means.”

“Let me go!” Marius shouted.

“Let him go,” I said.

“I will, as soon as I’ve had an opportunity to explain myself. All I’m saying is that I can’t be blamed that my tattoo bears some coincidental similarity to the symbol of an infamous cabal formed years ago.”

“Let Marius go!” I shouted again.

Kastian smiled. “Of course…I meant no harm.” He smacked Marius in the nose.

“You asshole!” Marius shouted, holding his nose just as Kastian had only a short time ago.

Kastian shook the hand he struck Marius with, grimacing as he said, “That was payback. Surely you have to allow me that.” He looked at Marius. “Now, we’re even.”

The roots began to unfurl from around Marius and retreated into the ground.

“We’re not even,” Marius said. “Not by a long shot.”

But Marius didn’t try to retaliate.

I was disappointed and dissatisfied. I’d been certain that Kastian had his hand in the Order’s dirty dealings, but now I wasn’t sure either way.

And then there was the matter of the would-be assassin to deal with.

Kastian threw a glance at the intruder, and within seconds the ground started shaking as another bunch of vines and roots shot up from ground and enveloped the man.

“What are you doing?” Rishika shouted, backing out of the way as more vines and roots tore out of the earth and wrapped around the assassin.

Kastian’s expression was dark and angry as he brought out even more vines to coil around the intruder. “It’s *his* payback,” Kastian said. “He tried to kill my wife, and now he’s going to pay for it.”

**Episode 5522**

**Greyson**

I kept my eyes focused on Xavier’s wolf, which was watching me from a distance. It wasn’t moving and seemed to be taunting me—which made perfect sense given that it was Xavier’s wolf. Even without being tethered to Xavier, its sole mission was to make my life hell.

I chuckled at that.

“What’s funny?” Cali asked.

“Nothing, just thinking about what a pain in the ass Xavier is, no matter what.”

If only I could shift…I’d have a much better chance at catching the spirit wolf than in human form. I was fast as a human, but the wolf would still leave me in the dust if I gave chase and spooked it.

*It’s probably a good thing that I can’t shift, since running through midday London in wolf form would be beyond reckless. We don’t need to draw any additional attention to ourselves.*

At least being without my wolf hadn’t left me without common sense. My instincts were still sharp, and I understood how to exist as a wolf in the human world even though my wolf had left me.

But living without my wolf was strange and unnerving.

I doubted that it was something I could ever get used to. My wolf was as big a part of me as my human side, maybe even more so. I missed feeling it inside me, the way it always seemed to guide me even when I wasn’t fully conscious of it.

Cali was standing right beside me, searching in vain to see what she couldn’t. For a moment, I got lost in a thought, wondering how different things would be if I’d turned Cali. If I made her into a wolf, she would be able to stand by my side as my complete equal.

I didn’t often admire Xavier and Ava’s relationship—for a number of reasons—but there were times when I envied the connection they had as two wolves who understood each other in a way that Cali and I never would.

It wasn’t that Cali and I didn’t get each other, because we did, but the wolf element would always be a divide between us.

But at least Cali could hold her own in tough situations. She’d used her Fae magic to help in the werewolf nightclub. It wasn’t like she was helpless. Far from it.

I started when I saw Xavier’s wolf turn and stalk off in the opposite direction. We were going to have to follow it.

I took Cali by the hand. “Xavier’s wolf is on the move.”

“But where—”

Cali cut her question short as she followed me across the street.

“Greyson! Watch out!” she shouted, suddenly yanking my arm to pull me out of the path of a speeding taxi.

“Thanks. I forgot that traffic runs in the opposite direction here.” I smiled at her. “You didn’t even need your Fae powers to save me from being mowed down by a taxi.”

“Nope, just a good eye and even better reflexes.”

“I think you put some werewolves to shame,” I said.

Cali gave me a proud smile. “Do you really mean that?”

“Of course I do, love. You may not be a wolf, but sometimes your instincts remind me of one.”

As we made our way safely across the street, I noticed that Cali seemed to be naturally taking us in the right direction.

“How do you know which way to go?” I asked her.

“I may not be able to see Xavier’s wolf like you can, but I can sense its presence. It must be because of the mate bond…or something,” she said.

“No need to downplay it,” I replied. “It’s likely the mate bond that you’re feeling.”

I hated to admit it, but there was no use denying something that was keeping Cali connected to Xavier’s wolf in a way that I wasn’t. Still, I didn’t think I would ever like to think about the bond Cali had with my brother.

*If I haven’t grown used to the reality of her bond with Xavier by now, I doubt I ever will.*

I knew I shouldn’t let it bother me, but when it came to how I felt about Cali, I had a hard time not letting even little things get to me—especially when those little things involved my brother.

“There he is!” I said. I spotted the wolf just as it turned down a narrow side street. As we approached, I hesitated. I didn’t want a repeat of last time.

The wolf was obviously doing everything in its power to evade me, and that meant it might lead me through danger to throw me off its trail. And the look of the street the wolf had taken wasn’t at all promising.

A sharp squawk from a raven perched on the roof above us sounded eerily like a warning.

With her hand still in mine, Cali took a step forward and looked ahead. “Is it still there? Do you see it?”

I locked eyes with the wolf. It was standing at the other end of the street watching me, its face half obscured by shadows.

“It’s leading us somewhere,” I said. “That much I can tell.”

I wanted more than anything to send Cali back to the safety of the hotel. I couldn’t know if there was any basis for it, but I had a bad feeling in my gut. Like something could go wrong if we kept following the wolf through these unfamiliar streets.

But I knew that if I tried to send Cali back, she would resist. There was no way she was going to let me do this on my own.

If I was myself—with my wolf intact—I would be a lot less concerned. But as it stood now, I was weaker than usual. My fight in the werewolf club had proven that I wasn’t completely powerless—far from it—but I knew I had to be more cautious than usual because I didn’t have my wolf to fall back on.

And aside from that, I didn’t want Cali to suffer another horrible nightmare like the one she’d experienced the night before.

“Stay behind me, okay?” I told Cali. If I couldn’t send her away from the danger, I could at least do whatever it took to mitigate it. If something unexpected happened, I could only hope that it would reach me first.

I took a furtive glance over my shoulder to be sure that nothing was creeping up behind us, either. I was so focused on moving ahead to get to Xavier’s wolf that we could easily be caught unawares from the rear.

I began to walk down the side street. The wolf’s scent was strong, but there were other scents, too.

Cali pulled on my hand and mind linked, *I think someone’s following us.*

That was what I’d been worried about. I took a slow, cautious glance over my shoulder, but there was nothing there. That didn’t mean we were in the clear, though. There were plenty of places to hide, plenty of doorways and shadows to keep to, so they wouldn’t be spotted.

“Not again,” I groaned.

“Can’t the English werewolves learn not to mess with us? It’s like they have radar for Americans here,” Cali said.

She had a familiar look on her face—like she was about to summon her magic.

“Don’t,” I said quickly. “Not here. It seems deserted out here, but we have no idea who may be following us. We can’t take the risk.”

And then I saw it—a strange shadow lingering at the corner. I stopped and pulled Cali into my arms. I kissed her deeply, keeping my eyes trained on the shadow.

I didn’t want to alert Cali yet—she was surprised enough by the sudden kiss—but she didn’t resist. I wrapped my arms around her and walked her against a wall. The kiss felt as amazing as ever and I wanted to give myself over to fully enjoying this moment with her, but I knew I couldn’t let my guard down.

Whoever was in the shadows still hadn’t revealed themselves, and it could be anyone. We’d drawn so much attention—the bad kind—since we arrived in London that there could be any manner of threat lurking.

*It could be someone who followed us from the tavern, or it could be the MI9 agent who warned me about causing trouble here in England.*

More than ever before, I hated being in unfamiliar territory, where I couldn’t immediately decipher the threats that might be waiting for us.

I felt exposed, out of sorts, and to top it all off, I didn’t have my wolf to give me that extra source of comfort that made me feel like I could take on anything that came my way.

But the more I thought about our conflict in the tavern, the more the bad feeling in my stomach grew.

Was someone following us to make us pay for the fight in the tavern?

**Episode 5523**

**Xavier**

I couldn’t help the huff of frustration that escaped my mouth. It couldn’t believe that Ava was dredging this up again—I had enough to worry about without contemplating the state of our relationship in the face of my connection with Cali.

I was starting to wonder if Ava and I would ever be able to get past the problems that seemed to stick to our relationship—namely, Cali.

*And Cali isn’t going anywhere, so I don’t see us ever getting over that one.*

The constant back and forth, push and pull, was getting old. I would give anything to never discuss Cali with Ava ever again. But I knew that was asking too much. There was too much history, too much pain, too many open wounds to count.

Cali would always stand between me and Ava. It was as much a part of our dynamic at this point as our love and respect for each other.

Ava was watching me, still waiting for an answer. I wasn’t sure what I could say to ease her concerns, especially when I knew there was no use.

“And don’t you dare change the subject,” she added. “I hate to bring it up, and I know you don’t want to talk about it, but ever since you came back from the Fae world, you’ve been…I don’t know, off.”

I pointed to the vessel. “I don’t know, maybe it’s because my fucking wolf left me for my brother?!” My voice was laced with anger, and I realized that it was misdirected. I shouldn’t be angry Ava, I should be angry with myself.

Besides, it wasn’t like Ava was wrong. If nothing else, Ava knew me almost as well as I knew myself.

I’d been going through a lot, and my relationship with Ava had suffered because of it. It would be way too easy to blame it all on my missing wolf and having to share my body with Greyson’s wolf.

Being in this state *was* hard on me, and it was a huge amplifier for all the other issues that I was dealing with. I didn’t know if anyone other than Greyson could relate to how awful and strange it felt to be without my wolf. It was something deeper than simply an unpleasant feeling.

And now that we’d managed to contain Greyson’s wolf in Big Mac’s vessel, nothing had really changed. At least not internally. I still felt off. Wrong.

I doubted I was going to feel like myself again until I had my own wolf back where it belonged. But that wasn’t going to change what was really troubling me.

I’d realized I was still deeply in love with Cali long before my wolf left—even before I went with Cali to the Fae world. In fact, there was no point in even pretending like I’d ever stopped loving her.

Even when the Adéluce had her claws in me and was working me like a puppet, my feelings for Cali were still there hiding beneath the surface only to emerge full force once I was freed from her influence.

I loved Cali. That would never change. And I’d hurt Ava when I told her the truth about it.

My journey to the Fae world by Cali’s side had been a play at helping to mend Cali’s distrust in me. I’d risked everything just to reignite our bond—even my relationship with Ava, since I’d left her and our pack behind for Cali’s sake.

But did any of that mean I loved Ava any less? That was the real, fucked-up question.

That was a question I was going to have to answer myself, and Ava deserved my honesty. I didn’t want to lie to her.

The truth was going to hurt her feelings yet again, and I knew that, but not nearly as much as if I told her what she wanted to hear, and she found out later that I hadn’t been honest.

“Things between Cali and me did change in the Fae world,” I began.

“I already know that, Xavier. What you haven’t told me yet is *how* things changed,” Ava pressed.

I took a breath, realizing that this was going to be way harder than I thought it would be. “I can’t really—”

“Please don’t tell me that you can’t explain it, X. Try! Just be honest with me. Did you sleep with her?”

I hated that she felt the need to ask me that, but I was relieved, too. That was a question with an answer I could give honestly and without hurting Ava.

I looked her right in the eye. “No, I didn’t sleep with her.”

Ava nodded as she took that in. “And do you intend to?”

I broke our gaze. That question was a lot harder to deal with. “Why do you insist on asking me questions that could hurt you?”

Ava’s mouth dropped open, and then she nodded at me. “Oh. So…the answer to that question will hurt me? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, that’s not it, Ava. Don’t put words—”

“Don’t you dare! I asked you if you plan on sleeping with her, and you can’t answer me. And you should know that it’s not the questions or answers that hurt me, Xavier. You and you alone cause my pain.”

I looked away. I couldn’t argue with that. She was right. I knew that, and there was no hiding from that fact. But then again, I hadn’t asked for any of this.

“I sometimes wonder if the problem isn’t that I have another mate, but that the mate is Cali. If it wasn’t her, would it make a difference? Would it be easier on you?”

Ava went quiet as she pondered that. “Anyone else would be an improvement over Cali.”

I knew I should bite my tongue and let her cast her barbs about Cali if it was how she felt, but I couldn’t do it.

“You take any opportunity you can to insult Cali. Leave her out of it for once.”

Ava’s eyes flashed before she let out a bitter laugh. “I’ll leave her out of it if you do. But you and I both know you’re incapable of that. No matter what we do, that tramp’s name always comes up.”

“Stop it *now*,” I snarled.

“Oh, that’s right. I better not speak ill of your precious Cali. You know, Xavier, I’ve always wondered, do you stick up for me with such passion when Cali says negative things about me? Or do you make an exception, since Cali can do no wrong?”

“Cali doesn’t go around bad-mouthing you like you do her. That’s one of the many differences between you two.”

Ava’s smile was ice cold. “Sure. Or maybe she keeps it inside. No matter how much you try to make it like she’s so innocent, just know that there’s no love lost between us—on either side.”

My anger had started to dwindle—it wasn’t like this ire Ava felt for Cali was new, so there was no use getting worked up, but I was still frustrated.

“Is that a surprise, though?” I countered. “You’re both my mates. There’s bound to be some jealousy. Cali is only human, after all.”

Another sly smile from Ava. “That’s the first honest thing you’ve said all day.” She stepped close. “You should remember that I’m not human. I’m a werewolf, just like you.”

She held up the vessel between us.

“Do you really think that getting your wolf back is going to change a thing? There’s a reason she left you for Greyson, you know.”

My anger flared up again, and it was burning hot. “You’ve got that all wrong, Ava. Adéluce forced me to leave Cali.”

Hurt flashed in Ava’s yes. “As if I can ever forget. You don’t miss an opportunity to throw that in my face, do you? A little reminder that the only reason we’re even together is because of Adéluce.”

“Stop it, Ava, that’s not what I—”

“Watch it. If you’re not careful, you’ll lose not one, but two mates.”

I was stunned into momentary silence. That was exactly what I’d heard when I had the hallucination at the miniature golf course. And then she melted in my arms.

I’d written it off as a symptom of the substances and energy of Burning Man, but maybe there was more to it…

I snapped out of it. “Don’t make threats.”

“It’s not a threat, Xavier. If you think I’m going to be your doormat forever, you’re wrong. Maybe I’m too available. Too forgiving. Maybe you need a little reminder of what you’ll be missing if I’m not around anymore.”

“Give me a break, Ava! You’re not a doormat, and you know it,” I snapped. “And in the same way you think I’m using you, I’m not going to let you continue lording me over Cali like your prized possession!”

Ava was about to say something, but then she turned away and started toward the Samara house only to whirl back around and face me with angry eyes. She held up the vessel.

“Wouldn’t it be a shame, Xavier, if I dropped this?”

**Episode 5524**

I hadn’t expected Greyson’s kiss, but it felt so damn good that I wondered if I were hallucinating again. But no, this was real, the feel of Greyson’s solid body against mine, his smell, the way his breath tickled my face as the kiss grew more intense—it was better than any dream, any hallucination could be.

I pressed my body against his and gave myself over to him completely.

How had he known that this was just what I needed? We were in a strange place that hadn’t been all that kind to us and in the middle of chasing down Xavier’s wolf. On top of that, we were possibly being followed, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t stop and enjoy each other—even if it was only for a few seconds.

I was just starting to get absorbed in the emotion of the kiss when Greyson pulled back. I gasped, still reeling from the sudden contact. I leaned toward him, wanting more before I opened my eyes and asked, “What was that for?”

And then I saw the answer in his eyes. He wasn’t looking at me anymore, but at something behind me. He didn’t look afraid—he rarely did—but I knew when Greyson was on high alert, and he was right now.

I glanced back, my heart still racing, and spotted what he was fixed on—a shadow at the edge of the street. He was worried that someone was tailing us.

I wasn’t going to dwell on my disappointment at knowing the truth of what had sparked the kiss. As good as it had been, it was meant to keep me safe, to give him a chance to determine if the shadow posed a threat without alerting whoever it was—if it was anyone at all—that he was on to them.

At the thought of fresh danger, I felt my magic building, and Greyson gripped my hand tighter in warning. He was hoping that his firm touch would prevent me from summoning my sword or shooting a well-aimed blast bright enough to light up the street.

I knew my powers should only be used as a last resort—I’d been using my magic long enough to understand when to take the risk and when not to. Any non-paranormal would be shocked, ask questions, or alert the authorities if they saw me use it, and then we would be in more danger than ever before.

But what was the point of having magic abilities at all if I couldn’t use them when I really needed to?

I wasn’t about to let a bunch of mean, asshole werewolves push us around. I was more than willing to show them that they might have had sharp teeth, speed, and brawn, but none of that mattered against a well-timed magic blast.

The shadow began to shift, and both Greyson and I tensed. My magic was hovering right at the edge, crackling and ready to burst free at a moment’s notice.

I wasn’t going to let anyone hurt us, and with Greyson by my side, I was confident that we would be able to take anyone who tried to hurt us.

But then the shadow stretched until its source appeared—an elderly woman walking a tiny dog.

Greyson sighed in relief and then chuckled. I couldn’t help but join him.

“Wow. We’ve been through so much lately that we’re afraid of old ladies and small dogs? What’s London doing to us?”

“Nothing good, obviously,” I replied.

I hugged him, and we held each other in silence for a moment before a sharp chill sped down my back, making me shudder.

Greyson pulled away to look at me. “What is it, Cali? Is something wrong?”

“I can’t say… I just felt something…cold.” And then I asked, “It’s gone, isn’t it?”

Greyson looked in the direction the wolf had been and nodded. “Yes, Xavier’s wolf is gone. But you already knew that. Did you see him?”

“No, I can’t see him—like I said, I can feel him. It was like a warmth, or a vibration, and when that feeling left a cold one replaced it. It almost felt like someone walking over my grave…or like I just lost a piece of myself.”

“I don’t like to hear you talk like that,” Greyson said. “In fact, I just wish you hadn’t said that at all.”

“I didn’t say it to make you feel bad.”

A half smile appeared on Greyson’s lips. “I know. You were just speaking the truth, as dark as it is. But don’t feel bad. It makes sense that you have a strong connection to Xavier’s wolf. You always have.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a little concerned. There’s something different—almost like my connection to Xavier’s wolf is more intense than it’s ever been.”

“And you’ve never felt it this strongly before?” Greyson asked.

I shook my head. “Not that I can remember.”

What I didn’t know was whether this new, more intense feeling was a good thing or a bad thing. Was it a sign that something was wrong?

Could the physical distance between me and Xavier be causing the *due destini* to act up?

I followed Greyson’s lead back to the hotel. I was happy to be off the streets, even though I knew that being in the hotel didn’t necessarily mean we were any safer.

“I’m disappointed that we lost Xavier’s wolf,” he said as we walked into our room. “And London’s a big city. It’s an easy place to hide and not be found.”

I didn’t want Greyson to be too hard on himself. “Don’t worry, Greyson. We found Xavier’s wolf before; we’ll find it again.”

Greyson smiled and lifted my chin. “I love how positive you always are. You always turn my mood around. It’s like you have a knack for it.”

I blushed. “Thanks. And I’m sorry this isn’t the Valentine’s Day trip we hoped it would be.”

Greyson shrugged. “Maybe not, but I have a feeling we have a lot more Valentine’s Days ahead of us—a lifetime of them.”

Greyson picked me up and carried me to the bed, planting kisses along my neck as he laid me down gently.

“I’m sorry that I’m empty-handed, Cali. No roses, no chocolates.”

I reached up and wrapped my arms around his neck, planted a kiss on his lips that Greyson leaned into.

“You know I don’t need any of those things, Greyson. You’re all I need.”

“Oh, is that right? But what if I do have one gift to give? Should I…keep it to myself?”

I smiled at him. “No. And what kind of gift?”

Greyson answered by unbuttoning my pants and sliding them down my legs, tossing them to the floor.

“The best kind.”

He crawled on top of me and kissed me again, his tongue gliding into my mouth slow but firm. He maneuvered his large, heavy body between my legs and then began edging down.

“It’s time for me to do something I’ve never done,” he said. He pulled my panties off and threw them on the floor next to my pants.

“Really? And what’s that?”

“Taste you in London.”

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the sensation of Greyson’s mouth on my sex, hot and urgent, his tongue slick and slow, his lips planting kisses along my thighs before he returned to my center and swirled his tongue inside me.

I gripped the comforter and then his shoulders and then his hair as waves of electric pleasure washed through me. I spread my legs wider, urging him on, and he took the invitation to heart. He gripped my thighs, holding me in place, before they started to wander to my belly, to my breasts.

“Greyson, I—” My words were cut short by the sudden, strong rush of my orgasm. I arched off the bed and then fell back onto the pillow, my head buzzing with pleasure that was quickly tempered by exhaustion.

Jet lag hit me like a ton of bricks, and I was asleep within seconds. But it wasn’t a peaceful sleep. From the moment my eyes closed, strange dreams lit up my mind.

I found myself walking down an abandoned street toward a park. It was kind of hard to see through London’s thick fog, but I kept walking, hoping to break through the fog and see what was on the other side of it.

The more I walked, the farther the park seemed to get. I stared into the thick grey mist and realized that there was something familiar about it. I didn’t know how I recognized anything in it since I’d never been to London before, but the feeling persisted.

I stopped short when I saw movement in the fog. I was afraid for a moment but then I kept walking. Something was coming right at me.

I bolted up with a start, my eyes open and my mind slowly registering that I wasn’t in that park anymore but awake in the hotel room with Greyson.

“What’s wrong?” Greyson asked me.

“I think I know where to find Xavier’s wolf!”

**Episode 5525**

**Ava**

I was back at the Samara pack house in my bedroom, pissed off.

Once again, I was forced to face the fact that Xavier had only broken up with Cali under duress. That if not for Adéluce, we would never have reconciled.

I was delusional to think that I ever had anything to do with it—that Xavier had left Cali because he wanted to be with me.

It made me question everything.

It wasn’t that I doubted Xavier’s love for me, because I didn’t. I could feel it, could picture the pain I’d seen on his face even now when I threatened to leave him. But my pain was so great it got hard to breathe sometimes—and I knew my pain was greater than his.

The thought that he would still be with Cali if not for Adéluce hurt more than I would ever be able to describe to him. But none of it was a surprise to me. I’d seen the way Xavier looked at Cali too many times to ignore it.

I wasn’t a fool. But I’d been in denial. I knew that now.

Maybe I just didn’t want to acknowledge that another woman had such a powerful sway over Xavier—or that someone other than me had that power.

*I don’t get it. Why does she have so much power over him? Why can’t he just choose me and only me for once?*

I had no idea what to do anymore. Should I finally leave him behind so that he could go to Cali? That was what he really wanted, wasn’t it? Or should I stick around and let things continue down this path, Xavier splitting his time, affection, and love between us both?

As if losing Xavier was even an option for me.

I’d spent so much time pining for him, trying to be whatever he wanted and do whatever necessary to get him back, but now that I had him it wasn’t in the way I wanted, because I didn’t have all of him. I didn’t even have most of him.

A larger part of his heart belonged to Cali. I knew that. I just didn’t want to admit it to myself. And that was the question I couldn’t ask him, wouldn’t ask him.

Did he love Cali more than he could ever love me?

I wanted to believe that if I ever asked him that question, he wouldn’t give the answer I dreaded. I wanted to trust that I knew him as well as I thought I did.

Xavier was stubborn, and if I kept pushing him, he was going to break things off—even if he suffered because of it.

But the thought of continuing this way and sharing him with Cali forever put a sour taste in my mouth. I’d rather go back to the spirit world and take my chances there.

But the truth of it was that losing Xavier would be so much worse than all that. I would fight through the spirit world again and again if it meant I would make my way back to Xavier’s arms.

And yet the thought of him in another woman’s bed—in Cali’s bed—was too much for me to handle.

*Fuck! I don’t know what to do.*

I heard Xavier downstairs talking with the other Samaras. Part of me wanted to lock him out of our room so that I wouldn’t have to see his face tonight, but a bigger part of me wanted no such thing.

What I really wanted was for him to come to me and tell me that it was all a mistake and that he loved me and only me. That he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me alone.

I knew I wasn’t going to get that, at least not yet. But I’d made it this far with Xavier and I wasn’t ready to give up yet, even though I felt like I was reaching the end of my rope.

Even if it hurt now, and god did it hurt, I was bound to get my reward sooner or later. I would have Xavier to myself someday. I had to believe that if I was going to be able to function.

And besides, I wasn’t a quitter. Never had been, never would be.

The door opened, and Xavier stood in the doorway. He gestured to the vessel where it sat safe and sound on the dresser.

“Glad you didn’t do what you threatened to do.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Believe me, I was tempted. But I want you to have your wolf back. I want you to be complete again. I’m waiting for you to be the mate I fell in love with—wolf intact and all.”

Xavier stepped all the way in and closed the door behind him. “Am I really that different without my wolf?” he asked.

I studied him while I considered his question. “You know, your wolf is a lot cuter.”

Xavier looked puzzled. “Cuter?”

“Than your brother’s wolf, I mean.”

Xavier grinned. “I didn’t think you’d noticed.”

I met his gaze head-on. “I notice everything about you, Xavier. I thought you knew that by now.”

He took a step toward me. “About what I said earlier—”

“Save it,” I said gruffly. “We both know where we stand. Let’s leave it at that for now. We need to focus on getting your wolf back first.”

Xavier’s grin widened as he crossed the small space between us and pulled me into his arms. “I like that we can agree on some things…once every blue moon.”

Despite how strongly I yearned for him, I pulled away. I had to stay focused.

“Do you think you should get in touch with Greyson and let him know that you have his wolf? And I assume he’s got yours, too?”

“Only one way to find out,” Xavier said, pulling out his phone.

He called his brother on speaker, and I noticed the exhaustion in Greyson’s voice when he answered.

“Hey, just calling to let you know that we’ve secured your wolf in Big Mac’s vessel,” Xavier said.

We both heard Greyson relay the good news to Cali, and I watched a range of emotions pass across Xavier’s face at the sound of Cali’s voice in the background.

I knew Xavier well enough to suspect that he wished he could talk to Cali directly, that he would have rather called Cali to relay the news to her.

At least I could appreciate that he’d avoided doing that for my sake.

“So, what about my wolf?” Xavier asked. “Have you caught it yet?”

There was a long pause, and I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I could tell that Xavier was thinking the same thing I was.

He glanced at me, and his voice was stern when he spoke again. “Don’t leave me in suspense, brother. I did my part, and now it’s time to find out if you did yours. Did you get my wolf back?”

“We tracked it down but lost it after we were attacked by a hostile pack of wolves.”

Xavier cursed, but his expression softened when Cali’s voice came in clear over the line, as if she’d taken the phone from Greyson.

“Xavier, it’s me. I know where you wolf is…at least I think I do. We’re going to try to get it back now.”

I couldn’t help but watch Xavier’s expression as he spoke to her. His entire demeanor had changed from when he was speaking to Greyson. He looked serene, happy, pleased to know that she was as concerned about his wolf as he was.

It hurt to see the obvious proof of how much he cared for her, especially after the conversation we’d had today, but there was nothing I could do about it.

If I truly planned to be with Xavier for the long haul, I was going to have to accept that moments like this were bound to happen.

Feeling invisible when Cali was in the room…or even on the phone.

“Good,” Xavier said, his voice soft. “And thank you for helping me with this.”

“Xavier, don’t thank me. You know how much I care about you, and I know how important this is. I’ll do anything to make you whole again.”

I was gritting my teeth, not only because this was yet another reminder of the connection that Xavier and Cali shared, but because Cali was lying in bed with one brother while expressing her affection for another.

Just another example of Cali having her cake and eating it too.

After Xavier ended the call, we stood there in silence. I was processing the conversation I’d just witnessed while worrying that if we left this up to Cali and Greyson, Xavier might never get his wolf back.

From the sound of it, Greyson and Cali had been in bed asleep…or just in bed. Xavier didn’t think Cali could do any wrong, but in my opinion, she wasn’t doing whatever it took to “make Xavier whole” as she’d put it.

“I’m sure that they’ll find it eventually, but I don’t know how much longer I can go without it,” Xavier said.

He was trying to be strong, and I appreciated that, but I had other ideas.

“You know what we have to do, don’t you?”

Xavier arched an eyebrow at me. “What?”

“We have to go to London.”

**Episode 5526**

**Greyson**

I woke up with no recollection of when I’d fallen asleep, which was disorienting to say the least. What I did remember was spending the latter hours of the night doing whatever I could to stop Cali from running off in search of Xavier’s wolf because of the dream she’d had.

It had been a close call, and for a second I’d contemplated staying up just to make sure she didn’t sneak out and try to do it alone.

The call from Xavier had lit a fire under her, and she’d wanted to rush right out just because she felt some sort of obligation to him to get his runaway wolf. I totally understood why she was so hell-bent on fixing this for Xavier, but there was no way in hell I was going to dash out into the night on another hunt that could very well end up just as unsuccessful as the first one.

In the end, her exhaustion had been the deciding factor. She could barely keep her eyes open and had fallen asleep before me. I knew better than anyone that trying to do important things while exhausted was the perfect way to make a mistake.

And after our dust-up in the tavern, we couldn’t make any more mistakes. We needed to be as careful as possible and try not to make any more waves for the rest of our trip.

But I knew that might be easier said than done.

I still felt a sting of regret for putting Cali in danger like that. If I could have found a way to stop Xavier’s wolf from running off like that, London could have been the romantic escape we both so desperately needed.

I rolled over and reached for Cali, but she wasn’t there. I shot up and looked around, a sense of dread taking hold.

*Did something happen to her? Did she run out anyway while I was asleep?*

I was just about to slip into full panic mode when the bathroom door swung open, and Cali came rushing out, phone in hand, her face glowing with excitement.

“You’ll never believe it! I found it!” She jumped up and down a few times, did a cute little spin. “I can’t believe it, I really found it! The place from my dream! It’s a real place, Greyson.”

I had to tear my eyes away from her naked body, fighting off the craving for her that consumed me in seconds—but it was quickly tempered by my own growing excitement. Her enthusiasm was infectious.

“I didn’t want to wake you while I searched for that park I saw in my dream—but I knew he was there. I couldn’t sleep because I just knew Xavier’s wolf was there, and I want to track him down before I lose him somehow, but then I got an idea.”

She turned her phone around so that I could see the screen. It was a picture of Hyde Park.

She smirked. “Technology is amazing, isn’t it?”

I smirked. “It can be. So, Hyde Park, huh? Why would Xavier’s wolf be hanging around in one of the most popular tourist attractions in London?”

As far as I knew, my brother wasn’t the type to see the sights when he traveled, but maybe his wolf was?

Cali shook her head. “No idea, but I do know that I saw his wolf there in my dream. And since I’ve never been to Hyde Park in my life, well, that must mean something, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but haven’t you seen the park somewhere before? On TV or online, in the movies? It’s pretty famous, Cali. There’s any number of reasons that you saw the place in your dreams.”

She wasn’t listening.

“Greyson, why aren’t you getting dressed?? We have to get over there and grab his wolf before it takes off again.”

“Can I just stop you for one second?”

Cali groaned. “Why? I did what you asked and stayed in last night, but now it’s time to get back on the hunt! Why are you stalling?”

“Because I think I have to temper your expectations a bit, Cali. You had a dream. It may not mean anything. People have dreams all the time, and yes, lots of times, we apply meaning to them when they mean absolutely nothing.”

Her hands flew to her hips in defiance. “Then does that mean that we shouldn’t at least try? If nothing else, I’ll get a chance to see the famous Hyde Park. It’s a win-win!”

I pulled her into my arms, relishing the warmth of her skin against mine. I kissed her neck. “I don’t know… I guess I was hoping to stay in bed just a little while longer? You know how much I wanted this trip to have at least a few romantic moments, so it doesn’t feel like a complete wash.”

I kissed the soft spot under Cali’s jaw, and her breath hitched. I was hoping she was going to give in and join me in the comfort of our bed, but then she was placing her palms flat against my chest and pushing me away.

“We can celebrate afterward, okay?” She gave me a quick peck on the lips and looked me in the eye. “I’ll make it worth your while…*later*.”

Then she dashed over to her suitcase and began getting dressed.

Begrudgingly, I did the same. It was clear that any hope of luring her back to bed was long gone. I was just going to have to give myself over to what I predicted was going to be nothing more than a wild goose chase. But I wasn’t going to tell Cali that.

We made our way down to the lobby to grab tea and a snack. I wasn’t exactly sulking—I knew that finding my brother’s wolf was important—but I couldn’t stop longing for Cali.

I just wanted to feel her skin against mine under the covers. Staying in bed all day seemed like a much better plan, in my opinion. I wanted to make love way more than I wanted to venture out into the unpredictable streets and parks of London searching for my brother’s wolf, which obviously did not want to make things easy for us.

As we made our way outside, Cali started beaming. “Look! It’s all foggy, just like in my dream.”

“I hate to break it to you, Cali, but it’s almost always foggy in London, at least in the morning.”

She gave me a playful smack on the arm. “Quit being a negative Nelly.”

I frowned at her. “Negative Nelly? Please never call me that again.”

“But it’s *true*! We have a chance to track down Xavier’s wolf, and you’re dragging your feet because you don’t believe it’s possible to see something in a dream.”

“I didn’t say it’s not possible, I said that I don’t think it’s likely in *this* case.” I sighed. “But it’s not like it matters—you know I’ll gladly follow you anywhere.”

“I know,” she said. She leaned over to kiss me on the cheek as we continued walking. I wanted to relax, but being that we were once again out on the mean streets of London, I couldn’t help but look around out of caution.

“I’m a little frustrated that we’re stuck running down Xavier’s wolf when we could be enjoying all the sights. It seems like such a waste,” I said as we passed a cute little café.

Cali shrugged. “I don’t mind this so much. It adds a sense of danger and excitement! Who wants to stand around looking at statues and stuff, when we can learn our way through the city by tracking down something important?”

“I guess I don’t need all the excitement since I’m here with you,” I said.

“That’s sweet, Greyson, but when have we ever successfully avoided excitement?”

I laughed. “You’ve got a point there.”

We were only a few blocks from the park when I finally started to loosen up. Maybe we’d left all the drama and craziness behind for today. It would be wonderful if we could get to Hyde Park, grab Xavier’s wolf, and then maybe salvage what was left of our stay in London.

I happened to glance over my shoulder and noticed someone familiar walking behind us—the old lady dog walker from the day before.

“Cali, it’s that woman again. The one with the dog. Why is she following us?”

Cali took a quick peak and frowned. “Is that really her?”

“Definitely. I’d remember that cute little dog anywhere.” I stopped. “I’m going to go see what gives.”

I marched up the dog walker, who quickly shifted all her attention to her dog, cooing at it almost aggressively.

“Hi, excuse me, ma’am? Why are you following us?”

A second later, a trio of people in suits joined us. I recognized one of them as the MI9 agent from before.

“Wait, what’s going on here?” I asked.

The agent’s expression was grim. “We’ve been following you because there was a deadly werewolf attack. Care to tell us where you were last night?”

**Episode 5527**

**Xavier**

Ava and I were seated in first class seats on our way to London. Everyone around us had already dozed off, and the plane was quiet, the lights dim.

I was seated in a spacious pod with my feet stretched out in front of me, as comfortable as could be. But I doubted I would be getting any sleep, even though we still had hours to go before we landed.

I couldn’t stop thinking about how Greyson had just let my wolf get away. If I’d done the same thing to Greyson’s wolf, he’d be all over me.

“I can’t believe Greyson can’t do one simple thing—catch my wolf.”

Ava gave me a look. “You aren’t really surprised, are you? He’s in London alone with Cali. He’s beyond distracted.”

I tightened my jaw in annoyance for a second before realizing that Ava wasn’t trying to be combative; she was just stating a simple fact.

My eyes drifted up to the overhead compartment where my bag holding the vessel was safely stowed. I was relieved that they hadn’t hassled me at security when they saw the strange item. There was no way in hell I was going to check it, and I’d been prepared to make a scene.

Ava was busy scrolling through the movie selection on the screen mounted to the seat back in front of her. She suddenly slammed back in her seat and sighed. “A million movies on here, and there’s absolutely nothing I want to watch—which is going to make this long flight feel even longer.”

I pointed to a thumbnail of a sitcom she’d mentioned before.

“What about that one? Weren’t you talking about it the other day?”

“Yes, but they only have a random sample of episodes. I can’t start it in the middle of the season. Why do they do that?”

I shrugged. “Who knows? You could read or something.”

Ava turned to face me. In the dim lighting of the cabin, her eyes seemed to sparkle. I had to admit that despite our fight—or disagreement—I was still so drawn to her.

It had always been like that with Ava. We fought all the time, and in the heat of things I would think about how easy it would be to just say *fuck it* and leave her behind.

But I never did.

The truth was, it wouldn’t be as easy as I thought to leave Ava behind. My feelings for Cali were strong, but I cared for Ava more than I even realized.

It helped that she was unbelievably gorgeous. It was difficult not to notice even when she was mad at me, especially when in this instance, she had reason to be.

And wasn’t this exactly what Adéluce had wanted? To destroy my relationships with both Ava and Cali? She was dead now, thank god, but she’d still accomplished some of what she’d set out to do.

Even in death, the vampire-witch was still torturing me.

Ava’s voice startled me. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I gently stroked her cheek, surprised that she allowed it and didn’t bat me away. “Just thinking, I guess.”

“About what?”

“About how sorry I am about earlier.” I moved in to kiss her on the cheek, but she grabbed my face and directed the kiss to her lips.

That surprised me, too, but dammit, it was a good surprise.

Maybe this little impromptu trip to London, despite the fucked-up reason for it, would somehow help smooth things over between us. I could only hope so. No matter how well it went, it wouldn’t change my feelings for Cali—nothing could do that—but it might bring Ava and me some much-needed clarity.

I palmed the back of her head and let my fingers run through her silky hair. All concern about others seeing us went out the window. This was just for us. And didn’t we deserve to share a little private moment?

Ava wrapped one arm around my neck while her other hand took a discreet journey all over my body. Her breath was hot in my mouth, on my lips, a reminder of how different it was kissing a werewolf versus kissing a human. The heat was unmatched.

She pulled away, took a furtive glance around, and then crawled into my pod. She drew the blanket over us, and I put all uncertainty on the back burner as Ava pressed her lips against mine once again.

This felt good. Better than good. Her warmth and smell and the weight of her felt right, her hair forming a curtain around us so that even though it was so far from the truth, it felt like we were the only two people in the world.

Ava lifted her hips while I made quick work of my zipper and, with some difficulty considering how hard I was, maneuvered myself out of my pants.

“This never gets old,” Ava said, smiling as she looked me in the eyes. She wrapped a hand tightly around my shaft and squeezed and pressed her lips to mine at the same time, muffling my groan of pleasure.

She pulled away and glanced down the aisle, and then back at me. “You’re going to have to keep it down.”

But it was torture. She was slowly moving her hand up and down my cock, and I was trying hard to hold back from coming too soon. I didn’t know what it was—the altitude, the danger of doing this right out in the open, or simply Ava herself that had me so turned on, so close to coming already.

Ava turned around so that her back was to me, and I helped her slide her leggings and panties down over her hips—and then she wasted no time lifting up and sliding me inside her.

I laid my head back on the seat as she brought her hips down flush against my lap so that I was completely sheathed in her hot warmth.

I bit my lips to hold back any sounds as she began pivoting her hips, rocking backward and forward, one hand between her legs rubbing her clit and the base of my shaft at the same time.

It was wonderful. It was hot and wet and naughty. I hazarded a glance around and was pleased to see that everyone was still asleep, that we weren’t drawing any attention to ourselves.

Ava grabbed my hands and placed them on her breasts, and under the cover of the blanket I crushed them together, pulled her back so that she was lying against me. I pivoted my hips up to meet her, and soon we were coming, Ava with a slight head start.

We went still as our mutual climax rocked us, our breathing coming in unison, too, a series of short, hard bursts.

When we were both spent, Ava went slack against me. I closed my eyes, pleased that we’d just taken a solid step forward in mending our little rift.

The next thing I knew, the sound of the flight attendant’s voice was waking me up.

“Ma’am, can you return to your seat, please? We’re beginning our descent,” she said to Ava.

“Yes, of course,” Ava said groggily.

She waited until the flight attendant moved off since I was still inside her. She lifted up, waiting for me to button my pants, and then plopped down in her seat, blanket and all.

The smile on her lips said it all. “You sure know how to kill time on a flight.”

“Always wanted to cement my membership in the mile-high club,” I remarked as we both caught the flight attendant’s eye. It was obvious that we hadn’t managed to trick at least one person on this flight.

I couldn’t help but laugh, and then Ava was laughing, too. The flight attendant rolled her eyes and moved on.

“She needs a sense of humor,” Ava whispered.

“Ah, don’t worry about her. Probably just jealous.”

Ava beamed at that. “If I were her, I’d be jealous that I got to ride you thirty thousand feet in the sky, too.”

I sat back in my seat, pleased that the tension between us was finally gone. It felt good to know that Ava was, at least, trying not to hold all the Cali stuff against me.

I knew better, though. I was aware that our issues with Cali would probably never be completely resolved—at least not as long as I could honestly consider them both my mates—but I was happy for peace for the time being.

Ava and I held hands while the plane hit the tarmac, and then as soon as we were parked at the gate, I got up to grab my bags and the vessel.

“I like flying with you,” I said, twining my fingers with Ava’s as we made our way over the jet bridge.

“I love flying with you too.”

We kissed as we queued into the customs line, and continued kissing as we waited, drawing plenty of stares.

“What do you think the flight attendant would think if she saw us now?” Ava asked after a particularly heated make-out session.

“Nothing—she’d probably just be happy that we’re not her problem anymore.”

We made it to the front of the line, and as we approached the desk, a pair of customs agents with stony expressions intercepted us.

One of them slapped a heavy hand on my shoulder. “You, sir, are coming with us.”

**Episode 5528**

The MI9 agent didn’t say a word on the ride over to a large, unmarked building a few miles from Hyde Park. I was nervous but trying not to show it. We hadn’t done anything wrong, and I was going to tell them that as soon as I could—but first, I had to find out why they’d picked us up in the first place.

“Where are you taking us? Why are we here?” I asked.

“An Alpha werewolf named Henson was found brutally murdered last night,” the MI9 agent explained as he led us to an interrogation room. “We’ve just opened an investigation and think speaking with you both is a wonderful place to start.”

Greyson and I shared a look. I couldn’t say that I felt bad about the news—the guy was a complete asshole. I supposed no one really deserved to die, but with that guy’s attitude, it was a surprise no one had offed him way before last night.

The MI9 agent motioned for us to sit and then took a seat across from us and threw down a folder. “So, now are you ready to tell me exactly where you were last night, Mr. Evers?”

“He was with me at the hotel,” I said quickly.

Greyson gave me a look. It was obvious that he preferred that I say as little as possible, but I wasn’t just going to sit here and let this agent ask questions that suggested Greyson’s guilt.

Greyson knew me well enough by now and should understand that I had to speak up, especially at a time like this. They were trying to accuse my mate of murder, and I wasn’t about to let that happen.

The younger MI9 of the two—who seemed to be playing the bad cop role—sat on the edge of the table and got right in Greyson’s face.

“What proof do you have of your whereabouts?”

Greyson looked up at him. “Do you have any proof of where *you* slept last night?”

The agent’s face turned beat red, and Greyson smiled.

“I didn’t think so.”

The other agent shot his younger, obviously less experienced partner an admonishing look before turning his attention back to Greyson.

“We’re just trying to determine what happened after you and Caliana left the bar. You may have been at the hotel last night, but we know you were at the club before that.”

It was hard to hide my shock. “Wait, you know about the club?”

“Yes, we know about the club,” the agent confirmed. “Or else we wouldn’t have mentioned it.”

“Annoying!” I huffed. “Why does every ‘crime fighting’ organization just sit back and watch while bad things happen?”

I thought about the werewolf council and how they never seemed to be there for us when we needed help but were always ready to punish us if they thought we’d done something wrong.

“If you were there, you had to have seen what happened to us while we were simply trying to mind our business. Why didn’t you intervene?”

“It’s not our job to be your bodyguard!” the younger agent sneered. He pointed to Greyson. “Anyway, this big bad wolf can handle himself, can’t he?” The agent was excited to get in a barb aimed at Greyson. “I’m sure he doesn’t need little old me watching his back.”

Greyson just chuckled, and I glared. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of a reaction he so clearly wanted.

“I don’t know why we’re here,” Greyson said. “When we left, Henson was very much alive.”

“But we have witnesses who say you both fought the victim.” The agent pulled out a notebook and began reading from it. “Says here you knocked him out with a stool, among other things. Turned into quite the brawl. Any comment on that?”

“And did your witnesses tell you why we were fighting with him in the first place?” I snapped. “Your so-called victim had me handcuffed and threatened me multiple times!”

Greyson placed a soothing hand on my arm. “Calm down, Cali. Don’t let these hacks get you worked up. We know we’re innocent,” he said pointedly.

He turned his gaze on the younger agent again. “Anyway, she’s right. Henson forced me into a fight. We did nothing wrong, and I stand by that. So, if you’re going to arrest me, do it. If not, release us. We’re here visiting and have a lot of sights left to see.”

The agents shared a look, and then they both stood and headed for the door.

“We’ll be back,” said the older agent.

“This isn’t fair!” I said. “How can they just pick us up like this and question us? Don’t they need a warrant or something?”

I was the first to admit I wasn’t well-versed in the British legal system, but this didn’t seem aboveboard.

Greyson shrugged and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “I’m not worried. They’re going to have to release us since we both know we didn’t do anything. They can’t possibly have any proof that says otherwise. So what? Some people saw us get into a bar fight. That doesn’t mean we *killed* the guy.”

I wasn’t as convinced, but I tried to tap into Greyson’s confidence. “I hope they let us out of here soon. Every minute we spend here is another minute we’re not out looking for Xavier’s wolf.”

“Don’t worry,” Greyson said calmly. “We’ll find my brother’s wolf. And believe me, I’m motivated. I’ll never hear the end of it if we don’t.”

The door opened, and the two agents came walking back in. I noted that the younger agent’s face was redder than ever before.

The older agent gestured to the door. “You’re free to go.”

I sighed in relief. But as Greyson and I stood up to leave, he added, “But you two are barred from leaving the country until this matter is resolved.”

“What? Why?” I huffed.

“Because Greyson Evers is still a prime suspect. Your explanation is fine, but it only confirms motive. You were in an intense altercation with the deceased only hours before he ended up dead. You’re persons of interest. Plain and simple.”

I was still fuming as we left the building. “I can’t believe they’re treating us this way! It’s like they think you’re responsible just because you defended us!”

“Don’t worry,” Greyson said easily. “We have plenty of stuff to keep us busy in the meantime, and hopefully, by the time we get Xavier’s wolf, the police will have caught Henson’s killer.”

“I hope you’re right. I don’t know much about London prisons, but I can imagine they’re not very pleasant.”

“You’re probably right,” Greyson said. He took my hand in his and squeezed it. “But luckily for us, we’ll never find out.”

I was glad the fog had lifted as we made our way back to the park. I slowed a bit just before we entered the gates, suddenly aware of that same strange feeling I’d gotten before when we were close to Xavier’s wolf.

“It’s here, I can feel it.”

Greyson stopped and looked around. “I can’t see it, but I can pick up its scent.” He smirked. “Guess you were right. He’s here.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We still haven’t got eyes on it,” I said.

Greyson led me deeper into the park, and it didn’t take long for us to realize we were being followed again.

Greyson looked over his shoulder and frowned. “Of course we’re being followed. It wouldn’t be a day in London if we weren’t being harassed in some way or another.”

“Who do you think it is?” I whispered.

“Probably those MI9 agents hoping that we’ll lead them to some irrefutable proof of our guilt.”

I smiled. “Well, too bad, because they’re going to be very disappointed. They’re wasting their time on you when they could be out chasing the real bad guy.”

“Their mistake,” Greyson said distractedly, his eyes scanning the park.

“What if he led them on a wild good chase just for fun?” I laughed. “Wouldn’t that be hilarious?”

Greyson laughed too. “Not a bad idea, actually. Maybe it’ll teach them a lesson about being more discerning when naming suspects.”

We both took off running, zigzagging down paths and chasing each other around fountains and ancient structures.

I was about to hide behind a tree and engage Greyson in a little impromptu hide-and-seek when I felt that strange twinge again.

I turned around and stared in the direction that the feeling was urging me to look—and there it was, Xavier’s wolf. “Greyson, it’s right there!”

Greyson narrowed his eyes and then widened them in surprise. “Xavier’s wolf is there. You felt it again?”

“Yes, and I kind of…saw it? Like a twinkle in the air or a disruption. I can’t quite explain it.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a text from Xavier.

*Where are you?*

I was confused as I texted back.

*What do you mean where am I? I’m in London, you know that.*

*So am I*,Xavier texted back. *I’m being detained at Heathrow.*

**Episode 5529**

I gasped, prompting Greyson to look at me with concern. I showed him the text.

“Shit. Really? We don’t need this right now—and what’s Xavier doing here, anyway? He has to be in big trouble if he’s detained. What did he do?”

“I have no idea!”

I went quiet, my worry for Xavier taking over. Why would airport security detain him? Had he brought contraband or something? That didn’t sound like Xavier. Maybe it was routine, and he’d been randomly picked for a more extensive search?

*Are you okay?* I texted him. *Should we come get you?*

I had no idea how airport detention worked. If the authorities wanted to question him, would we even be *able* to go and get him?

*It’s just a misunderstanding. They’ll let me go soon once they realize they’ve fucked up.*

*Good. I was starting to worry*.

*Don’t worry. At least not yet. And let Greyson know I’ve got his wolf with me. Where should we meet?*

I sent him the hotel’s address, hoping that Xavier would get out of whatever mess he was in and meet us soon.

Despite my surprise at him being here, I was excited to see him. I snuck a glance at Greyson. He obviously wasn’t happy about it; I could see that fact written across his face.

“I don’t get it. What the hell is my brother doing here? We didn’t tell him to come here last night, did we? We certainly didn’t tell him we needed his help.”

“Not sure, but I imagine that being without his wolf without any idea of how or when we were going to get it back worried him. Maybe he thought he could help? And also, he brought your wolf,” I said. “That’s a good thing, right?”

Greyson looked even more troubled now.

“I don’t know if that’s the best move since we were told to keep our distance from each other in order to get our wolves back. I hope Xavier’s not making it worse by rushing here for no reason.”

Greyson was angry but trying not to show it. I didn’t know if he thought Xavier was overstepping, or if there was something else at play here.

“I don’t know, maybe it’ll be okay since now we know where both wolves are,” I said. “Just looking on the bright side, I guess. And aren’t you excited to be reunited with your wolf?”

Greyson didn’t look convinced. “Yes, of course, but I hope you’re right. It’s been hard enough getting this shit figured out without Xavier complicating things. And I still don’t understand why he has to interfere. We have it under control.”

Greyson would never have said it, but he’d been hoping to spend quality time alone with me here, and now that Xavier had arrived, that plan probably seemed even less likely. I wanted to spend quality time with Greyson, too, but I also understood Xavier’s urgency.

“We’ll just have to do whatever we can to coax Xavier’s wolf back while we have the chance. And then, maybe we can reunite each of you with your proper wolf.”

