TORN BETWEEN ALPHAS

Season 44

**Episode 5581**

The ride to the airport was…tense. The car we’d ordered had three rows of seats, and Ava and Xavier had climbed in first, into the back row. Greyson and I sat in the middle row, and the driver sat up front, casting slightly wary glances back at us through the rearview mirror. Not that I could blame him. The air in the car was thick with tension.

I tried not to think about Xavier and Ava behind me, but it was hard, given everything that had happened recently.

And that only added to my increasing anxiety. As nervous as I was about the two sitting behind me, I kept looking out the windows, tensing whenever our car slowed down at red lights or roundabouts, or whenever there was even a hint of traffic. The way things had been going for us, I was just sure something else was going to happen that would stop us all from returning back to the States.

I didn’t know what, but my mind reeled imagining what it could be. Maybe MI9 again—even though Greyson said everything was fine, was it ever?—or maybe one of my mates’ wolves would somehow leap from them and run off into London again. At this point, who the hell knew what could happen?

I felt tense and worried, and I just couldn’t wait until we were all back home, safe and sound. More or less.

Greyson was holding my hand in his, and I liked that, but I couldn’t help but notice he was looking out the window, too. And he flinched when a pigeon flew close by, so I figured he was probably watching for ravens. Or could it be that he was just trying to find an excuse not to talk to me about what remained unresolved between us?

My head ached, and so did my heart. I felt more tired leaving London than I had when I’d arrived, and that was saying something.

But we managed to arrive at the airport terminal without incident, and the taxi driver helped us unload our suitcases, looking glad to bid us goodbye.

Greyson and I were the only ones with luggage—Ava and Xavier had come in such a hurry they hadn’t brought any—though they had picked up a couple of backpacks for some odds and ends. We headed for security.

As we waited in line, I pawed through my carry-on, making sure I didn’t have any liquids over three ounces. When I looked up, I caught sight of Greyson and noticed that he was scanning the security line, looking distinctly distracted.

I bit my lip as I watched him. I’d sensed this earlier, too. He’d been present and attentive while we’d made love, but afterward, I’d sensed that there was something troubling him. Just as he’d sensed that there was something troubling me. I had a feeling we were both right.

My instinct was to talk to him—to bring up my growing concerns about Kendall and everything that went along with that—but I glanced around. We were standing in the middle of the security line at Heathrow airport, surrounded by strangers. I literally couldn’t think of a worse place to have the kind of conversation Greyson and I needed to have. And there was no way I was going to talk about it in front of Xavier—or Ava.

“Go ahead,” Greyson said, putting his hand on the small of my back and giving me a gentle push as the security agent waved me forward.

I shook my head and tried to focus as I pulled out my passport and ticket.

We made it through security without incident—another miracle—and headed for our gate.

Ava seemed to have a low tolerance for boredom, and she and Xavier walked over to a café for coffee and snacks while Greyson and I sat in chairs near our gate. I turned to him, about to start a conversation, but just as I did, a large senior tourist group walked over, taking seats on either side of us.

“Well, young man, did you have a nice visit?” an older lady asked Greyson cheerily, and I closed my mouth and sat back as he answered her politely.

Finally our boarding group was called, and we all boarded the plane.

“I’ll take that,” Greyson said, taking my carry-on bag from my hand and easily lifting it into the overhead compartment.

“Thanks,” I murmured. I glanced into the rows behind us and caught Xavier’s eye.

He and Ava were taking their seats, and I smiled awkwardly when he looked at me, catching me staring at him. I was immediately flooded with the memories of the kiss that brought Xavier’s wolf back.

I quickly took my seat, hoping Greyson didn’t notice I was blushing, and just *dreading* this flight where this whole unresolved part of my life was sitting just a few rows back.

I closed my eyes as the plane took off, feeling the pressure in my ears, but as we gained elevation, I started to think about the flight. Maybe this was it. Maybe I should take advantage of this time and talk to Greyson. We had ten hours to kill, after all. And whatever was at the heart of my uncertainty between us, ten hours was a long time. Surely, we could get it resolved by the time we landed in Portland.

But when I opened my eyes and turned to look at Greyson, he was asleep.