“Almost sounds too good to be true, that we could be close to ending this nightmare,” Greyson grumbled. “I’m annoyed, as you can probably tell, but I am excited to see my wolf again. I feel strangely empty without it.”

We both looked behind us where Xavier’s wolf still lingered, watching us from behind a cluster of bushes.

“And look who else is watching us,” Greyson said, gesturing toward the MI9 agents who were doing a very bad job of trying to disguise themselves as they watched from afar. “Let’s get Xavier’s wolf and get the hell out of here before those bozos mess it up.”

He started toward the wolf, but I grabbed his arm to stop him.

“No, let me try.”

“Why?”

“Just trust me.”

I didn’t want to say it outright, but if Xavier’s wolf was going to respond to or trust anyone, it wasn’t going to be Greyson. I didn’t know Xavier’s wolf without the man attached to it, but maybe I could find some common ground, a way to show it that I meant no harm.

*I know this is hard for Greyson. Anything I do involving my other mate is rough on him. But at least he’s understanding enough not to stand in my way and let me try.*

I could only hope that my position as Xavier’s mate would be enough.

I approached the wolf slowly, taking one cautious step after another. When I was close enough, I held out my hand.

It was strange. The closer I got to the wolf, the more of a pull I felt. And though I couldn’t fully see the wolf, I sensed its presence and could even see the strange disturbance in the air in front of me.

Suddenly, my entire body was responding like my closeness to the wolf had flipped a switch. It felt like I was buzzing. I wondered if Xavier could feel this too, or if his wolf could.

For now, I was just happy that he was staying put and not running off like he had before.

“Xavier…I know you’re confused, and scared…”

I didn’t know that, but it sounded like the right thing to say to a wild creature that didn’t trust us very much at the moment.

“But we have to get you back where you belong—inside of Xavier.”

Well, that was sort of a weird sentence.

But I kept going. I was following my senses and hoping that I wouldn’t miss my mark since it wasn’t like I could actually see the wolf itself. I could only hope that our connection was enough to guide me.

“I know what it was like before when Xavier lost you—it had to be so lonely for the both of you. So, let’s fix this. Let’s get you two back together.”

I paused when I noticed that quite a few people had stopped to stare at me. I must have looked mad, talking to a bush like it was a living thing. But this was too important for me to care.

To my surprise, the closer I came, the more the wolf began to take shape, the shimmering mist turning into an outline that looked more and more like Xavier’s wolf.

“If you trust me, if you want to go back to where you belong, then come to me!”

The wolf hesitated, but at least it wasn’t running away.

I tried again, edging even closer, softening my voice even more. I thought about how I’d soothed Xavier in the past, calmed him when his wolf had him riled up. I channeled that voice and that energy now.

“I love Xavier more than anything, and that means I love you too. He and I are mates, and that means the same is true for you and me. You can trust me. I only want to help you. And know that I will do everything in my power to protect you—now and forever.

I wondered if mind linking would work. This wasn’t Xavier himself but the essence of his wolf, and Xavier was too far away for me to mind link with him, but maybe…

*Can you hear me? We can speak this way because of our connection. Because I know you and care for you. Don’t worry, our troubles will be over soon.*

The wolf cocked its head to the side, or the outline of the wolf did, at the very least. And then it took a step toward me.

I froze, not wanting to ruin our progress or scare him away when he seemed to be responding. I dropped to my knees as it took another step, and then another, closing the distance between us.

The wolf came to a stop just a few feet away. My heart yearned for Xavier, and I could see my mate in the transparent shine of the wolf’s eyes.

It was working. He’d connected with me in the way I hoped he would, and I was so close to getting Xavier’s wolf back.

*Will you come with me?* I mind linked. *Xavier is waiting for you back at the hotel. I missed you, he missed you, and I love you so much.*

I wondered if telling Xavier’s wolf how much I cared about it was the same as saying it to Xavier. And I didn’t know if I cared; it was true, wasn’t it? I loved this wolf because I felt that way about Xavier, even if things were still so complicated between us.

Slowly, I rose to my feet again. The wolf didn’t back away, but it was following me with its eyes, its interest piqued. Keeping my eyes on the wolf, I returned to Greyson.

“Looks like you’ve got him in the palm of your hand,” Greyson remarked. “But what now?”

“He’s going to follow us, aren’t you?”

The wolf took another step toward me in response.

I hooked my arm through Greyson’s. “We did it. Now, it’s time to bring him home.”

**Episode 5530**

**Xavier**

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and left the bathroom stall, thankful that the customs agents hadn’t noticed it. Either they were awful at their jobs, or they had their eyes on something else.

I was hoping it was the former.

I stepped out into the hallway where the agent was waiting to escort me back to the interrogation room.

I was eager to get the hell out of here, but it didn’t seem like that about to happen just yet—and the look on the agent’s face wasn’t at all promising.

As soon as I was seated in the interrogation room, they gestured to the vessel on the table in front of me.

“What is this thing?” one of them asked.

One of the other agents leaned forward and tapped the vessel with the butt of his taser. “Is this some kind of…” He looked to the others for assistance, but they all shrugged. “Some kind of container?”

“Hey, don’t tap it like that,” I said.

They glared at me.

“It’s fragile.”

“We asked you what it is, not whether it’s breakable or not.” The agent speaking now was obviously the leader, tall and broad, with a cop’s demeanor. “Tell us what it is, and this whole thing might go a little easier for you.” He looked around. “Emphasis on *might*.”

All the agents laughed.

I paused, trying to figure out how I was going to play this. There was no way in hell I could tell them the truth. They’d probably commit me right here and now.

But I knew what Ava’s answer would be. “It’s a vessel that holds my dead uncle’s spirit,” I said. “So happy to be able to finally bring it to your fine country.”

The agents looked at each other, and the big one said, “Come again?”

“So…is it ashes?” asked another. “Souls are included in ashes, right?” He winced. “Or are ashes just the bloody bits and bone?”

“How the hell should I know?” answered another.

“Not ashes exactly. A spirit. An ether if you will.” I held back a smile. “Spirit ether is the best way to describe it.”

“And you expect us to believe that?” They all chuckled. “That you’re traveling with a container full of *spirit ether*?”

More laughter. These guys obviously loved their jobs and were having a great time.

“Guys, it’s nothing; he just brought his uncle’s spirit over! Can you believe that?” said another around a guffaw that didn’t match the humor of what he’d said.

They all laughed anyway, though.

I shrugged. “I expect you to believe the truth, yes. That’s the truth. My grand old uncle’s soul is in there. Who are you to deny that? Don’t you believe in the afterlife?”

A few of them went quiet and gave me thoughtful looks.

One of the agents pushed the vessel toward me. “Well then, I’m sure you’ll understand that we want to see this soul of yours. Sounds like it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity. Open it. Let’s get a look at your dear old uncle’s soul.”

“What? I just told you there’s a spirit in there. If I open it, it’ll escape,” I said angrily. “Don’t any of you understand how spirits work?”

“Um…no?”

The agents dissolved into more loud laughter.

I hated that I was being forced to play this stupid game. It reminded me way too much of the interactions I’d had with Carlson Greene and Swift.

“If you don’t open it, I don’t know how we’re supposed to believe you,” the big agent said. “I’m sure you can understand that we don’t get many soul jars coming through Heathrow. Open it up and think of it as educating us, so that those who come after you won’t experience this level of…scrutiny.”

“Exactly. You’re paving the way for others!”

“Soul jar, good one,” I remarked. “But again, can’t open it, I’m afraid.”

One of the other agents stepped close. “Either open it, or we’ll send you back to the States. Simple as that. We have the safety of the people of this country to protect. I’m sure you understand.”

For one brief moment, I was happy I didn’t have my wolf, because if I did, I would shift and rip all these asshats to pieces for giving me such a hard time about this.

I smiled at the thought.

“I’m not opening it. Sorry. My uncle’s soul means more to me than getting in trouble with you all. And I’ve worked too hard to keep my uncle’s spirit intact and out of the hands of evil to just up and hand it over to you.”

I shook my head and plastered a forlorn look on my face.

“He asked me one thing on his deathbed. One thing. And that was to bring his soul to London. I have to do it. It’s the only thing he wanted. Are you all really going to stop me from granting a dying man’s final wish?”

The big one rolled his eyes. “If you really expect us to believe this…”

Another agent stepped in. “If you won’t open it, I will.”

The guy reached for the vessel, and at the same time I lunged. If I allowed them to open the vessel, there was no guarantee that Greyson’s wolf wouldn’t bolt and then we’d be right back at square one.

“Stop!” I shouted as two agents grabbed me and held me back while the agent pried open the lid.

I felt a sudden gust of cold wind, and I was instantly overcome by dizziness. I slammed a fist on the table as I watched Greyson’s wolf leap out of the vessel, glance back at me as if to say “fuck you,” and disappear right through the wall.

“Now you’ve fucking done it!” I shouted.

“Look at him, he’s really acting as if something came out of there!” one of the agents said almost gleefully.

“You’re overplaying it a little, aren’t you mate?”

I glared as the agent who’d broken the vessel open peered inside. “Well, it’s empty,” he said.

“It is now, you bastards!” I snarled. “Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to—you know what? Fuck it. And fuck all of you.”

“Watch it,” the husky agent sneered. He reached down and snapped the lid back on. “Guess you can go now. And take your empty soul jar with you.”

I got up, working overtime to contain my anger. “You have no idea what you just did.”

The agents chuckled. “What we just did was welcome you to England. Enjoy your stay!”

They opened the door and gestured for me to leave. I stepped out, but I made sure to bump into the big one before I left. His hand flew to the club on his belt, but he didn’t pull it out.

“You’re lucky it’s time for lunch!” he shouted as I went back out to join Ava who was sitting in the waiting room.

“What took you so long? Is everything okay?” She got up and rushed over to me. “I was going to mind link to make sure you were good, but I didn’t want to distract you. I didn’t know if they were questioning you or…really *what* was going on.”

She eyed the vessel.

“So…no trouble?”

“A lot of trouble. And it ended up with those assholes opening the vessel and letting Greyson’s wolf out.”

Ava’s eyes went wide. “What? Are you serious?”

“Very.”

“Okay, so where did it go?”

“I don’t have the slightest clue. The thing couldn’t wait to leave. It took one look at me and bolted from the room like an escaped convict.”

“Oh no! This is awful.”

“I know. It could be anywhere. Could have even boarded a flight to Australia for all we know.”

Ava closed her eyes and frowned. “Okay, let me think. Um, maybe we search the airport first?”

“Yes, let’s do that, but I don’t want to waste too much time.”

“How could it be a waste of time? If we don’t find the wolf, this trip—and our plans for the wolf swap—are kind of ruined, aren’t they?”

“You have a point. I heard from Cali, and she and Greyson are waiting for us at their hotel.”

Ava gave a slow nod. “Oh, you *heard* from her.”

“Don’t start, Ava. We have more pressing things to worry about, don’t you think, than me talking to Cali?”

“Fine, whatever. What about your wolf? Did they mention whether they’d found it or not?”

“No, I should have asked that,” I said.

“I’m sure you two were busy discussing other things.”

Another snide remark. She just couldn’t help herself. I wasn’t about to let it turn into an argument, not when Greyson’s wolf was on the loose again.

Ava started for the door of the interrogation area. “If they do have your wolf, great. Just because the stupid customs guys lost Greyson’s wolf doesn’t mean that you can’t be reunited with your own wolf…or does it?”

**Episode 5531**

Greyson and I walked back into the hotel room. The bed was still rumpled, so that meant housekeeping hadn’t been in to tidy up. I paused with my hand on the door.

“Do you think we should leave it open?” I asked.

Greyson turned, frowning. “What do you mean? Why would we leave it open?”

“Maybe for Xavier’s wolf?” I ventured.

Greyson shook his head. “We don’t need to do that, love.”

“Are you sure?” I asked anxiously. “What if—”

“The wolf isn’t a physical presence, Cali. It can pass through pretty much anything. It’s not going to matter if the door is open or not.” He stepped to the door and shut it firmly.

“Right. Yeah. Of course. I forgot,” I said, nodding.

Greyson raised his eyebrows. “Notice anything?”

“What?”

“Can you tell the wolf is already here?”

I stopped, surprised, and looked around. That didn’t really help since I couldn’t see the wolf, so I closed my eyes. I didn’t have a chance of seeing it, so I figured my best bet was to try to sense it.

And there it was. I gasped as I turned toward the corner of the room. Even with my eyes closed, I felt myself drawn to it like a magnet. When I opened my eyes, I still couldn’t see any details, but I knew it was there.

“I guess it must be eager to get back to Xavier.” I said. “And I’m sure Xavier is eager too.”

Greyson nodded, pushing a hand through his hair. “I imagine he is. I sure as hell am. After all this time, I’m looking forward to getting back to my own wolf.” He glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “I wonder how fast Xavier is going to be able to get here. I’m hoping he’s not going to have any more trouble with the authorities.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said, nodding, only half-listening as Greyson spoke. I felt a little light-headed, like I’d just stood up too fast. It felt as though the room was swaying around me as my eyes drifted back toward the corner of the room. I was trying to focus on what Greyson was saying to me, but I found myself inexorably drawn toward Xavier’s wolf.

Taking a step toward the corner of the room, I put out a hand toward it. There was a spot of air that felt cool, almost as though it was a different temperature than the rest of the room. And as I touched it, I was immediately hit with a rush of memory so strong I nearly stumbled backward.

I remembered walking up to the house for the first time, my stomach tied into knots. I remembered the first time Xavier kissed me, and the first time he made love to me. I remembered his misery when Xavier had lost the Lupo Finale to Greyson, and my own misery when he had walked away from the Redwood pack—and me—seemingly for good.

Gasping, I drew my hand quickly back. My face flushed, and I gave my head a shake, trying to clear it.

Greyson looked curiously over at me. “Cali? Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to say *Yes, fine*, but I paused. *Was* I okay? What the *hell* had that just been? I wasn’t sure what the answer to that question was, but I did know that it had involved Xavier, so I wasn’t eager to explain it to Greyson. I knew it would only hurt his feelings.

But he was looking at me expectantly, and I couldn’t just not tell him the truth of what I’d just felt.

“Cali? What’s wrong?” he asked.

I took a deep breath, noticing that I still felt shaky. “I just felt something.”

“Felt something?” Greyson frowned. “Felt what?”

“I don’t know, really,” I said honestly. “Something from Xavier’s wolf, I guess.”

Greyson took that in. “I suppose that’s normal,” he finally said. “It makes sense you would feel a connection to his wolf. You are still Xavier’s mate.”

I couldn’t help but notice the note of weariness in Greyson’s voice when he spoke, and it made my heart contract painfully. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to hear it. Greyson and Xavier had come to terms with the *due destini*—to some degree, each in their own way—but that didn’t mean that either of them had ever been happy about it. I knew it frustrated them and made their already tense relationship even more complicated.

How easy it would be if I didn’t have to share my love for each of them. I knew it would be easier on them, and it would sure as hell be easier on me. But that would require making a choice between them, and I just couldn’t fathom that. Unless—of course—I went mad first.

Greyson stepped toward me, his expression gentle. He brushed a hand softly down the side of my face. “I understand that everything about this is complicated, love.”

“Yes,” I said with a sigh I couldn’t suppress. “It is.”

He nodded. “The mate bond is strong. We’ve all felt it. And it can drive us to do things that we don’t always understand, or even agree with.”

I nodded again as tears sprang to my eyes. I didn’t know what had made me cry—maybe it was just hearing Greyson say these things that I had felt myself.

“But in the end, know this,” he said, his voice husky, “I love you unconditionally, Caliana Hart.”

“I love you too,” I rasped.

Greyson smiled, then leaned in and kissed me.

I put my hand to his face, threading my fingers into his hair. I leaned into the kiss, driven partly by my deep and burning love for Greyson, and partly by the guilt I felt for thinking of Xavier.

But as Greyson pushed his tongue to my lips and entered my mouth, I became aware that Xavier’s wolf was watching us. Not just watching us, it was glaring at us. The wolf was angry.

My stomach tensed as Greyson pulled me closer still. I wanted to be in this moment with Greyson—I wanted to lose myself in the feel of his touch and his lips against mine—but I could feel the angry eyes of Xavier’s wolf on me.

Maybe I shouldn’t be kissing Greyson so openly in front of the wolf. If it had been the actual Xavier in the room with us, I wouldn’t even think of doing this.

I was about to pull away when the door to the room swung open. Greyson and I turned to see Xavier stride inside, followed by Ava.

Xavier stopped suddenly and there was an achingly awkward moment where all four of us stared at one another, no one speaking at all.

My face felt like it was on fire as Xavier glared between us. Ava looked curiously neutral as she stood at Xavier’s side, but I wanted the floor of the hotel room to open up and swallow me whole.

Finally, when I thought the pressure of the silence was going to crush me, Greyson cleared his throat.

“So,” he said in a businesslike way, “why did you get detained at the airport?”

Xavier snorted. “This,” he said, holding up a metal pot that looked kind of like an urn.

“But they let you go?” Greyson asked.

“Obviously,” Xavier said. “But I’m still on some kind of a list. And there’s some weird little man in the lobby of this hotel watching me.”

I stared at the urn, baffled. “Why do you have that?” I asked, pointing to it. “And what *is* it?”

Ava rolled her eyes. “We have it because we needed to get Greyson’s wolf here. Remember? That’s what we’re all doing?”

I gritted my teeth. That annoyed affectation in Ava’s voice really ground my gears. She always spoke to me like I was an idiot for not knowing everything she did. How the hell was I supposed to know what that stupid pot thing was?

“Well, whatever,” Greyson said, and I could hear the relief in his voice as he spoke. “You’re here now, and we can finally get this whole nightmare over with. And it’s a good thing, too.” He glanced into the corner. “Your wolf has been waiting very impatiently for you.”

Xavier’s eyes skittered to the corner of the room where his wolf sat, waiting and watching. I could see a look of deep relief etched in his blue eyes.

“Let’s get this over with,” Greyson said, stepping forward and holding his hand out for the metal vessel in Xavier’s hands.

Xavier glanced over at Ava. A speaking look passed between them, and I felt my stomach tighten. Something was up.

“What’s the holdup?” Greyson asked, his hand still out.

“Yeah, about that…” Xavier said, trailing off. He crossed his arms.

Greyson narrowed his eyes. “What?”

Xavier shook his head. “Bad news, brother. We don’t have your wolf.”

**Episode 5532**

**Greyson**

I stared at Xavier. I got his joke, but I didn’t laugh. My brother wasn’t good with jokes in the best of circumstances, and this was *not* the best of circumstances. I was tense and angry and wound as tight as a coiled spring, so I really wasn’t in the mood for pranks.

“Yeah, right. That’s hilarious. Come on, we’ve both been through a lot of bullshit with these wolves at this point, so let’s just get this over with.”

Figuring it was holding my wolf, I reached out and grabbed the vessel from Xavier’s hands. But as soon as I touched it, my stomach dropped to the floor. It was like some kind of instinctual feeling. Without another word, I opened it up. This shit was empty. My wolf was *not* in this vessel.

Now it made sense that I hadn’t sensed him. I’d been hoping it was being blocked because of the magic Big Mac had imbued on this thing. Apparently not.

Shock radiated through my body like an electrical current as I looked over at Xavier. “What the fuck did you do with my wolf?”

Cali drew in a sharp breath. “Greyson,” she murmured, stepping in front of me, trying to block me from Xavier. But I shot her a warning look, and her step faltered. She took a hesitant step backward.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Ava said.

“It wasn’t his fault? So whose fault was it?” I snapped at her. “Yours? Because I can’t help but find it exceptionally convenient that I have Xavier’s wolf right here, ready for Xavier, but that you two somehow managed to lose mine.”

“Greyson—” Cali began again, but I ignored her again.

“What the hell are you two even doing here if you don’t have my wolf?” I demanded. “Did you come all the way from Oregon to London just to tell me that you fucked up? Because that wasn’t actually necessary. We probably could have done this with a fucking phone call.”

I could feel myself winding up. I was angry as hell, and I could hear my voice rising louder and louder, but I couldn’t stop myself.

Xavier had done some fucked-up shit to me over the years, there was no doubt about that. I know I hadn’t always been the perfect brother to him, but there was a lot on his side that he had to account for. I’d thought the peak of his selfishness had been when he’d left me to die in that cursed zoo in the Fae world. He’d walked away because he hated that I was his rival for Cali’s love. That had been some coldhearted bastard shit. But even still, this was somehow worse.

“I’ve been fucking counting on you, Xavier,” I said, shaking my head.

He looked pissed. “It’s not like that,” he argued.

“Yeah, I’m sure—”

Xavier’s eyes flashed. “It’s fucking not, and I’d be happy to tell you about if you’d just calm the hell down—”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I shot back angrily.

Xavier glared at me. “You know what? Fine. That’s fine. You don’t want to hear what I have to say? That’s fucking fine by me. I’ll just take my wolf, and we’ll go—”

“Stop!” Cali said, stepping between us. “Just stop it. Both of you.”

I was breathing hard, like I’d just run a hard sprint. The tension between my brother and me hung in the air like a heavy mist. Anger spiked in my chest, and I could barely breathe.

“I can’t believe you,” I hissed at Xavier. “I can’t believe you’d pull this shit with me.”

Fury twisted his expression. He opened his mouth to answer, but Cali spoke before he could:

“Stop it! You both need to stop acting like children,” she said. She looked at Xavier for a moment, then over to me. “You should at least let Xavier explain what happened, Greyson. Everything about this has been complicated—I’m sure there’s a good reason why he doesn’t have your wolf.”

I took a deep breath, trying to let it calm me. I was still angry, but just looking at Cali calmed me down. I couldn’t be angry when I looked at her, so I tried to focus on her face. But when I did that, I saw the pleading look in her eyes, and the last of my anger fled.

I took another breath, and this one felt better. I needed to think clearly, and I knew I couldn’t blame my rash behavior on Xavier’s wolf this time, because Xavier’s wolf wasn’t in me anymore.

Just to be sure of that, I glanced over to the corner to check, and there was the wolf. Though, when I looked over, I noticed the wolf wasn’t staring at Xavier, the way I thought it would. Instead, it was looking straight at Cali.

I pulled my gaze from the wolf and looked back at Xavier. “Fine, I’m listening. What the hell happened?”

Xavier held up the vessel. “After your wolf took off, Ava and I went to see Big Mac. She gave us this, and we used it to capture your wolf. We managed to do it and got on the plane—obviously fully intending to bring it to you—”

“So where is it then?” I asked, grinding my teeth.

“Just let me finish telling you,” Xavier growled back, glaring at me. “But when we got into England, we were stopped by customs officials, and they insisted on going through it. Which meant they opened it.”

“Shit,” I breathed.

“Yeah, exactly,” Xavier said. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. They opened it, your wolf jumped out, and that was the last I saw of it.” He shrugged. “Sorry, man.”

The apology wasn’t entirely sincere, and it made my hackles rise. I looked at Xavier, then over at Ava, who was watching me warily. I was looking to see if there were any looks passing between them, trying to determine if there was some kind of plot between them to screw me over. But there wasn’t anything—not that I could see. It seemed that my brother was telling the truth, as much as I hated to admit it.’

“This is fucking great,” I muttered to myself, pushing a hand through my hair. “Unbelievable.”

“So what do we do now?” Cali asked, looking between Xavier and me.

Ava made an impatient noise. “We do what we came here to do. We get Xavier’s wolf back into Xavier.”

“And what about Greyson?” Cali asked. “What about *his* wolf?”

A muscle in Ava’s jaw twitched. “Once Xavier is back with his wolf, he’ll be a lot more capable of tracking Greyson’s wolf, so the sooner the better. And I’ll be able to track, too.”

Cali looked over to me for confirmation, and I shrugged.

“That makes sense,” I had to admit. “Though I still don’t know how you managed to let my wolf run off.”

Xavier made a snarling sound in the back of his throat, and Cali spoke quickly, before things could escalate any further:

“Okay, so since we all agree this is the best way forward, what’s the next step to get Xavier reunited with his wolf?” she asked hurriedly.

She glanced over into the corner of the room where Xavier’s wolf sat watching her, and I felt a stab of jealousy, as I had since we’d walked in. I’d seen her eyes straying to his wolf again and again.

I tried to shake that off. “Maybe we should get in touch with Big Mac.”

“That’s a start,” Cali reasoned. “Let’s call her.”

I nodded and reached for my phone, then hesitated.

“What’s up?” Cali asked.

“It’s the middle of the night in Oregon right now,” I reminded her.

“Oh, right,” Cali said. She looked anxious.

I hated to see that anxious look on Cali’s face, and I figured that it was worth trying to get ahold of Big Mac anyway. “She’ll have to understand, right?” I reasoned. “It’s an emergency.”

“Of course,” Cali said with a nod. “We’re talking about your wolves here. There’s a lot at stake.”

“Exactly,” I said and dialed Big Mac’s number. I just had to hope that we were right.

The phone rang for a long time. I was about to hang up, when suddenly the ringing stopped, and Big Mac’s furious face filled up the screen. She looked hollow-eyed and tired and just radiating irritation.

“*What?*” she snapped.

I gritted my teeth. Of course Big Mac had a right to be angry for being woken up in the middle of the night, but I was angry too. My wolf was still out there—somewhere—and I had no idea how we were going to get it back. I hated that I agreed with Ava and Xavier, but I did think the best way was to have two full werewolves ready to track, so I pushed through my anger.

“Sorry if we woke you—”

“Of course you woke me,” she bit out. “Now what do you want?”

I blew out a breath. “Xavier just got here. I have his wolf, but…what do we do now?”

**Episode 5533**

**Xavier**

My eyes skittered to the corner of the room, where my wolf hovered. I’d been doing this since the instant we walked in—and caught Greyson and Cali making out. I was pissed about that, but more than anything else, I was just thinking about my wolf. I was *so close* to getting it back—it was literally here in the room with me—but I still felt so far.

I wished I could just grab the thing and get the hell out of this place, but I knew it wasn’t going to be so simple. How could it be? Nothing ever was. I fucking knew that all too well. Last time this had happened to me, I’d had to go into the spirit world to get the damn wolf back. That had been a hellscape in and of itself, and something I had hoped I would never have to do again.

But I was desperate. And at this point, if that’s what it took to reunite with my wolf, then I’d do it. Just like last time, being without my wolf had been total hell. Being with Greyson’s wolf had been awful, but being without a wolf at all was worse.

“What do we do next?” Greyson asked Big Mac.

Even from a distance, I could see Big Mac’s tired face darken. “What do you do next? How the hell should I know?!”

“Big Mac—” Cali started, but Big Mac spoke over her.

“I’m not a werewolf, and as I’ve told you countless times, I don’t know how these things are supposed to work!” She sounded pissed. In the background, I could hear someone else murmuring—no doubt it was Mrs. Smith.

Big Mac looked over, and I heard both of them speaking, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying. The voices were tense, though, and it sounded like a muffled argument. I was certain when I heard Big Mac hiss—

“*I don’t know what you want me to do, Sabine!*”

There was more murmuring, and then Big Mac finally turned back to look at the camera. “Talk to Swift. This is his thing, not mine.” And then, without another word—or waiting for anyone to respond—she ended the call.

I looked at my brother and found him looking right back at me. He looked angry—which I supposed I could understand—but he looked worried too. I also understood that. His wolf was still on the loose, and we had a lot of steps to get through before we could start properly searching. If Swift was one of those steps, that wasn’t great. Swift was unreliable at the best of times.

“So what the fuck was that?” Ava muttered. “A lot of help she was.”

“I say we take Big Mac’s advice and get ahold of Swift,” Cali suggested.

I groaned. “I would rather go back into the spirit world than ask that sleazebag for any more of his help.” I was still pissed about the windmill incident at the festival.

Ava put her hand on my arm. “X, come on. You want your wolf back, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said through gritted teeth. It was more than just that I wanted my wolf back—I *needed* it back. I hated the feeling of being without it. It was like missing a hand or something. When I reached inside myself and found it gone, the feeling echoed through me like pain. I didn’t recognize myself without my wolf. Yes, I wanted my wolf back.

“So, okay,” Ava said, and I saw her eyes scanning over me. More than anyone else, she knew how much I needed this. “Then let’s call Swift.”

“Fucking hell,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Fine.”

Yanking out my phone, I scrolled through my contacts for Swift’s number. As I did it, I stole a glance up at Cali. I could still picture her in Greyson’s arms, and I fucking hated it.

I shifted my gaze over to my wolf, and for the first time I clocked the unmade bed. Cali and Greyson’s unmade bed.

My stomach dropped. As much as it sucked to walk in on them making out, I doubted kissing was the only thing that had gone on between Cali and my brother last night.

Frustration coursed through me as I dialed Swift’s number. It was the middle of the night for him, too, but he answered on the first ring with an astonishingly cheerful—

“Xavier! Good to hear from you!”

I frowned. “Were you awake? Isn’t it the middle of the night?”

“Yeah, for some, but I’m doing a sleep fast at the moment,” he explained. “I’m only sleeping every other night, and only for four hours in hour-long bursts.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you are.” That sounded *exactly* like the kind of thing Swift would do. “How exactly does sleep deprivation help anyone?”

“Well, there’s actually a lot of scientific evidence to suggest that sleep fasting can increase REM sleep as well as have an effect on global quality of sleep. That’s not to say anything about the daytime concentration, vigor, and emotional balance. There are clinical tests that show—”

“Okay, okay,” I said, cutting him off. “I don’t know why I asked, I really don’t give a shit.”

Swift sighed. “Okay, so why are you calling me this time of night anyway?”

“I need your help. We got the wolf, and now I need some help in reuniting.”

“Xavier, have you ever stopped to consider *why* your wolf keeps running off?” Swift asked thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s time to upstream this problem. Do we need a group therapy session? I could call this guy I know—Carlson Greene—”

“*NO!*”

I’d yelled, but when I looked around, I realized that Greyson, Cali, and Ava had yelled as well. On this, at least, we were all in agreement.

“Okay, message received,” Swift said mildly.

I rubbed my temple. I felt a tension headache building behind my eyes. “I don’t want therapy, Swift. That’s not why I called. I just want to deal with this wolf issue.”

“Fine,” he said curtly. “Well, you know what you have to do.”

“If I knew what I had to do, I wouldn’t be fucking calling you, Swift,” I snarled back.

“You have an astonishingly short memory, Xavier,” he said. “It’s the same as last time. You need to go into the spirit world.”

I groaned. *That’s* what I had been afraid of. “Isn’t there any other way? I mean, I managed to get my wolf back once before without having to walk around the dead people and spirits.”

“You did?” Swift sounded surprised. “When was that? What did you do?”

Suddenly self-conscious, I glanced quickly around the room. Ava was next to me, and her hand was still on my arm. Cali was standing only a couple of feet away. She, along with my brother and my wolf, were staring at me.

I started to really wish I hadn’t put the damn call on speaker, but it was too late. I couldn’t just step away so Ava wouldn’t have to hear what I was about to say.

“Xavier?” Swift asked.

I glanced at Ava, then looked back down at the phone. “It was when I was first with Cali. Her love for me helped bring my wolf back.”

Ava’s hand—the one still on my arm—flexed. Or flinched. Cali stared at me, wide-eyed. Greyson’s face twisted, like he’d just sucked on a lemon.

I swallowed hard. “Swift?” I asked when the guy didn’t respond. “Hello? Are you still there?”

It would be just like Swift to have fallen asleep in the middle of the conversation. *Sleep fast* my ass.

He finally cleared his throat. “Well, then that’s your answer.”

I frowned. “What’s my answer?”

“Cali’s love for you brought your wolf back once; it can probably do it again.”

Ava shifted slightly on her feet, and when I looked over at her I nearly took a startled step back. Her blue eyes blazed, like she was about to set the room on fire with her gaze.

“How?’ I asked, pushing forward. “What do we need to do?”

“Um. You need to show your love.”

“What?”

He laughed. “You know, kiss each other or something.”

I felt a bead of sweat trailing down from my temple as my heart hammered in my chest. This was a fucking nightmare. The truth was that I would love to kiss Cali. My wolf would love to kiss Cali—even with him being outside my body, I could sense that we were on the same page. But what the hell was Swift suggesting here?

“Does it have to be her?” Ava asked abruptly.

“What?” Swift asked. “Who said that?”

“I’m just wondering if you are aware that Xavier doesn’t just have one mate. *I’m* his mate, too,” she snapped. And before Swift—or anyone else—could say anything to that, she grabbed my shirt, pulled me close, and kissed me.

**Episode 5534**

**Artemis**

When I woke up, it was slow. The air was cool in the tent, but I felt warm. And even conscious of the events of the night before, I felt safe. I was still a bit groggy, and it took me a long moment to remember where I was—and why. And even longer to register that I wasn’t alone. My back was pressed against Marius’s entire body. Not just his body—his *skin*. His shirt had fallen slightly open in the night.

I knew it was him even without looking at him. I could sense the broad shoulders and feel the strong forearm around my waist, keeping me locked against him.

But when I finally flickered my eyes around, I caught sight of Rishika asleep just in front of me. And then, slowly, realized that my leg was hitched up to Rishika’s hip.

I flushed, feeling embarrassed as I tried to disentangle myself. I had no idea *how* that had happened. Both Rishika and Marius had insisted on staying with me in my tent last night. A reasonable enough request after the first assassin that Kastian took—tied up like a trussed pig—back to his tent. But when the three of us had started the night off, we’d all been in separate places. But somehow, during the night, we’d gravitated together.

Close together.

I needed to get up, or at least just…out of here.

I tried to move, but Marius’s arm tightened around me.

“More sleep,” he slurred.

My body pulsed as he pulled me tightly against him, and my face heated again. I whacked his arm, trying to push it off me, but it was deadweight, and Rishika’s head was resting on my other arm, so I couldn’t get any leverage.

“Marius, get *off* me,” I muttered.

He groaned in response but didn’t stir. Rishika, on the other hand, did.

Her eyes fluttered open, and her brown eyes rested on me, looking right into my eyes.

My heart thudded as she reached down and ran her hand up my leg, which was still hitched over her. A sleepy, satisfied smile spread across her face.

Until she saw Marius’s arm around me. Then her eyes went over my shoulder to Marius himself.

I swallowed hard. “I can explain.”

But Rishika didn’t look mad. She seemed to be still sleepy, and she inched closer. “Good morning,” she murmured, and kissed me.

My brain nearly exploded as her lips met mine. Did that mean Rishika remembered? Marius and the whole Fae world seemed to disappear, and now it felt like a morning waking up together in the Redwood pack house. The lazy way Rishika coaxed my mouth open, the smell of her, the feel of her hair trailing across my arm. Everything.

I sank my free hand into her hair, deepening the kiss.

“Artemis!”

I froze when I heard someone outside the tent yelling my name, but behind me, Marius stirred. His hand slid slowly up my ribcage, stopping just below my breast.

I gasped—this was too much, but it felt so good.

“*Artemis!*”

This was a screech, and Rishika and I jolted apart. Marius cried out when I elbowed him in the throat, pushing myself to a sitting position.

“Come *on*,” he muttered, rubbing his neck.

But I knew that voice. It was Celeste, and she was getting closer.

“Shh!” I hissed at him. “Celeste is coming.”

That was enough for Marius, and he stopped complaining and sat up, completely awake.

“We have to get out of here,” Rishika said in a hushed voice.

“Yeah, I’m going to have to agree,” I said quietly. If Adair hadn’t been happy to see Marius and Rishika, then Celeste’s displeasure was going to be *lethal*.

“Let’s go,” Marius hissed, but they didn’t have time to go anywhere.

Before any of us could disentangle from our pretzel, Celeste pushed open the tent flap. With neither invitation nor announcement, she strode purposefully inside.

Her face was angry as she walked in and grew angrier still as she looked at the confusion of Marius and Rishika and me.

“*Artemis*,” she snapped, her voice sharp as knives. “*Why* is there an assassin tied up in your husband’s tent? And why are we being told to delay our travel to Embersy in order to interrogate him? What is going on?”

Finally managing to free myself from Marius and Rishika, I clambered to my feet. “What is going on is that I was attacked last night, Celeste. Thanks for asking, by the way.”

“Attacked?!” Celeste’s eyes grew large. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because we took care of it,” I told her.

*We*.

Celeste’s eyes snapped down to Marius, who was still on the ground, and then to Rishika, who stood just behind my shoulder.

“I don’t even know where to begin with whatever this is,” she said, closing her eyes as though she couldn’t bear to look any longer. “Artemis, get to Kastian’s tent. Now.” Then she spun on her heel and left my tent with a flourish.

Marius gave a low whistle. “So, you think she’s mad?”

I rolled my eyes and turned to look back at him. “Get up, Marius. And close your shirt.”

He got to his feet and grinned at me with what Cali had once explained to me was a shit-eating grin.

*It means self-satisfied*, she’d told me. *Smug, you know?*

I did know, and *Shit-Eating Grinner* would probably be etched on Marius’s tombstone. It wasn’t that he was as tall and muscled as some of the werewolves I’d met back in the human world. Marius had been on the run for too long. I had seen what the werewolves had to do to keep their chiseled chests and arms. Marius was longer and leaner. He looked fast, which was what he was. But he had something the werewolves didn’t have—he was beautiful. It was the structure of his face. I was sure of it, because I’d spent a lot of time resentfully thinking about it. He had a perfect bone structure. It was almost unmanly in its beauty but saved by the strength of his jawline.

He gestured down to his shirt, which hung open, giving me a look at his lean body beneath. “Oh, I’m sorry. Do you find this *distracting*?”

I ignored him and turned around, striding quickly to my trunks. I yanked off my nightshirt and pulled on one of the traveling dresses the maids had packed for me. It was a brownish red color, which I assume was intentional so the dust from the road wouldn’t look as prominent on the fabric. As I pulled it over my head, I didn’t even bother telling Marius not to look. I was in too much of a hurry, and what the hell did it matter, considering I’d just woken up wrapped in his arms?

I splashed some freezing cold water on my face from the basin near the front of the tent and stepped to the tent flap.

“Well,” I said, turning to the two of them, “come on.”

Rishika’s brows went up. “Are you sure about that?”

I shrugged. “Adair knows you’re here, Kastian knows you’re here, and now Celeste knows you’re here. I guess the secret of you two being here is pretty much out of the bag. No point in hiding now.”

I knew Adair wasn’t going to be pleased to see them after he’d told me in no uncertain terms to send them away, but I was going to deal with that later.

I walked over to Kastian’s tent and found a gathering of people outside of it. Including Adair and Tabitha.

When Adair saw me, he walked to my side.

“Artemis, are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m okay—”

“Then what the fuck happened last night?” he asked, looking uncharacteristically panicked.

I assumed he’d already gotten the quick version of the incident, but I leaned closer to tell him what I knew. “It was an assassin. One from the Order of the Winding Thorn.”

Confusion twisted Adair’s face, but it was quickly replaced with anger. The anger increased when Marius and Rishika stepped behind me.

He opened his mouth, but I held up my hand, forestalling the lecture I was sure was coming.

“I don’t have time for this,” I told him, then I strode into Kastian’s tent.

I walked in just in time to see Kastian’s fist connecting with the assassin’s face.

“*Oh god*,” I cried, startled. I hadn’t known what I was going to find inside, and I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised by the attack, but I was.

Kastian looked over, shaking his fist out. “Ah, Artemis, you’re here.”

“Yeah, what’s going on?” I asked warily.

“That’s a very interesting question.”

“Is it?” I asked with a frown.

Kastian gave me a strange, wide smile. He stepped next to the assassin and threw his arm around the guy’s shoulder, like they were old friends. He looked at the guy. “Would you like to tell my wife what you just said about her father?”

**Episode 5535**

**Xavier**

Ava’s kiss caught me off guard. For a moment I stiffened, but when I realized what she was doing, I tried to clear my mind and lean into the kiss.

The reality was that I loved Ava, and I loved kissing her. This was an odd moment—what with Greyson and Cali looking on, not to mention my wolf—but I loved the feel of her in my arms. And she was right: We were mates, and if kissing my mate had worked to restore my wolf before, there was no reason it shouldn’t work now.

My arms encircled her as I let myself be enveloped by her kiss. Her clean, floral scent and the feel of her body against mine drew me in, helping me forget that we were not alone in this hotel room. My mind cycled back, thinking of our past, and the rocky road we had walked together. I thought of how she had been there for me when I’d left the Redwood pack. How desperate and lonely I’d been.

I had hurt her, but she hadn’t held it against me, or tried to enact revenge for how badly I’d treated her when she’d come back from the spirit world. She hadn’t even asked a lot of questions—I had shown up on her doorstep with no explanation, and she’d opened the door for me. She had supported my rise to Samara Alpha.

She had always believed I was destined to be an Alpha, even in the times that I doubted I would ever become one. She had been at my side through thick and thin with the pack, always a supportive voice, always the first to volunteer for any patrol, always looking out for me. Even if everyone turned their backs on me, I knew Ava would be by my side.

She was my safe harbor, my port in any storm. I never doubted her love for me, because she never hid her devotion. It wasn’t split, and it never wavered. She had come back from the fucking dead to find me again. She had forgiven me more times than I could count. I knew that my love for Cali broke her heart, but she had chosen to look past it again and again, finding a way to love me anyway.

She was beautiful and powerful. Making love to her took my breath away every time. Hell—sometimes being with her took away my ability to form a complete sentence. She was sensual and passionate. She gave, but she demanded too. And she was the same as a wolf. Formidable. Sometimes I just watched her in fights, marveling at her power and skill.

Ava had been my first mate—and my first love. I could remember watching her as we grew up, still remembered skinny-dipping with her when we were kids, trying to catch sight of her boobs. When I thought back, that’s what I remembered—the innocence and awakening I felt with her.

But then Silas had started the pack wars, and all that had changed. None of it had mattered anymore.

And then I’d met Cali. And everything changed again. Cali had been the one who had brought my wolf back that first time.

But that didn’t mean Ava couldn’t now.

I could feel my wolf reacting. And why not? Ava was always able to stir my wolf. My wolf had always been drawn to her—exceptionally so—so why was it hesitating now?

I reached out for my wolf, trying to coax it, desperate to bring it back and end this hell.

Ava pulled back, her lips red and swollen. Her breath came hard and fast, and she smiled at me. “Well?” she asked.

I hesitated for a moment, hoping I would feel a change. That I would feel the return of my wolf. I still remembered what it had felt like when Cali had brought it back that first time. There had been an unmistakable surge of warmth. It had felt like being whole again, and my senses had been at their peak.

But I didn’t feel any of that now.

I shook my head. “No,” I said, my voice sounding raw. “It didn’t work.”

Ava looked at me, and I watched her blue eyes shifting. They changed like the seasons as I watched, going from confidence to uncertainty, then to disappointment and pain. And then, finally to anger. Fury mixed with deep pain blazed from her eyes.

There was a wounded expression on her face as she grabbed me and kissed me again. But I knew it wasn’t going to work. We both knew it. I could tell from how she was kissing me. This wasn’t a kiss born from Ava’s love for me. It was a kiss of pain and anger and jealousy. This wasn’t what Swift had in mind when he’d suggested it.

Ava pulled back, and her eyes were nearly shooting icy sparks.

“Hey! Xavier! What’s happening?” Swift asked from the phone. “Is it working? Are you re-wolfed yet? Don’t leave me hanging?”

Frustrated, I ended the call.

I looked over at Ava. I wanted to apologize to her, but I stopped myself. None of what just happened was my fault. I hadn’t asked her to kiss me. But she was hurt—I could see the pain written across her face. And I hated to see her looking so lonely and miserable.

I reached for her, but she stepped away from me, so my hand clasped only air.

“Go ahead,” she said, her voice cracking. “Kiss her. You want to.”

I couldn’t deny it—I *did* want to kiss Cali. I’d wanted to kiss her since the moment I walked in and caught her kissing my brother.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, her voice tight with pain. “I won’t stop you.” And she turned on her heel and stormed out of the room.

The door slammed behind her, leaving a heavy silence in her absence. I could nearly feel the tension in the air of the hotel room, hovering like a pall over us all.

Sensing my wolf, I looked over at it. It was watching me.

Without thinking, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as though that would somehow erase the public humiliation Ava had just endured.

Cali looked at Greyson, then back at me. She took a step forward, then took a deep breath. “If it will help you bring back your wolf, then I want to try.”

I hesitated. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to do this, I would have just preferred that it be Cali and me alone. Just the two of us. Well, three, if I included my wolf, who didn’t look like he was going anywhere.

But to do this in front of Greyson felt…weird. And deeply awkward. And just not right, somehow.

Normally I would feel triumphant about the opportunity to rub my connection to Cali in my brother’s face. But Ava’s reaction—and the pain I’d seen on her face when she realized what was happening—had tempered my mood.

My wolf growled, as though urging me to take action. And I knew what was happening—my wolf was choosing Cali once again.

So, in spite of my brother’s hulking, angry presence, I reached for Cali and pulled her close. I pressed my lips to hers, the kiss tentative.

Despite trying to ignore it, I was *very* aware of Greyson’s presence behind us, and Cali was too, judging by how stiff she felt in my arms. I could still smell Greyson on her too, which made it hard to really get swept away. I also couldn’t stop thinking about what was at stake. It was hard to concentrate on anything except my wolf. Ava’s kiss hadn’t worked—and if this kiss didn’t either, then what would that mean?

Where would that leave me?

Swift had said that a return to the spirit world was the only option. And if this didn’t work, that might be true.

But after a moment, those thoughts began to fall away. It didn’t happen all at once, but I slowly stopped thinking about Greyson, and what I could lose if this didn’t work. I stopped thinking about the pain in Ava’s eyes and even the feel of my wolf eyeing me from the corner. And I was slowly overcome with hunger.

It was a hunger I had nearly satisfied when Cali and I had almost kissed in her bedroom, right before she and Greyson left for London. That moment had been interrupted, and now it felt like I was finally scratching that itch.

Adrenaline rushed through my body, making my heart thud hard in my chest, like it was trying to beat its way out. I let out a feral growl which nearly drowned out Cali’s soft moan. But I could feel it, vibrating against my lips. I pushed past her lips and slid my tongue along hers, tasting her, drinking her in. My senses felt as though they were on fire, and I clutched her tightly to me.

I had never wanted anyone more than I wanted Cali in that moment.

**Episode 5536**

My eyes were already brimming with tears when Xavier’s lips met mine. I thought back to that moment in my room with him, just before Greyson and I left for London. Xavier and I had been so close to doing exactly this before I’d broken off that moment.

I had wanted to kiss him—and it was clear he had wanted to kiss me too—but I had stepped away from him and headed off to board a plane for England. With *Greyson*. The thought of Greyson was what had stopped me then, so why the hell couldn’t I stop myself now? Greyson was right behind me.

*Because I have to do this*, I reminded myself. This is the only way, apparently. That was the explanation—and the argument—I was going to cling to. I was kissing Xavier because it was his only option. Both he and Greyson had been miserable without their wolves, and then there was the separation and how that would affect me and the *due destini*. We were all at risk while the wolves were gone, and this was the only way to get Xavier’s wolf back. That was the only reason why I had offered, and that was why I was doing this. But…

Okay, so maybe that wasn’t the *only* reason. Or the whole truth. I had just watched Ava try to do this exact same thing—and I had watched her fail. Though unsuccessful in calling Xavier’s wolf back to him, the kiss she and Xavier had shared had been steamy as hell, and watching it had aroused a deep jealousy in my heart. One I didn’t even know I could feel anymore. It was one I hadn’t *let* myself feel. But even as the feeling had washed over me, I knew that it was one I was willing to endure if it meant that Xavier would get his wolf back. I had been prepared for it if it was successful. But then it hadn’t worked.

And if this was going to work—and save Xavier a dreaded trip to the underworld to reunite with his wolf—then that just left me.

I had stepped up, almost without thinking about it. It had worked once before, so I supposed it might work again, though these circumstances felt markedly different. Xavier and I were different. Everything was different. So when I’d offered, I couldn’t help but hope that this kiss would be easy. Short and quick, preferably. Nothing fancy. A peck or something. Like ripping off a Band-Aid, hopefully. Because whatever the kiss turned out to be, I knew what it was going to feel like—a painful memory of what used to be. Before everything changed.

But that wasn’t what this was feeling like at all.

This wasn’t quick, this wasn’t easy, and it certainly *wasn’t* a peck. Because while Xavier and I had started the kiss tentatively, that hadn’t lasted. He was growling, I was softly moaning, despite myself. This kiss had taken on a life of its own. Desire spread through me like an uncontrollable wildfire.

It was as though a dam had burst for us, and now there was no stopping it even if we wanted to.

Xavier threaded a hand through my hair, pulling just enough to make me gasp against his lips. I knew he was feeling what I was feeling—his body was telling the whole story. It was as though the past few months had never happened. Kissing him made me feel like nothing had ever changed in a way that all the kisses mixed with his apologies hadn’t felt.

Xavier and I were mates, and my love for him had never felt more sure or more powerful. The world around us fell away completely. It was just Xavier, just me. Only us, forever and ever.

And that was when I felt it—the jolt that told me Xaiver’s wolf was back. It was like an electric surge, and I was sure of the wolf’s return.

I could feel Xavier’s relief as his hand cradled my face. Now he was kissing me out of pure joy, pure love.

“Enough!” Greyson snarled as he grabbed my arm and pulled me away from his brother.

I stumbled back, held up by Greyson’s strong hand around my arm. I was breathing hard, gasping like I’d just finished a sprint. My heart was pounding, and my lips were burning, alive with Xavier’s touch.

Xavier snarled, and before I realized what he was doing, he had partially shifted and raised his clawed hand to Greyson.

“Don’t you go starting something you can’t finish, Greyson,” he growled.

Greyson glared back at him, his grey eyes shooting fire, but he didn’t speak.

I was still feeling light-headed from the kiss, but I stepped between the brothers, facing Xavier. “You have your wolf back.”

Xavier didn’t answer. It seemed to be taking a moment for him to register what I’d just said to him. He was looking at Greyson, then he slowly shifted his gaze to me, then to his hand. His eyes widened as though he was just realizing what he had done.

There was a tense moment before he shifted back to his human hand, though he gave Greyson’s chest a vicious shove. Still looking at his hand, Xavier breathed hard and fast, but I doubted it was because he had just been ready to attack his brother.

As if to prove I was right about that, he touched a finger of his newly human hand to his lips, looking rattled, but—as I suspected—satisfied. It was clear he had enjoyed the kiss as much as I had. Which was a lot more than either of us *should* have enjoyed it.

With a pang of guilt, I pushed him away from Greyson. He took a step back, still looking slightly dazed.

“Maybe you should go find Ava, Xavier,” I suggested. “She seemed upset.”

Xavier nodded, still looking as though he’d just woken up from a dream. He opened his mouth and started to speak, but stopped himself and glanced quickly at Greyson, like he was remembering that he and I weren’t alone.

“Yeah, I’m going to go find Ava. I need to talk to her.”

I nodded and he turned toward the door. He opened it, then stopped.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, not turning.

A second later, he was gone.

Gone, but his presence remained. I could still feel it in the room, and it made the tension feel nearly physical.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, I turned to face Greyson. I couldn’t quite bring myself to look at his face, and I felt my eyes fill with tears.

“I’m so sorry, Greyson,” I said quietly.

He didn’t say anything for a moment, and I worked up the nerve to look at him.

When he caught my eye, he turned away for just a moment, before looking back at me with a half-smile that was clearly forced into place.

“It’s okay.”

But I knew that was a lie. It was clearly *not* okay. I could see the pain in his eyes.

“I don’t know what happened,” I said, shaking my head, tears welling in my eyes. “I didn’t intend for that to—I-I really just wanted to help after Ava couldn’t—I think I just got carried away, and I’m s-sorry, Greyson.”  
 Greyson seemed to be having some kind of internal argument with himself. Finally he stepped forward, closing the distance between us. He put his hands on my waist and pulled me ever closer, so I was tight against him.

He hooked a finger under my chin and lifted it, so I was looking right into his eyes. “I said that it was okay, love, and I meant it.”

I looked at him skeptically. I trusted Greyson, but still. “*That* was okay? Are you sure? Because I feel terrible about it. We should never have done that in front of you. And I just want you to know—”

“I know,” he said, pressing a finger to my lips. “I know. But it worked. Xavier has his wolf back. That’s what you were trying to do, and it worked. That’s a good thing.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said faintly. I reached up and brushed his cheek with my fingers. He smiled and leaned into my touch, which only made me feel even worse. My heart ached when I thought of the pain I must have inflicted on him with that kiss. Why had I lost control like that? “But I’m still sorry.”

He caught my hand and kissed my palm. “It’s okay,” he repeated. “I told you.”

I nodded, but inside my soul, I knew it was not okay. Not at all, but not for the reason Greyson thought. Yes, Xavier had gotten his wolf back. Yes, that had been the point of the kiss. But whatever had just happened, it was *not* okay. Because when I kissed Xavier, something felt different. There was one thing I was sure about.

Something had changed.

**Episode 5537**

**Ava**

I had no idea where I was going as I strode down the London street. The sidewalk was crowded, and I weaved through the slow-moving tourists automatically, not even thinking about it as I went. I had no destination in mind—how could I? I’d been in England for less than eight hours, and I had no idea where I even was.

All I knew was that I had to get as far away from that hotel as possible. Distantly, I wondered if there was a barge I could board that would help me put an ocean between myself and that damned hotel.

I just wanted to lose myself for a while. Maybe a long time. Long enough to forget about the humiliation and pain that coursed through me like poison.

My breath felt tight as I remembered how it had felt to kiss Xavier. The first time I had been so hopeful, so sure I’d be able to bring his wolf back to him. I loved him so much, and I was certain that would be enough.

Then, as tears threatened to fall from my eyes, I remembered the sinking realization that it *hadn’t* worked. I remembered the way Xavier’s eyes had skittered away from me.

My stomach sank like a stone in the river when I remembered the desperation of that second kiss.

It wasn’t *fair*. Tears threatened to fall, but I took a gulp of cold, damp air and fought them back. It wasn’t fair, but I didn’t know why I’d been surprised. It felt like nothing in my life had *ever* been fair.

When I reached the river, I stopped and looked over the churning dankness of the Thames. Beyond it was the London Eye, and I watched it hypnotically for a while. Distantly, I thought how it might have been fun to spend some time in the city, and to ride the giant Ferris wheel with Xavier. I could only imagine the view from the top.

Watching the London Eye, it occurred to me how fitting a symbol it was for me. It was so much like my life—with everything in it just going round and round, over and over, constantly repeating itself. And—as always—in the very center of it all was Cali and the fucking *due destini*.

Still fighting tears, I ground my teeth as I stared up at the slowly revolving wheel. Cali was the reason Xavier and I had gotten into our latest argument. And—once again, exactly like every other time—just when I thought that Xavier and I could move things ahead together by bringing his wolf back, things took another turn for the worse.

I drew in a gulp of air as my throat tightened with a sob. If only my kiss had worked. If only it had brought back Xavier’s wolf.

But it hadn’t worked, and that was plain for everyone to see.

As much as it hurt that my love—my *full-hearted* love—for Xavier hadn’t been able to bring back his wolf, the humiliation of it being witnessed stung like fire. I doubted I was ever going to be able to live it down.

A tear finally fell, and I brushed it quickly aside. The thing was, I knew Xavier loved me. And he knew I loved him, too. But despite that, it just wasn’t enough to bring his wolf back. I didn’t know why. I doubted anyone knew why. But I did know that a werewolf without his wolf was an empty shell. Nothing but a shadow of what they once were.

What they should be.

Xavier had been miserable without his wolf. Having Greyson’s wolf inside him had made him edgy and furious. And *I* had been there for him, supporting him, helping him, searching when we needed to search, listening when he needed an ear. And what for? For all my time, my love, my patience, and the understanding that I had given him, in the end, our kiss meant nothing. Everything we had together had been meaningless. *Less* than meaningless. I felt like nothing more than a placeholder, and the ache inside me grew so much it was hard to breathe.

Tears blurred my vision, but I scoffed with a twitch of my shoulders. Xavier was probably there now, with Cali, kissing her and enjoying every second of it. He was probably trying to get back at Greyson for all the time he’d been spending with Cali.

I gazed out onto the river, wondering idly if Cali had somehow used her Fae magic to block Xavier’s wolf from reuniting with him when I kissed him. I didn’t understand the extent of Cali’s magic, and I certainly wouldn’t put something like that past her. She liked to pretend to be the nicest person in the world, but she had a petty, jealous side too. She just didn’t like to admit it to herself.

I nearly broke into a miserable smile when I recalled walking into the hotel room and finding her kissing Greyson. They had both looked so shocked to see us. Maybe we should have knocked, but Xavier had gotten a key from the front desk, and he was in a hurry.

But as I thought of his reaction, my smile faded. I knew it had hurt Xavier to see his own brother kissing Cali—who was, after all, also his mate.

A wind blew up, bringing with it the smell of wet London streets, and I wrapped my arms around myself. I wondered what would have happened if we hadn’t lost Greyson’s wolf. If we’d brought it along like we’d intended to. Would Cali have kissed Greyson too, in order to “rescue” his wolf?

I felt myself smiling again, wondering if Cali’s kiss might fail to bring Greyson’s wolf back, the way mine had with Xavier. I wondered if Kendall’s kiss would have done the trick.

My own heart felt so bruised, it was satisfying to imagine the heartache that circumstance would bring Cali. Maybe she would stop being so fucking sanctimonious if she understood what it was like to watch as the man you loved kissed someone else. Watch as the man you had dedicated your fucking life to turned to someone else to be made whole.

I shook my head thoughtfully. I still didn’t fully understand what the deal was between Greyson and Kendall, but I did know there was *something* there. It was impossible to ignore it. Even Xavier—who’d blown me off when I’d first mentioned it—acknowledged there was something brewing between them.

I took one last look at the Eye and turned away from the river. I started walking again, slower this time. I had lost some of the anger that had powered me like an engine, and now I just felt sad and very, very alone.

I looked around. I really didn’t have anywhere to go. Xavier and I had gone straight from the airport to Greyson and Cali’s hotel, without bothering to get a room of our own anywhere.

And there was no way in hell I was going to stay in the same hotel as the two of them. I’d rather sleep in a park than accidentally run into Greyson or Cali on the elevator.

The wind came up again, blowing my hair across my face. I pushed it away and looked around, wondering where I should go. Maybe I could stop in a pub and have something to eat. Xavier had been so pressed about getting his wolf back that he hadn’t bothered with food, and I hadn’t wanted to slow us down, despite the fact that I was starving.

Or maybe I should take advantage of my empty stomach and get completely wasted and make a fool of myself in front of a bunch of strangers. Why not? I’d already made a fool of myself in front of a bunch of people I knew.

Down the street I spied a likely-looking place. *The Rising Sun* was carved on the wooden sign, and an image of two tankards clunking together.

That was what I was looking for, and I started toward it.

Now that the desperate need to cry had abated somewhat, I thought back on the moment with Xavier in the hotel room. And as I did, I wondered why I hadn’t noticed at the time that Xavier had felt…*different.* I couldn’t say how he had been different, just that he had been different. I supposed at the time I thought it just had to do with the very weird situation. Walking in on Greyson and Cali and the heightened tension of trying to get his wolf back, but now I wondered if it might have to do with something else.

I stopped at the door of the Rising Sun and looked inside. It was dark and loud, and I debated going in.

But before I could make a decision, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I looked over to see a man striding purposefully toward me.

“You are Ava Reed, Luna of the Samara pack,” he stated. It wasn’t phrased as a question.

“Yes,” I said unnecessarily. It was clear he knew exactly who I was. NO use in trying to deny it, I suppose. “And who the hell are you?”

He pulled a leather case out of the inside pocket of his jacket and flashed a gold-colored badge. “My name is Frederic Bacon. I’m with MI9, and you need to come with me.”

**Episode 5538**

**Xavier**

Downstairs, I hurried through the lobby, looking around for Ava. And as I looked, I tried to come up with what the hell I was going to say to her when I found her. *If* I found her.

Taking a deep breath, I caught her scent. It was faint, but present, so she couldn’t be that far. But I still didn’t see her.

I wasn’t surprised that she had decided not to hang around. I might not even be surprised if she’d hopped in a cab and headed straight back to the airport to look for the first flight home.

Looking into the hotel bar, I scanned the place for her, looking for her sleek dark hair and perfect figure, but there was no sign of her. Or scent. So that must mean she left the hotel. And gone where? She didn’t know any places in London that I was aware of, and we hadn’t gotten around to booking a hotel room, so she couldn’t be hiding out. So where could she have gone?

I stepped out onto the sidewalk and looked around. The sidewalk was crowded with people—tourists and people heading home from work. Hundreds of people walked by as I stood there watching, but not one of them was Ava. This was going to be harder than I thought.

I sighed and pushed a hand through my hair. I was frustrated, but my one condolence was that at least I had my wolf back. That was going to make tracking Ava a hell of a lot easier than trying to do it solo. Though now that I had my wolf restored, I really wished I was back in Oregon. If I was home, I would shift and take off, running with my wolf until I dropped with exhaustion. It was what I’d been dreaming about ever since Greyson’s and my wolves had swapped, and it was an itch I couldn’t wait to scratch.

I looked around, trying to imagine what I would do if I was Ava. I knew she was hurt when she left—the pain in her eyes had been impossible to miss. She was also angry—with Ava, those two emotions often went hand in hand. So that meant she might be capable of anything.

In the distance, over the top of the pubs and small shops on the street, I caught sight of the London Eye. It was a giant Ferris-wheel type attraction that offered unparalleled views of the city of London. All of which I’d read in an in-flight magazine article on the way to London.

Ava had mentioned that she wouldn’t mind if we rode it together. She’d said it casually—a gesture to the kinds of things regular tourists to London might do.

I didn’t have any better ideas, so I started toward it. As I walked, I realized I kept touching my lip—right where Cali had kissed me minutes before. I smiled to myself. I knew I shouldn’t be so happy about how that had happened, but I was.

I was about to step across the street when a loud, sharp sound yanked me from my thoughts. I stopped and looked up just as one of the red double-decker buses that flew all over the road passed inches away from me.

I took a deep breath and collected myself. That had been close—too close. I needed to get my shit together. I couldn’t let what had just happened with Cali distract me. Especially not now, when I was looking for Ava. I knew that it was going to be nearly impossible to find her in this strange city, but I had to try. For my own sake. And for Ava’s.

And I felt like I was on the right track. As I moved through the crowded streets closer to the river and to the London Eye, the stronger Ava’s scent became.

I was grateful once again I had my wolf back. Ava could run from me, but she couldn’t hide. Not for long, anyway. I was an Alpha and an expert tracker. And I knew Ava, probably better than anyone else.

When I got to the river, I moved toward a place that had a striking view of the London Eye. Her scent was strong here, and I smiled to myself. She had been here. As I stood looking at the view, though, the smile slid from my face. The London Eye was the one thing Ava had spoken about. This whole trip had been undertaken for me, and that stupid Ferris wheel was the one thing she’d asked about.

I shook my head. This was undoubtedly *not* how she had seen this trip going.

I looked around, and when I caught the direction of her scent, I followed it. I kept my eyes open, avoiding any further run-ins with buses or taxis. I rounded a corner and found myself on a commercial street lined with restaurants, pubs, and shops. I scanned the street, then felt my eyes narrow when I caught sight of her.

Because she wasn’t alone.

She was standing in front of a pub, and she was speaking to a man in a crisp button-down shirt.

I frowned at the guy. There was something really familiar about him. I could have sworn I’d seen him before. But where?

There was nothing particularly specific about him—brown hair, small build. I racked my brain, trying to remember where I had seen him before. In Portland? Bend, maybe?

Then it hit me—I had seen the guy at the hotel. Apparently, my mind was so fucking scrambled I temporarily forgot. I’d noticed him when Ava and I had first arrived. He’d been watching us from the lobby while we were speaking to the woman at the front desk, trying to get a key to Greyson’s room.

I hadn’t thought much about it at the time—why would I? But now…

I stepped back into a doorway, so Ava wouldn’t see me if she looked over. I watched as the two of them spoke, all while my brain spun, trying to figure out who this guy was and what he and Ava could possibly be talking about.

The street was busy, and Ava didn’t look like she was in imminent danger, but I could feel my wolf fighting with me all the same. My wolf wanted to protect Ava.

That wasn’t surprising, it was just instinct. My wolf naturally wanted to protect my mate. Both my mates. This guy was a stranger, and that stranger was talking to Ava.

I didn’t know who this guy was, but I didn’t like it. I didn’t like any of it.

I stepped into the street, dodging cars as I crossed. Even as I drew close, neither Ava nor the guy noticed me.

My wolf was pacing, yowling and panting, pushing me to shift. At least partially. It wanted me to act, to show this stranger that even if he had found Ava alone, she belonged to *me.* She was *my* mate and *my* Luna. I felt rage rising up in the back of my throat as I saw him lean closer to her.

Something sharp brushed against my leg, and I looked down, surprised to see that I’d partially shifted my hand into a clawed paw, without even noticing.

*Shit*. That wasn’t good.

I looked quickly around, wondering if anyone had noticed, but it was clear that the people passing by on the streets were way too wrapped up in their own shit to bother noticing.

Even so, I shook my head. I couldn’t believe I’d done that. Or maybe I could believe it. I knew my wolf was champing at the bit to shift. It probably wanted to be back in Oregon even more than I did. We’d been apart ever since the Fae world, and this had been a long and painful separation.

But I couldn’t risk this kind of shit. Not in public like this. Especially not after the run-in with the suspicious agents in customs at the airport. The last thing I needed right now was more attention.

But what the hell was I supposed to do? It’s not like I could just stand back. I didn’t know who he was or how he had found Ava, though I suspected he’d followed her from the hotel, which was reason enough for suspicion. I wasn’t sure, but for all I knew, this guy was up to something.

It wasn’t like Ava was defenseless. She was strong and wary. She knew how to look out for herself, and she wouldn’t fall for anything, but…we were in a foreign city, and I knew she was hurting. The rules were different at the moment.

I couldn’t figure out why Ava hadn’t noticed me, and I was about to say or do something to get her attention, but before I could do either, I got close enough to hear what she was staying to the stranger:

“Did you know that the woman with the Redwood Alpha is Fae?”

**Episode 5539**

**Greyson**

I looked at Cali, then glanced away, my eyes scanning the room. I wasn’t looking at anything in particular—there really wasn’t anything to look at. The hotel room was spare, with only the bed, a dresser, an unused desk, and a small TV on the far wall. We’d spent so little time here since we arrived, I hadn’t even noticed the TV until now.

Xavier and Ava were both gone—almost as fast as they’d shown up—so now the place was empty but for Cali and me. It was just the two of us, but I felt crowded somehow and shifted my shoulders uncomfortably. I wasn’t looking for it—in fact I was actively trying to *not* think about it—but all I could picture was that kiss. Eyes open or closed, I just kept seeing it.

I glanced at the door. Maybe we should get out of this room. It probably wasn’t logical, but I didn’t know if I was going to be able to spend even another second in this room. It felt haunted somehow. I thought of how Big Mac would sometimes burn sage in places that she claimed had bad auras or histories. I wondered if there was a shop nearby where I could find some sage. Like, a hay bale’s worth of it. Or I could skip the sage and go downstairs to ask the clerk for a new room. Maybe we could just start this whole thing over.

Pushing my hand through my hair, I gave my head a shake. I didn’t usually like to think like this, but with all the toxic images in my brain, I couldn’t stop myself. Because maybe I deserved how awful it had felt to watch Cali making out with my brother. Maybe I had it coming after that drug-fueled kiss I’d shared with Kendall. I knew that I’d hurt Cali with that, and maybe I deserve to feel this way. Like this was payback.

But that was bullshit, and I knew it. That’s not what Cali had intended. She hadn’t tried to hurt me; she’d just wanted to help. I needed to shake this off. Maybe I needed some air or something. At least a moment to get my bearings. I glanced out the window, thinking I should go out for a walk.

But when I looked back into the room, I saw that Cali had sat down on the edge of the bed, and she was looking completely lost.

My heart gave a painful throb. There was a big part of me that wanted to go to her. To sit next to her and wrap my arms around her. I wanted to comfort her and tell her what I’d said earlier—that it was okay. That what happened with my brother was necessary to restore his wolf. That it sucked, but I knew it had to be done. It was either that or risk losing my brother to the spirit world again.

But I knew that if I got close to her, I’d smell him on her, and I didn’t think I could take that. The thought of smelling my brother on my mate made my stomach clench.

My head gave a pulse of pain. I really hoped Xavier would be able to mend things with Ava. Not necessarily for his sake, but my own. My wolf was still out there somewhere, and two wolves searching for it were better than one. London was a hell of a big city, and I certainly didn’t know where to start.

I was *really* looking forward to getting my wolf back. The only thing I was looking forward to more than that was kissing Cali as a means of reuniting with it.

She looked down at the floor. I felt like I should say something to her, but I didn’t know what that should be.

As I was thinking of that, I suddenly remembered that Xavier had said something about a strange little man he’d thought was watching him in the lobby. There was something about that story that rang an alarm bell for me, and I grabbed my phone from the dresser.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, gesturing with my phone by way of explanation.

Cali looked up, then forced a smile. “Okay. Don’t be long.”

I smiled back at her—mine just as forced—and headed out of the room. I skipped the elevators and took the stairs to the lobby. Then I stood in the doorway and took a long, hard look at every face in the place.

Like me, Xaiver was tall enough that him calling someone short could mean a lot of things, so I kept that in mind.

I scanned the room, taking everyone in, but there wasn’t anyone who stood out to me as strange—or short.

I didn’t disbelieve that Xavier saw someone, but whomever he saw might have just been another hotel guest.

*Or* he could have been an MI9 agent.

“Shit,” I breathed, shaking my head. I didn’t see anyone suspicious in the lobby, but I also didn’t see Xavier or Ava. So if they’d left the hotel, was it possible whoever it was that Xavier saw had followed them?

I ground my teeth as frustration coursed through me. Why the hell was this happening? Why were we being tailed here? Neither Xavier nor I had any plans to cause problems for the English werewolf community. I just wanted my fucking wolf back. That was all. So why did MI9 have to make such a big fucking deal about it?

My biggest worry wasn’t a confrontation, though. My big worry was that these agents could do something that would hamper my ability to get my wolf back.

I knew it wouldn’t do me any good to complain to the MI9 agency—they were already suspicious of me. And—apparently—of Xavier. And as for the police, well, they’d already practically accused me of being a serial killer, so that didn’t seem like a great option.

It didn’t leave me with a lot of available choices, but there was someone I could call.

Gripping my phone, I moved away from the lobby into a back service stairway. It looked like the exit corridor for the bar staff. It was brightly lit with flickering overhead lights, but it was—thankfully—empty.

I glanced around to make sure I wasn’t followed, then dialed Kendall’s number.

“Hello?” a gruff male voice answered, picking up after only a ring.

Frowning, I looked down at the phone. Had I dialed the right number?

“Hello?” the man asked again, sounding annoyed.

I was about to ask for Kendall when a familiar voice snapped, “That’s *my* phone.”

It was Kendall’s voice, and a muffled conversation followed. A moment later there was a rustling noise, then: “Greyson?” she asked, her voice sleepy and rough with irritation.

“Who was that?” I asked automatically, a strange anger flaring up in my chest.

“None of your business,” she shot back.

My grip on my phone tightened. I knew she was right—it was none of my business who the man was in Kendall’s bed—but there was something about imagining some random guy sleeping next to her that really rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe it had something to do with the kiss. That had to be it. It was still bugging the shit out of me how she handled it after the fact too.

I cleared my throat. “I need a favor.”

There was a long pause. Then, “Where are you?”

“I’m in London,” I admitted. “Why?”

“Oh, well, I was just wondering why you were calling me at *five o’clock in the fucking morning* for a damn favor, Greyson. You’re in London, so I’m guessing you were wide awake, but I have to ask—do you even understand what time zones are?”

“Kendall—”

“I’m going to hang up,” she snapped. “You can call me back when I’m not…otherwise occupied.”

The thought came immediately, and it filled my head: Kendall, naked in bed on the other side of this call.

My body flared with heat, but I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the thought—and the image. What the fuck was wrong with me?

“I’ll talk to you later—”

“Kendall, *wait*,” I said urgently. “It’s important. I wouldn’t have called if it wasn’t.”

She gave a long-suffering sigh. “Fine,” she finally said. “What is it? I’m listening.”

There was the murmur of a male voice, and Kendall laughed softly. I couldn’t hear the joke, but I didn’t like it.

“Stop it,” she said, her voice muffled, clearly speaking to the other man. “*Shh*. I’m on the phone.”

I took a breath. This whole thing was so fucking weird. Why had I had phone calls with her like this *twice*? What compelled her to answer the phone while she was with some guy? I couldn’t stop thinking about her, possibly naked, in bed with another guy, and here I was asking her for a fucking favor. This trip was just getting weirder and weirder.

“I’m calling to ask you if you can pull some strings for me.”

“What kind of strings?” she asked.

“Call in some favors,” I suggested. “Just do whatever you have to do to get MI9 off my fucking back.”

**Episode 5540**

I stared at the door. Hard. I stared until my eyes began to burn, like just looking at it would bring Greyson back to me.

I wanted to believe him—that me kissing Xavier hadn’t been a big deal. But I knew Greyson, and I knew that it *was* a big deal.

The only thing I was grateful for was that Ava hadn’t been here when it had happened. If she had been, I had a feeling she would have shifted and ripped out my throat before anyone could have stopped her.

I dropped my head into my hands, feeling miserable. This wasn’t right. I should be feeling happy and triumphant. Xavier had gotten his wolf back! That was a huge accomplishment. But it was also only half of what we’d all set out to do, and somehow I felt worse than when this whole thing started. Everything felt awful, like my whole world was about to crumble around me.

If only I could have kissed Xavier in private. Walked into the hallway or—hell, even gone into the bathroom for a moment. Not that I wouldn’t have told Greyson what happened, but at least he wouldn’t have had to *watch* as it happened. It had hurt him. Really hurt him. I knew he was struggling without his wolf, and I had seen the added pain in his eyes. He had told me that he was okay and that I shouldn’t worry about it, but I knew him too well to believe he was really shrugging it off.

So I was going to do something about it. I was going to make it up to him.

Somehow.

I sighed as I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. I was uneasy, and it wasn’t just about that kiss. That kiss had done more than bring Xavier’s wolf back to him. It had brought Xavier back to me. Neither of us had said anything, but I didn’t doubt that we both felt it. And if I closed my eyes, I could bring it all back again. The softness of Xavier’s lips, the heat of his mouth, the intensity of his hands on me, pulling me closer and closer. And the connection that flowed like white-hot electricity between us. My heart raced just thinking about it.

“*Stop*,” I said aloud, getting to my feet. I couldn’t do this—I could not go there. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Breathing like I’d been running, I turned and looked at the door. I wondered how long Greyson would be. He’d taken his phone with him, like he had to make a phone call, though why he felt like he couldn’t make one here didn’t make a lot of sense. He’d said he’d be right back. And I’d told him not to be gone long. But it felt like he’d been gone a long time. And the longer he was gone, the lonelier I felt.

I wished I had Lola here with me. I could use someone to talk to—although Lola might not be the perfect choice for this moment. She might not fully grasp the situation I had found myself in. Lola could be very…*opinionated* about certain things. And Xavier was definitely one of those things.

Greyson too. I didn’t know that Lola had forgiven Greyson for kissing Kendall, even if I had.

Really, there was nothing to forgive. I didn’t love it, but I knew it had happened because of the drugs at the festival and the confusion of the wolf swap. But it was hard to convince Lola of that. It was hard to convince her of anything, once she got an idea into her head.

No, I wanted to talk to someone who wouldn’t judge me or my mates.

I glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It might be too early to call Portland, but maybe not too early for Duluth. So I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed my mom’s number.

“Cali?” my dad said, answering after the first ring.

My throat tightened when I heard his voice. It was filled with love and concern, and I knew it had been too long since I spoke to him.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“No,” I said in a quavering voice. “No, Dad. I screwed something up.”

“Oh, sweetheart, trying to take a breath,” he said, his voice soothing. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

I took a shaking breath. “I hurt Greyson.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” he asked, sounding confused. “Physically? Emotionally?”

“I had to kiss Xavier, right in front of him. And now everything is a mess,” I said as tears started coursing down my face.

My dad was quiet for a moment. I closed my eyes and pictured myself as a small child. I had been a jumpy kid—even the sound of car door slamming shut scared me. So whenever there was a thunderstorm outside, or I’d had a particularly scary nightmare, I’d run to their room. Maybe it was because I had grown up as an only child, but my father had always welcomed me in, wrapping his arms around me and cuddling me close until I fell back asleep. I could remember this as if it was yesterday—the warm dark of their room, my mom’s quiet breathing, and the feeling that I was completely, totally safe with them.

My world had seemed so small and safe then. I wished I could go back to that time, or somehow recapture that feeling.

“Dad?” I asked, my voice cracking. “Are you still there?”

“I’m here.” My dad cleared his throat. “You know, Caliana, I might not know a lot of things, but I am certain about a few things. And one of those things is that Greyson loves you, honey. He loves you with all his heart.”

“I know,” I said, wiping the tears as they fell down my face.

“And I’ve also lived long enough to know that the key to love is understanding, forgiveness—when it’s warranted—and most of all, patience in all things.”

“Yeah, that sounds right,” I said, my voice hitching. I sat back down on the bed and used the edge of the pillowcase to wipe my eyes.

“I’m not going to pretend like I know what you’re going through, but I can imagine that being in love with two werewolves is probably overwhelming at times. And it sounds like this is one of those times.”

“Yeah, it is,” I agreed.

“You know, I had the chance to spend some time with Greyson, and I have a feeling he is a lot more understanding and patient than you might realize. I know you would never do anything to intentionally hurt him, and Greyson knows that too. We both know that, because that’s who you are, Caliana.”

Tears spilled over again, and I nodded, though I knew he couldn’t see me. I wanted to believe my dad. I wanted to believe him so much.

“I think you should talk with Greyson,” he advised. “You should tell him how you feel. See what he says.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks, Dad. I’ll try that,” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady.

“That’s all that you need to do. The rest of it will come naturally.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I took a deep breath, feeling my shoulders start to unknit. Maybe my dad was right. In any case, talking couldn’t hurt.

“And you’ll call me if you need to talk to me, or if you need anything else?” he asked.

“I will.”

“You promise?” he pressed.

I gave a shaky laugh. “I promise.”

“Okay, honey.”

“I’ll talk to you soon, Dad. Tell Mom I said hi—”

“Oh, Cali, that reminds me,” he said. “Do you know why I got a truckload of get-well cards and gifts from your crew team? Someone sent a flower wreath. Do you know what that was about?”

“Oh god,” I said, my stomach sinking. I’d completely forgotten about that. Lola had told the team that my father had fallen off a ladder or something and had been in a coma. But my dad didn’t need to know all that.

“Um…” I smiled at the memory of that particular subterfuge. “They got the idea that you were sick.”

“*Sick?*” My dad sounded shocked. “Why would they think that?”

“No idea. I’ll tell them to stop,” I promised.

“Okay,” he said, still sounding a little baffled. “Thank them for the cards anyway.”

“I will.”

“I’ll talk to you later, Cali. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Dad. Bye.”

I was smiling as I ended the call. I always felt better after I spoke to my parents, and it had felt better just to talk the whole thing out. My dad was right—I just needed to talk to Greyson.

I took a breath as my chest began to loosen up again. But then another thought struck me, and I shuddered. I could try to fix things with Greyson, but what was I going to do about Xavier?

**Episode 5541**

**Xavier**

I hid my shifted hand behind my back, but I didn’t return it to its human form. I didn’t know who the hell this guy was or what he might be capable of, and I wasn’t going to hesitate to attack if he presented a problem. I wouldn’t make the first move. Only if I had to.

But the little guy wasn’t even my biggest concern—I had a much larger problem with what I had just overheard Ava telling him. Why the hell was she telling some stranger about Cali being a Fae? Why was she offering up that information? Didn’t she know how dangerous it could be?

The street was lined with pubs and restaurants, so it was thronged with people passing by, going in and out of the storefronts. This was good for me as I moved quietly closer to where Ava stood with the man, because it allowed me to fade into the background of the pedestrians, and as neither Ava nor the stranger had spotted me, I thought I was doing a decent job of it.

I narrowed my eyes as I watched the stranger lean in closer to Ava. Ava wasn’t tall, but she was nearly as tall as he was. He looked like he was about to say something, but he suddenly stilled, like he sensed something. I was certain it couldn’t be me, but then his eyes slid over Ava’s shoulder and right to me.

Following the guy’s gaze, Ava turned, and her eyes widened with surprise when she saw me.

“Xavier!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

What was *I* doing here? “I was going to ask you the same question. I’ve been looking for you, Ava. What are you doing?” I asked sharply.

She shrugged. “Nothing. I’m just having a conversation with…” She turned to the guy. “What’s your name again?”

I bristled, and as the guy reached into his pocket, I flexed my claws behind my back, ready to strike.

“Just take it real slow, buddy,” I warned him. My whole body felt tense. I didn’t want to get into anything with him on a street crowded with people—witnesses—but I would if I had to.

“Now, now, there’s no need for things to escalate,” the guy said.

“No?” I asked. “And why is that?”

The guy slowly pulled a leather case out of his pocket. He opened it to show a gold-colored badge. “I’m Agent Bacon, with MI9.”

He said this like it was supposed to be explanation enough, but I just stared at him.

“Yeah? And? Is that supposed to impress me or something? Because it doesn’t.”

Agent Bacon shrugged. “I’m just doing my job.”

“And what job is that, exactly?” I snapped. “Harassing tourists? Quite a job you got yourself. You have an academy for that?”

“I’m not harassing anyone,” Bacon insisted.

“We were just talking about the packs back home, Xavier,” Ava said.

“Why?” I asked her sharply.

“Seems like MI9 has an interest in how we do it back home, and I was just trying to explain a few things,” she said.

I shot her a look. *What the fuck are you doing?* I asked her through the mind link.

While my eyes were on Ava, Agent Bacon reached out and put a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“You’re the Samara Alpha, right?”

I glared down at his hand then at him. “What the fuck do you care?” I snarled.

“That’s just part of my job, mate. MI9 simply likes to keep tabs on any visiting Alphas. It’s not personal; it’s just standard protocol.”

I shoved his hand away and took a step closer. I was a good six inches taller than Agent Bacon, and I towered over him. “I don’t give a damn about your protocol, man. We’re not doing anything wrong here, and last time I checked, it wasn’t a crime to be a tourist, so just leave me and my mate alone.”

My eyes flashed dangerously, and Bacon took a step back, holding up his hands in surrender. “It’s like I told you, I’m just here doing my job.”

“Great, so now that your job is done—and you know more than you need to—” I added, shooting an accusatory look at Ava, “you can get the hell out of here.”

Agent Bacon narrowed his eyes, but it was clear he really didn’t want any trouble. “You will be hearing from my supervisors,” he said in what I could only assume was supposed to be a threatening voice. He turned to Ava with a smile. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

I growled at him, and Agent Bacon scampered off.

Alone but for the Londoners walking by on the street, I rounded on Ava, my anger rising. “What the hell?”

“What?” she asked.

I glanced over as a group of tourists gave me a strange look and lowered my voice as I turned back to her. “You told that guy that Cali is Fae? *Why?* You can’t just go around telling people that!”

She gave me a long look, then pointed to my hand. “You’re showing your wolf in public. You sure *that’s* a good idea?”

“Dammit,” I hissed. I’d forgotten about that in the dust-up with Agent Bacon. I quickly shifted my paw back to my human hand. “Don’t try to change the subject. Why did you tell him that?”

“He was asking me a shit-ton of questions,” Ava countered. “What was I supposed to do?”

“You didn’t have to tell him *that*,” I huffed.

She looked up at me, her big blue eyes a mysterious mix of anger and pain. “Why?”

I sighed, and that heavy feeling settled over my chest again. “This is about the kiss, isn’t it?”

Ava didn’t answer. Her eyes stayed steady on me, motionless as stone, as the street moved quickly around us.

I pushed a hand through my hair. She didn’t have to confirm it—I knew this was about the kiss. Of course it was. And as I thought about it, I was feeling the kiss again—the softness of Cali’s lips against mine, the suppleness of her curves, the warmth of her body, and the intoxicating smell of her scent—

*Shit*. I couldn’t do this. I was letting myself get carried away in front of Ava, and that was a shitty thing to do. I had to snap out of it.

So I tried to explain. “I didn’t kiss her in front of you.”

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. “You kissed her, Xavier. You just didn’t want me to see.”

I blew out a breath. I was digging my own grave here—I realized that—but I really did feel like I needed to make her understand. “I did it for a reason, Ava.”

“Right.”

“I did. I thought it would bring my wolf back. And I was right—it did.”

Her eyes grew even more narrow. “Is that right?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, you saw. My wolf is back.”

A cold wind came up, bringing with it the damp, foggy smell of the city. Ava looked away, and I watched as she blinked quickly into the wind.

When she looked back at me, her eyes were bright. “Why didn’t our kiss work?” she asked quietly.

The question hung in the air between us for a long moment.

“How the fuck do I know?” I finally blurted out. “It’s all just a bunch of supernatural bullshit, Ava—you know that as well as I do. How the hell do I know what works or what doesn’t work? I’m just as in the dark about this as you are.”

This did not seem to be the answer she was looking for. She shook her head and turned to walk away.

I groaned in frustration, then started after her.

“Listen,” I said, falling into step next to her, “I know I hurt you by kissing Cali, but what else was I supposed to do? Seriously? What else would you have wanted me to do?”

“Are you serious, Xavier?” she said, looking over at me.

“This whole damn thing is a catch-22, Ava,” I said, shaking my head. “We came all this way to get my wolf back, and now it’s back. You should be fucking happy.”

She turned to look at me, and I could see by the look on her face that she was far from fucking happy.

Shaking her head—and without looking—she stepped out into the street to cross.

“Watch out!” I growled, grabbing her arm and pulling her back onto the curb just as a sleek BMW zoomed past, nearly clipping us both. “God, Ava, you need to be careful.”

She glared at me and pulled her arm roughly from my grasp. “*I’m* not the one who needs to be careful, Xavier. You are.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

Her eyes flashed, and I could see the wolf in them. “You’re playing with fire, Xavier. Only *I’m* not the one who’s going to get burned.”

**Chapter 5542**

**Greyson**

“Kendall?”

She didn’t answer.

Thinking I had dropped the international call, I looked down at my phone, but it still seemed to be connected.

“Kendall, are you there? Can you hear me?”

Finally, I heard her sigh. “Yeah, Greyson, I can hear you, but this really isn’t a great time for me to be talking…business.”

I shifted my shoulders. I really wished I could just call back at another time, but time was of the essence. I needed to just push through, despite how fucking awkward this was. “Yeah, I get that, and I’m sorry, but I wouldn’t have called if I didn’t need your help.”

“What did you do?” she asked.

“I didn’t *do* anything,” I insisted. The fluorescent light over me flickered then turned off.

“Okay, well, you must have done something to draw the attention of…you know, the agency. So, what was it? I can’t help you if you don’t help me,” she said in a mocking voice.

I rolled my eyes. “Nothing. I swear. All I did was come to London to try to get my wolf and Xavier’s wolf back. That’s really it.”

In the background on Kendall’s side, I could hear the murmur of that guy again, then Kendall cleared her throat.

“Grey—” she started, starting to sound annoyed.

“Do not hang up,” I warned.

“*Excuse me?*” she said, and suddenly I could hear the edge in her voice. “You wake *me* up, you need *my* help, and now you’re threatening *me*? Fuck you, Greyson Evers.”

The light above me turned back on, flickering like crazy, making me feel like I was at an ill-attended rave. I ground my teeth, trying to bury the frustration I was feeling at the sound of the guy, knowing he was in her bed, and attempted to sound reasonable when I spoke. “Are you going to help me or not?”

She sighed. “I might be able to make a few calls.”

“Thanks,” I said, relieved as hell. “I appreciate that—”

“I’m not making any promises,” she said quickly, cutting me off. “That’s not how this shit works.”

“Yeah, I got it,” I said. “I understand.”

Then I heard some muffled sounds, there was a thump, like she’d dropped the phone. This was followed by what sounded like the rustling of sheets.

Kendall gave a soft moan, followed by a laugh. “Let me finish!”

“Isn’t that what I’m trying to do?” the male voice said from a distance.

My grip on the phone tightened until the plastic started to crack, and my free hand balled into a tight fist as a surge of jealousy hit me like a sucker punch.

“Sorry about that. Dropped the phone,” Kendall said curtly, picking up the phone again. “Did you get it back?” she asked in a lower voice.

For a moment I wasn’t sure if she was speaking to me or the guy in bed with her, but then I realized she was asking about my wolf. She had lowered her voice to keep the guy in bed with her from overhearing.

A muscle in my jaw twitched. “Not yet. I’m still working on it.”

“Well, good luck,” she said. And then the line went dead.

I looked down at the phone, but the screen was dark. My jaw was clenched so damn tight, it hurt. The pain was moving up from my jaw into my head, making my skull ache.

I put my phone in my pocket and rubbed my temples, trying to alleviate the pain. But that was a bad idea because as soon as I closed my eyes, all I saw was Kendall. Kendall and her purple, sparkling eyes. Kendall smiling at me. Kendall kissing me. Kendall naked in bed with some random asshole.

I shook my head, literally trying to shake the images from my brain, but it didn’t work. Why the hell was I thinking about her? And why did I care who was in her bed?

But then I remembered the moan. I could hear it, playing over and over in my head. That damn moan. *Kendall’s* moan.

Fuck.

I just couldn’t figure out why any of this was actually *bothering* me.

She was an adult, she was single, and she could do whatever the hell she wanted.

The important thing—the only thing—was that she’d agreed to help get MI9 off my back. That’s why I’d called, and that’s the promise I’d secured from her. More or less.

Nothing else mattered. Except for Cali.

Leaving the stairway, I headed back into the lobby. I stopped for a moment and scanned the place, but it was largely empty. There were a few people lounging on the couches or sitting at the bar, and none of them looked remotely like they were watching me. Nor did any of them fit Xavier’s annoyingly vague description of the MI9 agent he’d claimed to have seen.

He and I were going to have to have a conversation about appropriate identification. Clothing, tattoos, hair color, height, weight, or other specific identifying characteristics. Really anything more than *some guy.*

I shook my head. Maybe there was an online tutorial I could get him to watch.

Taking the main staircase, I headed back to our floor and to our room, but I stopped outside the door just before I reached for the handle. Cali was going to ask where I had been when I walked back inside—so what was I going to tell her?

Cali had been worried about the threat from MI9 as well, and I knew she would be relieved to hear that we weren’t going to have to worry about them anymore, but I had been spectacularly vague when I’d left the room to take the phone call. I didn’t think I could get away with that forever, however. And I had no idea how I was going to explain how we were getting out of hot water with MI9 without exposing Kendall as my connection through MIB?

Cali was going to ask—of course she was—and I didn’t want to lie to her. Not about Kendall. And especially not now. Cali already knew about the kiss—what would she think if she knew I had called Kendall for help? I could try to explain, but I didn’t think I could figure out how without making things even messier than they already were.

I ran a frustrated hand through my hair as I thought my options through. I really hated to do it, but maybe I could just *omit* the information about the call altogether.

I wanted to tell her the news about MI9, but maybe I could just tell her that I’d gone downstairs to the lobby to check it out—to make sure we weren’t being watched by MI9. That was actually true. So it wasn’t *exactly* dishonest. Though it wasn’t exactly honest, either.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed the door open.

Inside, I found Cali where I had left her, sitting on the bed, staring out the window.

She turned when I stepped inside and shut the door, and I watched as her expression shifted from one of worry to a warm smile. “There you are,” she said softly.

All the trepidation I’d felt in the hallway a moment before melted away in an instant. When Cali smiled at me, she looked more beautiful than ever.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, frowning slightly.

I nodded, though I was suddenly so distracted by her that for a moment I truly struggled to form a coherent thought.

“Y-Yeah,” I stammered. “Fine. I’m fine. I was just…sorry for taking so long. I was just down in the lobby, and I—”

She had gotten to her feet and walked over to me, then ended my sentence abruptly when she kissed me.

I leaned into the kiss, hungrier for it than I had realized. I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck and pulled her close, more roughly than I’d intended. I just loved her so damn much.

Her body slid against mine, and she made a little moaning hum in the back of her throat as my tongue pushed through her lips.

I pulled slightly away and looked down at her. “What’s this about?”

She shrugged, looking up at me. “You’re back. That’s all that matters.”

She was absolutely right. We were together, and that was all that mattered. I wrapped my arms around her and swung her around, pressing her up against the wall and kissing her with so much force her feet lifted off the ground. She wrapped them around my waist, and I cupped my hands around her perfect ass. I loved Cali so much, and I knew I would do anything to keep her safe, *without* lying to her.

As I kissed her, I resolved to do just that—I needed to find a way to tell Cali about Kendall’s connection to MIB in a way that didn’t put Cali’s safety in jeopardy.

**Episode 5543**

**Artemis**

My interest instantly piqued, I looked from the Kastian to the assassin, then back again. “Wait, what did he say about my father?”

My heart thrummed in my chest as I waited for an answer. I didn’t know what to make of this—any of this. This guy was an assassin. He’d attacked me in my tent the night before. He’d tried to kill me. Could anything he said be trusted?

As I took a step closer, Kastian gave the guy’s shoulder another shake. He was acting so weird, like he and the assassin were two old friends getting a pint of ale at a tavern or something.

“We had a very interesting conversation, didn’t we?” Kastian said, giving the guy’s chest a slap that was just a bit too hard to be jovial.

The guy coughed, spitting out a spray of blood, and glared around, his poisonous gaze landing on me. “The traitor deserved to die, just like his daughter. We don’t need the false peace of the nobles. We know trash peddlers when we see them.”

“Very charming,” Kastian muttered, eyeing the guy warily.

“Kadmos was a monster,” the assassin went on, ignoring him. “Unnatural. No Fae should have been capable of doing what he did. The fact that he had any offspring at all is a threat to all Fae—”

“That’s quite enough of that,” Kastian said, straightening and punching him again, effectively cutting off the guy’s furious speech.

I took a startled step back. I was shaken by the assassin’s words and tried to think about what they might mean—especially the part about Kadmos being a threat and what he could do being unnatural. Though, when I thought about it, I figured that probably had to do with his manipulation magic—the magical ability I’d inherited from him.

I cast a glance at Kastian. I wondered if anyone here suspected I was capable of doing that kind of magic. There was no reason they should. I’d never made a show of it in the Fae court—not really.

The effects of the manipulation magic could be unpredictable, and it was a morally and ethically complicated conundrum that I didn’t want to be a part of figuring out. I would sooner wade into quicksand than try to parse those nuances. I knew it was that magical ability that had contributed to my father’s death. It was because of his abilities that he was thought to be too powerful, and that he could rule over everything, so even his attempt to forge a peaceful union between the warring factions by marrying my mother had been seen as a power play.

It had been the danger of what he could do—despite the fact that he was not actively using his magic to influence anyone—that had driven those responsible to try to kill him and also his child.

Me.

The assassin leaned over to spit out more blood—and, from the looks of it, a tooth or two. I had just opened my mouth to ask a question, when someone grasped my arm firmly and hauled me from Kastian’s tent.

“That is *enough*!”

I turned to see Adair at my side, looking furious. Tabitha was next to him, also obviously upset. Celeste followed us, and when we came back out into the cold morning air, Adair rounded on me.

“What do you think you’re doing, Artemis?” he demanded.

I goggled at him, shocked. “What do I think *I’m* doing? You mean besides being a victim of an attack? Nothing! I didn’t orchestrate any of this! I was attacked last night, Adair.” I pointed to the tent. “That guy tried to kill me!”

Adair’s face was flushed with fury. “If that Fae is part of the Winding Thorn—”

Celeste let out a high-pitched laugh. “*What*? The *Winding Thorn*? Come now, Adair, you’ve been gone for too long. Those extremists have been gone for a long time. They are no longer a threat to anyone.”

I looked at Celeste. “Gone a long time?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Like, around twenty-four years, give or take?”

Celeste’s brow wrinkled. “Well…yes, actually. Give or take.”

“Interesting. And now that I’m back, so are they, which means they never disappeared at all. They just went into hiding,” I pointed out. “They tried to kill me as a baby, and now they’re back and trying to kill me again. As we saw last night. So, who are they?”

Adair glanced at Celeste. They didn’t speak, but the look that passed between them was communication enough.

Adair sighed. “The Winding Thorn is a faction of the Fae who don’t like the courts—not that I blame them for that. They think the people of the court are unconcerned with the concerns of the Fae people, but their idea of an alternative is to have no order at all, and to kill without consequence. Their actions impact all the Fae in our world, but they take no responsibility for the effect of their extreme actions on the people they purport to protect.” He shook his head. “If it were up to the Winding Thorn, the courts would be completely destroyed, and they would run things in its place.”

“So…democracy?” Tabitha asked quietly. She shrugged. “Representation of the people? That doesn’t sound so bad…”

Adair shook his head grimly. “Maybe not so bad in the way you’re thinking of it, Tabitha, but I don’t think the Winding Thorn would be too concerned with free and fair elections or sending the best fit for ruling responsibly. It would just be swapping out one bad ruling party for another one just as bad. Hardly an upgrade.”

I nodded, taking this in. “So, they’re revolutionaries,” I said, trying to work it all out.

Adair gave me a hollow smile. “I’m sure they’d like to be thought of as such. Mostly they just want to burn it all down.”  
 “Okay,” I said. It wasn’t much information, but it was more than I had known before. I turned to go back into Kastian’s tent. I had more questions for the would-be assassin.

But two sets of hands clasped my wrists, and I looked down to see Adair and Celeste looking at me with alarm.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Celeste asked.

“To get answers,” I said, shaking them both off. I knew a little bit more about the group, but it was obvious I wasn’t going to get any useful information from Celeste, who was apparently pretending as though the Winding Thorn no longer existed and was definitely not a threat. Despite the fact that a member of said group had just tried to kill me. And not for the first time.

“I don’t think so,” Celeste said, shaking her head.

I narrowed my eyes. “I’ve got questions, and if I’m going to get answers, then I need to talk directly to someone who might have them,” I said and pointed into the tent. “And that guy is right in there.

Without waiting for a response—or for permission—I pushed into the tent. But I stopped when I stepped inside and realized that both Adair and Celeste had followed me in.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“You’re not doing this alone,” Adair informed me.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my temper. “I have to speak to this guy alone,” I said.

“Why?” he asked.

I glanced over my shoulder at the assassin then back at Adair. “I think he’ll listen to me, but I have to do this carefully. I don’t want to overwhelm him, and I think if we all come at him at once, he’s going to find that threatening and shut down. Okay?”

Neither he nor Celeste looked happy about it, but when I stepped forward again, I was relieved that they didn’t follow.

I closed the tent flap behind me—shutting out Adair and Celeste—and stepped toward the assassin.

Kastian had disappeared during my conversation with Adair and Celeste, so now there was no one in the tent except for me and my would-be assassin.

My heart rate ticked up as I looked at the guy. I knew I wasn’t in danger as Kastian had restrained the guy in a chair, but I was still shaky from the attack the night before, and I had to fight through some panic rising up in my chest.

I took another step in, trying to look braver than I felt.

The guy eyed me warily. “You’ll get nothing from me, you sick little abomination. Just stay away from me.”

I smiled. In a twisted way, this insult had the effect of eliminating my fear, and I suddenly felt better.

I took another step. “You will answer me with the truth when I ask.”

He scowled at me. “I’d rather die.”

I moved closer. “Well, you may get that chance, too, but first I’m going to get the answers I want by using the very abomination you speak of.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I watched his eyes go wide with terror.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed nervously. “Your foul magic won’t work on me!” he said, but his voice trembled, giving away his fear.

I grabbed his chin and forced his head up, so we were looking each other right in the eye. “Let’s find out.”

**Episode 5544**

My breath caught in my throat as Greyson moved his mouth down, kissing his way down to my jaw, then to my ear, then to a spot just at the base of my throat.

I hadn’t *planned* on kissing Greyson. I’d been so worried about him when he’d left. He had said he was just making a call, but I’d seen his face after I kissed Xavier, and I knew seeing that had devastated him. So, I’d just been sitting here, feeling so alone and anxious and guilty—and then he’d walked back in. Greyson had walked in the door, and I’d looked at him, and seen his shoulders nearly filling the doorway, and I knew it—he was all I wanted. He was everything I craved.

And when I kissed him, he’d quickly made it clear that he felt the exact same way.

There was a desperate kind of hunger as we pawed at each other, touching and tasting and stroking. I knew this trip to London hadn’t gone the way Greyson had wanted it to. Hell—he hadn’t even really wanted to come to London at all. All he wanted was his wolf back, but his wolf was still out there somewhere. I knew that was driving him crazy, but as I kissed him, I wanted him to know—in no uncertain terms—that I was here for him.

As Greyson pushed me against the door, lifting me off the ground and running his hands up my thighs, I was suddenly reminded of the kiss I’d just shared with Xavier. I grabbed the back of Greyson’s head and recaptured his mouth, kissing him harder and deeper than ever, as a pang of guilt speared my heart. Was that why I was doing this? Was this my way of dealing with the guilt of Greyson having to witness that kiss?

Greyson had said it didn’t bother him, that he’d understood why I’d done it, but I wasn’t convinced.

I loved Greyson, though, and I didn’t need any excuse to want to kiss him.

Besides, Xavier had kissed Ava in front of me, and it hadn’t brought his wolf back. Swift had instructed Xavier to kiss me. That was why I’d volunteered to try.

Greyson understood that…right?

I wasn’t looking for it, but thoughts of Xavier’s kiss kept swimming through my head. The kiss had started tentatively enough—and that’s how I’d meant to keep it—but then something happened. It had felt as if Xavier and I were back together again, like no time had passed, and our separation had never happened. Kissing him had stirred up all kinds of emotions for me, and now I didn’t know if I could bottle them up again.

But I didn’t want to think about any of that. Not now. The important thing was that it had worked. The kiss had brought Xavier’s wolf back. It was just too bad that Greyson had to witness it. Not that I would have kept it from him if he hadn’t been there. I would never keep something like that from Greyson…

My spinning thoughts disappeared, and my mind went blank as Greyson pressed me harder against the door, his hips pushing against mine, his lips grazing that sensitive spot just behind my ear.

I dropped my head back and moaned, and, encouraged by this, he turned me around and carried me over to our bed.