I stared at him for a long moment. I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised. London had been really hard on him, and he’d hardly gotten any sleep the whole time we were there. He’d been so worried about his wolf, and about me. I was tempted to wake him up, but he looked so peaceful with his head resting against the window. Unless he was just *pretending* to be asleep in order to avoid any more conversation about the Kendall topic.

I felt immediately guilty for even thinking that and looked away, down at my hands.

No, this was for the best. He needed to rest. I sighed and settled into my seat.

*Are you okay?* Xavier asked me through the mind link.

His voice surprised me, and—honestly—for a moment I wasn’t even sure how to respond. It was such a loaded question. On the one hand, yeah, things were okay. Everyone had gotten their wolves back, and I was really happy about that.

But on the other hand, between MI9, fighting Cordelia the houseboat witch, being abducted by ravens, being forced to watch Greyson kissing a puppet version of Kendall, and my kiss with Xavier—no, I kind of wasn’t okay. When I had pictured this trip to London as a way of putting some physical distance between Greyson and Xavier, I had known it was going to be hard and that there would be some risks, but this wasn’t remotely what I’d had in mind.

I was tempted to look back at Xavier, but I didn’t have to. I knew he was looking at me.

I wasn’t going to lie to him. *This is between Greyson and me.*

*That isn’t what I meant. I meant you and me.*

I swallowed hard, sighing. *You and me. There is no—*

*Don’t you dare finish that sentence, Cali.*

I twisted my fingers together. *I don’t know what you want me to say.*

*You know me better than anyone.*

My heart fluttered. He was right about that.

*And I know you just as well*, he added.

He was right about that too. When I’d first met Xavier, I’d been terrified of him. I’d also been undeniably attracted to him. A lot had changed since then—and a lot hadn’t. I was no longer afraid of him. And I understood him a lot more. I did know him. He and I had learned so much about each other.

And this time apart—since he’d left the Redwood pack—had been so hard. I’d missed him so much. It was more than just missing his physical presence—though of course I’d missed that. Mostly I’d missed the connection that we’d had. The conversations where all it took was a look between us to convey how much we loved each other.

*Do you really need me to tell you what you already know?* Xavier asked, his voice in my head interrupting my racing thoughts.

I bit my lip. It was as though he could read my mind. Maybe he could.

I hesitated, gripping the arms of my seat. I thought about how easy it would be for me to say it. How effortless it would be to speak the words—*“I love you, Xavier. I never stopped loving you.”*

The words would simply roll off my tongue with ease. I could practically hear myself saying them.

Next to me, Greyson stirred in his seat, shifting positions in his sleep. His movement snapped me back to reality, and I shook my head.

*What are we doing, Xavier?*

**Episode 5582**

**Xavier**

*What are we doing, Xavier?*

I wasn’t sure how to answer Cali, and I looked up at the ceiling of the plane as Ava leaned her head on my shoulder, asleep. I accepted the guilty feeling that washed over me. Having this secret conversation with Cali while Ava slept next to me was only marginally better than actually having it out loud in front of Ava. Or maybe it was worse—*because* it was secret.

I looked up at Cali’s row. I could see the top of her head, and next to her, Greyson’s head. Another wave of guilt.

But what the hell was I supposed to do with how I felt? I couldn’t just tuck these feelings away or hide them from her forever. And how the hell was I supposed to just sit here and pretend to be interested in some stupid movie that was flashing on the screen in front of me?

I rubbed my eyes. This was never going to work. All I could think about was Cali and how much I wanted to get out of my seat, walk up to her row, pull her up, and take her into the galley, push her against the galley wall and just…

I shifted in my seat. Fuck, what was going on in my head? I was completely aroused by the thought of kissing her, of the feel of her lips and the taste of her tongue. Every time I closed my eyes, I thought of my hands on her bare skin and of pushing her into the tiny airplane bathroom and fucking her—

*WHAT?!*

Instantly, I sat up straight, as if Cali had just shouted out loud.

Too late, I realized that I’d accidentally mind linked all those filthy thoughts to Cali, instead of just thinking them in my own head.

*Shit.*

Ava moved in her sleep, her hand dropping onto my lap.

*Fuck*.

I had to shift my position again, wondering what the hell I was going to do if Ava woke up and asked me why I was completely hard in the middle of *Eat, Pray, Love.*

*Shit, Cali, I’m really sorry. That wasn’t—I didn’t mean to say those things to you. I was just…thinking…*

She didn’t respond, and I started to worry. It wasn’t like Cali had never heard me talking like that before, but…things between us were strained. And strange. I worried I might have gone too far, and I really hoped I hadn’t just made things exponentially worse between us.

Finally, she spoke. *You were right, Xavier.*

My heart thudded. *What do you mean?*

*I mean that nothing’s changed. Good night.*

Her voice sounded firm, and there was something final about it that told me the conversation was over—for now. So I let it go.

I turned off the damn movie and tried to get comfortable. It was a long-ass flight, and I closed my eyes, thinking I could try to burn up some of the flight time sleeping. I was exhausted, but no matter what position I tried to get into, I couldn’t get comfortable.

Even after my body wound down from my little fantasy, my mind wouldn’t shut down. All I could think about was the conversation with Cali. I kept pulling it apart, trying to find the meaning in it. *Nothing’s changed*. She’d said nothing’s changed.

And while it had sounded final, it hadn’t been angry. Even when she’d overheard my fantasy, she’d been surprised, but not pissed. Which was…kind of promising? Maybe she’d even sounded a little hopeful. Maybe a little flirty?

It was hard to remember now, as I went over and over it in my brain. All I knew was that it kept sending a chain reaction from my brain, through my body, into my bloodstream, and straight to my cock.

And then to my wolf, who was so riled up that I was starting to get worried that I was going to lose control and actually shift on an airplane, five miles over the Atlantic. And I could only imagine what kind of disaster that would be. Like a freaking horror movie.

Annoyed, I opened my eyes and turned my screen back on. I found an actual horror movie and tried watching that, trying to distract myself from my thoughts—and my body.

My eyes were growing heavy, and Ava leaned into me. There was a thin blanket in the seat back pocket, and I shook it out and threw it around her. The end of it fell over me, and I leaned back, trying to relax.

Hours passed. The movie ended, and I turned off my TV again.

My thoughts spun, and Ava stirred beside me. Her hand shifted and moved. Coiled like a spring, my cock sprang to attention in a heartbeat, and she wrapped her hand around it.

“Is that for me?” she purred sleepily into my ear.

“Um…” I started, not sure what to say.

But Ava was already kissing my ear. She bit down on my ear lobe as she unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans, grabbing hold of my cock.

I stifled a groan.

She unclasped her seat belt and moved, straddling me and grinding into me.

“What are you doing?” I breathed. “We’re on a plane. In *economy*. This is dangerous.”

“*I know*,” she whispered back, then covered my mouth with hers, plunging her tongue into me. She guided my shaft into her sex, moaning into my mouth as she lowered herself onto me.

I knew this was wrong, and it was dangerous, but I couldn’t stop her, and I couldn’t stop myself. Or my wolf, who was going batshit crazy.

I grabbed her by the hips and thrust into her, feeling her dark hair curtain around me, and just as I exploded, the plane hit the tarmac with a jolt.

I opened my eyes, waking from my dream, and found Ava sitting next to me, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

“Welcome to the City of Roses,” the pilot announced over the intercom.

I was glad for the time it took the plane to find the gate and all the bullshit with the tunnel—it gave my body time to unwind from my intense dream—and by the time we walked into the airport and collected our stuff, I was feeling almost normal again.

The air was cold and wet outside the airport, and Ava and I waited for Marissa to show up to pick us up.

Ava kept her eyes on the passing cars, but I kept an eye on Cali, who was standing several feet away with Greyson.

Lola pulled up in Greyson’s car. “There you are!” she screeched, jumping out the car and throwing her arms around Cali.

“God, Lola is so fucking annoying,” Ava muttered, shaking her head.

I watched the scene a little wistfully, remembering what it was like to be with the Redwoods—annoying but lovable Lola, my best friend Jay…and Cali.

Sometimes, I really did miss it. But the Samara pack was full of good people, good wolves. Still. I missed my friends.

I missed Cali.

My wolf was doing his best to push me toward Cali, but a horn blast startled me from that thought, and I looked around.