The worries that had just been racing through my mind about Xavier and the kiss and everything that went along with it were fully gone now, vanished like smoke. As Greyson laid me down on the bed, I was completely overwhelmed with the sensation of his kisses and the pressure of his body pressing me down into the mattress.

He pulled away, and as he hovered over me, I could see the hungry, wolf-like look in his eyes.

He pulled his shirt off, then unclasped his belt and jeans before turning to my clothes, nearly ripping them off in his hurry.

I helped him by pulling down my own jeans while he practically demolished my bra trying to remove it.

Once it was gone, he cupped my breasts in each hand and ran his thumbs over my nipples until they hardened to peaks. I dropped my head back against the mattress and moaned as pleasure coursed through me. I gripped Greyson’s forearms, my nails burrowing into his flesh. I was burning now, and I could see sweat beginning to shimmer on Greyson’s bare chest as he hovered over me.

I arched up, desperate for him to—

“Please, just touch me,” I panted. I needed to feel him—and when his finger entered me and slid gently over my folds, my eyes squeezed shut. “God, yes, Greyson. Keep going,” I hissed.

He did keep going, this time slipping another finger into my sex and gathering my wetness. He parted me and rubbed in small circles.

I could feel him growing hard against me, and I reached for him as my pleasure grew.

He moaned as I stroked his cock. “Fuck, love. That feels good.”

“I need you,” I said, breathless.

I picked up the pace, gripping tightly, and after just a moment he shoved my knees apart and thrust himself into me with so much force that I gasped.

“Oh my god!” I gasped out, bracing myself against the headboard.

He filled me completely, and I was lost in the feel of it. The smell of him, the taste of his kiss in my mouth, the burning of his touch as he grasped my hips and thrust again and again, driving himself in.

“Greyson,” I begged, “don’t stop. *Please*.”

This was what I had wanted from the moment he’d walked in—from the moment I’d stepped away from Xavier’s kiss. I wanted to be reminded of this union of my body and soul with Greyson—my mate and my lover.

My orgasm built within me, like a tide determined to reach the shore. My breath shortened, and I wrapped my legs around him, holding on tight.

“Oh god,” I moaned.

“Come for me,” Greyson growled as my climax broke over me, and I rolled my hips beneath him. “Come on, love. Come for me.”

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Afterward, my legs were so shaky, Greyson had to hold me up in the shower, but I was feeling perfectly normal by the time Greyson and I walked into the lobby, hand in hand.

As we walked in, I watched Greyson surveying the place, taking in every person there. So, I looked around too, wondering if we were being watched.

Greyson looked down at me. “I’m working on getting MI9 to stop hounding us.”

I raised my eyebrows but didn’t respond. It would be great if they would leave us alone, but I wasn’t sure if there was anything Greyson could do. “I know you know people, Greyson,” I started, “but I just want you to be careful.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that if you ruffle the wrong feathers, we might be looking at even bigger consequences,” I said.

He nodded, his eyes shifting away from mine. “I’ll be careful.”

I frowned. There was something odd about his response. It was almost a little evasive. Maybe he just didn’t want me to worry.

But there was no chance of that. I was going to worry no matter what, and I was about to ask him for more information when something at the door caught my eye, and I turned to see Xavier walk into the lobby.

Immediately, I felt my face flush, and I just prayed that Greyson wouldn’t notice.

Xavier did a quick scan of the lobby, and when he saw us, he strode over. I knew he had seen both Greyson and me, but as he neared us, his eyes were locked only on me.

My eyes went immediately to his lips, and I felt my cheeks flush even hotter. I looked quickly away, embarrassed and flustered. What the hell was going on with me?

“Where’s Ava?” Greyson asked.

“Don’t worry about her,” Xavier said. “She’s off seeing sights.”

I had to wonder if that was true. The last time I saw Ava, she’d stormed out of the hotel room because her kiss hadn’t been able to bring back Xavier’s wolf. And—worse—he’d been about to kiss me. I couldn’t be sure, but sightseeing hadn’t seemed to be on her mind. More likely murder.

But I kept that to myself.

“I guess you’re still wolfless,” Xavier said dismissively.

A muscle in Greyson’s jaw flexed as he gritted his teeth. He looked pissed, but he glanced quickly around, clearly not wanting to make a scene in the crowded lobby. “Why don’t you put your wolf to use and try to find mine. Remember? What you came here to do?”

Xavier scoffed. “I already did. It’s not my fault your wolf went AWOL.”

Greyson took a threatening step toward his brother, and when he spoke, it was more snarl than speech. “Are you going to help me or not?”

**Episode 5545**

**Xavier**

“Maybe we should take this outside,” Greyson said tersely, looking around.

I followed his gaze and saw that our conversation was drawing more than a few stares from the other hotel guests gathered in the lobby.

“Fine,” I agreed and led the way. Once outside, I turned to face him. “We need to figure out what our next steps should be.”

“We find my fucking wolf,” he snapped back.

I swallowed back a sharp answer to that. Greyson was pissed—that much was clear—but I supposed I couldn’t blame him for that. I even tried to cut him some slack for being more tightly wound than usual. He was not only missing his own wolf, but he was missing a wolf completely, and that sucked. I knew better than anyone what it was like to be without a wolf, and it was rough.

“Okay, yeah, but London is a big place, so it would probably help if we were strategic,” I pointed out. “You’ve been here longer than I have. Do you know where to start looking?”

Greyson snorted. “We’ve been here for, like, three days, man.”

I rolled my eyes, and even Cali was looking at him anxiously. Clearly Greyson was not in the mood to be helpful.

“Shit,” he said, patting his pockets.

“What is it?” Cali asked, looking over him.

“I forgot my phone in the room. I’m going to go grab it,” he says, turning around and heading back into the hotel.

This left me alone with Cali, and as she turned to look at me, an awkward silence fell between us.

I cracked my knuckles and glanced around, then let my gaze rest on her again. I wondered if she was thinking of the kiss we’d shared. I wondered if she’d sensed how different it had felt. She knew it had brought my wolf back—but I didn’t know what more that was going to mean for us.

Cali cleared her throat, clearly feeling as strange and uncomfortable as I did. “So…”

“So,” I said, with a shrug.

“Ava’s sightseeing?”

I had forgotten I’d even told that hasty lie. “Uh, yeah.”

She nodded, clearly not believing me. “Are you worried about her?”

“Ava can take care of herself,” I said automatically.

This was objectively true. Ava could take care of herself. And I’d been working hard to tell myself that her absence—and her anger—wasn’t bothering me. But the fact was that I *was* worried. Ava was upset, and there was no telling what she might do.

And that only reminded me of Ava’s conversation with Agent Bacon, which I hadn’t yet mentioned to Cali or Greyson.

“I wasn’t talking about her being out and walking around,” Cali said, looking concerned. “I think she was really upset about…the kiss.”

“She’ll get over it,” I scoffed, the accuracy of her question making me uncomfortable.

Cali looked at me, her eyes wide. “Yeah, but Xavier, what if she doesn’t?”

I sighed and pushed a hand through my hair. What *if* she didn’t? What would that mean? I thought about what she’d said to me before she’d taken off, disappearing into the streets of London—warning me about who was going to get burned. I still didn’t know what she’d meant by that. I think the message had been intentionally cryptic, and it had been bothering me like a rock in my shoe ever since.

But when I looked at Cali, I forced a smile. “I think it’ll be fine. We just have to figure out a way to get Greyson’s wolf back. Once we do that, I’m sure everything else will work itself out.” I was trying to sound as convincing as I could, though I wasn’t really thinking about finding Greyson’s wolf. How could I, when my eyes kept straying down to Cali’s lips? Greyson’s wolf be damned—all I could think about was what it had felt like to kiss Cali, and how much I wanted to do it again.

Kissing Cali had been amazing—that hadn’t been a surprise. But that hadn’t been just *any* kiss. The feelings kissing her had evoked in me had been so unexpected, I wanted to do it again. And not just to have an excuse to kiss her again, but to see if that rush of feelings had been some kind of a fluke. Some kind of strange anomaly brought on by the weird, supernatural circumstances associated with my wolf and its return.

I mean, it probably wouldn’t hurt to try, right? All it would take would be one kiss to know for sure.

But that could be dangerous. That kiss upstairs had been explosive enough. Greyson was pissed, and I didn’t even know whereAva was at the moment because of it. So maybe it would make more sense to just ask Cali if she had noticed anything different about that kiss. I didn’t know if she’d answer, but it was worth a try. I had just opened my mouth to ask when Greyson strode through the lobby doors toward us, his phone in hand.

“Okay, we probably do need a plan,” Greyson said. Apparently, his walk back to his room had brought him back to his senses.

“Ya think?” I muttered, annoyed at being interrupted.

He ignored me. “I’m thinking we should probably find Ava. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover, and Ava has her wolf. The two of you working together will make it easier to track my wolf down.”

“Nothing is easy with Ava,” I said with a laugh that turned into a sigh, but I figured that Greyson did have a point. Ava was an excellent tracker. “But I’m not sure she’ll be willing to help.”

“Why not?” Greyson asked.

I shot Cali a look as I thought about how Ava and I had left things when she’d walked away from me. “I’m just not sure she will,” I said evasively.

“Have you tried calling her?” Cali asked quietly. She could clearly read between the lines to understand everything I wasn’t saying about Ava’s absence.

“I really doubt she’d answer,” I said. “But I can try texting.”

I pulled my phone out and shot off a text.

*Where are you?*

I was certain she was going to straight-up ignore me, so I was surprised when I saw the three bubbles appear below my message, a sign that she was responding.

Then—an instant later—they disappeared again.

Dammit.

Then: *At the Tower of London. Lots of torture devices on display. Really inspiring.*

I grimaced and slipped my phone back into my pocket. “We should probably just start looking without Ava for the moment.”

Greyson didn’t look happy, but he nodded.

I took a deep breath and looked around, taking in the bustling London street. Despite my worry about Ava and the confusion of my feelings after that kiss with Cali, I was actually feeling pretty good. I felt a hell of a lot more like myself than I had since I’d gotten back from the Fae world. Hell, I felt better than I’d felt since I’d left for the Fae world. That place was no picnic.

I knew how much I’d hated having Greyson’s wolf in me, but having my own wolf back made me realize just how *much* I’d missed it, and how much it really was a part of me.

Cali looked thoughtfully at Greyson. “Do you think there’s somewhere your wolf might like to go?” she asked.

Greyson shrugged. “I really don’t know.”

“Maybe somewhere it would seek out others like it?” she went on.

“There are other werewolves in London, but I doubt there are any in the same situation Greyson’s in,” I pointed out.

Greyson rewarded me for this comment with a glare. Then he looked back at Cali. “You might be right; wolves naturally find packs.”

“I really doubt your wolf is going to join another pack, Greyson,” I scoffed dismissively. “Especially here.”

“Why do you say that?” Cali wondered.

“Think about how any of our packs would respond if some random wolf showed up at our pack houses,” I said.

“I guess that’s true,” Cali said slowly.

“Yeah, exactly. And add to that Greyson’s wolf being an Alpha. I really doubt the presence of a foreign Alpha is going to be met with open arms by any pack.”

That made me think about my brief conversation with Agent Bacon, and how he’d explained that MI9’s policy was to keep an eye on foreign Alphas. He said it was done to avoid trouble with domestic packs, which indicated that someone had caused trouble at some point in the past, and they’d had to come up with a policy to fix it.

Cali looked up from her phone. “What about somewhere where Greyson’s wolf would feel more at home?”

Greyson snorted. “You mean Oregon?”

Cali smiled and held up her phone. We looked at the screen, which was a map of London.

“No, not Oregon. Maybe more like the London Zoo?”

**Episode 5546**

**Greyson**

I held Cali’s hand as we made our way through the bustling streets toward the train—the guy behind the front desk at the hotel had called it the Tube.

When we reached the station, Cali pulled away and stepped over to check the map.

Xavier kept his eyes on her as she walked away, and when she was out of earshot, he turned to me. “So, I talked to that guy I clocked in the lobby. I was right; he was MI9.”

“What?” I asked, astonished. “Are you sure?”

“The guy showed me his badge, so it was kind of hard to miss.”

“What did he want?”

Xavier looked frustrated. “He said he was just keeping an eye on me. He said he did it with all foreign Alphas.”

“Yeah, I heard something similar.” I said, shaking my head. “He came up to you?”  
 “Ava was talking to him,” Xavier said. “I overheard her telling this guy—Agent Bacon, if you can believe it—that Cali’s a Fae. He was pretty interested to hear that.”

“*What?*” I snapped. “Are you kidding me? Why did she tell him that?”

“Hell if I know.”

“What the fuck, man?” I asked.

He looked annoyed. “I know your natural instinct is to blame me for this, Greyson, but I’m just as mad about it as you are. I don’t know why she told him. She says he was asking a bunch of questions. I think she told him because she was pissed.”

I glared at my brother, thinking of the kiss Cali had given him to draw his wolf back. Yeah, big fucking surprise Ava was pissed. I wasn’t exactly thrilled myself, and I’d had to watch it happen.

Sure, that kiss had worked, but at what cost?

I gave my head a shake. No, I couldn’t let myself go there. Xavier had his wolf back, so the kiss had been necessary, and it hadn’t been anyone’s fault. Like my own kiss with Kendall.

Cali had understood and accepted that no one had been at fault in that situation either. At least I think she had. But it had been the drugs that had created the situation where I’d kissed Kendall, not some hidden desire I had for her.

And then I thought of Kendall’s moan.

Shit.

The sound of it replayed in my head, and I felt a wave of heat washing over me.

What the fuck was that?

“I think I know which way to go,” Cali said as she walked back over to us, interrupting my unbidden and unwelcome thoughts. She smiled. “Are you ready?”

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The day was sunny and almost warm, so there were a lot of people out. As we headed toward the train, the platform was crowded with people all wearing matching jerseys. They must have been coming back from a football match, and they’d clearly had a lot to drink. As we rounded a group, a knot of men began fighting, jostling each other and yelling.

Cali looked up in alarm, and Xavier put his arm around her and pulled her away, shielding her from the rowdy group.

He let her go quickly, and Cali stepped away from him, but I narrowed my eyes.

Once on the train, we stood near the doors, and when the train stopped suddenly, Xavier reached out for Cali’s arm, steadying her so she wouldn’t stumble from the jolt.

Something was going on. Xavier’s behavior toward Cali seemed to have changed.

Or was I just imagining it?

It might have been nothing. Xavier had his wolf back now, and he was probably only acting the way he used to—that’s why he seemed more protective of Cali, the way he kept putting himself between her and any stranger that stepped near her on the train.

Even when we got off the train and started walking toward the zoo, he reached out and stopped her from crossing the street, waiting until there was a break in traffic.

It was…odd. Not odd that Xavier was doing it, but these were things that *I* normally did for Cali.

I supposed I was distracted by the lack of my own wolf. Not having it with me was throwing me off and making it hard to concentrate. I tried not to dwell on the injustice of the situation—how Xavier had his wolf back because of my hard work, while I did not have mine. I just tried to concentrate on getting my own wolf back. I knew that once I did, everything would go back to normal.

At least, as normal as things ever were between the three of us.

When we got to the zoo, I paid for my ticket and Cali’s, leaving Xavier to pay for his own. He didn’t seem to like that, but it was time to put an end to whatever was going on between him and Cali.

“When do you think Ava will cool down?” I asked Xavier as we walked in, trying to divert his attention away from Cali.

“Who knows?” he said, looking annoyed.

“Have you heard anything else from her?” I asked.

“Nope,” he said, still being frustratingly vague.

I ground my teeth. I didn’t know why Xavier was acting so irritated all of a sudden, but we were going to need Ava around if we were going to track my wolf.

Cali looked wistfully around. “I wish we had time to actually explore the zoo. I did some research on the way over here, and there’s so much to see here. They have two Sumatran tigers and three cubs. I’d love to see them. And they have a butterfly conservatory that’s supposed to be really beautiful.”

I smiled at her and let my mind drift for a moment, thinking about what this trip was supposed to be. Originally—back when I’d first booked the tickets—I’d meant it to be a romantic getaway for Cali and me. Not some desperate wolf chase with my brother along as an annoying third wheel.

“Let’s go check out the gorillas,” Xavier said, pointing to the sign indicating their sanctuary. He shook his head. “Honestly, now that I’ve got my wolf back, I feel like I could go head-to-head with a silverback. I feel amazing.”

I had to fight not to roll my eyes. It was like the guy was a teenager who had just hit puberty and gotten his ability to shift for the first time.

As we walked into the zoo, I took Cali’s hand. “I know this isn’t the trip we planned, but I promise, I’ll make it up to you. Next time, it’ll just be the two of us,” I said in a voice just loud enough so Xavier could hear me. “Pick any zoo in the world, and I’ll take you there.”

Cali smiled up at me. “Great. I can’t wait to start looking into zoos around the world.”

Walking behind us, Xavier snorted.

I shot him an icy glare. I couldn’t believe he was acting like such a petulant child. I shook my head—I hoped I got my fucking wolf back soon so we could all go home. Or I could kick his ass. Whichever I needed to do first.

Cali looked around. “This place is really big. It might help if we decided where to look first.” She looked over at me. “Is there any animal your wolf might feel…I don’t know, safer around?”

“I’d start with the monkeys,” Xavier said with a grin. “Or the warthogs. Any of those around here?”

I ignored him and stepped over to the map nearby. “I guess we should start with the African wild dogs. They’re skilled predators, and they travel in packs,” I reasoned.

“Sounds like a good place to start,” Cali agreed.

We started to head north, but as we walked, Cali grabbed my arm.

“Oh, the tiger enclosure is right over there,” she said, pointing off to the right. “I didn’t realize it was so close. I’m going to run over and take a look.”

My phone buzzed as she hurried off, and I looked down to see that it was Kendall texting me.

I turned away from Xavier to read the message:

*I made a few calls—*

“Who are you texting?” Xavier asked, snatching the phone from my hand.

“Give it back,” I snarled.

But it was too late.

Xavier looked up from the phone, baffled. “Why the hell are you texting *Kendall*? I thought we talked about this, man. What the fuck?”

I grabbed my phone back and shot a look over my shoulder. I didn’t want Cali to overhear this conversation.

Xavier stepped closer to me, his eyes burning with fury. “What is going on between you two? I said we were going to talk about this bullshit when we got back, but that deadline just got moved up. Tell me about Kendall, Greyson.”

I signed. “You don’t understand—”

“Enlighten me,” he growled.

“Xavier—”

“I’m not fucking dropping this, Greyson. Tell me why you’re talking to this girl who is not your mate, even though you keep telling me there’s nothing between you two. Explain that to me.”  
 I looked at Xavier and recognized the stubborn jut of his chin. He was like a dog with a bone, and I knew he wasn’t going to let this go.

“Fine, I’ll tell you, but you can’t tell anyone else,” I said.

“Fine,” he gritted out. “Just fucking talk.”

I sighed. “Kendall is MIB.”

**Episode 5547**

**Ava**

I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin. I tried to take a deep breath, but it didn’t really help. I wished I could just rip my clothes off, shift, and sprint out of London altogether. I was so angry and hurt and confused, I could barely think straight. But I was lucid enough to keep my head—I was walking through a bustling London tourist trap, not in the middle of the Oregon woods. And it probably wouldn’t be the best idea to shift to my werewolf form in the Tower of London.

Not unless I really wanted to give some of these tourists something to talk about.

As a general rule, I didn’t mind being the center of attention, but probably not that kind. Though the pain I was feeling had left me feeling a little savage, and it might be fun to see the looks of terror on the faces of the tourists if I did decide to shift.

I could imagine the headlines:

*I Lived It: Trapped in the Tower of London with a Werewolf!*

*American Werewolf in London!*

*More Haunted Happenings at London’s Terrifying Tower*

But then my smile faded, knowing I’d have to control my urge to shift—not just for now—but until I returned back to the Samara pack.

And when the hell was that even going to be?

Xavier and I hadn’t bought return tickets. This was supposed to be a quick trip, but now that Greyson’s wolf was missing, who knew how long it was going to take? It was tempting as hell to think of getting a cab to the airport and just ending this whole nightmare by catching a flight home. Without Xavier.

Fuck him. Fuck them all. Greyson’s wolf wasn’t my problem.

Though I had to acknowledge that Greyson having his wolf back might set things between Xavier and me back on track. If Greyson had his wolf back, he’d naturally be more invested in his wolf’s mate—Cali. Or whatever the whole mess was with Kendall.

Either way, that would give Cali something to focus on besides Xavier. Maybe it would put things back to the way they had been before. How I preferred them to be.

The group of French tourists moved, so I stepped ahead and looked at the display of the crown jewels. The gleam of the gems was nearly blinding, even behind the glass. The diamonds and rubies and sapphires were as big as robin’s eggs, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from them.

It wasn’t the jewels themselves that caught my attention—looking at them, I started thinking of myself and Xavier as monarchs, ruling a kingdom of our own. Just the two of us together, ruling with absolute power.

I continued along the tour, looking down at the map I had picked up when I’d bought my ticket. I hadn’t wanted to take a tour with a guide—I just wanted to look at what I wanted to look at. And when I hit the ax and wooden block used at the execution of high-profile prisoners, I stopped and stared at the gruesome artifact.

I knew it was sinister, but I couldn’t stop myself from imagining how fun it would be to have the power to send Cali to the wooden block, and I smiled, picturing Cali’s neck stretched over the ancient, spotted wood.

I was pulled from my reverie when my phone buzzed with a text. I looked down to see it was from Marissa: *Hey, how are things going?*

I was halfway through composing a text telling her everything was fine when I stopped myself with a shrug.

“Screw it,” I said aloud, and stepped into a small alcove and dialed her number.

“Hey, Ava,” Marissa said, answering on the first ring. She sounded happy to hear from me. “How are you? How’s London? Is it raining? Have you had a cuppa and a biscuit?” she asked in a bad British accent.

“Okay, that’s actually terrible,” I said, chuckling.

Marissa stopped laughing. “You sound bad. What’s going on?”

I sighed. “Xavier kissed Cali.”

“What the fuck?” she exclaimed. “Are you fucking serious? That asshole!”

“I know, I know,” I said wearily. It made me tired just to think about it. “It’s a long story, but it got him his wolf back.”

“Yeah? I wonder what else it got him,” Marissa said darkly.

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. “I just wish I was home. This whole trip sucks.”

“I get that, but there’s not much happening around here,” Marissa said. “I just finished running patrol this morning.”

“Nothing noteworthy?” I asked, relieved to be able to talk about the pack. That, at least, made me feel normal.

“Just a lost hiker. I scared him off. The only other drama is Knox being a pain in the ass, trying to order everyone around.”

“So, nothing new,” I noted.

“Nothing new. But I do wish you were back here, so you could knock some sense into that bonehead cousin of yours. Not everyone wants to hear the sound of his voice the same way he does.”

“I will be glad to smack him around the second I get back,” I promised.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Marissa said, laughing.

I smiled and felt better. It was good to talk to Marissa, but as I did, I noticed that a woman walking nearby kept stealing glances at me. At first, I thought I was just imagining it, but as I watched her, the woman looked at me again, her gaze more pointed.

“I should get going,” I said to Marissa.

“Okay. Get me some souvenirs,” Marissa said. “Some tea and crumpets or one of the hats the palace guards wear.”

“You got it,” I said vaguely.

I had just started to put my phone away when another woman approached me from the side, holding out her phone.

“Would you take a picture of my husband and me?” she asked.

“What?” I asked, confused.

She pointed to the wooden block and the ax. “Would you take a photo of us with the chopping block? I want to show the girls in my book club.”

Inwardly, I rolled my eyes, but I grabbed the phone. “Oh, right. Yeah, sure.”

As I framed them in the camera, I gave the gallery a quick glance and noticed that the woman who’d been watching me was gone.

“Are you ready?” the woman asked, looking at me with a fixed grin. The man next to her hadn’t moved. He looked a little shell-shocked by the displays around him, and I wondered if he’d known what he was in store for when he’d walked into the Tower.

“Say ‘cheese,’” I said robotically and snapped a photo.

As I handed the phone back, the woman frowned at me.

“You only took one photo,” she protested.

“That’s what you asked me for.”

“But we weren’t ready!”

“I said ‘say cheese,’” I muttered, but I was already moving on. I was looking for the woman I’d seen earlier, so I barely heard the picture woman call after me—

“Rude!”

What the hell did I care? Ever since the conversation I’d had with Agent… What was his name? Agent Ham? Agent Sausage? Something to do with pork.

Agent *Bacon*.

Ever since that little tête-à-tête on the street, I’d been acutely aware of my surroundings, and everyone *in* my surroundings, thinking that I might be followed by one of Bacon’s colleagues.

The idea of spies after me was…admittedly a little exhilarating. But only up to a point. I didn’t like the idea of being constantly watched like I was some kind of a suspect.

Besides, there had been something about that woman—the way she had been looking at me was troubling.

I kept moving through the Tower’s displays, looking over each group of tourists, but I didn’t find her. Room after room, and she was nowhere to be found. It was as if the woman had disappeared.

As I worked my way to the ground floor, my senses perked up. I was picking up a scent I knew I recognized, but I frowned as I tried to concentrate on it. It was familiar, but the Tower of London was packed with people, and it was difficult to extract the familiar scent from the mix of scents in the place.

I kept walking, and as I did, I realized how I knew it—it was Greyson’s wolf!

My eyes wide, I followed the scent outside into the cold, late afternoon sunlight. I had stepped into a back courtyard, and I saw another figure in the garden. It was a woman; she had her back to me, and she seemed to be speaking to a couple of black ravens who pecked around on the ground at her feet.

I walked toward the woman, following as the scent of Greyson’s wolf grew stronger and stronger. When I’d stepped just behind her, the woman suddenly turned. She looked at me with astonishingly bright eyes.

I stared back at her, my mind racing in alarm and surprise. Why the *hell* did this woman smell like Greyson’s wolf?

**Episode 5548**

**Xavier**

I stared at Greyson for a long moment. Then I laughed. What the hell else was I supposed to do?

“Kendall’s MIB? Yeah, I’m sure she is. She’s a school administrator or some shit like that, man. I know she is. She works in a fucking office. She’s got a whiteboard behind her desk. Why are you lying to me about this? What the hell would she be doing with the MIB?” I asked.

“Why don’t you try keeping your fucking voice down,” Greyson hissed at me, grabbing my arm and towing me farther away from the tiger enclosure. “No one can know this. That means Ava. *And* that means Cali.”

I felt my wolf react to both of those names. I didn’t like keeping secrets from my mates—either of them. I supposed Greyson didn’t have that problem at the moment, since he didn’t actually have a wolf.

I looked over to where Cali was standing at the enclosure, marveling at the tigers and their cubs, who were pacing around, drawing gasps from the gathered crowd.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and let myself consider the idea that Greyson might be telling the truth. It seemed absurd, but…this was Kendall we were talking about. There had always been something not totally normal about her.

“So, okay, say you’re telling the truth about this—”

“I *am*,” Greyson growled.

“Then what the fuck would that mean?” I asked. “If Kendall is MIB, does that mean she’s been keeping tabs on us this whole time? Should I be worried about shit back home with my pack?”

Greyson shook his head. “No, nothing like that.”

“Then what?” I asked. “What exactly are you telling me here? I feel like there’s a lot here you’re not saying.”

He sighed and looked around. The zoo was packed, and even I had to admit this wasn’t an ideal place to be having this conversation. If I had my choice, we’d be having this conversation back in Oregon, at the Redwood or the Samara pack house, and there would be alcohol involved. Lots of it.

As it was, we were standing in the middle of a crowded zoo as packs of school children and tourist groups passed us on either side. I looked down as a peacock ambled next to us. The bird stopped for a moment and looked up, like even he realized whatever we were talking about was strange.

“Kendall was put into place by the MIB to deal with all that shit with Chessa at the university. I guess they thought she would blend in as an administrator or whatever they have her doing. But…well…” Greyson shrugged. “Maybe that’s half the truth.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s the whole truth?”

He looked away, his eyes on Cali, but I could tell he wasn’t really watching her. “Kendall told me she was there to keep tabs on me after that trouble with Malakai.”

I took this in. All this information was kind of blowing me away, but in another way, it only confirmed a lot of what I’d already been thinking.

“Okay, so you’re telling me that the woman coming on to your wolf was literally sent there to keep track of your every move?” I asked flatly. I shook my head in disbelief. “Precious. Absolutely precious. This shit writes itself, I fucking swear.”

Greyson snapped his head back around, glaring at me. “It isn’t like that with her,” he growled.

I gave him a dry laugh. “This is incredible. And you’re always accusing me of treating Cali badly? What the actual fuck, man? I mean, I know I’m not perfect. I know I’ve done a lot of shitty things to Cali that I’m not proud of, but this is something else.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he snarled.

“I don’t, do I? Flirting with some other woman like this is beneath you, Greyson.” I shook my head. “I didn’t expect it of you.”

He looked pissed, and I could see that he was clenching his jaw, but he didn’t say anything.

I tipped my head. “Are you cheating on Cali?”

Greyson’s eyes darkened, and he took a step toward me. “Are you serious? How can you ask me that? You know I’d *never* do that.”

I laughed hollowly. “Oh yeah, right. Because you’re perfect, right? How could I forget?”

Despite my sarcasm, I believed him.

“I’ve never claimed to be perfect,” he said tightly. “But I want to make one thing crystal clear to you, Xavier—whatever you think you know is probably wrong. You have a tendency to be absolutely certain about the exact wrong thing. But I am telling you right now, you better not tell anyone about Kendall being MIB.”

“You seem pretty protective of her,” I noted.

He shook his head. “This isn’t about you and me, Xavier, so just cut the shit. This is about keeping everyone safe—including Cali, Ava, and Kendall.”

There was something in Greyson’s voice and manner that told me he wasn’t bullshitting me—and he wasn’t exaggerating.

“Fine,” I said. “I won’t tell anyone anything. I wouldn’t do anything that would put Cali in jeopardy. But you better not be doing anything that would hurt Cali either.”

A group of school children passed by, being led by a zookeeper in a hat with elephant ears on it. The guy in the hat bumped into Greyson’s shoulder, but he was looking at me so hard he didn’t even notice.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” he demanded.

I looked over at Cali to make sure she was still transfixed by the Sumatran tigers. “Listen, since you seem to be in the mood to be honest, what’s with you and Kendall? I don’t want to hear about her job—what’s the deal with you two?”  
 “*Deal?*” Greyson repeated, frowning. “What deal?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. At this point we’re going in circles, man. You can lie to yourself all you want, but you know you’re just going to hurt Cali if you do.”  
 “I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“I *lived* with your wolf,” I reminded him. “I probably know what I’m talking about better than anyone, Greyson, and I know that there’s more than just a ‘professional interest’ between you and that woman.”

Greyson looked stunned for a moment, but then the surprise hardened into something angrier. “That’s pretty fucking rich coming from you, Xavier.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Are you trying to push me toward another woman because you want Cali back?” he asked in an accusing voice. “Because I gotta ask how that’s going to go over with Ava. You remember, the woman you left Cali for?”

Anger flared up in my chest as I glared at my brother. This was a familiar feeling—one I’d lacked while I was stuck living with Greyson’s much more controlled wolf in my body—and I’d almost missed it.

“At least they’re both my *mates*,” I snarled at Greyson. “So, I gotta ask you, what’s your excuse?”

“I told you before,” he snapped back, “there’s nothing between me and Kendall. You’re making all of this up. You’re trying to find something to come between me and Cali. You think you know my wolf, but you don’t, so stop trying to talk to me like you get me at all.”

Greyson was pissed, and his face was flushed with anger. But there was a look of something in his eyes that gave him away—and it looked like panic. He was denying it, but I thought he was lying.

I opened my mouth to argue further, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Cali walking toward us. She looked excited, and I knew she’d enjoyed seeing the tigers. I really didn’t want her to find us fighting.

“You better be right,” I hissed at Greyson, trying to wrap up our conversation before Cali reached us. “Because if you hurt her, I’m going to—”

“What’s going on?” Cali asked, interrupting what was shaping up to be a very colorful threat. She looked between us, her brows drawn down into a frown. “What are you two arguing about now?”  
 Greyson shot me a warning look, and I knew he didn’t want me to tell her we’d been talking about her.

I didn’t appreciate this—like I was some kind of fool.

So, I turned to Cali and put my arm around her shoulders, knowing full well that it would only aggravate Greyson further. “We were just strategizing what exhibit to go to next if we don’t find any sign of Greyson’s wolf with the African wild dogs. We just want to have a plan in place.”  
 I thought the story was convincing, but apparently Cali didn’t agree.

She looked at me, then at Greyson, still frowning. “I don’t believe you.”

“What?” I asked, surprised.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “And I’m not going anywhere until you tell me the truth.”

**Episode 5549**

I looked between Greyson and Xavier, but neither of them said anything. They both looked away, trying not to make eye contact.

“Maybe we should get going,” Greyson said vaguely.

I planted my feet on the ground and put my hands on my hips. “I mean it, you two,” I said firmly.

I really hated this—I knew they were arguing, and I had a pretty good idea what it was about—and who was responsible.

I turned to Greyson. “I know how badly you want your wolf back, but it’s not Xavier’s fault that it’s lost out there.”

“That’s not what we were—” Greyson started, but I talked over him.

“The truth is that none of this would be happening if it wasn’t for me. This is all my fault.”

Greyson and Xavier looked at me in shock. “*Your* fault?” they asked together.

“Yeah, of course.”

“How do you figure that?” Xavier asked in a voice not quite his own.

“How do you think?” I asked. “Neither of you would have lost your wolves in the first place if you hadn’t gone with me to the Fae world. If I hadn’t…needed you both to come with me.”

Predictably, they both shook their heads at this.

“Come on, love, we knew what we were getting into,” Greyson said.

“We agreed to go with you,” Xavier added. “And I’d do it again.”

“Me too—”

“It’s not just the Fae world element,” I said. “It’s the *due destini* too. That all started with me.”

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked, frowning.

I shrugged. “Maybe if I had been able to choose before now, things would be resolved…somehow. But I can’t, and I…” I felt tears fill my eyes.

Greyson reached for my hand. “Hey, love, remember, we’re bound by the *due destini*, too.”  
 “I know that, but it’s different for you,” I argued. “You two are fighting each other all the time because of me, and…” I hesitated, not waiting to bring up the obvious thing.

Xavier was staring at me. “And what?”

I shook my head. “No, enough. I don’t know why we’re talking about this. We’re here to look for Greyson’s wolf. That’s what we should be doing before the zoo closes. Let’s go,” I said briskly, and I started walking.

A moment later each of them fell into step on either side of me, though neither of them said a word.

*…And then I kissed Xavier and things got so much worse.*

That was what I’d been about to say before I’d stopped myself. I didn’t need to say it out loud—we all knew it. Of course things had gotten worse. I kept thinking about how things would be different if I hadn’t done it. If I hadn’t allowed myself to be drawn in. Even if I had kissed Xavier but had kept it chaste and businesslike, they way I’d intended. A kiss of obligation.

But as soon as my lips had touched Xavier’s, I knew that wasn’t going to be a possibility. Trying to resist him would be like trying not to breathe. As soon as we’d kissed, the whole world seemed to have flipped upside down. I had felt everything all at once—both elated and devastated. So happy to be back in his arms and shattered when I thought about the time that we’d lost.

That kiss had been electric, and I hadn’t been able to stop what had happened during the kiss any more than I could have stopped water from flowing or a fire from burning. I knew it, and Xavier knew it.

What broke my heart was that I thought Greyson knew it too. I felt sick when I thought about the look on his face when he’d pulled Xavier away from me. How hollow his eyes had seemed when he’d stepped out of the room afterward with his phone, leaving me all alone. I knew I was breaking his heart, because I was breaking my own heart too.

I wanted to make everything better between us, but I didn’t know what I could do. I couldn’t take back what had happened, and the only thing I could do was help Greyson find his wolf and just hope that reuniting them would smooth things over.

I thought about this as we walked through the crowded zoo, dodging families with strollers and tourist groups in matching t-shirts. The place was busy and bustling, and everyone seemed to be walking around wearing hats with animals emblazoned on them. They must’ve sold a huge selection at the gift shop.

I wished I could tap into Greyson’s wolf, the way I’d been able to do with Xavier’s. But I didn’t know how, and that was probably just one more thing that Greyson was acutely aware of.

Maybe it wasn’t logical, but I couldn’t stop myself from feeling like I’d failed him. Greyson deserved more from me, but I didn’t know what I could do to make it up to him.

As we drew closer to the African wild dog exhibit, my heart thudded in my chest. What if Greyson’s wolf *was* here? What could we do to reunite them before the wolf could escape again?

I wondered if I could try, somehow, to connect with Greyson’s wolf. I didn’t know how I did it with Xavier—it wasn’t something I’d ever thought about, it was just something that happened between us—so I wasn’t sure where I should start. This was probably something I should have asked Swift about.

When we reached the enclosure, I stopped and closed my eyes. I tried to picture Greyson’s wolf—the massive grey animal. I tried to draw up the image in my mind, hoping the wolf would appear in a vision, or perhaps the memory would help me connect.

But nothing happened. And then Greyson’s spoke, his voice snapping me back to reality.

“He’s not here,” he said flatly.

I opened my eyes again and looked around. Inside the glass-fronted enclosure I saw a group of dogs sleeping. They looked like regular dogs, but they were a strange, mottled color and had unusually large ears. There were five or six of them all sleeping close together. Their exhibit was large, and I looked around, hoping to see Greyson’s wolf the same way I’d seen Xavier’s. But as I looked through the high grasses and rocks, there was nothing.

I looked up at Greyson. “Are you sure it’s not here?”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

“He’s right,” Xavier confirmed, his eyes sweeping the enclosure. “His wolf isn’t here, and I don’t think he ever was. There’s no trace.”

This was a setback, but I wasn’t ready to give up. “Well, let’s keep going. There are a lot of other exhibits,” I said determinedly.

“Yeah, sure,” Greyson said, pushing a hand through his hair. He didn’t sound certain at all. “We might as well, I guess. We came all this way.”

My heart ached. He sounded so dispirited, I felt like my heart was going to break.

I reached out for his hand and gave it a squeeze. *We’ll find your wolf*, I promised him through the mind link.

He smiled back at me, though his grey eyes still looked flat. *Okay*, he said, squeezing my hand back.

“Well, let’s keep going,” Xavier said briskly.

“Where do you think we should go?” I asked.

Xavier looked around for a moment. “We could check out the lions,” he suggested. “They also live in groups.”

“Fine,” Greyson said.

I swallowed hard. The mood had shifted—I could feel it. And not for the better. None of us had said it aloud, but I thought we were all hoping to find something with the wild dogs, and finding nothing at all was demoralizing. I think it reminded us all how many places there were to look—and how hard this was going to be.

I tried again to think about Greyson’s wolf—desperate to make some kind of connection that might help—but I was distracted when Xavier’s phone rang.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and looked at the screen. “It’s Ava.”

I looked at him carefully, but I couldn’t read his tone, making it impossible to tell if he was pleased or annoyed that she was calling him.

Then, making it even harder, he turned his back as he answered, so I could only hear his side of the conversation:

“Ava? Where are you? I’ve been trying to—wait, *what*? Where? Are you sure? *Really* sure? *Dammit.* Fuck. Okay.”

He hung up and turned back to us.

“What’s up?” I asked, wondering why Ava was calling.

Xavier grabbed Greyson by the shoulder and gave him a brief shake. “Ava picked up your wolf’s scent on some woman at the London Tower.”

“*What?*” Greyson asked, shocked.

“*What?*” I repeated. “Are you kidding? That’s amazing! Well, come on, what are we waiting for? Let’s go find her!” I said excitedly.

But Xavier wasn’t smiling. “There’s one catch.”

“What?” Greyson asked.

Xavier took a breath. “Ava thinks the woman is a witch.”

**Chapter 5550**

**Artemis**

I grabbed the assassin by the hair and wrenched his head back. I felt a wave of anger and frustration crashing over me, and I tightened my hold as the guy squirmed.

“Artemis, stop,” Adair said, hurrying into the tent and coming to my side.

But I didn’t want to stop. I felt strange and frenzied, like my power was making my decisions now. Like it was getting the best of me.

Adair grabbed my arm and pulled me back, breaking my hold on the assassin. He took me by the shoulders and turned me so I was facing him. “You need to think about what you’re doing right now.”

I shook myself free of his grasp, frustrated by his tone. I didn’t need to be placated. I wasn’t a fucking child. “I know exactly what I’m doing,” I snapped.

“And what is that?”  
 “Getting some damn answer for once in my life,” I said, feeling frustration coursing through me.

“She’s going to use her powers on me!” the assassin cried out, looking scared.

Adair glanced over at the assassin, who was looking between us with wide, terrified eyes. Frustrated, he snatched up a scrap from Kastian’s dresser—a handkerchief or something—and used it to tie around the guy’s mouth, gagging him. Then Adair turned back to me.

“Think this through. So you use your magic on this idiot. What’s the fallout of that, hmm? The number of people who know you have this ability is miniscule. Do you have *any* idea what could happen to you if more people find out that you have your father’s power?”

Looking into Adair’s eyes, I saw something there, flashing behind the frustration and anger. It was fear, which was rare to see in my uncle.

But I doubled down. “I don’t care,” I said stubbornly.

He ground his teeth. “I *need* you to care, Artemis. I didn’t stay here in the Fae world for you to throw everything away and expose the most controversial and dangerous thing about yourself for everyone to see because you got angry one day.”

“I didn’t *ask* you to stay,” I shot back. “You volunteered, remember? And besides”—I looked around Kastian’s tent, which was empty except for the three of us—“there’s no one here. It’s just us. And who’s this guy going to tell?” I asked, giving the assassin’s chair a shove with my foot.

“Artemis—”  
 “Especially if I make him forget,” I added threateningly.

“Your every move is being watched, Artemis,” Adair hissed. “Think about it. I won’t let you forget that, even though you seemed determined to do just that. If you want to do this, fine. But you need to be fully prepared for the fallout of your actions.”

I scowled at Adair, but I couldn’t deny that his words left me feeling unsettled. I *knew* I was right—there was no one here to see me use my powers except Adair, who already knew about them, and the assassin, who could be made to forget. But I couldn’t feel comfortable. It was as though Adair had dug deep into my mind and reached that locked compartment where I kept all the fears I tried my hardest to ignore.

Obviously, I was worried about too many people knowing about my abilities. It wasn’t like I was worried about being burned as a witch or anything, but I knew there were those who would want to exploit what I could do. I had even run across that among people who I knew cared about me.

But here—in the Fae world—where power was wielded like a weapon, the wrong person knowing about my abilities would make me into a pawn in this giant game of political chess. Shit—I already *was* a pawn. That’s what I was doing out here to begin with. People knowing what I could do would only make it worse.

And there was another fear—I sometimes worried that my power would go to my head. I’d experienced that feeling before—the feeling of unchecked power—and it had led me to some dark places. And this new role put a huge target on my back—even if it was a target with benefits in a world I had only ever looked upon with envy.

Thoughts raced through my mind as I considered my options. I knew Adair had a point, but when I looked over at the guy strapped to the chair—the assassin who’d crept into my tent and tried to murder me in my sleep—and saw that he was smirking at me, I knew what I was going to do.

I wanted answers, and I was going to get them. That was the whole fucking reason I had come to the Fae world. I hadn’t come to be a politician, but to follow my father’s trail to see where it led me. And right now, it had led me here, and I wasn’t going to stop now just because things were getting difficult.

I couldn’t do that to myself. Or to my father.

I looked over at Adair, and I just prayed that he would know I meant what I was about to say. “Thank you for your concern for me. I really do mean that. But I have to do this. I hope you understand.”

He gave me a long look. Then he nodded, his face grave. “I don’t, but I do. I’ll watch the door to make sure no one comes in.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice tight with emotion.

He stepped away from me and stood by the tent entrance, his eyes averted.

Left to my own devices, I turned to the assassin, who I was pleased to see was no longer smirking. I ripped off the gag and bent, so I was looking him right in his frightened eyes.

The guy looked freaked out, but angry too, and he sneered at me. As I neared his face, he spat at me, the disgusting missile just missing me.

Fury surged through me. I was fucking sick of this guy. I grabbed him by the hair again and yanked his head back. That made it easier for me to stare into his eyes, and as I did, I drew upon my magic, reaching deep inside myself and calling it forth.

“No!” he cried out. “Leave me alone! Leave me be, you wretch!”

He tried to twist away from my grasp, but it was no use. Between my anger and the bonds around his feet and hands, he wasn’t going anywhere.

I stared into his small black eyes, working to get through the barriers of the assassin’s mind. This was usually an easy step, so I was surprised to feel his resistance. He pushed back—hard—and not just with his body. It was like his mind was fighting back as well, and I had to concentrate as I encountered barrier after barrier.

He didn’t break eye contact, but there was something behind his eyes that made me think he’d been trained for a moment like this—like he knew what he was doing. Whatever else the Order of the Winding Thorn was doing, they were training their people in all ways.

Using my magic was always somewhat tiring, and I’d never had to work as hard as I did now, but I gritted my teeth and pushed through, determined to infiltrate the assassin’s mind. I needed this to work.

And, *finally*, I felt it happen. One moment his whole being was tense and rigid with fight, and the next he had gone slack. Even his body slumped in the chair as my manipulation magic took hold of his mind.

I drew a shaking breath—that had been hard on both of us—and then I started asking my questions.

“Tell me everything you know about Kadmos.”

His eyes were flat and dull as he looked back at me. “What do you want to know?” he asked in an expressionless voice.

*Everything.* That was the answer. I wanted to know everything. That was why I had started this journey in the first place. Why I had chosen to leave the human world where I’d lived happily with my sister and my girlfriend, with my mother a phone call away. Where I’d had access to food and a place to sleep and a pack that accepted and valued me. Where I hadn’t been at the whims of a Fae court I still didn’t understand. All because I wanted to know everything about my father.

As I looked at the assassin, my heart thudded. Could it be that he was the key? That he would really give me the answers I’d been looking for all this time?

*What do you want to know?*

I needed to focus.

“Is Kadmos alive?” I asked, starting with what felt like the most pressing question.

The assassin’s expression shifted, like he was fighting somewhere in his head, trying to resist again, but my magic was too powerful.

“Yes,” he answered. “Kadmos is alive.”

**Episode 5551**

Even the mention of a witch put a pit in my stomach. It was clear that Xavier and Greyson weren’t too happy about it, either.

Xavier had been terrorized by a witch for months; a witch broke us up and changed both our lives forever. Not to mention all the other less than nice witches we’d dealt with time and time again.

*I think I would have rather found out that anyone or anything else was involved but a witch. If it’s true that a witch is tangled up in this, finding Greyson’s wolf just got a hell of a lot harder.*

“I don’t like this,” Xavier said. “A witch in possession of an untethered wolf? Not good. Witches do messed-up stuff to werewolves who have their wolf intact, so I can only imagine what plans it has for one that isn’t tied to its human.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Thanks for making an already bad situation sound even worse. Really appreciate it, Xavier.”

Xavier shrugged. “I’m just saying what everyone’s thinking.”

I focused on Xavier. “Are you sure Ava’s relaying the story correctly? What tipped her off that it was a witch?”

“She was at the London Tower or whatever and picked up a scent on the breeze—it was Greyson’s wolf for sure, and I trust Ava’s nose,” Xavier explained.

Greyson took a step toward Xavier. “Where?”

Xavier shot him a look. “I know you lost your wolf, but did it take your listening skills with it? I said she found it at the Tower of London.”

“Then that’s where we have to go!” Greyson nearly shouted, already starting to head off.

“Slow down,” Xavier barked. “Ava was wise enough to follow the scent for as long as she could.”

*Look at how he compliments Ava. Called her wise, trusts her nose. Does he compliment me that way?*

I stopped myself before I plunged down the rabbit hole. Of course he’s complimented me that way. He always has. I was just so messed up since our kiss that I was barely thinking straight.

What Xavier had with Ava was real—time had proven that—but I knew that our connection was still there, and that it was strong. Our kiss confirmed it.

There was no comparison between Xavier’s relationship with Ava and his relationship with me because they were on totally different ends of the spectrum.

Too bad knowing that didn’t make things any easier. But right now wasn’t the time to worry about where Xavier and I stood.

I had to focus all my attention on tracking Greyson’s wolf.

“The scent led Ava to a witch who reeked of Greyson’s wolf,” Xavier continued.

I wished he wouldn’t put it that way, but I could also imagine that being the exact way that Ava put it when she shared the news with Xavier. Like the scent of Greyson’s wolf was some kind of stench.

“Okay, so where’s the witch now?” Greyson asked.

Xavier sighed. “That’s the problem. When Ava tried to question her, the witch used some magic to stop her and disappeared in a flurry of ravens.”

“A flurry of ravens?” Greyson repeated before cursing under his breath. “Great, and she obviously has a flair for the dramatic. That’s the exact type of person I *don’t* want gallivanting around with my wolf.”

“I’m not crazy about this turn of events either,” Xavier said. “We all know how much I hate witches.” He shot Greyson a look. “Of course, not counting Big Mac. She’s different. But when it comes to witches, Big Mac is the exception, not the norm.”

“No, I get it, Xavier. I’m wary of witches, too,” I replied. “And I can’t blame you for being even more skittish about witches than the rest of us after what happened with Adéluce.”

Xavier shuddered and frowned. “Adéluce taught me that witches are capable of anything…even being half vampire.”

“Witches are unpredictable, but what would a witch want with Greyson’s wolf?” I said. “Most witches try to steer clear of werewolves, just like wolves try to steer clear of them.”

“I haven’t noticed that at all,” Greyson grumbled. “Everywhere we turn, a witch is behind some degree of our misfortune.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But there has to be a reason the witch wanted your wolf, Greyson.”

Xavier and I gave Greyson pointed looks, as if expecting him to have some kind of explanation.

“I have no idea,” Greyson said. “But I want to go meet with Ava to find out everything we can. Maybe there’s a detail she forgot about before that could help us. For all we know, the witch smells like my wolf because she came into contact with it at some point.”

Xavier cocked his head to the side. “Okay, yeah, that could be.” He didn’t actually sound convinced, but after being so negative before, he was probably trying to give his brother even a shred of hope that things weren’t as bad as they seemed.

Greyson’s eyes crinkled with concern. “But who knows? I definitely haven’t gotten any better at figuring out what makes a witch tick.”

“I wonder if there’s still a chance I can connect with Greyson’s wolf. I was interrupted before I really had a chance to try. Might be worth giving it another shot,” I said.

At this point, I would try anything. We needed to find Greyson’s wolf, and simply combing the streets of London hoping to catch a scent probably wasn’t the best idea.

Greyson turned and headed for the Tube, but I stopped him.

“Wait, let’s not rush off just yet. Let me try and connect first. I think it might help.”

Xavier and Greyson shot each other a side glance. They obviously thought this was a waste of time and that I wouldn’t succeed.

Greyson’s voice was soft when he spoke again, as if he were afraid of hurting my feelings. “Cali, I appreciate your help, but the longer we stay here—”

I cut Greyson off. “I was able to do it with Xavier’s wolf, so at least let me try.”

I caught a look in Greyson’s eye and realized that I shouldn’t have said that out loud, but it was too late now.

Even if I succeeded and was able to connect, it wouldn’t matter.

I took Greyson’s hand in mine and pressed my forehead against his. “Think about your wolf,” I said. “It’ll help me connect. And trust that I can do this, Greyson. I really think I can. And even if I don’t, what’s the harm in trying?”