Marissa had pulled up, and she got out of the car. “Hey, welcome back,” she said, giving Ava a warm hug.

“Thanks for coming,” Ava said, throwing her backpack into the trunk. “Was the traffic okay?”

“Not bad,” Marissa said with a shrug. “Nice to see you, Xavier.”

“Yeah, you too. Thanks for coming, Marissa,” I said, putting my bag in the trunk and closing it up.

But as Marissa and Ava got back into the car, I looked over at Cali. She glanced back at me as she got into Greyson’s car, but then she shut the door, and Lola drove off.

I slid into the backseat and pulled the door shut.

“How’s everything?” Ava asked Marissa as soon as she got into the car.

“Fine,” Marissa said, pulling away from the curb. “Same as I told you the last time you called.” She rolled her eyes. “Same shit with Knox.”

“Like what?”

“Just the same stuff. Him thinking he doesn’t have to go on patrol when he’s scheduled, or that he can tell everyone else what to do. Just Knox being Knox. He just needs you two to put him in his place,” Marissa said, merging into traffic.

Ava sighed. “Yeah, I think we’re going to have some pack maintenance to do. I want to look over the patrol schedules and make sure we’re not overdoing it given our current situation. We need to do a basic risk assessment…”

They kept talking, but I stopped paying attention. All I could think about was Cali. My wolf wanted her back, and so did I. I could feel it in my heart. I could dream about Cali—hell, I could even pleasure myself thinking about her.

That kiss had made me feel whole again. But I knew that—no matter what—it wouldn’t be enough.

**Episode 5583**

**Greyson**

“Oh! We need to get gas!” Lola announced as soon as we’d left the airport. She pulled the car into a gas station so fast the tires squealed.

“I’ll take care of it,” I said, getting out of the car. “And I’ll drive home.”

“That’s okay, I don’t mind—”

“I insist,” I said firmly.

Lola rolled her eyes but shrugged. “Fine,” she said, climbing out of the driver’s seat and into the back. “You might as well get into the front, Cali,” she said.

When I had pumped the gas and we’d finished musical car-seats, I slid into the driver’s seat.

*Thank you*, Cali mouthed to me.

I nodded back, understanding. We both knew that Lola’s driving could be a little…unpredictable. But I didn’t mind. I liked driving, and I was happy to see the cars on the right side of the road again. Anyway, it kept my mind focused on the road, instead of what had happened in London, which was all I was thinking about. As well as the look I’d caught between Xavier and Cali as we left the airport.

It wasn’t that I was jealous—though jealousy might be better than the increasing feeling of dread that was creeping in.

“Greyson?”

I looked over at Cali, who had placed her hand on my arm. “What?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Lola just asked you to show her.”

I frowned at her. I had no idea what she was talking about.

Lola leaned up from the backseat, her face between the front seats. “I wanna see your wolf, Greyson.”

I smiled. “Ah, that.”

“Yeah, *that*. You went all the way to London to get it back. So let’s see it!” she demanded.

I took one hand from the steering wheel and held it up. There was the snap of bone, and I partially shifted, so just my hand became a wolf paw.

Lola laughed and clapped her hands together. “That’s more like it! We can’t be having our Alpha running around without his wolf. Or with someone else’s wolf. That was crazy.”  
 I sighed as I shifted my hand back and grabbed the wheel again. There it was—another reminder of Xavier. But I could feel Lola watching me, so I forced a smile, but inside I was still feeling that dread spreading through me like an oil spill.

London hadn’t turned out the way I’d expected. When I’d bought those tickets, I’d intended for it to be a romantic getaway for Cali and me. Instead, it seemed to have reawakened something between Cali and Xavier. Which was *not* what I’d expected—or wanted. And it had brought up more questions for me about Kendall.

“So tell me about the rest of the trip. Did you get to any museums?” Lola asked.

Cali turned in her seat and gave Lola a quick rundown of the trip. I noticed that she skipped over a lot of the more traumatic parts, and mainly talked about the hotel and the food and the cute shops we’d stopped in.

When I pulled into the long driveway in front of the Redwood pack house, Ravi was the first wolf I saw. He was in his wolf form and just coming out of the woods when I stopped the car in front of the house.

He shifted to his human form and raised a hand in greeting. “Welcome back!” he called. Then he ran up the porch steps and opened the door. “They’re back!”

Jay must have been in the living room, because he was the first one out of the house. Sage came next, then Violet. Everyone poured out, waving and hugging and welcoming us back.

Torin even carried a plate of cookies. “Who needs one?” he asked, offering the cookies around.

Lola took two, but Cali shook her head.

I took one—I hadn’t eaten on the plane, and I was starving.

“Let’s go inside,” Lola said, shoving a cookie into her mouth. “It’s freezing out here.”

Jay and Lilac grabbed our suitcases from the trunk, and the whole pack headed inside, with Cali and me bringing up the rear. But as we reached the porch, Cali laid a hand on my arm, stopping me before we went into the house.

I looked over at her, and she threw her arms around me.

“I love you, Greyson,” she said, hugging me tight.

I smiled as I slipped my arms around her, hugging her back. “I know,” I said quietly.

She reached up on tiptoe but still had to grab onto my jacket to pull me down to kiss me. “I just thought you needed to hear that.”

And maybe she was right—maybe I did need to hear that. I picked her up, lifting her off her feet, overwhelmed with the feeling of love for her. “I love you too, Cali,” I said, murmuring into her hair.

“Are you guys coming in or not?” Lola asked, sticking her head out the door.

I groaned but set Cali back on her feet, and we walked inside. The kitchen was packed full of pack members, and I pushed a hand through my hair.

“I’m going to head upstairs and unpack,” I said to Cali.

She nodded, and I headed upstairs.

I shut the door to my room. Jay had brought my suitcase up, so I unzipped it and started tossing all the dirty clothes into the hamper. And as I unpacked, my mind started to wander. I couldn’t help thinking about everything that had happened on the boat after what Cali had said to me about Kendall. Why had I been so reluctant to kill the Kendall puppet? It had just been a freaking *puppet*.

So why had I been so weird about the idea of killing it?

I picked up my toiletry bag, and as I tossed it into the bathroom, I stopped and stared at myself in the mirror. *It’s just because she’s a friend*. Kendall was a friend, and she had helped me out a few times when I had really needed it. I would have felt the same weirdness if it had been a Rishika doll, or a Jay doll.

*It’s just weird to try to kill something that looks like a friend*, I told myself.

My suitcase empty, I stashed it in my closet and headed downstairs. I heard voices in the living room and walked in to find Cali with Lola, Jay, and Torin. Torin had his plate of cookies, and all four of them were laughing.

“Hey, Greyson,” Jay called, waving me in. “Cali was just telling us about your trip.”

I wasn’t sure what part of the trip was so funny, but I didn’t join them. “I’m going to go see my mom and thank Big Mac for her help. I’ll see you a little later, Cali.”

She nodded, and I headed outside.

The cold winter air felt good. I stripped down, leaving my clothes on the porch, and leapt. I had shifted before I hit the ground, and ran into the woods, straight to my mom and Big Mac’s house.

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“Greyson!” my mom cried out, overjoyed to see me as I walked into the house. “Your wolf is back! I saw you shifting in the trees.”

“Yeah, and I’ve got Big Mac to thank for that,” I said.

Big Mac handed me a robe. “Glad the anti-blipping mixture worked and you could get it back,” she muttered, looking grumpy as usual.

“Come in, come in,” Sabine said, pulling me into the warm kitchen. “I’ll make some white chocolate mochas. I’ll make some extra to bring back to Cali and Lola.”

“That’s great. I’m sure they’ll love that,” I said, dropping into a stool at the kitchen counter.

She paused as she reached for the coffee beans. “What’s bothering you, Greyson?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said, shrugging. That was a lie, obviously, but how was I supposed to explain something to my mother that I couldn’t even define for myself?

She put the coffee grinder down and turned to look right at me. “Greyson, if you can’t tell me what’s going on, who can you tell?”

*Cali.* That was the answer. Cali was who I would normally take my problems to. But not this time.

I looked up at my mom. She was my mother, and she was standing there, willing to listen. I knew she wanted me to open up…so I figured I would try.

“It’s about what happened in England,” I started slowly.