I closed my eyes and listened to Greyson’s heartbeat. I started breathing in the same rhythm as he did, trying to get in perfect sync so that I could do the same with his wolf, wherever it might be.

And then I felt something. A sensation of warmth, of fire, of anger and sadness. Greyson’s wolf was trapped somewhere, unable to run, howling for its freedom. It wanted to run, to get away from wherever it was, but it couldn’t.

Someone was holding it captive.

I concentrated hard, trying to see what was holding it back, but then just like that, the sensation dissipated, and I was left with nothing.

I gasped in frustration, trying to pull the sensations back into my consciousness so that I could connect and see or sense where his wolf was, but it wouldn’t work. Whatever I felt before, it was long gone, now.

I snapped my eyes open. “I felt something, frustration and fire and anger…” I looked into Greyson’s eyes, hating that I had to tell him this. “It felt like your wolf was trapped, being held prisoner.”

Greyson pulled away, snarling in anger. “I knew it! That fucking witch! Why don’t they ever mind their own business? Why are they always meddling in werewolf affairs?”

“Fuck,” Xavier pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I’m sorry, man… I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy.”

Wow. Hearing that from Xavier didn’t do anything to ease my anxiety about the situation.

Greyson said nothing. He had his back to us, but I could sense his anger even from the slight rise in his shoulders.

“I wish I could tell you both more, but I can’t get the feeling back. It’s gone,” I said.

“If this witch Ava tracked really has captured my wolf…” Greyson trailed off and then turned around to face us, determination burning in his eyes. “We need to find that witch. It’s the only way we’ll get answers.”

Xavier groaned. “Not another witch. Did I mention I fucking hate witches?”

“We don’t have a fucking choice,” was Greyson’s fierce reply.

“The witch is the perfect place to start, I agree with Greyson, but how the hell are we going to find her? We’ve never even met the witch, and if she showed her magic in public to get away from Ava, it’s clear she doesn’t want to be found.”

Greyson gestured toward the exit. “Then we need to go to the one place where we know there’s a witch. We have to go back to the club.”

**Episode 5552**

**Greyson**

Xavier looked particularly gloomy on the train ride to the club, and I had to wonder if he was worried about Ava, or simply annoyed that she was still pissed at him.

Not many things could get Xavier down—he was typically pretty unemotional and barely showed anything on his face—except when it came to Ava or Cali.

All I could think was that if Ava was pissed at him, I couldn’t blame her the least bit. Even now, I felt hints of the annoyance laced with anger, jealousy, and frustration that she probably felt.

I’d told Cali that the kiss wasn’t a big deal, but I just couldn’t stop thinking about it—or seeing it in my mind. Other than finding my wolf, watching the two of them locked in such a passionate exchange was pretty much *all* I could think about.

And even though Ava bolted in anger before seeing Xavier kiss Cali, I was sure her imagination filled in the blanks. That meant it was probably all she could think about, too.

I could only hope that when I got my wolf back, none of this would matter anymore. The trip to London was a wash—thoroughly ruined. There was no way it would turn out to be the carefree excursion I wished for, but maybe Cali and I could spend some private time once the stress of finding my wolf was done.

We reached the stop for the club and left the Tube, none of us speaking. We were obviously each lost in our thoughts about everything we’d been through here.

“I do wish I could offer more detail about where your wolf is, Greyson,” Cali said, breaking the silence.

I wished she could, too, but it wasn’t like I could blame her for not being able to sense more than she had. Without her, we wouldn’t have known that my wolf was for sure in some kind of trouble.

“Honestly, you did more than we could have hoped for,” I said. “I’m pleased that you were able to connect with my wolf like you did with Xavier’s.”

I didn’t mention that if she hadn’t been able to feel my wolf at all, it would have made me wonder about the strength of our connection compared to the one she had with Xavier.

We approached the Frost Moon Tavern, and Cali visibly shuddered at the sign above the door—the bloodred moon.

I put an arm around her and held her close, trying to calm her nerves, letting her know that even though I was the one in distress here, I was still here for her no matter what.

“This looks like the kind of place my wolf would hang out,” Xavier said.

We approached the bouncer, who took his time looking up from his phone only to greet us with scowl.

I gave him a dark grin. “Remember us?”

The bouncer’s only answer was a grunt, but he opened the door and allowed us in.

Cali and Xavier immediately started to walk into the place, but I had other plans.

“I think it’s better if you two wait here,” I told them.

Cali frowned and shook her head. “What? Why—”

I held up my hand to interrupt. “Because you were outed as Fae the last time we were here, Cali. And then, I’m sure you recall, someone shackled you, and I was forced to fight.”

Xavier nodded his agreement, one of the rare times we were on the same page.

“Greyson’s right. No need for us to draw any undue attention. It might scare the witch off—if she’s even in there.”

I was wondering if my brother was actually more afraid of *finding* the witch, and I couldn’t blame him. He’d been put through the wringer by a witch he wasn’t able to immediately defeat, and that had fucked with his confidence and given him an enduring fear of witches that I understood.

*Though he would never call it a fear.*

Cali touched my arm just before I could walk inside the club. “Are you sure, Greyson? Because if you need us, we’re happy to stand right beside you.”

“‘Happy’ is a strong word,” Xavier said. “But yes, we’ll go in with you if you need us.”

“Thanks, and I appreciate that. I’ll do anything to get my wolf back,” I explained. “Anything except put you in danger, Cali. I won’t do that again. I can’t.”

I looked at my brother.

“Stay with her, Xavier. Make sure she’s safe.”

“I don’t need you to tell me to do that—of course I will. And good luck in there,” Xavier replied.

Cali tightened her hold on my arm and was looking me right in the eyes. “Be careful, okay? Don’t lose your head in there, no matter what happens. You got this.”

“I promise I will.”

After one final, lingering look at Cali, I stepped inside.

I paused before I advanced any deeper in, surveying the room to get a lay of the land. It was less crowded than when we were last here, but there were more than enough werewolves in the room to cause trouble if they had a mind to.

And this was the kind of place that courted trouble.

Truthfully, I couldn’t be less interested in the werewolves and the wary looks they gave me, as I wound my way through the crowd.

I was here for one reason and one reason only, to find a witch that could very well have something against werewolves if they’d gone through the trouble of trapping my wolf—that is if Cali’s feeling was accurate.

Aside from that, the witch we met here the other night had no problem outing Cali as a Fae to anyone who would listen.

There were a lot more dangerous things in this club than some hot-headed werewolves.

I smiled as I passed a broken table pushed in the corner—the result of our escape the other night.

Many of the customers were obviously keeping their distance from me. They’d likely been here the night of our fight and remembered just how I reacted when someone tried to mess with me.

I moved up to the bar and paused to see if I could draw in a familiar scent. It was my hope that if the witch Ava saw at the London Tower was here, I would be able to pick up a trace of my wolf’s scent.

I kept trying, but it didn’t take me long to realize that searching for the scent was fruitless.

Even if my wolf was here and had been in the recent past, there were way too many other wolfy scents in here for me to be able to single out my own—even if I knew it better than any other scent in the world.

“You going to order something, or should I charge you rent for taking up space?” the bartender snarled.

“I’m looking for a witch,” I said to the man, keeping my voice nice and easy. I didn’t want him to think he’d shaken me, and I didn’t want to get any of the other patrons on higher alert than they already were by being threatening.

The bartender laughed and started to turn away.

“She was here yesterday when the fight broke out,” I added quickly.

The bartender narrowed his eyes, and I noticed a spark of recognition on his face. “Wait, you’re that guy who was in here with the Fae, right?”

I gave him a cold smile. “Bingo. Where is she?”

The bartender looked indecisive before I leaned in closer.

“You saw what I did to this place yesterday. I assume you don’t want a repeat performance?”

The bartender looked around nervously, and then, with hate in his eyes, gestured to the back of the room. “She’s back there.”

I nodded and started to go, but the bartender grabbed my arm.

I tried to yank out of his hold, but he held strong, and we shared a tense moment before he said, “Don’t tell Maeve I sent you—do me at least that solid.”

I smiled at him and yanked again, this time pulling away.

Without another backward glance at the bartender or the rest of the patrons whose eyes I could feel drilling holes in my back, I walked through a pair of heavy black curtains to a back room where a dart game was going on.

I spotted the witch, Maeve, sitting on a stool, drinking a pint.

She looked up as I approached, wiped a bit of foam from her top lip. “You’re the one who was in here with the Fae.”

I took a seat beside her. “Yes, and tonight I don’t want any trouble. Just looking for a witch.”

I relayed the description that Ava gave Xavier, and I was happy when recognition dawned across the witch’s face.

“You’re talking about Cordelia,” she said. “She’s the only witch I know who fits that description and does the whole flock of ravens thing.”

“It’s a relief that you know her. Any idea where I’d be able to track her down?”

Maeve took another sip of her pint. She was trying to look relaxed, but it was clear she was shaken. “If you know what’s good for you, wolf, you’ll stay the hell away from her.”

**Episode 5553**

I was so nervous about Greyson being inside that club all on his own that I couldn’t stop biting my nails. What if he got in over his head, or someone really tried to hurt him because of the scene we caused in the club last night, and I wasn’t there to help protect him? He didn’t have his wolf…

I would never forgive myself if anything happened to him.

While I could easily understand and appreciate that he was looking out for me given what happened last night, I would still rather be by his side and watching his back.

It wasn’t like I couldn’t take care of myself. I’d proven to him and everyone else time and time again that I could hold my own.

It wasn’t like he’d dealt with that club fight last night all by himself. I’d been a big part of helping us escape in once piece, and honestly, he was more vulnerable than I was right now being that he didn’t have his wolf to rely on.

*At this point, it’s way more dangerous in there for him than it would be for me. I don’t understand why he insisted on doing this alone. They’ll recognize him same as they’d recognize me, so what’s the difference?*

“He’ll be fine,” Xavier said suddenly, obviously reading my mind.

I turned to see him leaning against some scaffolding and looking way too nonchalant.

I grimaced and looked back at the club door. “Easy for you to say. You have your wolf right now and Greyson doesn’t. He’s on his own in there, in a bar full of shifters, witches, and who knows what else. You weren’t there when we were. It wasn’t a very friendly crowd.”

Xavier sighed, and then I felt his hand on my arm, pulling me away from the door to face him.

“Really, Cali, Greyson is going to be fine. He’s a big boy and can handle whatever he has to go up against in there even without his wolf. Trust me when I say that you have nothing to worry about.”

My cheeks grew heated as I realized how close I was to Xavier. So close that I was all but standing right between his legs.

I sucked in a shuddering breath, unable to stop the flash of heat that was gathering in the pit of my stomach.

*Even after all this time and everything we’ve been through, I can’t help but react to him like this…*

Electricity was crackling between us, and I was starting to lose my head. The heat of him was washing over me in waves, and I couldn’t stop looking at his legs and noticing the power of his thighs evident through his black jeans.

His easy going posture would trick most anyone but me. He was playing it cool, but I knew he had a lot on his mind.

*If I hadn’t kissed him like that earlier, would I be feeling this way? Like it’s all I can do to keep from jumping him and exploring what we started earlier… Crap.*

The kiss had been in one word: *intense*. Maybe more intense than any kiss we’d shared since defeating Adéluce.

There was so much going on right now—and the thought of Greyson’s wolf being ensnared by some witch was troubling, but even so, I couldn’t stop thinking about Xavier and how it felt to have his lips on mine.

Something had changed. It was hard to put it into words, though, since I’d always had strong feelings for Xavier. But now, it felt like whatever had been lying dormant between us was reignited and burning so much hotter than before.

He felt it too. I knew it.

How was I going to deal with this? How could I continue being around both him and Greyson without addressing these feelings and figuring out how to handle them without hurting Greyson in the process?

I cleared my throat and tried to take a step back, hoping some distance might help, but Xavier grabbed my shoulders and kept me pulled in tight and close.

“We should talk about what happened, shouldn’t we?” I said.

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “What about it?”

I was taken aback by his casual tone. He was pretending like the kiss was no big deal, but I knew him better than that. It was earth-shattering, and he knew it. If it meant nothing, he wouldn’t be taking pains to pretend like it didn’t matter.

I glared at him, not bothering to hide my annoyance. “You know exactly what I’m talking about, Xavier, don’t play coy. I know you too well for that to work.”

He pushed off the scaffolding to stand up straight, and in the process, closed what little distance remained between us.

“I don’t know, Cali. Why don’t you spell it out for me, just so I can make sure we’re on the same page.”

There was the smallest hint of a smile playing on his lips, like he was enjoying holding my feet to the fire like this.

He knew exactly what he was doing, and I was too wrapped up in it all to tell him to stop.

I was beyond flustered, and he was so close, I could think about nothing else but his lips, his tongue, the heat of his breath on my face…

I almost wanted to kiss him again, just to see if that out-of-control feeling would emerge again, if it would ignite that hunger in me like it had last time.

But I wouldn’t dare. Not with Greyson inside fighting to get his wolf back. That would be wrong and selfish and wouldn’t do a thing to make things less complicated.

I swallowed and then forced out, “The kiss. I’m obviously talking about the kiss.”

Xavier said nothing, simply reached out to run a finger along my bottom lip. His eyes were fixed on mine, and it was all I could do not to lunge, not to reach up and pull his head down so that our lips could connect again…even if only for a second…

I stopped myself again and caught my breath as he asked, “Were you surprised, Cali? Did you think it would feel like, what? Nothing?”

I shook my head because I couldn’t find the words. I was so wrecked by his proximity, my body so aflame that I had no idea what to say to break the tension.

“You shouldn’t be shocked by what you felt. Nothing’s changed between us. It never has, you know that right?”

Now I was really surprised. “How can you say that? Everything changed, Xavier. And I don’t know how to deal with it. Especially when we keep crossing the line—”

Xavier touched my chin, nudged my head up to look him in the eyes. “What happened with Adéluce and me ending up with Ava and the Samara only interrupted what we’ve always had.”

“But Xavier—”

He put a finger on my lips to quiet me, and I let him, wanting to hear what else he had to say despite myself.

“You’ve been hiding behind what Adéluce did, and I get it. I have been too. But what’s changed between us is all on her. She broke our trust, and then when we were in the Fae world, we started to rebuild things only to have Cenwyn trick you, which hurt, but…I can’t say I don’t understand why you believed it.”

“It’s been hard,” I choked out.

“I know. But even through all that, I never questioned what we have. It’s been here, simmering between us this whole time.”

I trembled under his touch, was blown away by his proclamations, and all the while I was tense because I knew Greyson could come out at any second and see this happening, and I didn’t want to hurt him again.

“But what about Ava?” I asked.

“Let me worry about Ava,” he replied.

He leaned closer, so close that even an accidental, small movement would drive our lips together.

“If Adéluce had never happened, Cali, ask yourself, where would we be? What would’ve happened?”

I shook my head, backed off just a little. “I can’t do that, Xavier. Adéluce *did* happen. No matter how much we hate her and know that she was behind so much of what fell apart—”

“Don’t make excuses, and I want you to think beyond Adéluce right now. Say it,” he interrupted. “Say what you feel. Because you know as well as I do what I mean. I mean that we would still be together. Nothing would have changed, and our love and attraction would be stronger than it is even now.”

I looked away, confused. My thoughts were rushing as fast as the blood in my veins.

And it was all made worse when he added, “You know it as well as I do, Cali. I see the way you look at me. And I know how I feel when I look at you. You said you still love me. I know you mean it.”

“Xavier, we—”

“We fit together, Cali,” he said quickly, cutting me off. “We’re meant to be together, against all odds, no matter what or who tries to break us apart. And to put it plainly, I fucking miss you, Cali.”

He took a deep breath, running a hand through his hair, looking pained. “But if you tell me to…then I’ll step away for good.”

**Episode 5554**

**Greyson**

“Thanks for the warning, Maeve, but I’ve handled witches before, and they don’t scare me. Even the bad ones,” I said.

If I had time and if I cared, I’d tell Maeve a little bit about how bad witches could get—Adéluce was a force that we would remember forever and were still recovering from. I doubted very seriously that this Cordelia person held a candle to her.

Maeve laughed. “Oh, is that so? Even the *bad* ones? You don’t get it, do you? I bet you’re a big bad Alpha wolf who thinks that no one can take you out. But you’ve never come across a witch like Cordelia, I guarantee you that.”

I leaned closer and narrowed my eyes, invading her space. “And Cordelia has never come across someone like me. You saw what happened here yesterday.”

Maeve sipped from her drink, looking unmoved. “Yeah, and last night you had the help of your Fae. You may not get so lucky with Cordelia. She’s not a bunch of drunk wolves with bad right hooks.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I said through clenched teeth, tired of her warnings. I didn’t need them, and she was only wasting my time.

“Why are you so interested in Cordelia, anyway? If it’s a spell you need, or a curse, or a love potion or something, I’ll do it for you in exchange for a drink or two.”

I wasn’t about to tell her the truth—that this Cordelia had somehow captured and trapped my wolf. It was better that she thought I had all my parts intact, and that she was afraid of what I might do as a werewolf if she didn’t cooperate.

“Thanks for the offer, but I need Cordelia. She has something the belongs to me, and I want it back,” was all I said.

Maeve finished her beer and sighed as she slammed the empty mug on the table. “Fine. Since you insist and won’t leave me to drink in peace, I may have some knowledge of her whereabouts.”

I nodded at that, finally feeling like we were starting to get somewhere.

“I get it. Like I said, I’ve dealt with witches before. I know nothing comes for free.”

I wasn’t about to give up an eye like Jay had for Lola, but I wanted my wolf back, and I was willing to do just about whatever it took to secure it.

“So, out with it. What do you want in return?” I growled.

The witch paused to think it over, and I waited without rushing her even though I was growing more impatient by the second. There was something about leaving Cali outside with Xavier all this time that was troubling me.

*You know exactly why you don’t want them alone together for too long. You saw that kiss. You know what it had to mean to Xavier and Cali both to feel that kind of spark and connection. Anyone with eyes could have seen that kiss was…powerful.*

I slapped down some money. “Tell me where she is, and you can buy yourself a couple of rounds and have a little extra left over. Do we have a deal?”

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A few moments later I was moving through the bar, trying to decipher what Maeve had just told me.

Witches had to be the most maddening creatures on the planet. Even when you struck what should have been a straightforward deal with one—money in exchange for information—what you got in the exchange was always maddeningly vague.

And it didn’t help that the witch had been three sheets to the wind even before we started talking. It was only because she was already sloshed that I figured my offer to buy her a couple more rounds would work. And it had—kind of.

*But what had she meant by “the crossroads at the frozen well?” Is it some kind of code word?*

It was a riddle if I’d ever heard one, and when I’d asked her to clarify, she’d ignored me and taken off with the money.

I would have pushed the issue further, but again, my knowledge of witches stopped me. She’d given me all she was going to. It was up to me to figure out the rest.

As I got close to the exit, I saw the bouncer standing by the door with a scowl on his face. That in and of itself wasn’t surprising since the bouncer always seemed to be scowling, but he was obviously waiting for me.

I stepped right up in his face, not in a mood to get into it with the werewolf but knowing that I needed to face whatever this was head on.

Cali wasn’t with me, and I didn’t have my werewolf to rely on, which meant shifting was out of the question—so this would be a tough fight. But if I showed any weakness, I knew it would be worse.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” the bouncer asked, his chest puffed out and his fists balled up at his sides.

“Yeah, I found it,” I replied.

He shoved the door open wide. “Good, then get the hell out and don’t let me see your face around here again.”

I hesitated only because I was so temped to smack the guy, but instead I just shoulder-checked him on my way out.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Good riddance,” he snapped before the door slammed shut behind me.

I spotted Cali and Xavier standing close together under some scaffolding as I approached. When she saw me, Cali stepped back, her cheeks flushed.

*Caught. She’s acting caught. But maybe I’m overthinking it. Maybe they were just talking. They’re allowed to talk, right?*

Whatever was going on, I didn’t like it and wanted to know right away what was going on.

*Are you okay, love?* I mind linked to her.

She nodded and I stepped close to put an arm around her.

Xavier had been standing up straight before but was now leaning against the scaffolding like he didn’t have a care in the world.

His expression was hard to read as he gestured at me and said, “Any luck?”

I tightened my hold on Cali, and Xavier didn’t react. I didn’t know whether or not to take that as a sign that nothing had happened, or that I’d just walked in on something big.

“Yeah, a bit of luck. The witch we’re looking for is named Cordelia.”

Cali lit up. “We got a name?? That’s a great start. Where do we find her?”

I was distracted for a moment by the tension I sensed between Xavier and Cali. She was trying to focus on me and my wolf, and Xavier was killing himself to act unbothered, and my gut was telling me something was up.

As much as it bothered me, I couldn’t focus on that right now. I had to get my wolf back.

“I’m not sure how to find her,” I admitted. “The witch in there told me to go to the crossroads at the frozen well.”

Xavier scowled. “And what the fuck does that mean?” He cursed under his breath. “I should have known that you’d come back with some witch riddle. Why can’t they ever be straightforward and tell you exactly what you need to know?”

“I know, it’s so typical. Believe me, I wasn’t surprised when she dropped that one on me. I was hoping one of you might figure it out, but I guess not?”

Cali and Xavier exchanged a look and shrugged.

“Nothing comes to mind,” Cali said.

“Then that means we need to ask someone,” I said. “I don’t want to waste any more time.”

Cali opened her phone and started scrolling around on her maps app, searching for clues.

While she was busy searching, I kept my eyes on my brother.

Xavier caught my glare. “You want something?”

I bit my lower lip, wishing I could say, “Yeah, for you to keep your fucking hands off Cali.” But I held back. Arguing with him right now wouldn’t help my situation, and it would put Cali in distress, and that was the last thing I wanted.

“All I want is my wolf,” I said tightly. “I’m sure you understand how that feels.”

Xavier nodded. “All too well.”

“Did she say anything about the King’s Cross Ice well?” Cali interrupted.

“No, that would be too specific, and she was aggressively vague,” I replied. “What is that place?”

“It’s a frozen well!” Cali said excitedly. “It’s a historic site that was used to store ice.”

Xavier didn’t look convinced. “Okay so…does this Cordelia witch live in a well or—?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she did,” I said. “But even if she doesn’t live there, she may live somewhere nearby. And if she does, then we should be able to pick up my wolf’s scent when we get close.”

“That’s a start,” Xavier said.

I turned to Cali. “Okay, so how do we get to this frozen well?”

**Episode 5555**

We were on the Tube making our way toward King’s Cross Ice Well and I couldn’t stop wondering what Greyson was thinking.

He’d been quiet since we left the club. I’d asked him a few questions and had gotten pretty short answers in return. He hadn’t snapped at me, but he was obviously distracted.

I didn’t want to believe that he’d seen anything happening between me and Xavier, but he’d walked out right as Xavier and I were discussing our complicated relationship. And it wasn’t like Xavier and I had been standing an appropriate distance apart while that was happening.

I’d broken away from Xavier as soon as Greyson appeared, but for all I knew, that had only made me look guilty.

Greyson had even mind linked to ask if I was okay, and that meant he’d seen enough to make him worry that things weren’t right.

And he was right to think that, because nothing was okay.

*Nothing* had been okay, if I was being honest, since Adéluce had wreaked havoc on our lives. The witch was long dead, now, but her impact would be felt for as long as we lived. I was sure of it.

I was still so confused by what Xavier said. I couldn’t wrap my head around how he could say that we fit together, that our mate bond was as strong as ever, when, all the while, he was still with Ava.

If our mate bond was so strong, wouldn’t he have left her by now? Wouldn’t he have told her that he loved me and couldn’t be without me and ended things once and for all?

I knew it was more complicated than that, but Xavier had spoken about our feelings and our relationship in absolutes, and so his behavior and continued relationship with Ava—who he obviously cared about—was confusing.

None of it made sense to me.

Above all, I didn’t want to be part of some supernatural love square. I didn’t need that kind of drama in my life. It was hard enough being part of the *due destini* without complicating things even further.

And even if he made some move to uncomplicate his side of things by breaking up with Ava, it wouldn’t be smooth sailing from there.

I’d grown to know Ava very well, and she wasn’t going to just give up on Xavier and say, “Here Cali, you can have him back.”

Ava was going to fight tooth and nail for Xavier. And if he did leave her in favor of me, how would Ava respond?

I shuddered to think about us going toe to toe, especially over Xavier. It wasn’t that he wasn’t worth fighting for, but I wasn’t interested in coming to blows with Ava when neither I nor Xavier were doing anything technically wrong. We were mates.

Ava needed to accept that, just like she was Xavier’s mate, I was his mate too. And that meant it would be near impossible for us to just not be in each other’s lives.

And then there was all the weirdness with Greyson and Kendall…

It was all getting to be too much, and I wasn’t sure I could handle any more.

When did things get so complicated? Why couldn’t I have an easy relationship and a normal life with the person I loved? Why did things have to be this way?

*If I could just make a choice between Xavier and Greyson, maybe things would be easier. There’s no guarantee that deciding would improve my life…but maybe it’s worth a try?*

The *due destini* was practically designed to torture me. For all I knew, it was a fallacy that deciding between my mates would solve anything.

What if I was destined to be in love with two men for the rest of my life, go mad, and that was that? Maybe I had less control over my destiny than I wanted to believe.

I was feeling so confused and had no idea how to bring up any of this to Greyson. Especially when he was preoccupied with something so big—finding this huge part of himself that was missing. And not only missing, but possibly in the palm of a strange witch’s hand.

Expressing my angst about being torn between him and Xavier would do nothing but hurt Greyson, I knew this. How could it not? We were together and Greyson wanted that to be enough, but it wasn’t.

And I didn’t know if it ever would be.

“Is Ava meeting us there?” Greyson asked Xavier.

What a way to be snapped back to reality--the mention of the other corner of our love square. I was starting to flush again.

I still had no idea how to be around Ava, but the fact that she’d stormed off once her kiss failed to bring Xavier’s wolf back and had been MIA ever since wasn’t a good sign.

Who knew what kind of mood she would be in once we were all around one another again? My guess was that it wouldn’t be a good one, and an angry Ava was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

I bit my lip and snuck a glance at Xavier. He seemed to notice, and his eyes flicked down to my mouth and lingered there.

A second later, his voice was in my head.

*Stop doing that. You know what it does to me.*

Now I was even more flustered.

*I’m not doing anything* to *you*, I mind linked back.

Xavier’s eyes finally left my lips as he said out loud, “I told Ava where we were going, but I’m not sure if she’ll show.”

Greyson snorted. “Well, hopefully she does. We need her. She’s the only one who saw the witch. It would be great to get confirmation that we’ve got the right person before going in guns blazing.”

Greyson turned to me. “Have you felt my wolf again at all?”

I was still looking at Xavier’s lips, but Greyson’s voice snapped me out of my reverie. “I can try again,” I said quickly, hoping that I didn’t sound as flustered as I felt.

I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing, but no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t concentrate like I had back at the zoo.

My conversation with Xavier, how close we’d been, the sexual tension, it was all I could think about.

And deep thinking was difficult while we were on the Tube. All the swaying and talking and loud noises had a way of breaking my concentration repeatedly.

The train suddenly jerked to a stop at the next station, and I fell into Xavier, one hand landing flat against his chest while the other hand grasped the bar over my head.

Xavier responded quickly, wrapping one strong arm around my waist and keeping me from stumbling.

The doors opened and more people crowded in, forcing us closer together. His chin was resting against my cheek, and just like outside the club, my entire body felt like it was engulfed with white hot fire.

How was I supposed to function with him this close? And how was I supposed to control myself, even though Greyson was standing right on the other side of me?

*Fuck me, and fuck the* due destini*.*

What made it worse was that the hand still clasping the bar was layered right under Greyson’s. It was a mindfuck, having one mate holding one hand while the other was pressed tightly against me.

I was in such an awkward position, and there wasn’t room to correct it. The other passengers jostled against me as the train began to move again.

I couldn’t help but think about how telling this was. I was literally sandwiched between my mates, each one holding me, claiming me as their own in a subtle way.

After what felt like an eternity, the train reached its stop and the three of us forced our way through the press of bodies to get off.

Greyson’s hand never left mine, and Xavier was right beside me, his arm brushing against me.

It was sensory overload, and I felt like I was going to explode any second now.

How was I supposed to deal with this much stimulation when I already felt like an exposed nerve?

My close encounter with Xavier earlier still had me reeling, and simply being next to Greyson made me feel like I wanted to give in to him too.

I was grateful when we finally emerged from the station and were met with a rush of cool, fresh air.

I pulled away from them both and concentrated on my phone, searching the map to orient us. I pointed ahead. “This way.”

We walked in silence to the King’s Cross Ice Well. When we got there, Xavier took one look around and shook his head.

“I don’t know…maybe that witch at the club was fucking with you, Greyson.”

Greyson sighed. “Wonder if the crossroad she mentioned is an intersection or something.”

“Maybe,” Xavier said. “But which one?”

“What about that?” I pointed to a canal just past the Well and started heading toward it. There were a few boats floating nearby, and then I noticed a Houseboat moored along the bank.

Across the back of the boat was a sign—the *Crossroad*. We’d found it.

**Episode 5556**

**Artemis**

Adair stopped short by the tent door and whipped around to face the assassin. “What did he just say?!”

I was shellshocked by what the assassin had said too, and it was taking me a minute to absorb it.

*Wait. Is he telling the truth? Is my father really alive?*

All at once, a mix of conflicting emotions flooded through me. This was not news of my father’s death, but of his life, a confirmation of what I’d believed to my core for so long—that my father still lived, despite what everyone had told me.

“Don’t believe anything this snake says,” Adair cautioned. “He’s here to sow confusion and lies, and he does it as easily as he breathes.”

But it was all too simple to block out Adair’s warnings. I took a deep breath and asked the obvious next question.

“How do you know Kadmos is alive?”

The assassin answered, still under the sway of my magic and unable to resist. “He’s alive.”

My frustration was starting to build.

“You already said that!” I hissed. “I’m asking how you know!” I grabbed him and gave him a hard shake. “Tell me! Have you seen him?”

“He’s alive,” the assassin mumbled again.

I was shaking the assassin so hard his head was snapping back and forth on his neck when Adair interceded and pulled me back.

The assassin went limp, his head slumping to his chest.

“Let me go!” I shouted at Adair. “He knows something, and I want him to tell me what it is! Now!” I was struggling to get out of Adair’s hold, but he wouldn’t let me go.

“Stop it, Artemis, you have to step away, and you have to calm down!”

I turned on him and pointed a finger in his face. “Don’t tell me what to do! And why are you so calm? You heard what he said, same as I did!”

“I heard him, yes, but that doesn’t make it the truth, Artemis.”

I was fighting back tears, anger and sadness battling for dominion inside me. “You heard him, but you just don’t *want* to believe! You refuse to listen because you don’t even care!”

“That’s not true!” Adair snarled.

A pained expression crossed his face before he took me by the shoulders. His voice was strained with emotion when he spoke again, and I was willing to listen only because I’d never seen Adair this emotional.

“You have no idea how much I wish my brother was still alive.”

“If that’s true, why don’t you—”

“Using magic isn’t always the right thing to do. And words from an assassin should never be taken at face value, no matter how much you want to believe that what they’re saying is true.”

“But it’s all I have! The only real lead I’ve gotten in all this time,” I choked out.

“I know,” Adair replied quietly. He lifted my chin and looked me straight in the eye. “But we need more.” He gestured at the assassin who was now slumped in his chair. “He told you that your father is alive, but we don’t know anything about his source. Has he actually seen a walking, talking Kadmos? If not, it’s just hearsay.”

“I don’t understand why we can’t just treat this as a lead!” I said, aware of how pitiful I sounded.

“Because there’ve been too many unfounded rumors about my brother. Too many to count. And none of them has ever panned out, Artemis. Not one,” Adair shot back.

I pulled away and wiped the tears from my cheeks. I felt embarrassed for reacting so strongly, and what Adair was saying made perfect sense, but that didn’t make me feel any better.

It was hard to admit that maybe I wanted so much to believe that my father was alive and that my journey to the Fae world to find answers wasn’t a failure, that I was willing to take any information as the truth.

“I understand that you want to explore this to see if there’s a shred of truth to what this man is saying, but I don’t want you out here chasing shadows. If your father is truly alive, where has he been all these years? Kadmos is a force to be reckoned with, Artemis. He’s not invisible— someone would have spotted him by now!”

“But the assassin is caught up in a loop and won’t give any more details—that doesn’t mean he hasn’t seen Kadmos. I just need to question him some more, and then maybe I’ll get down to the truth.”

Adair shook his head. “No. Again, this isn’t the source to hang all your hopes on, Artemis. Magic doesn’t always produce a perfect result, no matter how much you want to believe that it does. And there are too many signs that point the other way—too much proof that what the assassin is saying couldn’t be further from the truth.”

I nodded my agreement, but inside, I wasn’t about to discredit the assassin’s words.

The tent flap flew open, and a very annoyed Celeste came walking in. “We’ve wasted enough time. We need to get going.”

She trained her sharp gaze on me.

“And why is that werewolf friend of yours and the Fae bounty hunter still hanging around here? I told you to get—”

Celeste stopped talking as she finally read the room. Her eyes left me and landed on the assassin.

“Why the hell is *he* still here??”

I was about to explain, but a look from Adair stopped me cold.

“He needs to be disposed of. My guards will deal with this assassin, and I expect everyone to be ready to go within the hour!”

With that, Celeste blew out of the tent as quickly as she’d entered, and Adair and I stayed silent, both lost in our own thoughts.

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Soon after, I was sandwiched between Kastian and Celeste in the back of a bouncing carriage. Adair and Tabitha were following behind in their own carriage.

“I hope that was the last I’ll see of your friends,” Celeste remarked. “I’m tired of all this riff raff hanging around.”

I had to withhold my smile. That very well could have been the last Celeste saw of them, but it didn’t mean they would ever be far from me.

Rishika and Marius were no doubt following the procession in secret. They were good at not being seen unless they wanted to be—being caught in bed with me this morning not withstanding—and it was comforting to know that they were close.

I took a minute to go over the last twenty-four hours in my head. I was trying to piece things together, and there was a lot to consider—the Order of the Winding Thorn, the assassin, the fact that Kadmos may still be alive.

My emotions could easily have clouded my judgment with all this going on, but I couldn’t let that happen. There were so many pieces to this puzzle, which was making it almost impossible to solve. If only I could figure out how it all fit together.

The carriage came to a stop. We’d reached Embersy.

I glanced out the window, wondering if Rishika and Marius had already arrived.

“Just a few words of advice,” Celeste said to me and Kastian. “It’s best to present yourselves properly to all the people here who will be seeing you for the first time as a new couple. Do not give anyone any reason to doubt your love. This visit is about more than your petty feelings, got it?”

Kastian rolled his eyes. “I hardly need to be coached, Celeste. I’ve lived my entire life as a noble, remember? I know how to fake it with the best of them, yourself included.”

As we stepped out of the darkened carriage and into the bright sunlight, Kastian offered me his hand. I started to slap it away, but a sharp look from Celeste stopped me.

*Fine. I can play this game if it buys me more time to look for my father. No big deal at all.*

The village was picturesque, with quaint little markets and shops, cobblestone streets, and food stalls all over.

A bunch of villagers stopped to gawk at us as we passed.

I felt a little bad for deceiving them. Little did they know, there wasn’t a shred of love and barely any respect between Kastian and me. However, if we had to present an image for the sake of keeping the status quo intact, I was willing to pretend for the time being.

“Ah, Mayor, I’d like to introduce you to Kastian and Artemis,” Celeste said as we approached a tall, distinguished-looking man waiting for us in the town square.

“Pleasure to meet you both,” the mayor said. “I hope that you’ll find Embersy enjoyable during your stay.”

Kastian and I were all smiles as we shook hands with the mayor.

As soon as I could, I broke away to feign interest in one of the market stalls when I heard someone mention the name Erimentha.

I snapped around to see who was speaking. Hera had told me to seek out a Dark Fae named Erimentha for information about my father. This village was right smack in the middle of Dark Fae territory.

I looked around, wondering who’d said her name, my hope rising as I wondered if I’d somehow ended up right where I needed to be.

Could Erimentha really be *here*?

**Episode 5557**

“Can you pick up my wolf’s scent? Even a trace?” Greyson asked Xavier. “Something to let us know that we’re in the right place?”

Xavier paused and concentrated with his nose to the air. After a while, he shook his head. “Sorry, I can’t say for sure. There are so many conflicting scents here. It’s kind of weird.”

Greyson nodded. “I know. I’m having the same problem.”

I started marching toward the boat with the *Crossroad* sign on it.

“Wait, not so fast,” Xavier said.

“He’s right. We don’t know what we’re dealing with here. We should take a second to make some sort of plan of attack,” Greyson said.

“But we’re wasting time,” I said.

“Better to waste time than walk into some witch’s lair without our wits about us. Maeve—the witch from the club—warned me about Cordelia. We should be cautious at the very least,” Greyson said.

“It’s never a great idea to go crashing uninvited into a witch’s house. It’s dangerous; she might have set up a bunch of bullshit traps in and around the houseboat,” Xavier said.

I sighed, wondering why Greyson wasn’t on my side. He knew as well as I did that for something like this, time was of the essence. Why wasn’t he as eager as I was to finally get to the bottom of this?

“I’m not going to break in, I’m going to knock,” I said. “How dangerous can that be? I could be a neighbor checking in on her for all she knows.”

“But you’re not,” Xavier deadpanned. “You’re with a couple of werewolves who are pissed at her for sending us on a wild goose chase to find one of our wolves that she shouldn’t have in the first place.”

“Ditto,” Greyson remarked.

Why did they always seem to agree only when they were both disagreeing with me?

“This is all we have to go on, and I’m tired of flailing around in the dark trying to find a clue. This is our one clue, and the only thing we can do is knock and see what happens.”

Neither Xavier nor Greyson looked happy about it, but they didn’t stop me when I continued toward the boat.

It wasn’t until I got closer that I realized getting to the boat was going to be a lot harder than I thought it would be. It was moored to a rickety dock, and the only door I could see required me to stop onto the boat’s deck in order to reach it.

I hadn’t had the best luck with boats or water in the past, but then again, I was a winning coxswain so maybe that counted for something.

“Careful, love,” Greyson warned as we negotiated our way down the dock and stepped onto the boat.

Xavier hung back, keeping an eye on the area and ready to alert us if he saw anyone matching Cordelia’s description approaching.

I got onto the boat fine, but Greyson was a lot heavier than I was, and the shifting of the boat, ever so slightly rocked me. I yelped and fell into him, and he held onto me tightly until I was able to steady myself.

After a while, he pulled away to look me in the eye. “You good, love?” he asked.

My cheeks felt like they were on fire as we stood there staring into each other’s eyes.

It was amazing how much of an effect these two men had on me, time and time again. It was like I was a light switch that either one of them could flip on at will.

That would bother me more if I didn’t know that I had the same effect on them. And Xavier had taken pains to let me know that nothing had changed for him in that regard. I used to turn him on and apparently, I still did.

Only after the boat stopped swaying underfoot did Greyson release me. I took a moment to catch my breath and then walked to the door and knocked.

After a few moments of silence, I knocked again, this time a little louder and with a stern, “Hello?”

But the only response was the creaking sound of the boat as it rocked gently in the water.

Xavier’s voice startled me. “What are you doing here?”

Greyson and I turned to see Ava approaching.

Her long, perfect hair hung loose around her shoulders, and she was wearing a new, skintight outfit that accentuated evert curve she had.

*Of course. She must have gone shopping.*

I should have been grateful that Ava was here—we needed her to help identify the witch and hopefully find Greyson’s wolf—but I had a sinking feeling that having Ava here was only going to make things worse.

*Remember what Xavier said. Let him worry about Ava. She’s not my problem. I can just mind my business, live my life in the way I always do, and everything else will take care of itself.*

The thought of living my life on my own terms inevitably made me think about the kiss I shared with Xavier, who was, even though it didn’t feel right to admit it, with Ava now. I was the one who’d betrayed her in some sense, not the other way around.

Xavier was my mate and all, but I was self-aware enough to put myself in Ava’s shoes and understand what it must have been like to know we were going to kiss—and that it would be the catalyst to bring Xavier’s wolf back after she failed. It wasn’t a good feeling. How could it be?

But it still wasn’t *my* fault.

“What do you think I’m doing here?! You asked for my help with this missing wolf debacle, didn’t you?” Ava snapped. Then she looked right at me. “And when *my* mate and *my* Alpha needs my help, I come.”

I bristled at the pointed response but kept my mouth shut, not wanting to cause a scene in a situation where it was best if we laid low.

*Ava is here to help. That’s what counts. Nothing else matters. This isn’t about me, Xavier, or Ava. It’s about getting Greyson’s wolf back by any means necessary.*

I was about to knock again when Greyson gently grabbed my hand.

“No use, Cali. Cordelia obviously isn’t home right now.”

“You’re right,” I said, feeling dejected. “What do we do now?”

Ava jumped aboard, causing the boat to rock wildly. Perpetually unfazed, Ava didn’t even bat an eyelash at how badly the boat rolled. She might as well have been standing on solid ground.

“We don’t bother knocking,” Ava said before kicking the door in.

It happened so fast that the only thing any of us could do was stare at the swinging door and at Ava.

“I can’t believe you just did that!” I gasped.

Ava smirked. “Cali, there are so many things I do that you wouldn’t believe.”

Her eyes shifted slowly to Xavier who jumped onboard next, causing me to tumble into Ava.

Not missing a beat, Ava shoved me aside and said, “So what are we waiting for?”

I glowered at her. Not willing to let her one-up me, I pushed past her and stepped through the doorway. So she didn’t want to knock? Fine. I would lead the way.

I was stunned by what I saw. The others reacted with surprise too, as they followed me in.

The place reminded me so much of Big Mac’s in the way that the inside wasn’t at all what the outside made it out to be.

Instead of the inside of a cramped houseboat, the interior was roomy with long, seemingly endless hallways that stretched toward the back of the boat.

The main room was lined with shelves of books, tinctures, hanging herbs, figurines, and things I couldn’t identify.

I was all too aware that we were very much trespassing, so I cupped my hands to my mouth and bellowed out another, “Hello??”

My voice echoed back to me, unanswered.

“Weird. This place is even bigger than it looks,” I said. “Definitely some magic at play here.”

Greyson started down one of the hallways. “I just got a whiff of my wolf’s scent!” he announced excitedly.

“I smell it too,” Ava said.

“That makes three of us,” Xavier added.

I tried not to feel left out since the only thing I smelled were the fragrant herbs that filled the place.

“I recognize the witch’s scent,” Ava said. “This place definitely belongs to the same one I saw with the ravens back at the Tower.”

The hallways were even longer than I first thought, and soon I realized that they were winding into a labyrinth with sharp turns and so many intersections I lost count. The mirrors covering the walls didn’t help orient us at all.

We continued walking until we stumbled into a large, cavernous room. It was dimly lit, and there was something that looked like an altar at the opposite end.

Something was moving around on it, something I couldn’t quite make out, but I could feel exactly what it was.

Greyson pointed at it. “There it is! My wolf!”

**Episode 5558**

As soon as the words escaped Greyson’s lips, the undefined shape started moving rapidly, leaping off the altar and taking off down one of the many, winding corridors.

Xavier shouted out a curse and shoved Greyson. “What the hell are you just standing there for, Greyson? It’s getting away!”

Greyson quickly pulled himself out of his shock or surprise, whatever it was that had kept him rooted to the spot, and raced off after his wolf, which was moving so fast, it was already yards ahead.

Xavier and Greyson were shoulder to shoulder as they rushed to chase it, and I was just wishing I could see it clearer. If it wasn’t moving so fast, maybe I could have gotten a better look at it, but it was on the move, and the four of us had no choice but to give chase.

We followed it down a long, dark corridor that dead ended at a brick wall. Though I still couldn’t see the wolf clearly, I was hoping we had it trapped. It was a dead end, after all.

*We’re so close. All we have to do is corner it, and then this will all be over!*

“Easy,” Greyson whispered as we slowly advanced on it. “Easy. Come back home. We need each other and you know that. You’ve had your fun, but now get back where you belong.”

We were edging closer at a snail’s pace, trying not to spook Greyson’s wolf, but it didn’t matter. Right before our eyes, the corridor stretched out in front of us, elongating like some optical illusion come to life.

It was like we’d stumbled into a funhouse, but there was nothing fun here. This was nothing but powerful, maddening witchcraft at play, driving us crazy and reminding us how powerless we were against magic.

No matter how fast we ran, we just couldn’t get any closer to the wolf. It was the most frustrating chase I’d ever been a part of. Chasing Xavier’s wolf around London hadn’t even been as infuriating as this.

“This is pointless!” Ava shouted out as she slowed to a stop. “It’s staying one step ahead of us no matter what we do because of this damned enchanted hallway. We may as well be running in place!”

That was something we could agree on for once. There was no use chasing something that obviously couldn’t be caught under normal circumstances.

Physically, I didn’t know if I could run anymore, anyway. At least not without a long break. I was bent over and panting, my hands braced on my knees, and completely worn out from what could not have been a more fruitless hunt.

“Fucking witches,” Ava hissed angrily under her breath. “They have the worst sense of humor of all the supernaturals. What’s the point of this? An endless hallway? Why?!”

I glanced at her. She was leaning on Xavier with one arm and looking absolutely livid. Neither of them had broken a sweat and had stopped more from annoyance and frustration than from anything resembling exhaustion.

I was still trying to figure out how Ava still looked so chic after a chase like that, dressed in her too sexy to believe outfit. The only proof that she’d exerted herself at all was that her cheeks were slightly flushed, which only made her look all the more stunning.

“Does anyone have any ideas?” Greyson asked. “We’re literally getting nowhere chasing it.”

“I have no idea what to do next,” I said. “At least the wolf is still there, right? Somewhere?”

Greyson nodded and pointed. “Yes. It’s right there watching us. Probably laughing at us, too.”

I wished I could see it. I tried to connect to it like I did before, but something was interfering with the connection, and I just couldn’t build a link with it like I had before.

I jumped when a shadow passed over me. I whipped around to gaze down the other end of the long, dark hallway.

“What was that?” I said. “Did anyone else see it? That shadow?”

But there was nothing but the long corridor and the faint, blurred image of Greyson’s wolf standing by the brick wall as if waiting for us to attempt to chase it again.

*Did I imagine that or—?*

“What shadow?” Ava said. “The only thing I see is your mate’s wolf over there, waiting to taunt us some more.”

“I thought I saw something fly over me, but that doesn’t make any sense, right?” I asked.

And then it happened again. A shadow passed over us all—far more noticeably this time—and we all ducked.

“Wait a minute, what the hell was that?” Xavier said.

I looked around again, but just like last time, there was nothing unusual, no strange creature lurking around behind us, ready to pounce.

“Maybe you should try connecting with your wolf, Greyson, so we can get the hell out of here. We’ve led you to it, now you need to take the next step and draw it to you. It’s yours, right? Act like it,” Ava said.

“*Fine*,” Greyson hissed.

He took a few steps forward and then stooped down. He was about to close his eyes to concentrate when the shadow flew over us again, but this time, it was accompanied by a strange cry.

Everyone whipped around in different directions, because it sounded like it was coming from everywhere at once.

When the cry happened again, even louder than last time, I backed into Xavier.

“I’m getting kind of scared now. What was that?” I asked.

Xavier grabbed my arm and held me close. “I have no idea.”

“Be quiet!” Ava hissed. “I’ve heard that sound before.”

Another shadow coasted over us, followed by the same strange cry.

Ava nodded slowly. “It’s a raven. That’s a raven’s call for sure.”

“What? Why would there be a raven in here?” I asked.

And then something fluttered by me so close that my hair stirred in its wake. I recoiled, once again bumping into Xavier, who grabbed me to keep me calm and steady on my feet.

A single black feather floated down and landed at my feet.

I stared at it for a few beats before looking up and nearly crying out in surprise. The ceiling was gone. In its place was a dark, ominous sky streaked with flashes of lightning. Each time the lightning came, it revealed the outline of a large, shadowy bird circling overhead.

Greyson followed my gaze, his eyes wide with shock. “Is this *real*? It’s an illusion, right? It has to be.”

Ava looked shaken, which was a rare sight. Nothing ever seemed to get to her. “Maybe it’s a spell?” she said.

I bent down and picked up the large black feather at my feet, then held it out for all to see. “It’s no illusion,” I said.

There was blood on my fingertips, stained from the feather. I shuddered as another bird whipped by. Its cry was piercing enough to hurt my ear drums and so unsettling that I was wondering whether we should try to retrace our steps to get out of here and try for the wolf another time.

It wasn’t like we were going to be able to catch it, and now we were just sitting ducks for whatever this witch had planned.

“Fuck this, honestly,” Ava said. She swiped out with a partially shifted claw only to come up empty handed—though she did manage to tear a seam in the corridor wall.

“Everyone stop moving!” Greyson shouted. “The ravens aren’t harming us, so they don’t matter. Just cover me—I’m going to try again to connect with my wolf. That’s why we’re here, and I’ll be damned if I let these birds scare me off.”

I watched as Greyson tried once again to concentrate. He squeezed his eyes shut and his forehead wrinkled as he strained to build a link with his wolf, but it wasn’t working.

“I can’t do it!” he admitted after a while.

I glanced at Xavier, hoping he would understand before I looked at Greyson and shouted, “Kiss me!”

That seemed to suck all the air out of the room, but I knew what I was doing. It wasn’t ideal, but what else could I do but try the one thing that had worked for my other mate?

“That’s how I got Xavier’s wolf back, so why wouldn’t it work for Greyson’s?” I added.

Ava glared at me, but I ignored her. This wasn’t about her, anyway. It was about helping my mate reclaim a piece of himself that he was missing, and I was willing to do just about anything to make that happen.

Greyson pulled me to him without another moment of hesitation, and we kissed.

My entire body felt like it was vibrating, surging with energy and lust and desire so strong that I couldn’t help the moan of pleasure that burst from my lips.

I wasn’t sure how much time passed before Greyson pulled away, breathing hard.

Gasping, and I locked eyes with no one but Greyson. “Well?” I asked. “Did it work?”

**Episode 5559**

**Greyson**

My mind was racing—but not about how to get my wolf, but about Cali. It felt so good to kiss her just like it always did. If only we weren’t doing any of this wolf retrieval nonsense… It would feel so good to keep kissing her, to have less clothes between us and feel her skin on mine…

As soon as we broke apart I heard her voice.

“Greyson, is it back? Can you feel your wolf? Did the kiss work?”

I didn’t have to think about it to know, because the same empty feeling I’d had for days was still there.

Cali gave me an anxious look, and I knew she’d seen the cold truth in my eyes before I spoke the words.

“No,” I replied. “It’s still gone.”

“Guess a magical Cali kiss can’t *always* save the day,” Ava remarked under her breath. “Good to know.”

“*Stop*,” Xavier hissed at her, but I could tell that the comment had already gotten to Cali.

She threw her arms around me. “Come on, let’s try again. Maybe we were distracted.”

I wanted to believe that. This houseboat of endless hallways was creepy, and all the swooping, screeching ravens and bloody feathers and weren’t helping. Maybe all of it taken together had thrown off our vibe, and Cali just needed to kiss me again to make things right.

I certainly had no objections to trying.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed my brother’s grim expression, but I didn’t give a damn what he thought. Maybe this was his payback for my having to stand back and watch him share that explosive kiss with Cali.