And I told her about Cali, and what happened between her and Xavier when he got his wolf back, and how uneasy it had made me. How I’d thought that once we reestablished the balance with our wolves, things would just automatically go back to normal—the way things had been before. But now that we did have our wolves back, things hadn’t gone back at all—I wasn’t sure why I’d ever thought that.

“It just feels like a mess,” I said, rubbing my head, which had started to ache.

Sabine had been quietly preparing the white chocolate mochas while I spoke, and now she poured some into a mug.

She pushed it across the counter to me. “What do you think is going to happen?”

I wrapped my hands around the mug, feeling the heat of the liquid seeping into my palms. “I think Cali’s coming back to Xavier. And I think it’s my fault.”

**Episode 5584**

I watched Greyson head out the door, then leaned back in the chair next to the fire.

“Okay, tell me everything that happened,” Lola said, stretching out on the rug like a cat. “And I’m not talking about the food and your hotel room. Tell me about what actually happened, from the moment the plane left Portland to the moment it landed on the tarmac again.”

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. Jay had gone out on patrol, Torin and wandered back to the kitchen—it was just Lola and me in front of the fire, so I just started talking.

“It was pretty weird right from the start,” I admitted. “Greyson was stressed, but I was trying to have a good time. It was my first time in London, you know.”

“Sure.” Lola nodded.

“But things got weird fast.” I told her about being tailed by MI9, and the weird supernatural tavern where Greyson had to fight his way out. The incredible wolf hunt, and how Xavier and Ava had shown up. The kiss with Xaiver to regain his wolf, which made Lola gasp.

I told her about the puppet show and the ravens and the incredibly strange Cordelia.

“We had to call Big Mac for help—”

“I bet she loved that,” Lola noted. “I called the other day to ask Mrs. Smith about the mocha recipe—Torin’s versions are great but they just don’t hit you know? Sorry, anyway, you were saying.”

I laughed. “And then we ended up in the puppet show ourselves,” I went on.

I intentionally left out the part about Kendall. Everything about Kendall, actually. Lola was an incredibly loyal friend, and I knew she would fly off the handle if she knew anything about any of Kendall’s involvement with anything that had happened in London. I’d seen it happen. It would happen even if that involvement didn’t extend beyond the extremely fucked-up marionette controlled by Cordelia.

I knew that had nothing to do with the actual Kendall, but I also knew it could spark something in Lola and send her down the Kendall rabbit hole again, digging up dirt on that mystery woman. And Greyson had been so adamant about Lola leaving her alone…

Which made me wonder *why* he was so adamant about that.

“I’ll bet Ava was pissed,” Lola said, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked over. “What? About the kiss?”

Lola raised her brows. “Yeah, *duh*.” She shook her head with a satisfied smirk. “I really wish I could have been there to see the devastated look on her face.”

I shook my head. “She left but…she knew what happened. But like I need to give Ava any more fuel to hate me. Besides, I thought you were pissed at Xavier for what he did during the whole Adéluce thing.”

“Oh, I am, but I hate Ava more,” Lola said lightly. “Anyway, how *was* the kiss with Xavier?”

The memories flooded back into my head in an instant. I nearly gasped at the strength of them. I could remember *everything* about the kiss, and my face flushed. I turned toward the fire, hoping Lola wouldn’t notice. “It worked,” I said, trying to sound casual. “It brought Xavier’s wolf back.”

But Lola’s sharp eyes narrowed. “That’s not what I meant when I asked how the kiss was, Caliana, and you know it.”

“Well…it—it was nice,” I stammered, my cheeks growing even hotter.

“*Nice?*” Lola repeated, her brows rising. “You kissed your mate after everything that’s happened between you, and you tell me that it was *nice*?”

“So?” I asked defensively.

She shook her head. “I don’t buy it. Nothing about Xavier is nice. I’ll tell you what’s nice—a nice pair of slippers. A nice cup of coffee in the morning. The nice cashier at the gas station who helped me find the cheese that one time. All of those things are nice, and none of them bear any resemblance to Xavier.”

I had to admit she had a point. “Okay, it was mind-blowing,” I said in a low voice.

“Yeah, that’s more like it,” Lola said with a satisfied nod. Then she frowned again. “But what about Greyson? Does he know what happened?”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah…he was there. He saw the whole thing.”

“He *saw* you kissing Xavier?” Lola gasped.

I nodded. “Yeah. We talked about it—sort of. We need to talk about it more. I’m planning on really sitting down and talking to him about it, now that we’re back. Anyway,” I said, and cleared my throat. I was desperate to change the subject. “How are your classes going? Midterms are coming up, right?”

Lola smirked at me. It was clear she knew what I was doing. “Yeah, they are. Oh! I forgot. The crew team has been asking about you. Gael stopped by.”

“Oh god,” I groaned, slumping in my chair. “I really screwed things up with them.” I shook my head. “And I’m sure I’m going to fail my classes.”

“No you’re not, I took care of all that.”

I looked quickly at her. “What does that mean? How did you take care of that? What did you do?’

She grinned at me. “Better you don’t know, Cali. But you won’t be failing. I fixed your grades, but I can’t fix the crew team. That’s on you, girl.”

It was slightly also on her, but I didn’t bring that up. Instead, I pulled out my phone and looked at the time. It was early afternoon. I might still be able to catch the team if I hurried over to campus. I was pretty tired from jet lag, but I could probably make it through the day if I pushed through.

I got up and headed for the door. I pulled my jacket on and grabbed my keys. “I’m just going to head to campus real quick. I’ll be back soon,” I called to Lola.

“Tell the guys I said hi,” Lola said, stretching out in front of the fire.

I jumped in my car and sped over to campus. I’d been so wrapped up with everything that was happening in London that I hadn’t even let myself think about school or what was happening with the crew team. I was almost glad Lola hadn’t told me what she had done with my grades—she was right, it *was* better that I didn’t know—but I was kicking myself for not checking in with the team.

I pulled into a spot in the student lot and raced toward the boathouse.

I had almost reached it when I nearly ran into a familiar face. “Codsworth!” I gasped,

“Hey! Cali!” he said, looking excited to see me. He wrapped me in a bear hug. “Jolly good to see you, old girl!” he said in a bad British accent.

“Yeah, you too,” I laughed. “I’m sorry I went AWOL for a while there. I had to go out of town at the last minute.”

“Oh hey, I get it. Life, right?” he said with a shrug. But then his smile faded. “Listen, I totally get it, but I’m not so sure Coach is going to be so understanding.” He glanced over his shoulder at the locker room. “He’ll be in his office now, though, if you wanted to stop in to talk to him.”

Shit. I hadn’t really thought about talking to Coach. I was thinking I’d stop into the boathouse to talk to the guys, but I probably should check in with Coach. He’d probably been wondering where the hell I was too.

“I’ll see you, Cali,” Codsworth called. “And good luck!”

That didn’t fill me with optimism, and I walked slowly toward the locker room, and Coach’s office. Each step felt like I was moving through wet cement. I was just dreading the reception I was going to get when I got there.

But when I knocked softly and heard him bark, “Come in,” I was surprised to see him smile when he saw me.

“Caliana Hart, as I live and breathe,” he said, looking up from his desk. “Good to see you.”

“Thanks,” I said, frankly relieved to see him smiling. “It’s nice to be back. I’m sorry I was away, I just had to—”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses,” he interrupted, his smile dropping from his face. “This isn’t tennis, girl. Crew is a team sport. You are part of that team, and there’s no ‘I’ in team. And there’s no ‘C’ either,” he said with a stern look.

I nodded, feeling about two inches tall. “Yeah, I know. I’m really sorry. I know I let you down, but I’m back, and I’m really hoping to make it up to you and the whole team.”

Coach gave me a long look. “I’m going to level with you—I’ve had my doubts about you, but you’ve turned into the best coxswain this team has had in a long time, and the guys really like you. So I’m willing to give you one last chance. But if you screw this one up, that’s it. You’re off the team for good. You got it?”

I nodded quickly. “I got it. And thank you.”

“Okay, get out of here,” he said, waving me out the door.

I left before he could change his mind, and as I headed back to my car, I couldn’t help but smile. Despite everything, Coach still liked me.

I was feeling better and better until I happened to pass by the administration building. My smile faded as I looked up at the imposing structure.