*If kissing Cali brought Xavier’s wolf back, it has to be able to bring mine back too, right?*

I lifted Cali’s chin, wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her close, so that the lengths of our bodies were melded together, and I kissed her slowly.

That familiar surge of pleasure filled my body, and I lost myself in it. The love in my heart for Cali was overflowing, but I could also sense her desperation. She wanted this to work so badly, and I did, too.

I wanted it to bring my wolf back, of course, but I also just wanted her to be able to prove that our connection was as strong as the one she had with Xavier. Strong enough to make me whole again by bringing my wolf back to where it belonged.

But as pleasurable as our kiss was, and no matter how much I wanted it, it did nothing to bring my wolf back.

When we broke our kiss a second time, I felt speechless. Stunned.

*Crushed.*

The disappointment in Cali’s eyes was almost too much to bear as she asked, “Wh-Why didn’t it work?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but there was nothing waiting there to come out. I stole a glance at Xavier. If he said a word right now, whatever it was, it would be wrong. But for once in his life, Xavier seemed to sense that he should keep his mouth shut.

And maybe more surprising, Ava didn’t have a snide remark waiting for Cali this time around.

But…I did see something in my brother’s eyes that I didn’t like. A certain look of pride that made me want to haul off and hit him.

Meanwhile, Ava looked pissed. Maybe it was because she saw the look in Xavier’s eyes too, and she knew him well enough to understand what it meant. Or maybe she was angry because she realized that Cali’s kiss worked for her mate, but seemingly not for me.

Even though Ava was rough around the edges and cared about nothing but Xavier, I felt a shred of pity for her. Now I knew exactly what she’d gone through, and it didn’t feel good at all.

“Don’t worry, Cali,” I said. “I’m sure it didn’t work because of the witch. Her witchcraft on the boat must interfere with our mate bond or something. Or my connection with my wolf somehow…”

I didn’t know who I was trying to convince more—her or me.

Ava scoffed, but again, said nothing.

I wasn’t sure I believed it, either, but it was the only thing that made sense to me.

I looked back at my wolf just as a raven’s shadow flashed over us once again. And in the brief darkness the raven’s large body brought, the wolf’s eyes sparkled with a purple sheen.

*What the hell—did anyone else see that?*

I looked around, but no one else was reacting. I didn’t mention it, either. Why were my wolf’s eyes purple? And not just any shade of purple, either, but the same as Kendall’s eyes.

Xavier had accused me of having something going on with Kendall. That was crazy, and I’d been all too ready to trash my brother for making such a silly assumption. I would never hurt Cali like that.

Xavier had left Cali for another woman—circumstances notwithstanding—and he was trying to make it seem like I would do the same when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

Still, Xavier said that when my wolf was in his possession, he’d noticed that there was more to my and Kendall’s relationship than professional.

Sure, I respected Kendall, and she was very good at what she did. But beyond that… I couldn’t help but wonder if the kiss would have worked with Kendall.

*Don’t fucking think like that. It’s dangerous.*

I would never have admitted it to Xavier, but I had been feeling pretty strange about Kendall lately, which was a generous oversimplification. So strange though that I’d felt what could only be described as jealousy at the man’s voice I heard in the background when I spoke to Kendall on the phone. It wasn’t the first time I’d felt that jealousy either.

“What is it?” Cali asked, snapping me back to the present moment. “What’s wrong?”

I shook away all thoughts of Kendall, as if Cali would be able to sense them if I didn’t clear them away.

None of the Kendall stuff made any sense anyway. The purple I thought I saw in my wolf’s eyes could have been anything, a play of the light, or the effects of the magic the witch had obviously cast on my wolf. She wasn’t the only wolf to ever have purple eyes.

*Just the only one I know.*

“I’m fine, but this whole place is weird and giving me the creeps,” I said.

“You can say that again,” Ava grumbled.

“I wonder if we can lure the wolf out of this cursed houseboat,” Xavier said. “You’ll have a better chance of getting your wolf back without all this bullshit interfering.”

Ava snarled as she clawed out at the raven again, but she missed. “Damn things are fast!” she complained.

Still shaken by the failed kiss, I could only agree. “Yeah, let’s get the hell out of here.”

“And maybe I can help lure it out since we’re mates!” Cali offered.

“Do you really think his wolf will listen to you? Didn’t that dry kiss you and Greyson just shared prove that his wolf doesn’t care for you very much?” Ava remarked.

“Ava, stop!” Xavier said. “That’s enough.”

“What? I’m just stating the obvious. I don’t get why it would follow her, just because she’s Greyson’s mate, when it’s obvious that their bond wasn’t strong enough—”

“Stop it!” Cali snapped. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. If the witch is messing with our mate bond or his wolf, of course the kiss wouldn’t work.”

“And the witch knows you have a mate bond *how?*” Ava snapped.

“Ava, just stop,” I said. I was tired of her comments; they weren’t helping. And when magic was involved—and when a vengeful witch was behind that magic—there was no use sticking to reason, anyway.

Ava shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’m not going to pretend like there are any rules to whatever the three of you have going on anyway, so maybe it’ll work. Good luck.”

“Come on, Cali. Let’s see if this will work,” I said to her.

Even though she was trying not to let it, I could tell that Ava’s dig had gotten to her.

Still, she was ready to try her best, and we both called out to my wolf which, after a few long moments of hesitation, took a slow, cautious step toward us.

We backed up slowly, and the wolf started to follow us. As we moved down the hallway, the wolf continued responding, and I was growing more hopeful by the second.

If we could get the wolf off this boat, I was sure a third kiss would do the trick.

*Good things always happen in threes, right?*

A harsh voice rose behind us. “Where do you think you’re taking my wolf?”

We all turned around to see a woman standing at the end of the corridor. Her eyes were dark swirling circles of blue and orange, and a raven was perched on her shoulder.

“That’s her,” Ava whispered. “The witch from London Tower.”

*Cordelia*.

I stopped beckoning to the wolf and turned my full attention on the witch. Maeve’s warning rang in the back of my head, and now I understood. There was something uniquely chilling about this witch.

“You’re Cordelia, right?” I asked.

“And you’re trespassing!” she shot back. “You’re trying to steal my wolf!”

“Your wolf?” Cali scoffed. “He doesn’t belong to you, and you know it.” Cali took a step forward, and in a flash her magic shield was shining in front of her. “This is my mate’s wolf, and we’re taking it back!”

**Episode 5560**

I was itching to throw every ounce of magic I possessed at this wolf-stealing witch. One blast would teach her that she’d stolen the wrong wolf, but Greyson’s gentle touch stopped me from doing just that.

*Cali, don’t threaten her*, he mind linked. *She’s dangerous, and I don’t want you to get hurt. Let’s try to reason with her first.*

Begrudgingly, I lowered my shield, but I kept it ready just in case. Greyson wanted to reason with her, and I would respect that, but there was something about this witch that told me reasoning with her wasn’t going to work.

Cordelia shifted her gaze from me to Ava. “We’ve met, haven’t we?”

Ava nodded. “Yes. At the Tower of London.”

Cordelia flashed an insincere smile. “Sorry for leaving so abruptly, before we had a chance to talk.” Then she looked past us and gestured with her hand.

I felt something breeze past me and realized that Greyson’s wolf was walking toward Cordelia.

“Don’t go with her!” I called out. “Stay with us, where you belong!”

Even though I couldn’t really see the wolf, I knew that it hadn’t stopped and was by Cordelia’s side by now. Greyson’s frustrated curse confirmed it. Once again, the wolf had slipped through our fingers.

“The wolf isn’t yours, it’s mine,” Greyson said, allowing a slight edge to his voice. “Just let us have it back, and we’ll leave. We only came in here for the wolf. We don’t want anything else, and we don’t want any trouble, but the wolf doesn’t belong to you.”

Codelia’s smile faded. “And none of you belong here. You broke into my home and think you can make demands? Typical werewolves. You think you can flash your teeth and claws, and everyone will just give in. Not with me.” She stroked the blurry figure beside her. “Obviously, I’m not typically fond of werewolves, but there’s something about this little darling that just catches my heart. My wolf is so smart and beautiful and sweet. And loyal.”

“It’s not your wolf!” I snapped, but Cordelia ignored me and continued stroking the wolf.

“It helps that the wolf and my ravens get along so well. It’s like they’ve known each other their whole lives. And it gets so lonely here, especially at night. But my wolf is so warm and big and perfect to snuggle up with, so I’m going to keep it.”

The raven on Cordelia’s shoulder squawked.

Xavier took a step toward her. “Do you really think we’re going to let you keep my brother’s wolf just because you want it as a pet? Think again. We came here for the wolf, and we’re not leaving here without it.”

“What I think is that none of you have much of a choice in the matter. But I’m nothing if not fair, so I will let the wolf decide.”

She leaned down to nuzzle it. I could only just barely make out the wolf’s shape, and even then, my ability to even see it was flickering in and out.

“What do you say, my pet?” Cordelia cooed at the wolf. “Would you rather return to your former host who cruelly let you run off and get lost? Or would you rather stay here with me, where you’re safe, and I’ll never let you out of my sight?”

“That’s not what happened,” I said. “We didn’t let it run off, and Greyson certainly isn’t cruel to his own wolf. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Cordelia arched an eyebrow. “Oh no? Yet I’m the one who found it roaming the streets of London, lost and alone.”

I was getting frustrated, and it was becoming very clear to me that reasoning with this witch was as fruitless as chasing the wolf down her crazy winding hallways. “No! That’s not—”

“No more lies!” the witch shouted, cutting me off. “It was lost, or else you wouldn’t be looking for it, now would you?”

She had us there. I opened my mouth to shoot back a reply, but I was at a loss. It was obvious that we couldn’t talk her into giving us the wolf, and Greyson didn’t want me to use magic, so I had no idea what the next move was.

Cordelia trained her attention back on Greyson. “Go ahead, dear. Call to your wolf. Let it choose. If it wants you, it’ll come to you, won’t it? And if it wants you, there’s no reason why I should keep it against its will.”

I looked at Greyson, who dropped down to his knees and gestured to his wolf. “Come on, boy. You know where you belong. Right here with me. We’ve been together for so long. Don’t let me down, now.”

I was looking in the wolf’s general direction, but of course I couldn’t see anything at all. “What’s happening, Greyson? Is it coming?”

Xavier put a hand on my shoulder. “Yes, it’s coming. Slowly, but it’s coming.”

I was brimming with fresh hope. It was working, and soon this nightmare would be over, and Greyson would be whole again. I knew Greyson’s wolf wouldn’t choose to stay with someone like Cordelia.

But as Greyson reached out a hand toward the wolf, Cordelia snapped her fingers.

In a flash, the corridor began to bend and distort, and a flock of ravens began to swirl around us, so many that I could barely see the others. I put my hands up in front of my face, protecting my eyes as they swooped so close, I felt the wind of their wings and sometimes, the wings themselves.

Then I felt something pulling at me as the floor began to quiver and shake under my feet. I fell to my knees in anguish, wondering what the hell was happening.

*The time for talking with this witch is over. The only thing that’s going to work now is taking Greyson’s wolf by force.*

I tried to conjure my magic, but I couldn’t. I ground my teeth and concentrated, but nothing was happening. My magic was locked up inside me, and I couldn’t access it.

Suddenly, everything stopped moving, and a blanket of thick silence descended over me.

When I looked up, I gasped. Where the others had been standing only moments ago, there were three other Calis in their place.

I shook my head, trying to clear what was obviously a hallucination, but when I looked again, I was still staring at three replicas of myself.

*What’s happening? Am I losing my mind? Where is everyone?*

I staggered to my feet, and the other Calis seemed to be reacting just like I was, their faces screwing up into masks of horror and confusion.

The walls were now floor to ceiling mirrors, and where Ava had been standing, a horrified Cali screamed, “Give me back my face!”

Where Xavier had been, a concerned Cali rushed to Ava’s side. I turned around and caught my reflection in the mirror behind me. I was still Cali, so what the hell was going on?

What was real and what was imagined? And better yet, what was this witch doing to me?

“Enjoy,” Cordelia said, and then she started to walk away.

I turned to Greyson who was also a Cali and shouted, “She’s getting away! Stop her!”

It was beyond weird to be yelling this at myself, but there was no one else here but…me. Three of me. Whatever the witch was doing, she’d done it well.

I was completely lost and disoriented, and I couldn’t make sense of what was going on or even where I was in time and space. For all I knew, one of the other Calis was really me.

“She’s got my wolf!” the Greyson Cali shouted, sounding just like me. He started running after her just as Xavier, looking just like me from head to toe, sprinted after Cordelia.

Just before the Greyson Cali could reach out to touch her, the witch waved her hand and suddenly, we were in a large, ornate room.

Codelia was seated on a wooden throne with Greyson’s wolf on one side, and Greyson, himself again and no longer a replica of me, standing on the other side with a blank look on his face.

Cordelia reached out to stroke the wolf with one hand while the other hand stroked languidly through Greyson’s hair.

“I just want you to know, Cali, that I will take good care of both your pets. I get why you’re fighting so hard to keep them. They’re both very cuddly and warm.”

I raced toward her, trying to conjure my magic, frustrated that it was still just out of my reach.

I’d almost reached Cordelia when she said a sweet, “Goodbye.”

Once again, I tried to draw my magic to strike her, but rather than conjuring my sword or shield, my entire body started to vibrate, and the room trembled and shimmered.

When everything calmed down, I found myself in a courtyard with Xavier and Ava and a flapping flock of ravens.

I whipped around, unable to control my panic. “Where’s Greyson?!”

**Episode 5561**

I looked frantically around the courtyard, searching for Greyson. The Tower of London loomed in front of us, and I took a startled step back. A hand grabbed hold of my arm, and I turned to see Xavier at my side.

“He’s not here,” he said, his voice low.

I swallowed hard and nodded. I knew he was right. “Cordelia must have done…something. She must have blipped us or something. But she kept Greyson and his wolf with her.” I shook my head as my mind raced. “What does she want with Greyson?”

“Hell if I know,” Xavier muttered. He looked pissed. “I fucking hate witches.”  
 Ava looked grim. “I think that witch Cordelia might have some kind of obsession with werewolves.”

I frowned at her. “How do you know that?”

She looked at me for a moment, like she was debating answering my question. Then, “She just had this look in her eyes. And the way she talked about Greyson and his wolf. She referred to both of them as her pets.” She shifted her shoulders, looking deeply uncomfortable. “I’ve heard of this before. Nolan had a problem with a werewolf-obsessed witch once.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised.

She nodded curtly. “Yeah. Apparently, it’s a thing. Witches and werewolves are natural enemies, but there are always some exceptions to that.”

“Like Big Mac and Mrs. Smith,” I murmured.

“Right. But there are others who become crazy and obsessed,” Ava said darkly.

I knew I was on dangerous ground, but I wanted to know more, so I cautiously pushed forward. “So, what happened with Nolan?”

She gave me a dark look, but—to my surprise—she kept talking. “This witch used her magic to trick him. She trapped him and kept him. Like a pet. The way Cordelia’s talking about Greyson.”

I shuddered at that. “How did he escape?”

Now Ava smiled, though the expression was dangerous. “He waited until she was distracted, and then he killed her.” Her smile faded. “He wasn’t so lucky with Silas.”

I could see the pain in Ava’s eyes when she spoke about her brother, and I felt a stab of pity. She always presented such a diamond hard façade, but I couldn’t even begin to imagine how hard it would be to lose Artemis, and it was clear from the pain in her voice that she still felt the loss of Nolan, even after all this time.

“How was he able to get out from under the spell she had cast?” I asked quietly.

Ava glanced at me. “Luckily, the spell broke when he killed her. I think that usually happens when a witch is killed. I don’t think their spells can outlive them, but that doesn’t seem like a hard and fast rule.”

I nodded, taking this in. It was true, the Samara house still stood after Kira rebuilt it even after she’d died… Hopefully that was an exception.

“We need to get out of here,” Xavier said, glancing around the courtyard. “We need to get back to the boat and get Greyson out of there. Hanging around the Tower isn’t going to do us any good.”

He was right. There was nothing for us to do here, so I nodded. “Yeah, let’s go.”

The courtyard was crowded, and we started to move through the throngs of people, but it was slow going. But I stopped when I saw a familiar figure. It was Cordelia, just ahead of us.

Or—if not Cordelia—a woman who looked a hell of a lot like her.

Heart pounding, I started moving toward her, pushing through the crowd.

Xavier looked over at me. *What are you doing?* he asked through the mind link. *The exit is the other way.*

I ignored him as I pushed through one tourist group after another. If Cordelia was here, did that mean that Greyson was here too? And his wolf? I had to find out.

But when I reached the spot where I could have sworn I’d seen the witch, I stopped and looked around, turning in a full circle.

She wasn’t there. There wasn’t anyone there but a short man wearing a tweed jacket, holding a sign for Highland Tours.

He smiled at me. “Hello, dear. Are you here for my two o’clock tour, then?”

“What? Oh, no, I’m not, thank you,” I muttered, baffled.

“Don’t worry if you scare easily,” he said with a friendly chuckle. “It’s not one of those ghost tours. Just pure history on Highland Tours.”

“No, I’m not taking a tour today,” I told him.

The man in tweed looked a little disappointed but turned away as another group of tourists approached him.

“Cali, what are you doing?” Xavier asked as he and Ava caught up to me.

“I—I thought I saw Cordelia,” I stammered, still looking around. “I could have sworn I saw her in the crowd.”

Ava took a deep breath, then shook her head. “I don’t think so. I’m not picking up her stench.”

My stomach clenched. “Maybe I’m losing it. Maybe I’m going mad.”

Xavier put a gentle hand on my arm. “Or maybe it’s some kind of a spell, Cali. Like the kind a witch would cast to confuse you.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said vaguely, as I let Xavier steer me toward the exit.

He looked around as we walked. “I don’t like this place. It gives me the creeps.”

“Yeah, I have to agree,” Ava said. “This is where I first saw Cordelia. I think it must have some kind of special meaning or connection for her.”

I shuddered.

As we drew near to the exit, I heard the cry of a raven. I turned to see the wings of the black bird lifting from the ground and fluttering away. Watching it, I was reminded of the ravens that swirled on Cordelia’s boat, and a feeling of dread descended on me.

I swallowed hard, hoping that Greyson was okay, wherever he was. I wished I could mind link with him and let him know we weren’t going to give up on him.

But as we walked out of the courtyard, I had to wonder how in the world we were going to break the spell.

We stepped out onto the cobblestone road outside the gates and looked around.

“Where to?” I wondered.

“We should take a taxi back to the *Crossroad*,” Xavier suggested.

Ava nodded, and I agreed, though it was clear by the silence that followed that none of us had a great plan for what we were going to do once we got there.

We walked to the thoroughfare, and Ava stepped to the curb to hail a cab. Dressed as she was, I figured it wouldn’t take her long to get a taxi, but there were so many tourists and the streets were so crowded with traffic, even she was having no luck.

“Let’s walk over a block,” I suggested. “It might be easier to find a ride.”

“We might have to,” Xavier muttered. “Let’s go.”

As we started out, I thought about what Ava had just told me—about the werewolf-obsessed witches. This was a thing that happened, she had said. And it seemed to be happening here, with Cordelia and Greyson.

So what did this mean? How far would Cordelia go to keep her…pets?

As we rounded a corner, I heard a burst of laughter, then applause. I looked up to see a small crowd gathered at the end of the block. “What’s going on down there?”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Probably one of those mimes or one of those idiots who paints themselves to look like a statue and then jumps to scare the tourists.”

“Let’s get going,” Xavier said, gesturing me onward. “We’re wasting time.”

I nodded, but I hesitated and looked back toward the crowd. I couldn’t explain why, but I felt drawn in the direction of the laughing crowd, and—for a reason I couldn’t fully articulate—I started walking toward it.

“What are you doing?” Ava snapped.

“Cali!” Xaiver called.

But I ignored both of them and kept walking.

The closer I walked, the stronger the pull became, and as I neared the crowd, I was surprised to see that they were gathered to watch a puppet show, being performed in a small booth set up on the street corner. Children were gathered near the front, sitting on the cobblestones of the sidewalk. Parents stood in the back, some watching the show, most looking at their phones.

I stepped closer and leaned around a tall man so I could see the placard on the booth:

*The Story of Little Red Riding Hood*

I smiled and turned my attention to the puppets.

There were three, and they were the marionette kind of puppets, held from above with strings controlling the movements of their heads and arms and legs. The characters were Little Red Riding Hood, of course, the Huntsman, and the Wolf.

But there was something strange about the puppets, and I stepped closer, pushing my way past the tall man so I could see better.

And when I did, my blood ran cold as ice. Because Little Red Riding Hood looked *exactly* like me. From the brown hair to the light brown eyes, the face shape, even the nose. And the Huntsman was a dead ringer for none other than Greyson.

**Episode 5562**

**Greyson**

I blinked hard. I felt confused and disoriented, and when I looked around, I realized that I had no idea where the hell I was. I tried to shake the cobwebs from my head, but I felt like there was something holding me back. The bright lights shining right into my eyes were making it hard to see, so I looked away, trying to blink past the spots that appeared in my vision.

But when I tried to move, I realized that my wrists were tethered. I snarled as I pulled at them. It wasn’t rope—it was thin, almost like string, but it wasn’t breaking, no matter how hard I tore at them.

I let out another roar when I tried to lift my legs and found that they too were tied.

Someone laughed—a low, evil sound. I looked around and caught sight of that witch, Cordelia, looming over me. She was holding some kind of a wooden crossbar. It was almost like a controller on which the other end of the strings were tied.

My head swam as I looked up at her. None of this made any sense. I must be hallucinating. This must be some kind of fucked-up dream. I tried to think back to the last thing I remembered. Cali was with me. We were in Cordelia’s houseboat, only it hadn’t felt like a houseboat. It had been a corridor, and then it had been filled with mirrors, and then…

And then *what*?

My mind raced, trying to fill in the gaps. What the hell had this witch done to my mind? Where was I? And where the hell was my wolf?

As if in answer to that question, I heard a low yelp. I turned to see that my wolf was near me, but he was also bound by strings, and Cordelia had another wooden crossbar controlling him in her other hand.

I glowered at her, furious. “What the hell are you doing?” I demanded. “My wolf shouldn’t be bound like that! It goes against nature!”

I tried to jump up to grab the witch, but I couldn’t get to my feet; I couldn’t reach her. I fell back, then was jerked up by the strings on my wrists and ankles. I stood straight, then was turned, forced to look out into the room.

That was when I realized that Cali was no longer with me. I stared around frantically, my eyes scanning for her, but she was gone. Gone also were Xavier and Ava.

I whipped around to Cordelia. “Where are the others?” I hissed at her. “What have you done to them?”

She looked distinctly unconcerned by my rage. “Who? Oh, your little friends? They were being such a nuisance. And, of course, they tried to steal my favorite pet from me. I couldn’t allow that. So I did what I had to do.”

“And what was that?” I snarled.

She gave a casual shrug of her shoulders. “I blipped them back to the Tower. Unharmed, if you must know. For now,” she added darkly.

I struggled against the strings, which still held fast, despite how delicate they looked. “I am *not* your pet,” I snapped at her. “I am no one’s pet.”

Cordelia made a condescending *tsking* sound. “The harder you fight, the worse it will get,” she admonished me.

I stared up at her, seething with rage. “What do you think I’m going to do? Because if I could grab you, I would choke the fucking life out of you.”

She smiled at me, the expression devoid of light or happiness. “You know, in time, I believe you will come to see how really *fortunate* you are.”

I made a disgusted sound.

“You *will*,” she insisted. “I promise you that you will come around. All my pets do. In the end.”

I ground my teeth as fury burned through me like a damned forest fire. “Let me assure you that I will *never* come around. And neither will my wolf. Ever.”

She tipped her head, looking at me closely. “Your wolf did take some time; I do have to admit that. But once your wolf realized how well I treated him, he came around and fit right in.”

I shook my head, completely disgusted. “I knew witches were known for their cruelty, but this is something else completely. This is too far. If you cared at all about any of your so-called pets, you should at least let my wolf go. Keep me, but let my wolf go. It goes against nature to keep him like this.”

Looking at my wolf tied with strings, controlled by Cordelia made my whole body tighten, the reaction automatic and completely visceral. It was just fucking wrong.

She shook her head. “No, that’s simply not possible. I’ve become…attached to your wolf.” She smiled and held up the wooden crossbar. “Literally.”

This caused my wolf to growl.

“Besides,” she went on, “I’ve grown so fond of it. And I think I will grow to have the same connection with you, Greyson. And then, I will have what I’ve always wanted.”

My stomach tightened at this. I didn’t want to ask the question—because I didn’t really want to know the answer—but I did it anyway. “And what’s that? What have you always wanted?”

She gave me a hungry look. “A werewolf of my very own.”

I snarled at her, growling and pulling on the strings as hard as I could.

She pulled back, but not hard enough. The yank on my end jerked her off her feet and she screamed as she was pulled forward. She staggered, crashing into me.

I shoved her, then grabbed her back, grasping onto her arms. Fury coursed through me, but it was unfocused and confused. My body was trying to shift, but without my wolf, I wasn’t able to, leaving my instincts floundering and grasping for purchase. If only I could shift, I could end this witch in an instant. But even without my wolf, I wasn’t without resources.

Grabbing the string around my left wrist, I wrapped it around Cordelia’s neck and pulled it tight. She gasped and gurgled, flailing and trying to claw at my hand and the string, trying to get free.

She was strong, I’d give her that, and it wasn’t without struggle that I held her tight. Especially because my eyes were fixed on my wolf now, and I was trying to hold her still as I tried to coax my wolf toward me.

If I could just get my wolf over to me, maybe I could get him to return to me. If I could manage that feat, then I could shift and finally put an end to this fucking nightmare once and for all. And put an end to Cordelia.

I looked at my wolf, calling softly to him. “Come here,” I whispered. *Come on*, I tried, calling through the mind link. *Don’t be afraid.*

My wolf didn’t look afraid, but he didn’t move either. He only stared at me. He looked as though perhaps he wanted to come to me but couldn’t.

Shit.

I tightened my hold on Cordelia as she continued to choke and struggle. I pulled at the strings on my legs, trying to break the strings bound around my ankles. But when I reached down for them, the strings around my right hand got tangled with the strings around my ankles.

“Fuck!” I yelled as I lost my balance.

I toppled over, bringing Cordelia down with me. She fell beneath me and I was on top of her, pinning her arms down. Her face was turning blue and only her left hand could clutch at her throat.

This wasn’t how I’d imagined this fight going, but it did look like I was winning, which I took some vicious pride in.

That was until the witch vanished from beneath me.

There one second, gone the next, the world spun around me, and suddenly I found myself in another room altogether, unable to move.

Cordelia was there, standing now, next to a large glass decorative case. It was filled with dolls or something, but that’s not what I was paying attention to. A second ago Cordelia had been turning blue, looking like she was a hair’s breadth from suffocating beneath me. But now she was standing there, breathing fine. Worse, my wolf sat at her feet like a fucking show dog. When she saw me blink up at her, she smiled in a satisfied way.

“Well, it looks as though I made a good choice. You are stronger than I thought you would be. I’m sure the others will like you.”

“*Others*?” I asked through gritted teeth. “What others are you talking about? Who else is here?”

She raised an eyebrow, then glanced over at the case next to her.

I followed her eyes and felt my body freeze. Because there, in the glass case, were large, wooden marionettes that eerily resembled Cali, Xavier, Ava, and…Kendall.

**Episode 5563**

**Xavier**

Frustrated, I shook my head as I pushed through the crowd of people. What the hell was going on? I had no idea what Cali was thinking, or why she had decided that she wanted to see a puppet show of all things right now. We had shit we needed to get done. First and foremost, we needed to figure out how we were going to get Greyson.

“Cali,” I said, stepping beside her. “What are you doing? We need to go.”

She didn’t answer me. I was about to take hold of her arm and try to tug her away, but I stopped when I saw the arrested expression on her face. She looked nearly frozen, and there was fear in her eyes.

I followed her line of vision to the little booth, and when I saw the puppets, I understood why she looked the way she did.

Because there, bouncing around on the miniature stage behind the miniature curtain, was a marionette version of my brother. The puppet looked just like him, with the same jaw and the same long, light-colored hair. He was dressed like a fairy-tale hunter and was being controlled by strings on his wrists and ankles. It was…uncanny.

And then I saw Little Red Riding Hood, and my breath caught in my throat. It was Cali.

*Shit*.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. This was more than a coincidence. This had to be Cordelia’s doing. Not good.

Ava stepped beside me. She looked at me, then Cali, then at the puppets, quickly taking it all in. “Okay, what the fuck is that?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” I muttered.

I didn’t wait another moment before starting through the crowd, moving carefully, and skirting around the children watching the show in front of the booth. I circled around back, ready to find Cordelia—but instead of the witch, I found an elderly man in a turtleneck sweater and sport coat, who turned and glared at me angrily.

“What are you doing then? Can’t you see I’m in the middle of the show? The wolf is just about to dress up as the little old gran!” he hissed, then turned back to the puppets.

“Where is she?” I demanded, grabbing his arm.

The old man shoved me off him. “Where is *who*? I don’t know who you’re looking for, but there’s no one back here but me, and if you don’t stop bothering me and disrupting my show, I will be forced to call for the constable.”

I was completely baffled. This old man was definitely *not* Cordelia, but…the puppets. What about the fucking puppets? This didn’t make any sense.

I peered over the old man’s tweed shoulder at the marionettes, which he was still moving using wooden crossbars held expertly in his wrinkled hands. “Where did you get those puppets?”

“Sod off, then,” he hissed, glaring at me. “You go get your own, do your damn show. I’ve been doing this show for thirty years. Did the *Ice Queen* for twenty years before that! Get on out of here!”

Cali and Ava stepped to either side of me.

“Where did you get those puppets?” Cali asked.

“What’s your game here?” Ava demanded.

“What is all this?” the man asked, looking alarmed as he stared between the three of us. “There’s no one allowed backstage!”

I was just about to point out that *backstage* was just the sidewalk, when a strong hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. I looked into the face of a man my own height, but at least fifty pounds heavier.

The man had short-cropped black hair, sallow skin, and was glaring at me with small, angry eyes. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, mate?”

“They’re trying to interrupt my show, Devon!” the old man hissed, then turned back to his puppets.

I was feeling about as wound up as a steel spring. Everything about this was too fucking weird—the witch, the puppets, the old man, and now this. I wasn’t about to answer to some no-neck moron.

“It’s none of your business,” I growled. “Fuck off.”

The man tightened his grip on my shoulder. “This here’s a kiddie show, so watch your fucking language, you wanker.”

Quick as a bolt of lightning, Ava grabbed the guy’s arm in a powerful, painful grip. She leaned in. “If you don’t release my mate, I swear I’m going to tear your arm clean from the socket,” she whispered, her voice soft as velvet.

The man looked shocked for a moment, then sneered at her. “Piss off.”

I shook my head. “I’d be careful, man. That one gets really upset when someone’s rude to me.”

Baffled, the big guy looked between Ava and me, clearly confused about who we were and what the hell he should do.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see Cali moving her hands, drawing on her magic like she was going to zap the guy. That might work, but it would probably also cause more trouble for all of us.

I needed to act, so in one quick move, I shook the guy’s hand off my shoulder and grabbed his wrist, twisting it backward. He winced and dropped down to his knees.

“Hey, mate, I was just kidding with you,” he said quickly, a panicked tone to his voice.

“I’m *not* your mate,” I hissed, then gave his wrist another painful twist before I released him.

Cali had her eyes narrowed at the old puppeteer, but I shook my head.

“Leave that guy alone. I don’t think he knows anything. It must be one of Cordelia’s little tricks. We’re just going to have to wait to settle up with her.”

Cali looked uncertain, but she nodded and shoved her hands in her pocket.

“Let’s go,” I muttered, and the three of us stepped away from the small booth, leaving the old man and his puppets behind.

“We should get back to the *Crossroad*,” Cali said as we started walking. “Who knows what the hell Cordelia is putting Greyson through.”

As we walked down the sidewalk, I kept my eyes on the oncoming traffic, looking for a cab with a light on. But something over my head caught my attention. I looked up to see a large black raven swooping down at us.

I swatted at the thing. “What the hell?” I muttered.

The raven flew away, but then I heard another cry. And another. The sounds were eerie, and they were close by. I looked around and caught sight of a grouping of ravens perched above us on the lampposts lining the street. I knew it sounded crazy, but they seemed to be looking down at us.

Ava followed my gaze and looked up, her eyes narrowing at the sight of the birds. “An *unkindness.*”

“What?” I asked.

“That’s what a group of ravens is called. An unkindness.” She looked at me, her dark eyes flashing. “Or a treachery.”

Cali’s eyes went wide as she looked up. “Are they spying on us for Cordelia?” she asked, voicing what we were probably all wondering. “Do you think she’s watching us right now?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, but I don’t want to find out.”

A cab stopped just in front of us, and I ushered the two women over, pulling open the door and cutting off a stodgy old couple who were shuffling toward it.

They glared at me, but I could only shrug. “Sorry, it’s an emergency,” I told them, before I slammed the door.

“Where to?” the driver asked as we slid into the car.

“King’s Cross Ice Well,” Cali said.

He nodded and started into traffic.

Ava sat back in the seat and looked over at me. “And what are we even going to do once we get there?”

“We’re going to free Greyson,” Cali said forcefully.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Okay, and what exactly is going to prevent Cordelia from blipping us away again, like she did last time?”

I pushed my hand through my hair, feeling stressed. “Yeah, that’s a good point. She could do that. I mean, that does seem to be her move.”

“So, what do you suggest?” Cali asked.

I thought for a moment. “I don’t know. I wonder if there’s a way we can stop her before she has a chance.”

“We can shift right when we get there and just tear her fucking throat out before she can do anything.”

The cab driver glanced at us nervously in the rearview mirror but didn’t say anything.

“Why don’t we lower our voices,” I muttered, giving Ava a quelling look.

“That’s my point exactly,” Cali said quietly. “It’s a terrible idea. We’re in the middle of London. You can’t just shift and kill people. There are going to be consequences for stuff like that.”

Ava huffed, sounding deeply annoyed. “Okay, fine. What brilliant plan do *you* have?”

**Episode 5564**

What *was* my brilliant plan?

I thought for a moment, then reached for my phone. “We’ll call Big Mac and ask her what she thinks.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “There’s an idea. Let’s bring yet *another* witch into this. Great plan.” Shaking her head, she turned to look out the window, watching as London flashed by.

I gritted my teeth, but I had to remind myself that I didn’t care what Ava thought. With everything going on, we needed all the help we could get. And killing a witch in a foreign city when MI9 had been following us—and Greyson was already a suspect in the murder of Henson—seemed like a very, very bad idea. If I could find a way out of this whole Cordelia situation without bloodshed, then that was what I was going to do.

The real question was if Big Mac was going to agree to help us at all. I’d noticed she had been getting more and more annoyed with us as we’d been asking for things, so my pulse raced nervously as I dialed her number and listened to the phone ring.

“What is it?” she answered curtly.

“We have a…situation,” I said. “A witchy situation.”

Big Mac huffed irritably into the other end of the phone. “Of course you do. Okay, just spit it out. What’s going on?”

I took a deep breath. “There’s a witch here in London who somehow got ahold of Greyson’s wolf. And now she’s got ahold of Greyson. We think she might have some kind of obsession with him and wants to keep them both as pets. I don’t know. It’s weird. And there’s some other weird stuff too.”

“Like what?”  
 I told her about the marionettes.

“Dammit,” she hissed. “Why can’t any of you just stay out of trouble?” she grumbled. “Especially Greyson. Sabine is going to be very worried about him.”

“It’s not like he did it on purpose,” I said, earning a grumble from her. “So, we’re going to try to confront her and get Greyson, but we’re worried that she’s going to keep blipping us away. Is there a way to prevent her from doing that? Otherwise, we’re back to square one.”

Ava made a low sound in her throat, almost like a growl. Xavier shot her a look.

“*Preferably* without ripping her throat out,” I added.

Big Mac signed. “Yes, there is a way—”

“What is it—”

“—but you have to listen to everything I say to you and follow it exactly.”

“Yes, we will,” I started hurriedly. “Thank you so much, Big Mac. I don’t know what we would do without—”

“You can thank me later,” she snapped. “Just listen now and make sure you do *exactly* what I say. Do you understand?”

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Twenty minutes later, Xavier, Ava, and I were standing outside an apothecary shop. It was a small shop in a back street, with small, mullioned windows, and a narrow door.

Xavier eyed the place with a skeptical look. “I really hope this place has whatever weirdo ingredient Big Mac told you to get, Cali.”

Ava looked similarly unconvinced. “I’ve never even heard of black hilo root. Even if this place does have it, what if it’s called something else here?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You know, some things are called different names here in England. Like they say lifts for elevators, and jumpers for sweaters, and fanny when they mean—”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” I said, cutting her off. “Let’s just go inside and find out if they have it.”

I pulled the door open and stepped inside the shop. It was small and dim. It had a strange smell—medicinal, but also musty, like a place that had been closed up for a long time.

There was a small man behind the counter, and he looked up when we walked in. He startled me, mostly because he was wearing a magnifying glass over one eye like a monocle, making one of his eyes appear huge.

“I’ll be right with you,” he said, and went back to measuring a small hill of blue powder.

I nodded and looked around, scanning the store. It was lined with shelves, and I prayed they held the black hilo root we were looking for.

When the man finished with the powder, another clerk appeared, equally as small, and the first man handed him the powder in a small vial.

“Take this to Clarice Smoot on Charing Cross Road. She’ll be expecting this.”

The second clerk nodded, then walked out, sliding past us and out the door, the bell ringing gently as the door closed behind him.

The first clerk took the magnifying glass from his eyes and looked at me. “Thank you for your patience. How may I assist you, young lady?”

“I was wondering if you had black hilo root,” I said cautiously.

The man looked at me for a moment, as though he wasn’t sure if he’d heard me right. Then he raised an eyebrow. “Black hilo root?”

“Yes.”

“Are you…*certain* that is what you’d like?”

“Yes,” I insisted. Big Mac had been very clear.

He cleared his throat. “I haven’t heard anyone ask for black hilo root in a very long time.”

“Do you have it?” I asked, starting to feel really nervous. “It’s actually really important that we get it.”

The clerk nodded. “Allow me to check my shelves.”

He stepped out from behind the counter and went over to the shelves, which were filled with glass jars with yellowed labels. There was cramped writing on them, and he examined each of the labels closely.

It seemed to take a very long time, and I was getting antsy.

I wasn’t the only person who was getting impatient, and I looked nervously over at Ava, who wasn’t known for her chill attitude.

Finally, the clerk turned back to me. “I’m afraid I don’t have any black hilo root in stock.”

My heart sank. “Are you sure? We *really* need it.”

The clerk looked at me for a long moment. He narrowed his eyes for just a beat, then nodded once. “I will check in the back.”

I held my breath, hoping against hope that he was going to be able to find this stupid root that Big Mac swore we needed. My heart was beating fast, and I reached out to grab Xavier’s hand, hoping for some reassurance. But I stopped myself. With Ava here, holding Xavier’s hand in front of her would be like poking a werewolf, and I wasn’t about to make things worse between them.

At least Ava hadn’t brought up the kiss with Greyson or rubbed its failure to bring his wolf back in my face. Of course, this was *Ava* I was talking about, so there was still time for her to bring it up.

I gave her a sidelong glance. She was examining the items on a small table—glass bottles and vials. She looked amazing in her skintight outfit and her long, swinging hair, and as I watched her, she draped an arm casually across Xavier’s shoulders.

I wasn’t even sure if she knew I was watching, or if it was just a casually possessive move, but it was a not-so-subtle reminder of the relationship dynamics at play here.

There was the sound of someone clearing their throat and I looked over to see the clerk returning from the back, holding a small box in his hands.

“It turns out that we do, in fact, have a small amount of black hilo root remaining, though I can’t guarantee that it’s still potent. It’s rather old.”

My initial excitement drained away, and I hesitated. That didn’t sound great, but I didn’t know how much choice we had here. I wasn’t about to run around London looking for it elsewhere. And given that it wasn’t a common herb, I didn’t know if we stood a chance finding it anywhere else anyway.

“That’s okay,” I said, deciding quickly. “We’ll take it.”

He nodded. “How much would you like to take?”

“All of it,” I said firmly.

The small man raised the other eyebrow but didn’t protest. He simply rang up the bill and slipped the box into a small paper bag.

Xavier paid and, finished with the transaction, we headed back outside into the London afternoon.

“Okay,” I said, turning to Xavier and Ava, “we all have to stand shoulder to shoulder.”

Ava looked annoyed at being told what to do, but she stepped next to Xavier, and I did the same.

I pulled the box out of the bag and opened it. I shook the fine black powder into my hand, then closed my eyes. When I was sure I remembered exactly what to say, I carefully recited the words Big Mac had told me to say.

I felt a strange, warm sensation spreading across my palm. I lifted my hand high and sprinkled the powder over all our heads.

Xavier sneezed.

When the last of the powdered herb had drifted silently to the sidewalk, Ava raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, so how do we know if it worked?”

I shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out.”

**Episode 5565**

**Greyson**

Transfixed, I stared at the puppet of Kendall. I couldn’t believe what I was looking at. It was definitely Kendall—I knew that for sure. The face was unmistakable. The high cheekbones, the soft mouth. The upturned nose. And the eyes—the eyes of the marionette were the *exact* same shade of purple as Kendall’s.

I suddenly remembered that flash of purple I’d seen in my wolf’s eyes when I’d kissed Cali, trying to use our bond connection to bring my wolf back to me. It had failed, and I was starting to believe the reason for that might be standing right in front of me.

Cordelia opened the glass door of the cabinet. “Greyson dear, you seem simply fascinated. Would you like to play with one of my pets? You are welcome to. I want you to enjoy yourself. Now, tell me which one. I saw you earlier with this one,” she said, sliding a finger down the cheek of the puppet that resembled Cali. She gave me a cunning look. “Though, perhaps you would prefer some…variety.”

My stomach clenched as she lifted the chin of the puppet that looked like Kendall.

“Like this one?”

She was trying to goad me. I could feel it and see it in the way her eyes flashed when she looked at me. She was laughing at me, so I gritted my teeth and didn’t answer. My mind spun as I tried to think this all through, trying to make sense of what the hell was happening. How could Cordelia know anything about Kendall? She wasn’t even in London. She was back in Oregon, for fuck’s sake. I hadn’t called her or talked to anyone about her since we’d interacted with this witch.

Of all the people I knew—why *Kendall*?

I could feel Cordelia’s eyes trained on me. She was watching my every move, examining my reactions with a slight smile curling her lips. It made me feel like a bug pinned under glass.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, pet,” she purred. She stroked a hand down the Kendall puppet’s hair. “Who is she?”

Fuck that.

I pressed my lips together, staying silent. I wasn’t going to give this lunatic any more information if I could help it.

Cordelia pulled the puppet out, and I was shocked to see the marionette was even bigger than I’d thought. It must have been nearly life-sized.

She looked at it carefully. “I can understand your attraction to her, pet. She *is* beautiful.”

A snippet of a conversation I’d had with Xavier ages ago, back in Oregon, when he’d had my wolf within him flashed into my mind. He’d been hassling me about my feelings for Kendall, which he said he knew about because my wolf was attracted to Kendall. Cordelia had somehow found my wolf and had been keeping him as a kind of pet. Was that how she knew about Kendall? That might make some sense, but it didn’t even come close to explaining the damn puppet.

Cordelia stepped toward me and gave me a once over. “You are a messy Alpha, aren’t you?”

I couldn’t turn my head, but I could manage to avert my eyes, so I did that. I didn’t say a word—not about Kendall and not about anything else. I didn’t want her dragged into this.

But apparently Cordelia didn’t like being ignored. She stepped to the right and grabbed my chin with a force that surprised me. She held it tight, forcing me to look right at her. “*Who is she?*” she demanded. Her voice was no longer the soft purr, but harsher. A steel brush against stone.

But it was going to take a lot more than an angry witch to intimidate me. I stared right through her, trying not to listen to her infernal questions. I tried to think about Cali. I wondered where she was and what she was doing—likely doing something ridiculous to try to help me. I thought about her smell and the softness of her skin. How it felt to hold her in my arms, and how soft her lips had felt when I’d last kissed her.

But that made me think of the failed attempt to reclaim my wolf, and I felt another flash of anger and frustration. I just didn’t understand why any of this was happening. I just wanted my damn wolf back, and I wanted this to be over.

Cordelia’s grip on my face tightened, her fingers digging into my skin. “I asked you a question, pet,” she said, her voice growing even harsher.

“Don’t fucking call me that,” I finally snapped. I flicked my eyes toward the puppet. “I don’t know who the fuck *that* is. She’s *your* creepy-ass puppet.”

Cordelia looked surprised for a moment, then she laughed, though the sound was devoid of mirth. Her eyes narrowed and her voice turned icy cold. “Do you know, my dear, what I do to disobedient pets?” She tipped her head. “Do you? I hate to be hard, but sometimes wild things need discipline. It’s really for their own good. And you are a very wild thing, aren’t you.”

I made a low growling sound in the back of my throat.

She nodded, as if that confirmed her suspicions. Then she turned to my wolf. “Now I am sure that if I ask nicely, your wolf will reveal who this purple-eyed beauty is to you.”

Fuck. I really wished I could move right now. If I could then, I could just grab Cordelia and…

I tried it, but nothing happened. I couldn’t move my hands or my legs. Hell—I couldn’t even lift a finger. I didn’t think I was tied down or anything. It must have been some kind of a spell.

Maybe if I could get closer to my wolf, maybe I could connect with it, and maybe if I could get it back once and for all, I could finally shift again. Then I’d be able to deal with Cordelia.

My wolf wasn’t far, but when I tried to move toward it, it was the same story. I couldn’t move an inch. The magic she had on me was just too strong. I hoped that if I could touch my wolf—if I could just make some contact—maybe I would stand a better chance of reuniting with it.

I took a deep breath. I didn’t like what I was about to do, but I couldn’t move, and I knew I needed to do *something*, so this was my only option.

“I’m sorry,” I ground out. “I’m just upset because I can tell that my wolf is…lonely.”

Cordelia looked stunned. She stared at me for a moment. “And why would your wolf be lonely? It’s been perfectly happy to spend time with me.”

“Yes, well…” I had my doubts about that, but it didn’t seem like a good idea to refute her. I needed to proceed carefully. “If I could just pet my wolf, I feel like it might be comforted.”

Cordelia still looked suspicious. She looked at me for a moment, then over at my wolf.

I held my breath. A lot depended on if she was going to buy this story.

Finally, she waved her hand in a swirling motion. It looked casual, but I felt the effect almost immediately. I could feel the spell binding me dissipate, and I nearly toppled over. I hadn’t realized that the spell itself was holding me up.

The spell must have bound my limbs tightly, because I could feel the blood rushing back into my arms and legs. I shook them out, then moved over toward my wolf. I crouched down and stroked down my wolf’s back.

The touch sent an electric current through me and gave me a flash of being one with my wolf. I could channel the feeling of running as a wolf, moving fast through the deep, dark forests of the Redwood land. I could feel the strange, inevitable pull of shifting, and the huge, powerful feeling of being a werewolf.

I closed my eyes, doing all that I could to connect with my wolf, to help him to remember me as I was remembering him. Trying to draw my wolf back to me. And maybe it worked, because the next thing I heard was—

“*Enough!*” Cordelia’s voice was harsh and angry.

Perhaps she realized that she’d made a mistake, because I opened my eyes just in time to see her waving a hand, then I was blasted backward. I slammed against a stone wall and slid down to the floor, gasping for breath.

She stormed over and towered above me, glaring down. “I granted you a favor, pet, because I thought you would behave. Do not take me for a fool, dear. I know what you were trying to do, but it’s not going to work. I won’t let it. There’s only one way to fix a disobedient pet like you.”

**Episode 5566**

**Artemis**

I looked around, quickly scanning the faces of the villagers in the marketplace. I didn’t know which of them had spoken, so I couldn’t be sure which of them knew something about Erimentha. But I couldn’t just stand there and do nothing—I couldn’t let a chance to learn more about my father pass me by.

Shooting a quick look at Celeste, I saw that she was engaged in an animated conversation with the mayor, who seemed to be showing her the wares at some of the stalls in the marketplace. I was certain that Celeste couldn’t have been less interested in the barrels of beans and pickles, but she was feigning convincing enthusiasm.

Certain she was otherwise engaged, I stepped into a stall selling delicate silver jewelry. I glanced at the women inside and listened hard, trying to determine if I could recognize the speaker’s voice.

I was engaged in that pursuit when someone stepped beside me.

“Wouldn’t these look beautiful on you,” a familiar voice said, holding up a pair of delicate silver hoops.

My heart flipped, and I looked quickly over. “Rishika?”

The figure turned, and Rishika’s face smiled at me from beneath a large hood.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered, glancing quickly around, trying to see if there was anyone near enough to hear us.

Rishika shrugged. “Just doing some shopping. And keeping an eye on you.”

“Where’s Marius?” I asked.

Rishika shot a glance to her right. I followed her eyes and saw Marius standing in the market, wearing some kind of shepherding outfit with a felt hat pulled low over his eyes. He looked absurd, but still kind of hot. It was confusing.

He caught my eye and winked at me.

“You two are taking a big risk being here,” I said.

“We don’t care. How are you? Is everything okay?” Rishika asked.

I had just opened my mouth to answer when I heard Celeste’s voice calling out:

“Where is she?”

I groaned, then quickly told Rishika, “Listen, someone here knows about Erimentha. Find out what you can, okay? I’ll find you later.”

Rishika nodded. I slipped my hand around hers, gave it a quick squeeze, then slipped out of the jewelry stall, stepping over to where Celeste was waiting for me with an impatient look in her eyes.

“There you are,” she said sharply. “Come.” She cast a dark look over her shoulder at the stalls. “It’s nice to mingle with the commoners, but you don’t need to oversell it.”

We loaded back into the carriages and traveled to our lodging in Embersy. When I stepped out and looked up at the inn, I was surprised to see that it was larger and more opulent than I had been expecting. Embersy seemed humble by nature. I knew it was a significant trade hub, but I hadn’t been expecting the inn to be so fancy.

It was an old building, almost like a castle, with stone floors and walls, but there was a large hearth in the main hall when we walked in with a huge, crackling fire. There were paintings and tapestries on the walls, and candles set into sconces all along the hallways, giving the place a well-lit, cheerful feel.

When the staff led us up the large, grand staircase and guided us to our suites, I was dismayed to realize that I would be staying in the same suite as Kastian. I turned to protest, but Celeste was standing in the doorway, and when I caught the look on her face, I shut my mouth.

I supposed that it made sense that he and I were together. Everyone believed we were married. We *were* married, technically. It was only our inner circles who knew that it was a *technical* marriage, in name, only.

The suite was large and airy. The walls were white plaster, and the ceilings were high. There was another grand hearth, and someone had built a fire, so the rooms were warm. It might have felt comfortable and cozy if I’d been with someone else.

“This will be fine, thank you,” Kastian said coolly to the inn’s staff, then shut the door.

Without a glance at me, he stepped into the bedroom and began to unpack his trunks, which had already been brought up.

I dropped onto the couch in front of the fire with a sigh. I couldn’t stop thinking about Marius and Rishika. I hoped they were being careful. I also wondered if they’d had any luck asking around the market. I wondered if they were going to be able to find anything about Erimentha. All I wanted was an update—but how was I going to be able to hear from them? Especially now that Kastian and I were roomies.

There was a knock on the door of the room and Celeste opened the door before I could answer it. She carried a dress over her arm.

“I have your clothes for the parade, Artemis.”

I grimaced. “Is a parade really necessary?”

“*Necessary?*” Celeste repeated, looking baffled.

“Yeah. Isn’t there something more low-key we could do to announce to the people here that the Dark and Light Fae have united, rather than a freaking parade? I mean, it’s not like we need to put on a Super Bowl halftime show here.”

Celeste stared at me, clearly baffled. “I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about, Artemis. I’m certain you are making those words up just to confuse me. But I am here to tell you that a parade is undoubtedly the best way for people to see you. Besides, it’s less of a parade and more simply a chance for you and Kastian to march through the streets of Embersy.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s much better,” I muttered.

Celeste ignored me. “You’ll greet people, wave, perhaps even kiss a few babies.”

“Oh gods,” I groaned, putting my hands over my eyes.

“Enough with that attitude. You need to look excited to be here,” Celeste snapped. She tossed the dress onto the couch. “Get ready. I’ll be right back.”

She walked out, slamming the door shut behind her. I pulled the dress toward me, looking at it critically.

It was really more of a gown than a dress. Full-length, which might be good considering that it was freezing here in Embersy. But it was not my style at all. I preferred simple clothes, but this had clearly been designed to symbolize something—probably the coming together of the Light and Dark Fae. The bottom of the skirt was black, then slowly changed to charcoal grey, then to a light grey, then—by the time it reached the high neck—was a pure snow white.

The symbolism was not subtle. The sleeves were lace, and the dress had a thin black satin belt at the waist. It wasn’t the ugliest dress I’d ever seen, but it wasn’t something I ever would have picked out for myself. But I knew that I didn’t really have a choice.

Kastian was still occupied in the bedroom, so I stood with a sigh, pulled off my traveling dress, and tugged on the parade gown. It fit perfectly. Whoever had made it had done so expertly.

There was another knock at the door, and Celeste walked back in, this time flanked by two of the servants she’d brought with her on the journey. They were two quiet Fae women who smiled shyly and began to fix my hair.

It had been up while I traveled, but they unpinned it and combed it out, so it hung down in long brown waves past my shoulders.

Finished, they moved to my face and applied light makeup, touching me so lightly it felt like raindrops.

When they were finished, they stepped back, melting behind Celeste.

“What do you think?” Celeste asked.

I turned to look in the mirror over the fireplace. “Beautiful,” I said automatically. I looked fine. Probably beautiful, but I wasn’t thinking about it. I only had one thing on my mind: Erimentha.

I knew I had limited time in Embersy, and I didn’t want to waste this opportunity. Celeste had been droning on about the next stop on our tour, so I knew this was my only chance. I was going to have to figure out a way to slip away and find this elusive Dark Fae. I just had to hope to the gods that Marius and Rishika were able to find a lead for me to go on.

I needed this—especially after the assassin from our last camp had told me that my father was alive. He had said so while under my manipulation magic, so I knew there was no way he could have been lying.

“And there *you* are,” Celeste said warmly. “Don’t you look wonderful.”

I looked over to see that Kastian had just walked in from the bedroom. He was wearing a ceremonial suit, the colors blending from coal black to snow white, just as my dress did. Our clothes had clearly been designed to be complementary. His dark eyes flashed and the white of the suit near his face made his skin nearly glow. He did look well, and he clearly knew it.

He gave me a roguish wink. “You look like you’re ready to be wedded and bedded all over again, wife.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “Let’s just get this over with.”

**Episode 5567**

I took a deep breath. I was trying my best to feel confident that I had done what I was supposed to do and executed Big Mac’s instructions *exactly* as she had given them. I reviewed in my head—I’d sprinkled the black hilo root powder on all three of us. I’d said the incantation. I’d waited until the powder had settled. And we hadn’t let ourselves get wet afterward.

I knew very well—too well—what could happen when a spell was mishandled, and I knew that we did *not* need that kind of catastrophe on our hands in addition to everything else we had going.

But I also knew that Ava had her own plans for dealing with Cordelia, and those plans could involve some pretty significant bloodshed, and I didn’t like the idea of her heading into a confrontation with Cordelia like a bat of hell. Any kind of violent escalation was only going to make an already bad situation worse, and we didn’t need that.

Xavier, Ava, and I were standing on the street corner a little ways away from the apothecary shop, trying to find another taxi, but we weren’t having much luck.

“How does anyone get around this fucking city?” Xavier muttered, looking out at the cars as they blew past us.

“Maybe everyone here takes public transit,” Ava countered.

“We’re *not* taking a bus,” Xavier growled.

“Then keep your fucking eyes open for a cab,” she said sharply. “Wait, there’s one!”

She dashed into the street, dodging cars and ignoring the blares of horns as she moved across three lanes of traffic to throw herself in front of a cab who had paused at a stoplight.

That left Xavier and me alone on the corner for just a moment, and I looked over at him.

He was looking at me. “Hey, we’re going to get Greyson and his wolf back together. No matter what.”

I swallowed hard. I knew he was trying to reassure me, but it was the *no matter what* that kind of freaked me out. There were just so many things that could go wrong.

Some of my anxiety must have shown in my face because Xavier took my hand, his eyes fixed on mine. I felt my heart squeeze as he looked at me, but just as he opened his mouth to speak, Ava yelled at us from across the street:

“Are we doing this or what? The meter’s running on this thing! Come on!”

Xavier released my hand, and we headed across the street, with Xavier leading the way. As we moved, I kept my eyes on him, wondering what he had been about to say to me. Did it have anything to do with the kiss? Something about him and Ava?

I wished I could ask him, but we had reached the cab and slid into the backseat, and I couldn’t ask him with Ava sitting right there. Anyway, we had a witch to confront.

I took a shuddering breath as I leaned back in the seat, hoping that the black hilo root had done its job. We really needed something to neutralize Cordelia’s power to blip us away if we were going to have any chance of rescuing Greyson and his wolf.

“Where to?” the cabbie asked.

“Kings Cross Ice Well, please,” I said.

“At your service,” the man said, and merged into the slow-moving traffic of a London afternoon.

I tried to focus on what we were about to face—and think about Greyson—but it was hard to concentrate. The three of us were squeezed together in the back seat of the cab with Xavier sitting in the middle, between Ava and me.

I could feel his hand against my thigh, and the pressure of it brought back a lot of feelings that I…maybe shouldn’t be feeling. Or at least shouldn’t be feeling just now.

“Where do you go to get decent curry around here?” Ava asked the driver, leaning forward and resting her arms on the front seat.

The driver, a youngish guy with dark hair and a bright white smile, gave her a cheeky look. “What do you know about curry, then?”

“Enough to know when it’s shit. So where do I go to find something worth eating?” she asked, smiling at him. I was always surprised at the way her face changed when she wasn’t aggressively snarling.

I glanced over at Xavier. I didn’t mean to, but my curiosity won out. *What were you going to say to me?* I asked through the mind link.

He looked over at me and smiled. *When this is all over, and we’re back home, we need to finish talking about us. Unless you forgot*, he added.

I swallowed hard and looked away, casting my eyes out the window. *Forgot?* I shook my head. *How could I have forgotten about that*?

I could still feel how his lips had felt against mine, and the words that made my heart pound—*I fucking miss you*.

Ava was distracted, still talking to the cab driver, who was telling her about a curry place his cousin ran on the east side of London, and I was relieved that she wasn’t looking at me.

*When we get back*, I told Xavier through the mind link.

He nodded.

“When we get Greyson back, we definitely have to try this curry place,” Ava said, sitting back in her seat.

I forced myself to clear my mind. She probably wasn’t looking for a response from me, but I nodded, my gaze still out the window. I knew I couldn’t bear to make eye contact with Xavier just then.

The cab pulled to a stop, and I looked around, confused. “Where are we? We can’t be at the King’s Cross Ice Well yet.”

“We’re not,” the driver said. “It’s a bloody traffic jam, isn’t it?”

I looked out the window and saw that it wasn’t just regular slow-moving traffic—it was a parking lot.

Xavier leaned over to look out the window, his face grave. “We should just get out of here. We’re close enough to walk from here.” He pulled cash out of his pocket and handed it to the driver. “Thanks, man.”

“Yeah, no problem. Take care, Ava,” he said, giving her a wink. “Hope you get that curry.”

She grinned back at him as she slid out. “Thanks, Aahan. Maybe I’ll see you at your cousin’s place.”

She shut the door with a wave, and we headed across the street toward the well. I could see it up ahead, which meant that we weren’t far from the *Crossroad*.

We all hurried forward, but as we approached the dock, I slowed slightly and looked around, confused.

“Hang on. Where is it?”

Ava and Xavier were both frowning.

“Where’s the boat?” Ava asked.

We were all seeing the same thing—the dock was vacant.

I stared at the water, my mind struggling to figure out what the hell I was missing. “Did we make a mistake? Are we at the wrong dock or something? I mean, I guess they do all kind of look alike…”

But when I looked back toward the Well, I was almost positive. I was almost certain we were in the right place. So where was the *Crossroad*?

Xavier stepped closer to the dock and looked around, his eyes on the water. “I suppose it’s possible that Cordelia just pulled anchor and took off.”

I took a shaking breath. I was trying not to panic, but the idea that Greyson had disappeared—just slipped through our fingers—was almost too much to bear. I was starting to feel overwhelmed.

Ava eyed the river. “Well, that’s not good. That witch could have taken the damn boat anywhere along the Thames.”

I felt the last of the energy leave my body. “Oh god. What are we going to do now?”

Xavier put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “We’ll figure out something.”

“Yeah?” Ava raised her eyebrows. “Like what?”

Xavier didn’t answer. He was clearly trying to think of options.

Ava sighed. “I guess we could rent a boat.”

I stared at the empty slip.

“We can go find out if that’s even possible,” Ava suggested, and she and Xavier turned to walk back the way we came.

I was about to follow, but just as I started to turn, I noticed something in the water. I stopped and looked closer. There was a shimmering spot on the water, though there was no sun in the sky to catch the light.

When I realized what I was actually looking at, my heart nearly leapt out of my chest—I had seen that shimmering before: when we were looking for Big Mac’s house.

“Cali?” Xavier called as I started toward the water. “Cali?! What are you doing?! Where the hell are you going?!”

“It’s cloaked!” I shouted as I ran toward the dark, murky water.

“Cali!” he shouted.

But I didn’t stop, and instead I launched myself right off the dock, hoping like hell that I was right.

**Episode 5568**

As I flew off the dock and sailed through the chilly London air, I could hear Xavier and Ava shouting behind me. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, so there was enough time for me to notice that Xavier sounded panicked, while Ava only sounded annoyed, like she wasn’t looking forward to the prospect of fishing me out of the water if I fell in.

But it was too late to listen to either of them now. I held my breath, bracing for whatever was going to come next. I was either going to land hard on the deck of the magically cloaked Crossroad, or I was about to splash into the cold, brown, filthy water of the Thames River. I quickly thought of everything I had ever heard about the famed river and wondered if I did end up in it, if I would need to get a shot, or a prescription for antibiotics. I’d heard stories about dead bodies being dumped in the river. That could just be local legend, but London *was* a big city. Who knew what kind of horror lay beneath the surface of the water.

Well, I might know in a minute, if I’d been wrong about the cloaking.

An instant later my feet hit hard wood. I gasped as I landed, and the boat deck of the Crossroad was suddenly visible to me. I quickly windmilled my arms to keep from falling on my ass, then I slid my way to the opposite side of the boat as my forward momentum carried me, nearly tumbling over the far rail in the process.

But I finally managed to steady myself and gripped the rail as my heart thudded in my chest. I grinned to myself, then sneered at the slow-moving watery sludge of the Thames below. “Not this time,” I whispered to it.

Then I turned back to where Xavier and Ava were still standing on the dock and raised my arms in triumph. I had done it! The boat was here. I waved them toward it.

But neither of them moved. They didn’t even look at me.

I frowned. What was their problem? “Hey! The boat’s right here. Come on!”

Xavier looked around. “Cali? Where are you?”

“I’m right here! Right in front of you!” I called back.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Oh my god. You’ve gone invisible. If only we couldn’t hear your voice too.”

I glared at her. I didn’t like her tone. She was talking like I was supposed to somehow know that I had gone invisible.

I walked to the edge of the boat closest to the dock and reached out for Xavier’s hand. “I’m right here. Take my hand.” I brushed my fingers against his knuckles, trying to ignore the surge of electricity I felt as I touched him.

He reached blindly, but managed to grasp my hand, then hopped down beside me. On deck, he was finally able to see me and smiled with relief. “There you are.” Then he turned and grasped Ava’s hand and helped her down to the deck.

“Okay, this is wild,” Xavier said, looking around. “Cloaking is crazy. It was completely invisible. But I can see everything now that I’m onboard. I wonder how other boats don’t hit it.”

I shrugged. “Maybe she creates a magical buffer too? Like a bumper car.”

Ava eyed the boat, looking grudgingly impressed. “I have to admit, that was a pretty ballsy move. Though it would have been fun to watch you hit the Thames if you were wrong about the cloaking thing. I’ve heard there’s live gonorrhea in the water.”

I glared at her. “That’s charming. Anyway, I was pretty sure the boat was here.” I looked toward the door to the cabin, which was still broken from when Ava kicked it in. “Okay. Now that we’re here, let’s go get Greyson.”

Xavier put a hand on my arm to stop me. “Hang on. We still don’t know if Big Mac’s spell or advice or whatever worked.”

“Come on, has Big Mac ever failed us before?” I started but trailed off. The reality was that some things with Big Mac could be a little dicey, and we all knew it. Witchcraft was like that. I shrugged. “Listen, worse case, if the black hilo root fails us, we’ll just get blipped away and end up back in the courtyard again. Which doesn’t seem like the worst fate. Isn’t finding Greyson worth the risk?”

“I still think it would be better if you and I shifted, X,” Ava said to Xavier. “That way if the witch tries anything, she’ll already be at a huge disadvantage.”

Then to demonstrate, she partially shifted her hand to her werewolf form. Her eyes sparkled as she extended her shockingly sharp claws and slashed at the air. She moved so fast it made a singing noise in the cold, winter air.

“And I would still prefer not to go that route,” I said firmly.

Ava rolled her eyes. “I think it’s a big mistake to go in there unprepared.”

“We won’t be unprepared,” I argued. “We’ve got the black hilo root to protect against blipping. And I’ll have my magic on standby, just in case.”

“We should keep the chatter down to a whisper,” Xaiver hissed. He eyed the door. “Magic or not, shifting or not, what we currently have is the element of surprise, and we don’t need to give it away by alerting the witch that we’re back.”

“Yeah, sorry,” I whispered. I shook my arms out and flexed my hands. I felt my magic surging there, but I quelled it. I wasn’t going to use it unless I absolutely had to. I didn’t want this to escalate. Our main goal was to get Greyson and his wolf.

I stepped toward the door of the ship’s cabin and pushed it gently open. It swung wide, revealing the cabin. As it had before, it shocked me by how giant it seemed. So much larger than the exterior of the boat would suggest.

Xaiver and Ava walked in with me, into the same room we had previously entered. We stepped inside and paused, all listening, all looking around, all wary and cautious.

My thoughts went to that weird puppet show we’d encountered on the street. I was convinced that hadn’t been a coincidence. How could it be? The hunter that looked *exactly* like Greyson and Little Red Riding Hood that looked *exactly* like me? It was too uncanny.

So was it possible that Cordelia had suspected we would be back and had used that puppet show as distraction? Using that time to take Greyson somewhere else entirely? Had she hidden him from us?

“Is he here?” I asked aloud.

“He’s here,” Ava confirmed, taking a deep breath.

“You’re sure?” I asked anxiously.

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure. I can smell him. And so is the witch.”

I gritted my teeth. I hated that Ava could smell Greyson and I couldn’t. That just didn’t seem fair. *I* was Greyson’s mate, after all.

“Let’s keep moving,” Xavier said, glancing warily around.

We moved forward as a group, stepping cautiously toward the corridor.

“Are you picking anything up?” I asked.

“I can smell Greyson now,” Xavier said. “They can’t be far.”

My heart was beating so hard, I could hear the pounding of my pulse in my ears as we moved down the long corridor. I tried not to think about how the witch bent the logic of space to create this massive place inside what looked like a modestly sized houseboat. It made my head hurt to try to figure it out, and right now I was just trying to remember the last time we had been here, and which way we had to go.

But it was hard to recall. The last time we had been here, everything had been so chaotic and terrifying—all I could remember clearly was the fear and confusion.

Suddenly Xavier stopped. He motioned for Ava and me to stop as well and keep still.

I did as he instructed, wondering what he was seeing. Or hearing. Or smelling.

Then I saw something moving into the corridor from a doorway a ways down. It was a blurred shape.

“Greyson’s wolf,” Xavier whispered.

My heart swelled at the sight of it. It was Greyson’s wolf! It felt almost like seeing Greyson himself. I crouched down and gestured for it to come near.

“Come here,” I called softly. “Come on.”

I watched as the shape paused for a moment, as though responding to my voice. It turned, and I held my breath, really concentrating on connecting with the wolf.

Then I felt a tug deep in my belly and the wolf began to move toward us. He was responding to me, and my heart lifted. He was moving fast. Then faster. Even faster.

Then I heard a sound that chilled me to my bones—the wolf snarled at me.

Greyson’s wolf was attacking us.

**Episode 5569**

I gasped, but faster than I could even think, Xavier had hooked me around the waist and pushed me behind him, slamming me into Ava.

He stood tall, blocking the wolf from reaching me.

The wolf stopped. I couldn’t really see what it was doing, but I could hear it growling quietly, snuffling and snorting.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Xavier said quietly. “But I’ll do what I have to do. So, let’s just stay calm.”

It was sound advice, but it was too late for me to stay calm. I was fully *freaking out*. If the wolf attacked, what was Xavier going to do? Greyson’s wolf wouldn’t stand a chance against both Xavier and Ava, who glared at me and shoved me away from her.

I glared back, but I didn’t have time to deal with Ava’s petty bullshit at the moment.

“Xavier,” I whispered. “Let me talk to the wolf.”

He shot me a wary look over his shoulder. “I don’t know, Cali. I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Xavier—”

“I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but this wolf is clearly out to get you.”

I swallowed hard. It *was* hard to hear, but he was right. At first, I’d thought the wolf was attacking all of us, but it had slowed, then stopped when Xavier faced it. For whatever reason, the wolf was after me.

I shook my head. “I think the wolf is just confused,” I argued. And I *did* think that. In my heart, I felt certain that I knew Greyson’s wolf. I had known this wolf since the day I’d met Greyson, and I knew his wolf would never hurt me. We were mates.

“Cali—” Xaiver started, a warning note to his voice.

“We’re bonded, Xavier,” I reminded him. I knew it was going to hurt him to hear that, but it was true, and I needed to say it.

This shut him down for a moment. He didn’t respond right away, then he shook his head. “That might be true, and normally you might be right about this wolf. But right now, there’s no way of telling what Cordelia has done to it. The wolf’s been in the possession of a witch, Cali. For a while. She’s obsessed with getting a werewolf for herself. We have to keep that in mind.”

“I understand that, but I still have to try,” I said. “If I can win the wolf over, then we can lure it off the boat. Then we can get Greyson. This is the first step in getting this over with.”

Xavier still didn’t look certain. He glanced at Ava. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s a shit idea.” She shrugged. “But whatever. It’s Cali’s funeral.”

Xavier didn’t like that, but after a moment he took a reluctant step back.

My heart beat wildly, but I had to try, so I took a step forward and crouched down again. “Come here,” I called softly.

The wolf growled at me again. I flinched, but I didn’t move.

“Come on.”

The wolf stepped toward me slowly, one careful step at a time.

My hand shook as I reached out to touch it.

I narrowed my eyes. Was it my imagination, or was the wolf starting to take a more defined shape? I hadn’t even been able to see it at first, when we had first tried to call it back to Greyson. Even when it shot across the corridor, it had only been a blur in the corner of my eye. But I felt like it was becoming clearer the longer I looked at it.

I could almost touch it—

And then it lunged at me.

I screamed in shock and fell backward, pushing myself back, trying to get away.

Xavier leapt forward, colliding with the wolf in the air. They fell to the floor, and I stared at them, stunned. I had been right—the wolf was more corporeal than ever before. I could see it clearly now. It was huge and white. Magnificent, but also massive and *fiercely* menacing.

Tears of shock and anger sprang to my eyes. Xavier had been right—Cordelia must have done something to it.

Xavier and the wolf rolled across the smooth wooden floorboards, grappling and snarling. Xaiver was doing all he could to restrain the growling, snapping wolf. He had said that he didn’t want to hurt the wolf, and I believed him, but I also knew Xavier. He was a fiercely protective Alpha and mate, and if the wolf kept trying to attack or threatened Ava or me, he was going to do whatever he had to do to protect us.

Ava stepped around me. “I swear to god, I will kick your spirit wolf ass if you do so much as *scratch* my mate,” she threatened.

There was the sound of snapping and breaking—the telltale sounds of shifting—and I looked over to see that Ava had shifted to her wolf form.

I shouldn’t have been surprised, but this was exactly what I *didn’t* want to happen.

I leapt to my feet. “Please, *stop*!” I called out. I turned to Greyson’s wolf. “Please, remember who I am! Please! Remember who we are to each other!” I cried, pleading with him.

And—to my surprise—the wolf stopped fighting Xavier. It stopped growling and looked over at me. The eyes flashed, and for a moment—for just a moment—I saw a glimpse of Greyson in the storm grey eyes. I saw my mate, and my heart contracted.

“Xavier,” I whispered, “let the wolf go.”

Xavier glared up at me. “*What*? No fucking way! He’s going to try to attack you.”

I shook my head. “No, he’s not.”

“Cali—”

“He’s not. I *know* he’s not. I don’t know how to explain this to you, but there’s something about his eyes that tells me he’s not going to harm me,” I said, feeling as certain about this as I’d ever felt about anything.

“*Fucking hell*,” Xavier muttered. But, after a moment, he released the wolf and moved away.

The wolf took a step back, eyeing me carefully.

My heart pounded as I crouched down. “Come here,” I called cautiously.

The wolf was still for a moment. Then it took a step toward me. When it did, I relaxed. I could see it in an instant. Something had changed, and the menace was gone completely. The wolf walked toward me and sniffed my hand. I reached up and petted its fur, scratching between its ears.

The wolf withstood this for just a moment, then turned and took off down the corridor.

“It’s running away!” I shouted and started after it.

I sprinted, but the wolf was fast, and was booking it down the long corridor. It was getting away, turning from one room into another.

I chased, finally following it into the room where I found Cordelia. I pulled up short, shocked and terrified. Looking past her, I saw Greyson standing next to her, a blank look on his face.

The wolf had stopped just between Cordelia and me, and I stared at the witch, then at Greyson, then back at the witch.

Cordelia looked surprised to see me too, though perhaps not completely shocked, as though she’d expected me to come looking for Greyson again.

She glanced down at the wolf. “Come, little button.”

I seethed at this. Greyson’s wolf was a massive, ferocious creature. It had lethally sharp teeth and claws. It could outrun most cars. It was silent as a shadow and deadly as a sword. Greyson’s wolf was *not* a *button*.

The wolf didn’t move, and Cordelia looked back up at me, her dark eyes flashing dangerously.

“You again. You are growing very tedious, girl. Time to get rid of you. Back to the Tower for you!”

She snapped her fingers. The room around me shook, and I had to brace myself to stay on my feet, but I didn’t move. Nothing happened.

The irritation in Cordelia’s expression flickered with doubt. She snapped her fingers again. The room shook once more, but I was ready for it and rode it out. I was gaining confidence now and even managed a victorious smile at her.

She clocked that, and her eyes narrowed. “Oh, I see. You seem to have found something to block me. Nettle sage, maybe? Black hilo, perhaps. You think such powders and tinctures can stop me? *Me?* Please. I have other means.”

My heart thudded. I didn’t like the sound of that.

Cordelia raised her eyes and waved her fingers. I followed her gaze upward and saw the ceiling of the room in which we were standing begin to part. The sky overhead was grey as steel, and as I looked, a flock of ravens gathered. They began to descend just as Xavier and Ava burst through the door.

“*Cali!*” Xavier bellowed.

But it was too late. I felt the claws grasping onto my clothes. The ravens had taken hold of me, and my feet left the floor. The birds were lifting me up and carrying me away.

**Episode 5570**

I soared through the cold winter air, the London wind whipping at my cheeks. It blew through my hair as I flew over the Thames River, struggling to get the claws to let me go. I looked down as it flowed slowly beneath me. Then I looked up at the ravens over me. What had Ava called them? A *treachery*.

I closed my eyes. What the hell was I going to do?

Suddenly, everything went dark.

When I woke up, I was in a dark cramped place. I gasped and looked around, squinting, trying to determine where the hell I was. But I couldn’t see anything. It was stuffy and airless. My clothes felt hot and stifling. I was uncomfortable and cramped, my shoulders were sore, and I wracked my brain, trying to figure out what the hell had happened to me. How had I gotten here? And where the hell was *here*?

And then I remembered—the ravens. The must have carried me here somehow.

Shit.

I had to figure out a way back to Greyson’s wolf—and to Xavier. But when I tried to sit up, I realized that I couldn’t move. Something was holding me back. I frowned, baffled. Was I chained up?

Somehow, I didn’t think so. Whatever it was, it didn’t feel like chains.

Dammit. I really wished I could see.

Suddenly, a light snapped on over my head, and I screamed at the reflection in a glass window just in front of my face.

My regular clothes were gone, replaced with a stiff red hood and a red cloak.

I stared, baffled, as a terrified chill ran down my spine. I looked just like Little Red Riding Hood.

With a huge amount of focus, I was able to move my hand up to touch the hood. I just wanted to make sure I was looking at a reflection, rather than some kind of picture of myself dressed in a costume. But there it was—I could feel it, sitting on my head.

But something else in the reflection caught my eye. It was something attached to my wrist, and with effort I turned my head to look. Was that a *string*?

It seemed to be wrapped around my wrist, and then attached to something over me, but when I looked upward, into the light over my head, I couldn’t see anything but the bright glare of the light.

What the hell was going on?

Looking around, I felt dread descend on me. I was in some kind of narrow room. Or…was it a closet with a glass-fronted door? My breath came in short gasps, and I was just starting to panic when I looked to my left and realized that there was a figure next to me. I wasn’t alone. There was someone in this weird closet with me.

With effort, I turned my head to the left to see more clearly, then gasped in shock.

“*Greyson*?!”

Very slowly—and with a lot of effort—Greyson turned his head to look at me.

His eyes went wide. “*Cali*?” he gasped, looking stricken. “Love. What are you doing here?”

Hot tears spilled down my face. I tried to lift my arms to reach for him, but try as I might, I couldn’t do it. We were too far apart, and my arms wouldn’t lift that high. That made me cry harder. Then I saw that Greyson had long strings attached to his wrists too. What was this? What was going on?

“What is happening?” I asked him, trying to speak through sobs. “Where are we? What’s going on?”

“Oh, love—” was all he managed to say before another light clicked on, illuminating him more fully.

With the light on, I saw that he was dressed all in black leather—pants, boots, full jacket.

I took this in, baffled. “Why are you dressed like that? Why am I dressed like this? What’s going on?”

“Welcome back.” Cordelia’s voice filled the air around us, sharp and grating.

I bristled at the sound of it, my senses on high alert. I tried to move but realized I couldn’t even budge now.

She appeared just in front of me, on the other side of the glass door. She paused for a moment, then stepped toward me. I saw that Greyson’s wolf trailed at her heels.

“What did you do to him?” I hissed. “What did you do to my mate? And to his wolf? You must have done something. There’s no way anyone would *choose* to be with you!”

Cordelia made a show of looking injured, then she smiled. “Do you like playing with puppets?”

“*What?*”

“Puppets, dear. Marionettes.” She didn’t move, but the glass door opened, and somehow Greyson and I were moved from our seated positions and out onto what turned out to be a narrow stage.

It was very dark, and I couldn’t see what was on either side of it. Everything was in shadow, save for a bright light directly overhead, glaring down harshly.

Cordelia was the only audience member. She sat in a single chair just in front of us, eating from a box of popcorn she must have conjured from absolutely nowhere.

She smiled wickedly. “I do *love* a good performance. And I wonder how you’ll react, dearie, when you see the plot twist I’ve cooked up for this show.”

I glared at her. “I don’t give a damn about your show.”

She *tsked* at me, but it must have made her choke on a piece of popcorn because she stopped and coughed for a moment. When she recovered, she shook her head. “Everyone’s a critic. But you should save your very unfair critique until after you see it. Actually,” she gave me a bright smile, “you’re going to *star* in it.”

I didn’t like the sound of that at all. I looked over at Greyson, but there was something going on with him. Cordelia must have put him under some kind of a spell, because he wasn’t fighting at all. He was simply standing there, his face expressionless.

I twisted my wrists against the strings, then flexed my fingers, trying to summon my magic. If ever there was a time to escalate to violence, this was it. But it was no use. There was no familiar tingle in my fingertips. The strings—or some other aspect of Cordelia’s magic—was preventing me from using mine.

I looked over at the witch, who was still chowing down on her popcorn. The woman had gone completely mad.

She caught my eye and smiled again. “I do *love* a good show.” She put down her popcorn and got to her feet, stepping to Greyson and letting her hand run along the strings connecting to his wrists.

Greyson looked up at her, animated now. His grey eyes flashed angrily. “When I get my hands on you, and I will…”

Cordelia scoffed dismissively. “Please. You won’t harm me. Listen to yourself. I’m your puppet master, and you are my puppet on a string. And”—she smiled—“speaking of strings…”

She let the word hang in the air for a moment, looking between Greyson and me for a moment.

“What a perfect pair,” she went on, gushing insincerely. “You both have two sets of strings. But I wonder—where could these stings lead? Perhaps we should let the show begin.”

She snapped her fingers and stepped back. I heard a door open, and I looked behind me, where we’d come from. It wasn’t a closet, but a glass display case. And there had been another puppet that I hadn’t noticed. It must have been on the other side of Greyson.

My movement had been so restricted I had barely been able to see Greyson, so I hadn’t caught sight of anything else. But now—at the snap of Cordelia’s spell-casting fingers—the other puppet stepped out of the case and joined Greyson and me on the stage.

I recognized her immediately and stared at her in shock. *Kendall?!*

What in the actual hell was *she* doing here?

The Kendall puppet turned to look at me, and I stared back at her, jarred. It certainly looked like Kendall—if Kendall happened to be a life-sized marionette. But the purple eyes—so like the actual Kendall’s eyes—showed no signs of life.

She had strings around her wrists and ankles, and when Cordelia snapped her fingers, the Kendall puppet began to move, walking in a slow, jerky fashion toward Greyson.

“What will happen when Little Miss Purple Eyes runs into Greyson?” She shot me a grin. “Shall we find out?

She snapped her other hand, and Greyson’s strings moved, jerking him toward Kendall.

Kendall’s arms raised, wrapping around Greyson. Then her head inclined, and she kissed Greyson.

My stomach plummeted. I knew it was a puppet—or some kind of doll version of Kendall—but it looked uncannily real, and I couldn’t bear to watch it. I turned my head away, but an instant later my head was snapped forward again, forced to face Kendall and Greyson.

My breath caught in my throat, and I shut my eyes, but some unseen force pulled them open.

“*Oh god*,” I moaned. What the hell was happening?

Cordelia yawned. “This really isn’t doing it for me. We need a little more heat, don’t you think?” she asked, glancing at me. She looked over at Greyson and snapped her fingers. “Take it further! Rip off her shirt!”

**Episode 5571**

**Greyson**

*Why can’t I help myself? Why am I kissing this Kendall puppet? This is Cordelia’s doing…but why?*

I didn’t understand the witch’s obsession with Kendall and me. It was unsettling that she knew anything about Kendall, let alone was amusing herself by making us interact this way.

I felt my arms lifting up against my will, wrapping around Kendall to pull her closer, to reveal her soft skin underneath her shirt.

I struggled against the invisible force moving my limbs, trying my best to break free of Cordelia’s magical hold.

“Greyson!” Cali gasped, the distress clear in her voice. “What are you doing?”

I wanted nothing more than to tell her that I wasn’t in control of my own body, that this wasn’t me.

Surely she had to know I wouldn’t do this willingly, wouldn’t throw it in her face like this.

I had to break free of Cordelia and her games and get to my real mate. But how?

I gritted my teeth and concentrated on treating the force of Cordelia’s magic like a physical hold—like a hand pushing me and pulling at me.

I was often strong enough to overpower physical attacks, so maybe, if I tapped into that same strength, I would be able to overpower a magical strength as well.

I gritted my teeth and put every ounce of strength I had into pulling out of Cordelia’s hold. I almost shouted in satisfaction when suddenly, my arms broke free of Cordelia’s magical grip.

I’d regained control of myself again, and I wasted no time pushing the now half-shirtless Kendall doll off me.

Cordelia’s angry voice boomed into my ears like a crack of thunder. “What do you think you’re doing?! Th-that’s not possible! How did you break free of me?”

With a big burst of will, I flung the Kendall doll as far away from me as I could, and her wooden body clattered heavily to the ground.

“You’ve ruined my show!” Cordelia screamed, shooting up from her seat. “You’re going to pay for your disobedience!”

I started to run to Cali, but I only made it a few steps before another magical force wrapped around me and pulled me backward.

I’d used all my strength to break through Cordelia’s magic the first time, and so I wasn’t able to replicate it and break free again—I was out of gas.

Cordelia flicked her wrist, propelling me into a glass box that shut tightly around me like a deadly display case prison.

“Greyson!” Cali screamed. She threw herself against the box and slammed her fist against the glass, trying to help me break free.

I was blasting it with my fists on my side, but the glass was proving impossible to break.

It was no use. The glass didn’t even crack. It was magically reinforced and unbreakable.

I watched in horror as Cordelia’s magical force lifted Cali into the air. Cali kicked her feet and clawed at the invisible hands that were busy choking her.

“Cali!” I shouted, pounding my fists against the glass until they ached. “Cali, be strong, fight her! I know you can do it, love!”

I paused for a second and concentrated as hard as I could on calling my wolf.

*Come on, I need you! We have to save Cali. I need you right now. Come back to where you belong.*

I tried and tried to connect with my wolf, but it either couldn’t hear me or was ignoring me, because it didn’t come.

“Stop this!” I growled at Cordelia. “We’ve done nothing to you. Why are you punishing us? Let us go!”

Cordelia grinned from where she stood a few feet away, her fingers moving as she manipulated her magic.

“I’m doing it because it’s fun!” she said. “In fact, I can’t remember the last time I had such a blast!” Her smile widened. “I just knew you would be a great addition to my toy collection. You can both try to fight me as hard as you can, but know that I’m going to win in the end!”

I shuddered at her words. She was collecting us like figurines. She had no regard for our humanity at all. We were nothing but entertainment to her.

She didn’t care about us beyond what we could do for her, and that meant that she would throw us away just like broken toys she was bored of when she was done.

“If you let Cali go, I’ll play whatever game you want me to!” I said. “Whatever you ask, I’m willing to do. Just leave Cali alone!”

Cordelia shook her head. “You had your chance to play along, and you messed up my fun. So, your dear Cali will have to make up for it. Remember, there are always consequences to our actions.”

“*No*,” I shouted. “She shouldn’t have to pay for what *I* did. I’m the one who messed up. Punish *me*.”

Cordelia pinned me to the spot with an annoyed glare. “This mate of yours is the reason you acted out in the first place. As soon as she’s out of the picture, I’m sure you’ll behave!”

“If you hurt her, if you kill her, I will *never* cooperate,” I shot back.

It didn’t matter, though; Cordelia wasn’t listening to me anymore. She was glaring at Cali who she still had suspended in the air in front of her, choking and gasping for breath, her legs kicking.

“I want this wolf,” Cordelia said to Cali. “It completes my collection, and it’s got the fire and passion that I love in a toy!”

“No, let him go!” Cali choked out.

“No. I don’t think I will. And why do you care? You have another one, anyway. I can feel your connection to him, even now. So, you have a decision to make: renounce this mate and return to your other one, then I'll let you go!”

“Take the deal,” I called out to Cali.

All I wanted was for her to stop choking. She couldn’t breathe and she wasn’t going to last long. If her finally making a choice between me and Xavier was the key to her living through this ordeal, then it was a no-brainer.

She needed to choose Xavier to save her own life.

“I won’t let you die this way, Cali!” I shouted. “Take the deal! Please. Even if I have to lose you in the process, your life is worth more.”

Cali looked at me with wide, desperate eyes. Then she shifted her gaze to Cordelia and let out a high-pitched, “Please!”

Cordelia flicked her hand, and Cali dropped to the ground.

I knelt in my case, splayed my hands against the glass wishing I could run to Cali’s side and comfort her.

It tore me apart seeing Cali hurt, and Cordelia knew it. This was a torment unlike anything I’d ever experienced. Cordelia knew right where to kick me, and she was doing it over and over by treating Cali with such wanton violence.

Cali crawled over to me and put her hands against the glass. Her face was still red from the attack, and she hadn’t yet caught her breath.

“Greyson, what are we going to do?” she rasped, tears streaming from her eyes.

I nodded sadly, keeping my eyes locked on hers. “It’s okay, Cali. I’ll be okay. All that matters is that you’re safe. Choose Xavier. It’s the only way.”

“But Greyson… I don’t know if—”

“Cali, don’t worry about me or how I’ll feel about it. The only thing that matters to me is that you get away from this witch as soon as you can!”

Cali’s gaze turned desperate, and a sadness unlike anything I’d ever seen shined in her eyes.

*Could this really be it?* I thought to myself. *No. Never.*

“I want you to know that I love you, no matter what choice you have to make. I love you, Cali. Forever.”

Cali nodded and then finally turned to face Cordelia.

She lifted her chin, bruised from the attack, in defiance. “I refuse to play your games, Cordelia! I’m leaving here with Greyson *and* his wolf, one way or another.”

“Cali, no!” I shouted. “Don’t do this. She’s not to be played with!”

“Is that so?” Cordelia said. She rounded on Cali and slapped her hard across the face. Cali crumpled to the ground with a shrill scream.

“Don’t you touch her,” I growled, feeling helpless.

“I already did, stupid wolf!” Cordelia hissed.

Then, with a snap of the witch’s fingers, Cali disappeared. Blipped away to some unknown place.

I slammed my fists hard against the glass, willing it to break.

Cordelia had to pay for how she was torturing us. I wanted nothing more than to wrap my hands around her neck and squeeze until she couldn’t breathe. But I was trapped.

“Where did you send her?” I demanded.

Cordelia’s grin was evil as she said, “If she won’t leave me alone with my toys, then she’ll be part of the game!”

Cordelia snapped her fingers again, blipping me away too.

I landed on something hard and cold a few seconds later. I lay still for a few seconds, letting my disorientation drain away.

When I finally blinked my eyes open, I realized that I was lying on a large stage.

**Episode 5572**

**Xavier**

I was desperate to find Cali. She was so far out of my reach by now that I couldn’t even smell her, couldn’t sense her.

I was doing my best not to panic, but every second without her made it harder to keep my cool.

Nothing else mattered but laying eyes on her and making sure she was okay—that the witch hadn’t hurt her.

Ava and I were running full speed through the labyrinth of hallways that crisscrossed the boat. I was thankful that Ava seemed as dedicated to finding Cali as I was…or maybe she was only helping because she knew how important it was to me.

Either way, I was happy to have her by my side. I needed all the help I could get.

“What the hell happened back there?” Ava asked. “The ravens seemed to just pick Cali up and fly her away.”

“That’s exactly what happened,” I replied.

“Then that means those birds are dangerous. We have to be careful of them,” Ava said. She looked around us as if worried that more of the ravens were going to pop out at any second.

“We do have to be careful. They’re just yet another tool at Cordelia’s disposal,” I said. “And we’re on her turf, which means we could encounter them at any turn.”

Then I saw someone running just ahead of us and my heart jumped.

“Wait a minute, I think I see Cali,” I said. “She’s right there!”

She was sprinting through the hallways a few yards ahead of us, but she was walking funny, limping like she was hurt.

*Cali, are you okay?* I asked through the mind link. *Please tell me that you’re okay. We’ve almost caught up to you.*

I waited for her reply, but when none came, my confusion grew.

I couldn’t figure out what was happening. Had Cordelia put another weird spell on Cali? One that wouldn’t allow me to mind link with her?

I gasped when Cali collapsed to her knees outside a huge, ornate door. My worry intensified when she didn’t get up, but just sat there with her legs folded awkwardly beneath her.

I increased my speed and hurried to her side. I gathered her in my arms, happy that we were finally reunited. “Cali, are you okay?”

In a split second, I realized this wasn’t Cali at all—this Cali was made of wood, her lifeless, wooden eyes staring up at me.

“She’s a puppet,” I cried out.

Horrified, I dropped the wooden Cali to the ground and backed away.

“Xavier!” Ava called.

I was still staring at the fake Cali, my heart beating so loudly, it was like I couldn’t register Ava’s voice.

Ava grabbed my shoulders and gave me a little shake. “Are you listening to me? Xavier, look!”

I turned around and saw that the strange door was glowing.

“Be careful,” Ava warned. “There’s something fucked up going on here.”

Before I could jump out of the way, the door swung open to reveal a heavy darkness on the other side.

Ava and I exchanged a look.

“What the hell is going on here?” Ava said. “We need to get out of here before something worse happens.”

I was about to agree with her since I had no interest in messing with unknown magic.

But then Cali’s voice drifted through the doorway. “Hey! Stop that!”

“Cali?” I called out. “Cali, is that you?”

She didn’t answer, but now that I’d heard her voice, there was nothing for me to do but rush in and see if she was inside and needed our help.

I rushed through the door and plunged into the strange darkness on the other side.

Ava and I advanced cautiously, looking around. The darkness dissolved as we walked, and the room appeared to be a small theater with stage lights so bright that I blinked against the strength of them.

Once my eyes finally adjusted to the glaring shine, I spotted Cali standing on stage. She was wearing a sexy red dress with a hood. It looked way too much like what I’d seen the puppet at the puppet show in.

“Cali!” I called out.

I ran toward the stage as fast as I could, but a second later, I lost control of my legs.

“What the fuck is happening?” I hissed.

No matter how hard I tried, my legs wouldn’t move.

Two chairs appeared behind Ava and me, and an unseen force pushed us back until we were sitting in them.

I struggled to stand, but I couldn’t move. It was as if I were chained to the chair, or like my entire body was petrified.

I was locked into a sitting position, my head forced straight ahead. I had no control over my own body, and it was an awful feeling.

“The play will begin momentarily!” a voice announced over a loudspeaker. “Remember, no flash photography allowed during the show! Please enjoy tonight’s production of *Little Red Riding Hood*.”

Horrified, my eyes—the only body part I could move—dragged across the stage. Cali was all alone and looked as frozen and horrified as Ava and I were.

“What the hell is this?” Ava said, her words slurred and strange since she couldn’t move her lips.

“The witch used some kind of freezing spell on us,” I answered, my voice and words coming out as strangely as hers.

I tried to think of how we’d gotten out of this predicament before. Last time, Cali used her Fae magic to release us. She was in no state to do that right now, though. We were on our own, and so far, we weren’t strong enough to break Cordelia’s hold over us.

“Try to shift,” I said to Ava. “Maybe that will break the spell.”

“Okay, I’ll try,” she replied.

I was trying, too, using every bit of concentration and power I had to tap into my wolf and let it take over. If I could shift forms, I could only hope it would break the ties of Cordelia’s magic. It was just a guess, but I was desperate.

But it wasn’t working. My wolf remained just beyond my grasp—but I could feel its presence.

Even though I wasn’t able to shift, I was comforted by my wolf’s reply and could feel it stirring inside of me, trying to break through.

I’d been without my wolf for so long that even knowing it was there inside me was good enough—even if shifting wasn’t within my power right now.

Strange music echoed to life around us as the play began.

Cali’s body started moving in strange jerking motions, as if she was a puppet on strings. When I narrowed my eyes just a bit, I could even make out the magical glimmer of puppet strings attached to her limbs.

*I have to shift—it’s the only way I may be able to break free and save her.*

The narrator’s voice filled the room. “Little Red Riding Hood is on her way to her grandmother’s house, but, oh no! A wolf is stalking her. Whatever will Little Red Riding Hood do?”

A second later, Greyson’s wolf appeared on stage and started stalking Cali like prey.

I tried to call out to Greyson’s wolf to tell it to stop, but I couldn’t.

“In the woods, there is also a hunter!” the narrator announced.

Greyson appeared on stage in a leather get-up that left nothing to the imagination. If I could have closed my eyes to block it out, I would have.

This play was looking more like a BDSM fantasy than a fairytale, and Greyson appeared to be under the control of puppet strings just like Cali.

But that wasn’t the worst part. The music suddenly changed to a slow trippy tune, and Greyson started to *sing*.

“Fuck me,” I grumbled.

Ava groaned. “Oh no…I thought it couldn’t get any worse, but…is this a fucking *musical?* Kill me now.”

I had to agree with Ava. It was bad enough that we were frozen in place and forced to watch whatever this was, but Greyson was a horrible singer.

With a shocked expression, Cali joined in.

Her voice was sweet, and she sounded much better than Greyson, but the horror on her face belied any thought that she was enjoying this.

The musical number seemed to go on forever and ended with Greyson’s wolf howling as the puppet strings spun Cali into Greyson’s waiting arms.

And then it got even worse. Greyson lowered Cali into a dip and *kissed her*.

“Hey!” I shouted. “This isn’t how *Little Red Riding Hood* goes!”

Cordelia’s voice boomed over the loudspeaker. “Audience must refrain from heckling during the show, or they will be *expelled!*”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I was certain it meant something much worse than getting kicked out of the theater.

Afraid to court any more of Cordelia’s ire, I kept my mouth shut and watched in tortured silence as Greyson and Cali’s kiss intensified until they were engaged in a hardcore make-out session.

My wolf was as agitated as I was, growling and howling inside of me. Suddenly, my hand shifted into a claw.

I could do this.

I would break free and show this witch why she should never want a werewolf as a pet.

**Episode 5573**

Beyond my anger and fear at being ensnared in Cordelia’s control, I felt conflicted.

Part of me was consumed by the fire of Greyson’s kiss, but this was all Cordelia’s doing. As soft and sweet and familiar as Greyson’s lips felt on mine, we weren’t kissing because we wanted to.

I was enjoying it, but it still didn’t feel right to be doing this at Cordelia’s behest. I hated that something as sweet and sacred as Greyson and I expressing our attraction and affection for each other was now tainted by Cordelia.

Our connection was ours and ours alone, but Cordelia was exploiting it and that didn’t feel good.

The history between me and Greyson made it so that there would always be a heat between us that couldn’t be denied.

Even when a witch was literally pulling our strings.

She didn’t care about our pleasure, or how satisfying it felt to be in his arms despite our circumstances.

She was using us as literal playthings, dolls that carried out the fantasies she was projecting onto us.

So why was my entire body heating up, coming to life with arousal and longing.

I wanted Greyson so badly, and the kiss felt different than it ever had before—like its effects were magnified by Cordelia’s magic.

I threw my arms around his neck, unsure of whether it was Cordelia’s doing or my own.

Either way, it felt right.

I was subtly aware of Xavier’s presence in the darkness of the audience seats beyond the stage, but I was in no state to hold back for Xavier’s sake, and I wouldn’t be able to, anyway.

Greyson and I were under Cordelia’s control, and we couldn’t defy her wishes.

I yelped when a second later, Cordelia ripped Greyson away from me.

Immediately, I felt cold, alone, and hopeless.

I knew that the kiss was of Cordelia’s making, but in those few moments when our lips were joined together, I’d felt peace.

“Greyson!” I called out, reaching for him, but the magical puppet strings forced my hands back down to my sides.

Cordelia took over the duties of the spectral narrator, and her harsh voice drowned out every other sound in the theater. “Little Red Riding Hood arrives at her grandmother’s house.”

A little cottage appeared behind me in a swirl of sparkling magic. If I weren’t scared and struggling to wrangle back control over my body, the sudden appearance of the magical building might have impressed me.

My mouth flew open just as it had for the forced duet with Greyson, and I heard myself saying, “Grandmother, it’s me, Little Red Riding Hood. I brought you some food!”

A growl filtered through the closed door in answer.

“Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother growled for her to come in,” Cordelia narrated.

*Oh no. If I go in there, Greyson’s wolf is going to eat me, isn’t it? Is that even possible, though? His wolf is just a spirit, right? Can a spirit wolf use its teeth to chew me up? Can a spirit swallow me whole?*

I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t want to find out either. Cordelia was unpredictable, and there was no way for me to know how strong a hold she had over Greyson’s wolf.

If she wanted it to tear me apart or swallow me whole, it was going to happen one way or another unless I found a way to negate Cordelia’s power.

I fought against the magical strings forcing me toward the door, but there was nothing I could do. The strings pushed my arms forward and I couldn’t resist opening the door and stepping into the cottage.

The scene shifted again, and the exterior of the cottage swirled into a magical representation of the interior of the cottage.

It felt very much like I’d stepped into the fairy-tale version of Grandmother’s house.

There was a bed right in the center of the stage with something large hiding underneath the blanket.

I kept fighting the puppet strings, but I was just expending so much of my energy with no result.

Cordelia walked me up to the bedside until I was close enough that the wolf could reach out and rake me to ribbons if it wanted to.

*It’s me, Cali*, I mind linked to the wolf, where it stayed in its hiding place, partially covered by the blankets. *Cordelia wants you to eat me somehow, but I know that’s not what you want. You belong to Greyson, and he would never want you to hurt me.*

The wolf growled and shifted around under the covers. Its snout poked out and I could see a curly wig sitting atop its head as it sniffed the air, likely confirming that I was who I said I was.

If this wasn’t completely horrifying, it might have been funny. I’d seen Greyson’s wolf in many states before, but I’d never seen it in a wig.

*I’m your mate, right? You don’t want to harm me,* I mind linked. *The witch is controlling you, and she doesn’t want what’s best for either of us. Resist her! I know you can!*

Suddenly, I heard Xavier’s voice in my head.

*Cali, I’ve almost broken free of Cordelia’s magic. Just hold on for a few seconds more, and I’ll come to you.*

*I don’t think I can hold on for much longer, Xavier. Greyson’s wolf is licking its chops—it’s about to eat me!*

The wolf had thrown its covers off completely, and just like in the story, it was draped in the quintessential grandmother’s bed clothes—a white cotton nightgown and slippers.

Cordelia had apparently gone all out with the wardrobe and wanted every detail to remain true to the fairy tale itself.

*You have to hold on, Cali, I’m shifting right now and am almost free*,Xavier replied. *Just give me a few more minutes and then I’m going to rush in and get you out of there.*

I wanted to turn and look at Xavier where he was sitting out in the audience, but since Cordelia was calling the shots, I wasn’t able to do it.

Instead, I took a few more jerky steps closer to the bed. I tried to back away, but it was as if my back met up against a brick wall.

I was trapped right where I was, and no amount of fighting against Cordelia’s magical puppet strings seemed to be working.

“Grandma?” I heard my voice say. “What large teeth you have!”

“Better to chew you with!” Cordelia recited for the wolf.

The wolf moved as if to leap out of the bed, and I was frozen in place with no possibility of backing away to put some distance between us.

*I have to tap into my magic. If I don’t, I’m dead.*

I screamed as my hand finally seemed to break free of the witch’s magic, and I flexed my fist open and closed, excited to find that I’d regained some control over my own body.

“What’s happening?” I shrieked as my hand began to glow.

Greyson’s wolf landed on the ground in front of me instead of devouring me. It seemed to be captivated by the Fae magic glowing at my fingertips.

Finally, I was able to command my own body. I’d managed to break free, and I felt my power surging inside me.

The wolf was still watching me with curiosity, as if feeling out what I was doing and what the sparking lights at my fingertips meant.

For the moment, it didn’t seem hell bent on eating me, though I could have been misreading its expression since it was a wolf, and they weren’t the most expressive creatures.

“Now the wolf *eats* Little Red Riding Hood!” Cordelia narrated angrily. “Now! Don’t waste any more time!”

Still, the wolf stayed right where it was and made no move to lunge and tear me apart.

It was still focused on the magic crackling in my hands.

I gasped when it took a step forward and gently nuzzled my hand.

It seemed like the sight of my Fae magic had broken whatever hold Cordelia had had over Greyson’s wolf. It wasn’t obeying her any longer.

I heard a loud crash and turned to see Xavier shifting as he broke out of his chair. Ava shifted beside him at the exact same moment as Cordelia’s panicked voice erupted from the loudspeaker.

“No! No! No! This isn’t supposed to happen. This is not how the show goes! Get back in your seats! Wolf, eat Cali! Now!”

“Find Greyson,” I shouted at Greyson’s wolf. “He needs you!”

The wolf turned and took off.

“Stop it now! Get back in your places! If you ruin this performance, you’ll regret it!” Cordelia shouted.

Xavier bounded onto the stage in wolf form and bumped his head against my side. My body was slowly becoming my own again. I tested out my reclaimed freedom by stooping down and hugging Xavier’s wolf.

A loud screeching sound filled the air, and I looked up to see a swarm of ravens flying overhead.

**Episode 5574**

**Artemis**

We made our way out into the city for the parade that wasn’t quite a parade, and I would have rather been anywhere else in the world.

It was enough that I was officially married to Kastian, and another to have to present it to everyone as real when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

I prided myself on being real, authentic, on not lying unless it was absolutely necessary. But here I was, preparing to lie to millions of people by presenting my marriage as everything it wasn’t.

At least it was for a good cause.

“Smile and look like you like each other, please,” Celeste hissed. “It’s important that you both keep up appearances, no matter how much you hate each other.”

“You got it,” Kastian said, dripping with charm. “And I don’t hate Artemis.”

I didn’t reply, because I wasn’t sure I could say the same about him.

“At least one of you knows how to look the part,” Celeste said, giving me a pointed look.

I pasted on a smile. “Is that better?” I asked.

“Much,” Celeste said, rolling her eyes. “We’ll begin the procession here at the top of this hill. Once we reach the middle plaza, you’ll kiss,” Celeste explained.

“Wait a minute…kiss? You didn’t mention anything about a kiss,” I said.

“I just did,” Celeste snapped. “It’s just a kiss. Pretend you’re on a stage if you have to.”

Kastian smiled. “Oh, Artemis, don’t look so sour. It doesn’t become you.”

I gritted my teeth. “Fine. A kiss. Sounds like fun.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Kastian quipped. “It’s unbelievable.”

It took everything in me not to sock him in the face.

I spotted Adair and Tabitha approaching, and my heart lurched.

We hadn’t had a chance to discuss what happened with the assassin. I had no idea where Adair’s head was at the moment, and he’d been on the fence about admitting whether or not he believed that Kadmos was alive.

I understood why.

He’d gone through a lot to come to terms with the reality of his brother being dead—and was still thought to be dead.

It had to be difficult to process, so I couldn’t blame him for not being gung-ho about the possibility of Kadmos being alive after all.

*I wish there was something I could say to him to help him come to terms with the possibility that his brother is still alive, but I’m not sure there is.*

I just felt it so strongly after hearing the assassin’s claims. Adair hadn’t trusted the assassin—for good reason—but the conviction in the man’s voice haunted my dreams.

Deep down, I knew he’d told the truth. I’d forced him to.

My father was alive.

What I wanted—no, needed—right now was Adair’s support. It would mean so much if I had him on my side. He’d almost come around a few times, but now it was more dire than ever.

Just as I was about to break away from Kastian and Celeste to go speak to Adair, Celeste grabbed my arm.

“Don’t go anywhere,” she said. “The parade is about to start.”

“You said it’s not a parade!” I hissed back at her.

“I’m sorry, the procession is about to begin. Is that better?” Celeste snapped.

“Shall we?” Kastian offered his arm.

Every fiber of my being screamed for me to leave him hanging, but in the end, I hooked my arm through his, and we took the long winding path down through the town.

It was strange to see droves of Dark Fae lining the parade route, because no matter what Celeste called it to lighten the blow, there was no denying that this was a full-blown parade.

Kastian and I were milking our marriage by parading our “love” through the streets for everyone to see.

He was obviously a hero in this Dark Fae town. People cheered and called out his name as he waved and smiled—a natural at soaking up adoration.

As soon as we reached the bottom of the hill, he leaned over and said, “Maybe look a little more like you actually want to be here? These people aren’t stupid, and they know a scowl when they see one.”

“I’m not scowling,” I shot back.

“Of course you are. I’ve started to believe it’s your default expression. But dial it back today, okay? Smile. Even a little. This isn’t about you and me, it’s about keeping peace in the realm,” Kastian said.

I couldn’t argue with him there. This marriage certainly wasn’t serving a romantic purpose, so the least I could do was milk it for the positive effect it could have on Dark and Light Fae relations.

I pasted on a smile and tried to schmooze and wave like Kastian, but the more I paid attention to the reactions of the people lining the streets, the more I realized that our reception was mixed at best.

People seemed to be responding well enough to Kastian, but when their eyes landed on me, all I saw were strange looks and whispers.

*Is it because they know I’m Kadmos’s daughter? What would they do if they felt like I do—that he’s alive? Do they even believe I am who I say I am?*

I tried to work through my feelings as quickly as I could. I kept telling myself that it didn’t matter, that I would get all the answers I needed about my father and Erimentha soon.

All I had to do was make it through this stupid parade.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Adair strolling behind us with Tabitha beside him. We caught each other’s eye, and I was pleased when Adair gave me a slight nod.

I turned around and tried to grin and bear it through the rest of the parade, but my heart leapt into my chest when we reached the plaza, the spot where our “romantic” kiss was supposed to take place.

Kastian leaned forward to whisper in my ear again. “You’d better make it look real, Ari. It’ll only last a few seconds.”

I glared at him and then quickly covered it with a smile.

He wrapped his arms around me and pressed his lips against mine. He took charge since I was almost too horrified to move. I was grateful that he didn’t go overboard with tongue or anything.

In fact, he kept things very wholesome, and for my part, I leaned into him and didn’t flinch away when he wrapped his arms around my waist.

I was giving it all I had, and I was sure that it looked as romantic and authentic as we wanted it to.

We broke apart soon after, and as everyone applauded, I spotted Marius in the crowd.

He gave me a hand signal that I recognized as one we’d used on missions in the past.

*Has he found something?*

Now that the parade was over, Celeste ushered us down a separate street, away from the majority of the crowd.

“Great job,” Celeste said once we were alone with only the guards within earshot. “I was worried that you weren’t going to be able to sell it, Artemis, but you found your footing just in time.” She turned her eyes on Kastian. “And of course, you’re a pro at this sort of thing.”

Kastian smirked, pleased with himself as always.

“You did well, no matter what Celeste says,” Adair said once he’d joined us on the side street. “These sorts of things are never easy, putting on a show for the masses when the image you have to portray doesn’t match up with how you really feel inside.”

“I already told them they did a good job,” Celeste snapped.

“Thank you, Adair!” I said, interrupting before things disintegrated into a blowout. “But there’s something I need to tell you.”

Adair raised an eyebrow. “Yes, what is it?”

“I’m searching for a woman who may know where Kadmos is.”

Adair didn’t seem impressed. “And?”

“And Marius may have found something. He’s following us.”

Adair tightened his jaw and took a look around. “He is, is he? Where?”

I looked over my shoulder to make sure that Celeste was occupied before I said any more. Just to be sure, I pulled Adair to the side, out of Celeste’s earshot.

I knew we didn’t have long, but hoped we could snare a few minutes to chat about this. I led Adair around the side of a building until we came upon Marius and Rishika.

I didn’t wait a second to get down to it.

“Did you two find anything?” I asked.

Marius and Rishika exchanged a glance, then they both gave Adair a cautious look.

“It’s okay, he’s on our side,” I said, even though that kind of remained to be seen.

“I found Erimentha. She has a cottage outside the village,” Marius said.

My chest suddenly felt tight, almost like I couldn’t breathe. It was obviously the shock of learning that this could really be happening. I was going to find my father if this lead panned out.

“Could it really be Erimentha?” I said to myself.

“Where is the cabin exactly?” Adair asked.

“On the mountain’s edge,” Marius said.

Rishika jumped in. “And we plan to go at sundown.”

**Episode 5575**

**Greyson**

I was suspended in place off stage, frozen like a puppet waiting for its puppet master to give me commands.

I couldn’t say this was the most powerless I’d ever felt—we’d dealt with our share of enemies that had left me feeling similar to this before—but this was certainly the strangest way my agency had ever been stripped from me.

I was literally hanging from puppet strings.

Cordelia’s power was proving too strong for me to break, even though I was giving it all I had. I tensed my jaw with effort as I strained and pulled and fought to break the strings, but they held together as if I wasn’t trying to tear myself free at all.

Suddenly, a familiar voice called my name. The magical strings I was hanging from tugged to life, forcing me to turn as a puppet Kendall emerged from the shadows.

“I know you want me,” Puppet Kendall said. “There’s a connection between us, and you know it. Don’t try to deny it.”

She floated toward me, hanging from her own set of magical strings, and threw her arms around me. She pressed her hard, wooden body against mine and buried her cold head in the crook of my neck.

I knew this wasn’t Kendall, but somehow, she still had some kind of pull on me. It was like Cordelia had paid attention to the smallest details and infused this puppet with a bit of Kendall’s essence.

*Wait, no. That shouldn’t matter since I don’t want the real Kendall either. Why am I reacting to her this way?*

Whatever I was feeling for Kendall right now was all thanks to Cordelia. Her magic was manipulating me, and I still wasn’t strong enough to fight it off.

Not only was Cordelia controlling my body, but she was trying to control my mind, too.

*I have a mate. One. And it’s Cali. Kendall means nothing to me. Cordelia is* not *going to tamper with my emotions. I won’t let her.*

It was hard to keep that thought at the forefront of my mind when Kendall looked so real, especially in the dark. Her purple eyes seemed to beckon to me, and I was finding it hard to resist despite my resolve.

“I want you too, Greyson. There’s no need to deny what there is between us. Not anymore. With me, you’ll be free of all that awful pain the *due destini* and Cali bring you,” Kendall said.

I gasped. “How do you know about that?”

“I know everything about you because you belong to me, Greyson. Just accept me as your mate, and then you’ll be free. Don’t you want to be free?”

I shook my head, trying to dash away the image of Kendall standing in front of me, but it was no use.

Her puppet was dangerously close, and in seconds, her lips were on mine.

I struggled and tried to push her away, tried to rear back, but no part of me would obey. In fact, as the kiss wore on, the magical puppet strings tugged my arms up to wrap around Kendall’s body.

Soon I felt like I was losing myself. It suddenly didn’t seem so important to pull away.

*Maybe this is better. Kendall and I can just exist here forever without a care in the world…*

A sudden howl gave me a start—shocking me enough that I was able to break through the hold Cordelia had on me and push Puppet Kendall away.

The strange thoughts in my head cleared, and I realized that once again, Cordelia had been manipulating me, making me feel things that weren’t real.

The howl rang out again, and I saw my wolf emerge from the shadows. For the first time since Cordelia snatched my wolf, it seemed to recognize me.

“Do you know me?” I asked my wolf. “It’s me, Greyson. I’m you, and you are me. Do you see that now?”

The wolf stepped forward and pressed its nose against my hand in answer. It felt cold, which wasn’t unexpected since it was a spirit, but I could easily feel its energy and its connection to me.

“Come on, boy,” I said. “Come home.”

The wolf seemed to nod and took a running leap at my chest.

I braced myself for impact, but I didn’t feel it the way I thought I would. It was a strange sensation; the feeling of the wolf spirit being absorbed into my body.

It almost felt like I was burning from the inside out, but the pain was worth it if it meant I would finally be whole again.

The energy of my newly reintegrated wolf spread through me like a wildfire, and my claws sprang free of my fingertips as I started to shift.

Shifting had never felt as satisfying as this, had never felt so right. I was back to myself, and just in time, too.

I was one with my wolf again, and only then did I realize just how wrong and empty I’d felt without it.

I shifted fully into wolf form and let out a joyful howl sending Puppet Kendall stumbling backward.

I turned on her and growled. Cordelia had to be watching me through the puppet’s eyes, and I wanted her to see that I wasn’t falling for her “charms” anymore.

Kendall’s puppet face scrunched up into a scowl, and she lunged. The puppet had Kendall’s face, but it wasn’t Kendall, and that meant it was nothing more than another of Cordelia’s pawns ready to do her dirty work.

I had to defend myself.

I clawed the puppet and it let out a synthetic-sounding scream. She lunged at me again, and even though she was a puppet, her strength was enough to push me back against my will.

She landed a painful blow across my flank, and I was driven back until I stumbled back out onto the stage.

“Greyson!” Cali called out to me.

I spun around and saw her standing beside Xavier’s wolf. They were cowering away from something, and a second later I saw what it was.

Above their heads, a flock of ravens swarmed, a few of them diving down to pluck at Cali’s hair.

*You’ve got your wolf, so come on*, Xavier mind linked to me. *We need to get the hell out of here. These ravens carried Cali away last time, and there’s no guarantee they won’t do the same thing again!*

Xavier was right. We had to protect Cali at all costs. I started to sprint over to Cali, but she was already climbing onto Xavier’s back.

We all raced out of the theater. Ava was leading the charge, and her strong paws blasted the ornate, glowing door wide open.

We raced out into the maze of hallways with the ravens hot on our tails, pecking and diving at us as we tried to make our escape.

“This way!” Ava said.

She took a sharp left and burst into a room full of pumping machinery.

“Is this the engine room or something?” Cali said.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here!” Ava said, already turning back.

We’d nearly reached the door when a bunch of figures emerged from behind the machinery to block our retreat.

They weren’t moving normally. Their bodies jerked awkwardly along as they gained on us, their bodies clanking against each other and making a loud wooden sound.

“Puppets!” Cali screamed in horror. “They’re all puppets!” Cali pointed at the puppet closest to us. “Is that the prince of Wales?”

I realized with a shock that each of the puppets were modeled after different famous people. I thought I saw Elton John, Lady Gaga, and even the prime minister.

*We’re going to have to fight through them to get to the exit*, Xavier mind linked to me.

*Let’s do it*, I replied. *I’m right behind you.*

We lunged at the puppets, tearing into them without regard for their famous faces.

It was jarring to have to maul the face of one of my favorite models, but I didn’t have a choice. If we didn’t clear these puppets out of the way, we would be trapped in here.

*Sorry*, I thought to myself as I ripped the model’s head off and flung it against a piece of machinery with a loud *clang*.

Between me, Ava, Xavier, and Cali’s magic blasts, we made quick work of the puppets.

When they were all down for the count, we regrouped and sprinted for the door, but just before we could escape the loud machine room, the Kendall puppet appeared.

She had an angry red wound on her face from when I’d defended myself from her.

Xavier started to lunge at her, but I shouted, “Wait!”

Xavier stopped his advance but gave me a curious look.

*Wait?* he mind linked. *Why?*

I understood his confusion. The Kendall puppet looked more horrifying than ever before, its eyes glowing bright red.

“It’s demonic!” Cali screamed, jumping back to hide behind me and Xavier.

Puppet Kendall’s mouth opened, and Cordelia’s voice came out. “You’ve ruined my puppet show, and for that, I will kill you all!”

**Episode 5576**

I was feeling the fatigue of using so much of my magic to fight against the onslaught of celebrity puppets.

I’d hit as many as I could with energy balls but was reluctant to shoot one that looked exactly like Spider-Man.

I really liked those movies, and I knew Spider-Man was one of the good guys, but not tonight. Tonight, Spider-Man was simply one of Cordelia’s agents sent to kill us one by one as punishment for ruining the witch’s stupid play.

*What’s up with Cordelia? Why is she making puppets that look like famous people? And why are they famous people that I actually like?*

Despite my hesitation about mowing down these icons with magic blasts, I kept on shooting. I blasted Spider-Man and Elton John to bits while reminding myself that not only were these not the people they looked like, but they also weren’t human.

The way they exploded into slivers of splintered wood each time my magic hit them drove that point home again and again.

Even though it was a mindbender seeing all these puppets with famous faces and bodies trying to kill us, I kept my eyes on the prize: getting to the exit.

If we could get out of here, I was sure we’d navigate our way through the maze of hallways and finally escape Cordelia.

We’d gotten what we came here for. Greyson had his wolf back, and now all that was left was getting out of here in one piece.

I was going to make sure that happened for us. Whatever barriers I’d felt to using my magic while being here on Cordelia’s ship had melted away, and the only thought in my head was protecting my mates no matter what.

Not that they really needed my help.

They were tearing these puppets apart, throwing wooden limbs this way and that, shredding them to pieces, and quickly clearing a path to the door.

After we’d cleared all the puppets away, we bolted toward the door. Just before we could disengage the lock, a final puppet stepped forward.

I gasped at the sight of the Kendall puppet with a deep red scratch across its face. I couldn’t help but glance over at Greyson to see his reaction, but in his wolf form, it was hard to tell if he was having any reaction at all.

All I knew was that he didn’t seem in any hurry to attack it even though it clearly wanted to destroy us the same as all the “famous” puppets.

Xavier started to lunge but then stopped and turned to look at Greyson, as if Greyson had mind linked something to him.

*Wait a minute, did Greyson tell Xavier not to attack this Kendall puppet? Why?*

I couldn’t believe it. Did Greyson feel some connection to this doll—to Kendall—and didn’t want to hurt it? She was going to hurt us, that much was clear.

When I really looked at her, I noticed that there were some key differences between this Kendall puppet and the real thing. For starters, this Kendall had that strange shine to her face because she was made of wood, and while Kendall’s eyes were purple, this puppet’s eyes glowed red.

“It’s demonic!” I shouted, stepping behind Xavier and Greyson.

Its eyes were freaking me out, and I was wondering why neither of my mates had destroyed her already.

“What are you two waiting for? Get her before she gets us!” I shouted.

The Kendall puppet turned its attention on me and lunged. It grabbed a hold of my foot and yanked me toward the ground.

I resisted but the puppet was strong, and I lost my footing and landed hard on my stomach, which knocked the wind out of me.

I clawed at the ground and twisted and kicked my feet, trying to break free.

The puppet’s strength was mind-blowing, and it was obvious that Cordelia had imbued the puppets with a surplus of power that made them worthy adversaries.

I was trying to turn over onto my back so that I could blast Puppet Kendall away, but I couldn’t seem to get my bearings as she dragged me across the floor, pulling me toward the shadows of the whirring machines.

*Cali, I’m coming*, Greyson mind linked.

A second later, he tackled Puppet Kendall to the ground, finally breaking her hold on me.

I skittered out of her reach, but I shouldn’t have worried about her coming for me again. Greyson’s strong jaws were clamped around the puppet’s wooden leg, and he flung her against the wall.

She shattered into what appeared to be a million pieces, and her disembodied head rolled over to lay at Greyson’s feet.

Greyson was staring at the head. Now that the eyes had lost their red glow, it looked so much like the real Kendall that I was conflicted.

*Greyson and Kendall have something like a friendship. Is that why he seems so affected by her?*

I wanted to go to Greyson to see if he was okay, but I was still processing why he was so upset about this obviously fake Kendall.

What was there between Greyson and Kendall that the mere sight of her face on this puppet was hitting him so strongly?

My heart squeezed in my chest at the thought of whatever connection they might have, but now wasn’t the time to dwell on it.

A swell of ravens flapped madly into the machine room, shooting down at us like guided missiles.

Greyson bolted for the exit and shifted back to his human form so that he could spin the circular latch that held the door closed.

The ravens kept diving, driving their beaks into Ava and Xavier’s backs, so I conjured a shield to protect us as best I could while Greyson worked on the door.

Just as Greyson pushed the door open, Ava shifted to human form and shouted, “We have to get off the boat! It’s going to explode!”

We all rushed out onto a narrow edge jutting off the front of the boat. The wind was blowing so hard that we could barely keep our footing.

Greyson came and grabbed my hand. “Come on, Cali, we have to jump!”

I took a fearful glance over the edge at dark churning water below.

Xavier shifted and jumped in without a second thought, and Ava went in after him.

“Come on, love, I’m right here, and I won’t let go of you, okay?” Greyson said.

“Okay,” I said finally, and then he took my hand, and we plunged into the cold water.

Submerging myself in ice cold water had a way of clearing my head, and I immediately started swimming away from the boat as fast as I could with Greyson splashing beside me.

A second later, I heard the boat explode behind me. I turned to look, panicking until I saw Xavier and Ava floating nearby.

They were both safe, and we were finally away from Cordelia.

The flames flickered brightly as the burning boat began to sink. I heard an angry scream echo from inside.

“Did you hear that?” I said to Greyson. “Is Cordelia dead?”

“We’re not going to stick around to find out,” Greyson replied.

We swam for the shore and crawled cold and dripping wet across the rocky beach.

“Where the hell are we now?” Ava said, looking around.

I wasn’t an expert on this part of the world, but it didn’t look like we were in London anymore.

“This isn’t London,” Greyson said as if reading my thoughts.

“It’s not. It looks like maybe Cordelia’s boat carried us pretty far down the River Thames,” I said.

I frowned as I looked farther up shore and spotted what looked like a ruin. It was scary and deserted as most ruins were, and I suddenly wished we were back in London proper.

Who knew what was lurking behind those dilapidated walls? Though I supposed nothing could be as bad as Cordelia.

*And as long as Adéluce isn’t lurking inside, I think we’re going to be okay.*

“Shit, we don’t have clothes,” Xavier said. “Greyson, Ava, and I should probably shift back to wolf form until we can find something to change into. I didn’t go through all that with the puppeteer witch from hell only to get pinched for indecent exposure.”

Greyson shifted and came to stand beside me as Ava and Xavier shifted to wolf form, too.

I looked between them before silently climbing onto Greyson’s back. It was strange, considering how hurt I was, despite knowing I shouldn’t have been… I needed time and space to think, but we didn’t have that right now. Still, there’d been something between Greyson and that puppet version of Kendall that I still didn’t understand, and it was more than that kiss Cordelia forced them to perform.

If Greyson had feelings for Kendall, and his behavior was making me think that was a possibility, we had a lot to discuss.

And if there really was something more than platonic between Greyson and Kendall, what did that mean for us?

**Episode 5577**

I pointed to what looked like a cottage in the distance where I could just make out the flutter of sheets in the wind, like they were hanging on a line.

Maybe there would be clothes too.

We’d obviously made it very far outside of London if we were looking at small cottages and sparse green fields and forest lands.

The air smelled fresher than in London, and it was a lot more peaceful—which was good after the stressful events we’d just experienced.

I was going to have to look up exactly where we were when we got back to the hotel. Maybe if I ever came back to this side of the world, we could spend some time in the countryside, far away from London, which hadn’t treated any of us that kindly.

I glanced down at Greyson who was running alongside the other two. I considered mind linking with him to try talking about what had happened, but I decided against it. Now wasn’t the time to get into what would inevitably end up being a pretty serious discussion about Greyson’s feelings for Kendall—or lack thereof.

*See those clothes up ahead?* Greyson mind linked. *Xavier suggested we can find outfits to change into and then find our way back to London to regroup.*

*Sure*, I said back, hoping he couldn’t hear the hurt in my voice.

I climbed off Greyson’s back so that the others could shift and get dressed quickly when it was time.

“These are old man clothes,” Ava complained once we were close enough to see what the clothing options were.

“That’s all we have to work with,” Greyson muttered.

Ava shrugged and got dressed, keeping whatever additional complaints she had to herself.

Greyson came walking over to me with a set of clothes in hand. “You should change too, Cali. You’re soaking wet.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “And anyway, I feel bad about stealing some old man’s clothes.”

Greyson frowned. “Okay, love. If you’re sure.” He clipped the clothes back on the line.

For himself, he’d chosen a pair of baggy khaki pants that were as short as capris on him because of his height. But whoever the clothes belonged to must have carried a little extra weight around the middle since the shirt hung loose around Greyson’s chiseled abs.

“You okay?” Greyson asked, reaching for me.

I stepped back out of his reach and hurt flashed across his face.

Before I could say anything, Ava joined us.

“Come on, Xavier spotted a road. We can try to hitchhike from here,” she said.

I tore my gaze away from Greyson, for the first time happy to be interrupted by Ava. “That sounds like a plan,” I responded.

Greyson and I would have to talk eventually, but for right now, I wasn’t even sure what I had to say to him.

He hadn’t even really done anything wrong other than hesitate a little too long when he was facing down that evil Kendall puppet.

Maybe I was building this up in my head, but a gut feeling told me that there was something going on with him.

We joined Xavier at the edge of the road. “I saw a couple of small cars go by, but we wouldn’t all fit,” he said.

“I don’t mind walking,” Ava said.

“I don’t mind walking either,” I said, too tired to think about how I was agreeing with Ava right now. “I’m sure another car will come by soon, one that will fit us all.”

Xavier slapped his brother on the back when Greyson trotted up to join us.

“So, your wolf is back where it belongs, huh?” Xavier said.

Greyson nodded, but his eyes were on me, and they weren’t moving.

I avoided his stare as best I could.

Xavier looked between us before adding, “Well, at least in the midst of all this stupid witch puppet shit, you got your wolf back. That’s a major silver lining.”

“Agreed,” Greyson said. “And if all of you agree, I’d like to get the hell out of London as soon as possible. This place is cramping my style.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if he wanted to get back to the states so bad because of Kendall. I hated myself for even thinking it since it made literally no sense, but I couldn’t help myself.

Xavier and Ava were talking quietly between themselves. I watched as he laced his fingers through hers, and she laid her head on his shoulder. Obviously, they were used to fighting and making up quickly.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if my annoyance with Greyson over the Kendall puppet had something to do with the pain of seeing Xavier mated to someone else.

Someone who hated me, at that.

Ava and I would never be friends. Perhaps we weren’t quite mortal enemies anymore, but that side of our dynamic was bound to flare up again at any time.

A truck came thundering down the road, and Xavier stuck out a thumb. The truck slowed to a stop, and the driver stuck out his head.

“Where you lot headed?” he asked.

I couldn’t ignore the loud squawking sounds and saw that he had caged chickens in the back.

“London,” Xavier said. “Mind if we hitch a ride?”

“Sure, if you don’t mind sharing the accommodations with a few of my feathered friends,” the driver said.

We climbed into the straw-lined truck bed. It was a tight fit, and I found myself wedged against a cage as the driver drove off. I didn’t mind so much since the chicken’s feathers felt soft and warm against my chilled skin.

Xavier was sitting across from me. He and Ava were almost on top of each other. Greyson was tucked in the back away from the rest of us in the last bit of free space there was.

I felt bad that we weren’t sitting together. It was probably best for me to not hold a grudge against him until we talked, and I figured out what was really going on. It wasn’t like Greyson was the type to lie to me.

It would be better for me to just ask what was going on between him and Kendall, but I was just so afraid of what the answer would be.

I also felt really bad, because being angry at him at all felt hypocritical, considering all that had happened between Xavier and me.

Being mated to both Xavier and Greyson was hard on them both, but they’d both done whatever they could to accept it and be supportive.

I was still putting them through so much by not making a choice.

So why couldn’t I accept the idea that there could really be something between Greyson and Kendall?

In the past, when people even brought up the possibility that Greyson and Kendall had some kind of connection beyond friendship, it was easy to dismiss. Rowena had even told me about all the complicated mate strings, and I still hadn’t taken it to heart.

Now I was wishing that I’d paid more attention to it, because if Greyson was reacting so strongly to an evil Kendall clone out to kill us, how was he treating the real live woman when I wasn’t around?

None of us talked much on the ride back to town, and before long, the driver slowed to a stop on a busy corner to let us out.

Xavier thanked the driver with a handshake, and he and Ava hopped out of the truck bed.

As I went to climb out, Greyson offered a hand to help me down, and I reluctantly took it.

He didn’t let go once my feet were on the ground. Instead, he gave it a squeeze and asked, “Are you okay? You seem…distant.”

It was time for me to finally face him. I didn’t know why I was so afraid of being honest with him. What was the worst that could happen?

Part of me knew that he wasn’t going to admit that he had some world-shattering crush on Kendall, but I was still afraid to have the conversation.

I frowned at him and said, “I’m not so sure.”

Greyson searched my eyes for a few beats before saying, “You know that whatever happened back there with that Kendall puppet clone, Cordelia forced me to do it.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m starting to think that maybe you’re in denial. Maybe there’s something there, and you don’t want to admit it because you don’t want to hurt me—”

“Cali, that’s not it.”

“Greyson, just let me finish. Maybe you don’t want to hurt me by admitting the truth, and I really do appreciate that, but it’s time we face this head on.”

Greyson frowned and pulled me away from Xavier and Ava. “Face what head on? What are you talking about exactly?”

“Greyson, you know what I’m talking about. This thing that’s going on between you and Kendall.”

**Episode 5578**

**Artemis**

I groaned at that. “Are you sure I can’t just ask someone to cover for me? Maybe Adair will do it?”

Adair gave me a hard look. “I have to accompany you into the mountains for your safety, Artemis.”

I hated that, and almost complained that I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself, but I knew that there was no changing Adair’s mind once it was made up.

“What about Tabitha?” I asked.

Adair hesitated for a moment before saying, “She’ll be fine with Celeste for now.”

“You’re leaving your current girlfriend with your *ex* you’re not even divorced from yet?” I said.

Adair gave me a cutting look, and I snapped my mouth closed. It wasn’t a good idea to get on Adair’s bad side for a number of reasons, and I knew how complicated relationships could be. I shouldn’t have said that in the first place.

“We’re adults; they’ll both understand,” Adair said tightly.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, then I guess I’ll ask Kastian.”

I stormed back into the inn where we were staying for the night and found Kastian drinking in the food hall.

I sat down beside him while trying to figure out how to broach the subject. Kastian could be easy to handle…if I approached him the right way.

“Want a drink, dear wife?” he asked good naturedly. “To celebrate successfully pulling the wool over hundreds of people’s eyes?”

I scowled, and then I remembered that I needed a favor, so I immediately turned that frown upside down and smiled. “Why, of course, husband, I would love one.”

Kastian frowned in confusion but poured me one anyway.

*Oops, I think I laid it on a little too thick there. I should pull back before he senses that something’s up.*

I took a sip from my drink and scowled—the beer tasted like gym socks—before wincing and setting it down.

“You know, Kastian, I’ve really been enjoying our time together,” I said. “You’re so interesting and easy to talk to.”

Kastian frowned. “Um…okay?”

“And I’ve kind of come to trust you. A little.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. He was certainly a lot better than I used to think he was, though he was as much of a womanizing rake as ever. I guess I’d gotten used to it and accepted it as a harmless quirk.

Kastian said, “And I you, kind of. A little.”

“So, I’m hoping you’ll be willing to cover for me while I take a bit of time away for myself. I’ve been feeling so suffocated lately.”

Kastian raised a brow in surprise. “Suffocated?”

I was starting to worry that I wasn’t convincing enough.

*Is he going to buy any of this? Or will he see right through me and get suspicious? I need him to believe me if going to find Erimentha is going to work. Celeste can’t find out what I’m up to.*

He grinned and purred, “Of course. You can ask me for just about anything, my wife. A husband’s job is to serve, after all.”

I scowled at how easily he seemed to agree with me. Almost too easily. Kastian could be handled, yes, but this was an uncharacteristically easy interaction, and I wasn’t buying it.

“All right, cut the shit,” I snapped. “What do you want in return?”

Kastian grinned like a cat with cream. “Nothing at the moment…but I reserve the right to call in a favor at a later date.”

I hated how vague that sounded. With that kind of promise, he could ask for just about anything. With Kastian, you never knew what, or who, he might want in return.

“Fine. I will grant you a favor, but you have to cash it in within the month. And it can’t include killing or betraying anyone I love,” I said.

Kastian nodded. “All right, I—”

“Or sleeping with you,” I added. “Because that’s solidly off the table. I wouldn’t sleep with you for anything, and if that’s what you plan to ask for, well, just forget it.”

Kastian scowled. “Well, that’s no fun. But fine. It’s not like I need favors to get anyone to sleep with me, anyway. It’s a deal.”

He extended a hand, and I shook it and gave it a hard shake, even though it felt like making a deal with the devil.

I hurried out of the inn to find Adair, Rishika, and Marius waiting for me at the market.

They had a cloak ready for me to hide my face so I wouldn’t be recognized as we hurried through the market.

Even after I had the cloak on, there were a few times that people stopped and stared too long, and I worried that they knew exactly who I was.

If they did, as long as they didn’t stop me, no harm done. It wasn’t like I wasn’t allowed to be out in the market just like everyone else, though I did have to be careful of drawing crowds or causing confusion that would slow our progress.

Thankfully, we made it out of the village without anyone stopping us. Marius led the way to the steep mountain range beyond.

Before we began the climb up the jagged mountain path, Adair stopped us.

“Wait a second. I should go first,” he said.

Marius frowned. “Why? You don’t even know the way.”

Reluctantly, Adair agreed to let Marius lead.

On the climb up, I took my place between Adair and Rishika—Rishika bringing up the rear.

Rishika had always been quick on her feet, so when I slipped on a loose rock and Rishika caught me without missing a step, I wasn’t surprised. Just grateful—and kind of turned on.

“You good?” Rishika asked, her arms tight around my waist.

I nodded, my pulse pounding in my ears. I turned around to face Rishika and muttered, “Yes. Thanks…for saving my ass.”

Rishika smiled. “It’s a beautiful ass. Would never let anything happen to it on my watch.”

I smiled, my entire body reacting to having Rishika so close like this. We were on a treacherous climb to find the woman who could lead me to my father, but right now, my mind was on nothing but Rishika’s beautiful lips.

They were so close to mine. If I leaned forward just a little, we could kiss, just like that.

I met her eyes and could see that she was looking at me in the way she always did when she was turned on.

This was as good a time as any to act on what we were feeling, wasn’t it?

We drifted closer and closer, but someone called my name just before our lips met.

“Artemis, Rishika, now’s not the time to play kissy face. We need to get up this mountain,” Adair said. “Get a move on. We almost lost you two.”

I nodded and followed after my uncle, too embarrassed to even level a snide remark at him.

*No. Right now is not as good a time as any to make out with Rishika. We’re on a serious mission, and I need to stay focused. Plus, she doesn’t remember everything yet.*

I was all flushed and flustered and had to concentrate overtime so that I didn’t stumble again.

*Though if I do, I know now that Rishika would catch me—which I wouldn’t mind her doing again and again.*

The rest of the climb proved uneventful. We were getting so high up that it felt very isolated. I wondered why Erimentha had chosen to make her home in a place so far away from civilization.

From what Marius explained, she still sold tonics to villagers, which was how he came to learn about her in the market.

Someone had mentioned her by name while looking to buy a hair growth tonic. But this was so far up, I wondered who would wander up here just to go shopping.

For all I knew, the reason she hid away like this was because her services were forbidden.

I shuddered to think of it, but I had to find the Dark Fae and find out exactly what she knew about my father.

Finally, I saw a thin thread of smoke rising over the trees. We were getting close.

“I think that’s the cottage up ahead there,” Marius called back to us. “This is about where they said we’d find her place.”

“Why does she live all the way up here in the middle of nowhere?” Rishika asked, her words aligning perfectly with what I’d been thinking the entire climb.

“Because she’s allegedly unhinged and hates crowds,” Marius said. “At least that’s what I was told.”

I paused, thinking about the implications of that. This could be my one and only chance to find out what was really going on with my father.

I wasn’t about to let anyone or anything ruin it. If Erimentha was the type to get spooked, we needed to tread lightly.

“If Erimentha really hates crowds and something small could set her off,” I said to the others, “then maybe it’s best that I go see her alone.”

**Episode 5579**

To my complete and total frustration, Greyson totally shut me down. “I’m sorry, Cali, but now’s not the time to talk about that.”

“What? Really? I’m the one who’s been holding off on saying anything because I wanted to wait until the right moment. And I felt guilty for keeping it from you. And now, you’re saying that you’re not ready?”

I was spiraling a bit and talking loud enough that both Xavier and Ava turned to look in our direction.

Greyson gave me a look, imploring me to calm down, but I was only getting more annoyed.

“Now I’m really starting to think that there *is* something going on since you won’t even talk about it…”

“Cali, it’s not that I won’t talk about it, it’s just that—”

Greyson trailed off and glanced around at the busy street, at Xavier and Ava pretending not to listen. Greyson was very private, and I knew that the thought of Ava and Xavier and a bunch of complete strangers overhearing us was too much for him to bear.

*Maybe he’s right. This is not a discussion that needs an audience.*

I sighed. “Okay, maybe right now isn’t the time or place. We’re standing on a street corner, and I’m cold and tired and way overdue for a shower.”

“Thank you for understanding,” Greyson said. “I want to talk about it, but just not right now. Not here.”

“But you’re not off the hook,” I said. “As soon as we get back to the hotel and have some privacy, we’re going to dive in, okay?”

Greyson nodded. “You got it. You deserve an explanation, and I’m ready to give it to you.”

Greyson took the lead to the hotel, and night was just starting to fall when we arrived. This felt like the longest day I’d ever lived.

I was just happy we’d made it back to our hotel, and that I was finally in complete control of my body again.

Serving as a puppet for a witch who’d obviously lost touch with reality certainly took a lot out of you.

I’d been quiet on the walk to the hotel, and I remained that way as we boarded the elevator.

“We’re going to stop by our room to clean up,” Xavier said.

“I can’t wait to get out of these peasant clothes,” Ava said with an eye roll. “Not that we took them from a real peasant. That’s just what they look like,” Ava said quickly.

I noticed that she was trying to shirk her reputation as a raging bitch these days, but she had a lot more work to do if I was ever going to believe that she was a changed woman.

I felt Xavier’s eyes on me, and it almost seemed like he wanted to say something else to me, but then he looked back and forth between me and Ava and snapped his mouth shut as if he’d decided against it.

Xavier and Ava’s room was one floor below ours, so after they said their goodbyes and got off, Greyson and I were all alone.

I wanted so much to pretend like everything was fine between us. I was exhausted from the day and ready to go to bed, but I couldn’t let these bad thoughts rest.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get the image of Greyson kissing the puppet Kendall out of my head.

It felt kind of silly since I knew Kendall wasn’t real and that Cordelia had imprisoned Greyson on magic puppet strings, but it was like my mind couldn’t register that part of it. The image of Greyson kissing Kendall and looking like he enjoyed it was all that I could see.

*I don’t care what Greyson says. That kiss meant something, and there was more than magic at play. He might not want to admit it, or know what it is, but I can feel it.*

It wasn’t like this was the first time I’d had to grapple with Greyson and Kendall getting a little too close for comfort. Greyson had kissed Kendall while drugged, too. They’d blamed it on being under the influence, I hadn’t bought it then, either.

I hated that I felt this way. I hated that it was making me treat Greyson differently, but there was nothing I could do. I couldn’t ignore the way I felt no matter how hard I tried and wanted to keep the peace.

Once we were alone in our room, Greyson said, “You should strip out of those dirty clothes. I’ll go start the shower so that it’s hot for you.”

“Not yet,” I said. “I want to talk about Kendall now. It’s driving me wild, and I need to get it all off my chest before I explode.”

Greyson stopped in his tracks and turned to face me. “Sure, of course, Cali. Say whatever it is that you need to say.”

“A while ago, I spoke with Rowena about my mate bond with you, and she mentioned something about our bond splintering and creating two threads. Cordelia mentioned something similar, which was why she was obviously so obsessed with having a fake Kendall in the mix.”

“Yes, but I don’t think that’s it—”

“But how do you know, Greyson? I kept on ignoring the possibility that your mate bond could have split, and that one of those threads might extend in Kendall’s direction, but more and more, I’m realizing that maybe the witches are on to something.”

“I get trusting Rowena, but you’re really taking what Cordelia said to heart? Why? She wanted nothing but to terrorize us so that you would leave, and she could keep me as her pet.”

“Maybe, but how could both she and Rowena be wrong? I kept on ignoring it, deciding that since you were *my* mate, there was nothing to worry about. But if I’ve learned anything from this *due destini* stuff and everything with Ava and Xavier, it’s that our bonds are more complicated than we think.”

Greyson nodded. “I can’t disagree with you there. Nothing has ever been straightforward between us. Not since the very beginning. So, I suppose it makes sense that we may encounter some more bumps in the road.”

“Exactly. And our bumps could just be that some people have more than one mate. Nothing is set in stone. Again, I keep thinking about Ava and Xavier—”

“I’m not Xavier. And you’re not Ava. I would *never* hurt you like Xavier did. You’re the only one for me.”

I almost mentioned that the pain Xavier caused me was out of his control, just like it was out of Greyson’s control when he kissed that imitation Kendall today. But before I could say a word, Greyson closed the space between us and pulled me into a kiss.

I moaned into his mouth as he poured all his love into the kiss. It didn’t take long for the kiss to heat up, and all thoughts about Kendall and Cordelia and multi-threaded mate bonds faded into the background.

I wanted so much to ignore everything that had been bothering me and lose myself in Greyson. It was the easy way out, but maybe after everything we’d been through, we deserved something easy.

I matched his passion, pressed my body against his and swirled my tongue deep into his mouth, pulling a low growl from his throat. He spun me toward the bed and ripped my shirt off so violently that it tore down the middle, exposing my breasts.

We collapsed together onto the bed, and I was desperate to get the rest of my clothes off. Greyson lent a hand when he saw me struggling to unbutton my pants, and soon I was naked from head to toe.

Greyson stood at the head of the bed, admiring me. Then he pulled his shirt over his head, wriggled out of his khaki capri pants, and covered my body with his own.

The heat of him seared straight through me, knocking away the chill that had lingered since our plunge into the river Thames.

He pressed a flurry of warm kisses across my face and down my neck. He took his time lapping at each of my nipples with his hot, wet tongue, pausing ever so often to mention how beautiful I was, how much he wanted me.

I reached down between us and gasped when my hand brushed against his erection. I sheathed him in my palm and gave his shaft a hard tug, pulling a gasp from his lips.

“I love when you touch me. It’s like heaven,” he said before leaning forward and capturing my lips with his again.

I continued stroking him while my other hand was busy caressing the taut planes of his chest. It was easy to forget everything else when we were lost in each other like this.

“You’re the only woman for me, don’t you get that, love?” he said.

I wanted to tell him I believed him, but then he moved down my body, and I felt the rush of his breath on my sex before his tongue flicked out to taste me, blotting out anything and everything but a mind melting rush of white-hot pleasure.

**Episode 5580**

**Greyson**

Tasting Cali had been the only thing on my mind from the first moment we started kissing. Not only was it a pleasure for me to drive Cali wild with my lips and tongue, it was partly a selfish move.

I wanted her to forget about Kendall. I wanted to show Cali that her and her pleasure and her happiness were all that mattered to me.

I wanted to make her feel so good that she remembered why she was the only woman for me, and why I would never do anything to hurt our connection.

She was the woman I’d fallen in love with. She was my mate. She was the one I wanted to spend my days protecting, loving, and fighting to be a better man for.

I wanted her to *feel* that.

With that in mind, I flicked my tongue across her clit and spread her legs wide so that I could devour every inch of her.

“Greyson,” she moaned, rising up from the bed when I gently spread her folds apart and bathed her with my tongue. She tasted sweet and salty, her body heady with desire, which only made me harder.

It wasn’t that I thought I could throw Cali off by going down on her, but I was hoping that a nice, satisfying release would remind her of just how good we were together. How much I loved her. How much I couldn’t fucking stand to be without her, even for a second.

Why would I stray when I had everything I wanted right here? My wolf seemed to need a reminder of it too. I was happy to give it to them both.

Slowly, I swirled my tongue around her most sensitive spot, piercing her with it, loving the way she grabbed my hair tightly. Her little gasps and whimpers spurned me onward, and I sank my fingers into her thighs, grabbing her tightly and securing her to me. If it were up to me, I’d stay here like this, edging her for hours.

“Greyson, if you keep that up, I’m going to come,” she whimpered.

“Then come,” I said as I slid a finger inside of her hot, tight, wet pussy.

She arched her back and her thighs clamped together, trapping my head in place. It was right where I wanted to be.

When she began humping my head, I gently pushed her knees apart and then pulled myself up so that my face was level with hers again. While I could go down on her forever, there were other ways to give her exactly what she wanted.

“How do you do that?” she asked, her eyes lazy and her voice so breathy that I had to ask her to repeat herself since I could barely make out what she was saying. “You always know exactly what to do…”

“And I fucking love doing it. That, and I know your body so well that it’s easy to make you feel good.”

“You do,” she said. “Always… A-And Greyson… I need you.”

Fuck if those words didn’t feel good.

“Yeah, love?” I asked, gripping the base of my cock as I hovered over her. I gave it one stroke, groaning as I looked down at her, flushed and panting. “Where do you need me?”

She squirmed, looking at me from under her lashes. “Inside…m-me.”

And then a second later, I drove my cock inside her.

Cali clung to me, her limbs wrapping around my body and holding me still while she adjusted to the sensation of my quick entry. I was happy to take things slow since the joy of being so close to her was almost too much to take. I kissed her, cupping her face in my hands before moving them down to her chest, caressing her breasts. Then she lifted her legs around my hips and I fully sank into her.

For as much pleasure as I brought her, Cali gave it back tenfold. It felt good to be sheathed inside her. Her soft body fit against mine just right, like we were made from the same mold.

When I finally began thrusting, transitioning into a quick, hard rhythm that made the bed and Cali’s body vibrate, I realized I wasn’t going to last very long.

After the stress of the day, coming with Cali was the release I’d been waiting for—longing for.

Cali raked her nails down my back and dragged her teeth along my shoulder before letting out a loud, “Oh my god, I’m coming, Greyson.”

“Me too,” I panted.

All gentleness went out the window as the first hints of my climax took over my body. I rammed into her, overcome by a desire so strong that I felt like I was lifting out of my body altogether.

Cali moaned, loud enough that there was no doubt in my mind that everyone on the floor heard her.

I didn’t care.

It was proof that I belonged to her, and she belonged to me, a sentiment I shared out loud once we were finished and lying in each other’s arms.

“I love you, Cali, and only you. Don’t *ever* doubt that,” I said.

Her silence scared me for a moment before I realized that she’d fallen asleep.

I closed my eyes, too, telling myself that I was going to prove to Cali, no matter what, that I only had eyes for her.

But just before I drifted off to sleep, Kendall’s purple eyes flashed through my mind.

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The next morning, we packed our things after deciding to fly back home as soon as possible.

Xavier and I booked our tickets on the first flight we could make it to the airport to catch.

I was preoccupied with Cali, hoping that she felt better after last night. Even though we’d made love and felt so connected in those heated moments, she still seemed a little distant in the cold light of day.

As we stood waiting for the elevator to go down to the lobby, I turned and asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just tired and wondering if I should text Jay and Lola about an airport pick up.”

The elevator arrived and we headed down to the lobby. We found two chairs near the elevator and posted up with shitty hotel coffees, waiting for my brother and Ava. As I took a sip of my coffee, trying to figure out how to talk to her about her noticeably distant demeanor, I noticed someone familiar across the way.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Cali. “Wait for me here.”

“Greyson, what’s going on?”

“I’ll explain, just wait for me, okay?”

Cali nodded, and I crossed the room.

When Agent Bacon saw me, he nodded, stepping away near some vending machines. I followed him. What the hell was the MI9 agent doing here? Were they still convinced that I’d killed the Alpha at that club? I joined him as he punched a number in on one of the vending machines, a candy bar falling.

“Alpha Greyson,” he said, reaching to pick up the candy bar. “Pleasure.”

“What do you want?” I asked, skipping the pleasantries.

Agent Bacon turned around, opening up the candy like he had all the time in the world. “You’ve got some friends in high places, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

Bacon took a bite, the scent of the nugget filling the small space. “We got a tip from the Mysterious Incidents Bureau in the States. Apparently, you’re their business, not ours. Asked us to call off the werewolf hunt.”

I stared at him. MIB called MI9? Wait… That meant that Kendall called them. She did what I’d asked her to do. It wasn’t exactly shock that I felt, but… She’d listened. She’d done it.

Why hadn’t she said so?

“So, is that what you’re doing?” I asked, crossing my arms. “Stopping the hunt?”

Agent Bacon lifted up a finger as he finished chewing. “Yes, but not for the reason you might think. We found evidence of Alpha Henson’s own brother staged a coup, you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

I nodded, a small amount of relief filling me. The last thing I needed was MI9 to be on my back. This was a good thing. We would be able to leave without anything following me back home to Oregon.

“Let me give you a little advice though,” Agent Bacon said, stepping forward. “Whatever friend you have at MIB? They’re probably not your friend. I’d be careful if I were you. Keep your nose clean.”

Then Agent Bacon moved past me, leaving me in the vending machine area. Was that supposed to be a threat? He was right about one thing though, Kendall wasn’t my friend, not exactly. And I didn’t figure for a moment that she’d called MI9 out of the goodness of her heart, but only time would tell.

Feeling mixed emotions, I headed back out to the hotel lobby. Over where Cali was sitting. When I came back, she gave me a sort of tight-lipped smile.

Cali looked at me. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just that MI9 agent. Apparently they solved the club situation, they won’t be following me anymore.”

The corners of her mouth barely lifted. “Good. That’s such a relief.”

“Love, you don’t seem like yourself…” I said. “Are you still upset with me?”

She sighed and looked me in the eye. “Honestly, I’m not sure.”

I cupped her face. “Hey… I’ll do anything you ask to prove my love to you. You name it and it’s done.”

“I know,” Cali said, reaching up to stroke my cheek.

I leaned in to kiss her.

I put all my emotion into the kiss, all the feelings from the past few days melting into her as she pressed her body against mine. Coaxing her mouth open, I wanted her to know how sorry I was for everything. I cradled her head, loving the feel of her soft hair against my palms.

But as the kiss became more intense, Kendall’s face flashed through my head again, and I pulled away angrily.

*Fuck. Why the hell does that keep happening?? I meant what I said to Cali. She’s the only woman I love. The only woman I want. So* why *does Kendall keep popping up?*

“You do know that I’m not questioning your love for me, right?” Cali said. “That’s not the issue.”

The elevator doors slid open before she could say anything else.

Xavier and Ava appeared in the lobby with their luggage. Xavier gave me a questioning look, but I ignored it.

Ava frowned, taking the two of us in. “Are you two ready?”

“Yup, let’s go,” Cali said quickly.

Then she got up, and we all headed out to the street where we’d hail a cab. My heart clenched in my chest, but I had no choice but to follow Cali.