Should I go in? Should I talk to Kendall?

**Episode 5585**

**Artemis**

I stared up at the cottage. Marius and Rishika stood next to me, also staring.

I bit my lip as I looked at the small home. I couldn’t help but hope that this journey—a journey that was going to cost me a yet-to-be-named favor for Kastian—was going to bear fruit. But the look of this cottage didn’t exactly fill me with hope. It looked…unpromising. It was ancient and worn and not exactly hospitable.

“Do you want me to go in with you?” Rishika asked, stepping text to me.

I looked over at her, distracted for a moment from the task at hand. I still couldn’t quite believe that Rishika was here with me—even though she still didn’t exactly remember our past together.

“I could go too, if you want some backup,” Marius offered.

I glanced over at him. Having him with me made this trip…easier. Behind them, Adair and Tabitha looked on. All of them had come to help me and it warmed my heart in a way that still surprised me. I couldn’t have begun to imagine any of this back when I had lived in the Fae world, alone, living day to day as a bounty hunter. I’d been on my own then, without family or friends. I would never have been able to picture a support system like this, yet here I was.

But I shook my head. “Thank you, but I think I need to do this alone. At least at first, I need to talk to Erimentha by myself.”

“Are you sure?” Marius asked, casting the cottage a wary look.

“No,” I admitted, “but I’m worried that she’ll be scared off if we all descend on her at once.” That was true, but it was more than protecting the Dark Fae woman from this group. Though all of them had come with me to this house, the search for my father was really my own, and though I valued their help, it was my journey to pursue.

“If you’re sure,” Rishika said nervously.

“I’m sure,” I promised.

“We’ll be here if there’s any trouble,” Adair said.

“I know, thank you,” I said, then turned and started toward the cottage. I went through the creaking gate, then along the uneven stones of the rock path. The front door hung at an odd angle, and it shuddered when I lifted my hand and knocked.

For a moment there was nothing but silence, and I could hear my heart pounding in my ears.

Then, from inside the house, I heard the shuffling of footsteps. They were slow and light. Even though the sound was slight, I could hear that they were cautious.

The door creaked open to reveal a figure with a wizened, yet beautifully smiling face. As the woman’s eyes took me in, her smile faltered a little, and a look of uncertainty crossed her face.

“You’re—you’re new here.”

It took me a moment to realize this was not a question. “Yes.”

The woman nodded once and stepped aside to allow me inside. “How many?”

I stepped inside but hesitated on the doorstep, hit by the strong smell of spices, herbs, and wood smoke. “How many?” I repeated.

The woman reached for a woven basket from a nearby table. It was filled with small glass vials that clinked as she held it toward me. “How many bottles of tonic for you?”

“Oh.” I shook my head. “I’m sorry, I’m not here to buy tonic.”

The woman frowned, confused. “The people you came with, do they need tonic?”

I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

“Then why are you here?” the woman asked reasonably.

I gathered my courage. “Are you Erimentha?”

The woman eyed me warily. “And who is asking such a question?”

I paused and did some quick calculations in my head. I needed to decide how much I wanted to reveal to this woman—and how much she might already know. She wanted to know my name, but that didn’t mean she really didn’t know it.

I decided to tell her the truth, to see if I could discern any reaction. After all, most Fae believed Kadmos’s daughter to have died at birth.

“I am Artemis,” I said, watching her carefully.

Erimentha didn’t react in any noticeable way to this information, which I took as a good sign.

“It isn’t easy to reach my home,” she said, smiling again. “If it is not my tonics you are after, why have you traveled all this way, Artemis?”

I swallowed hard. “I was told you might know something about my father.”

Erimentha waited for a moment, but when I didn’t go on, she laughed. “I have many unique abilities, dear, but mind reading is not among them. Who is your father?”

This was it. This was the moment. I had to decide if I was going to hold back, or just lay my cards out on the table. I looked at the woman standing in front of me. She had a kindly face. Wrinkled and wise with grey hair pulled back into a braid that fell down her back. The hands holding her basket of tonics were sure and steady, and now that I’d had a moment to grow used to it, I liked the earthy, spicy smell of her home.

So I took a deep breath and took a chance, hoping this woman could help me. “My father is Kadmos.”

Erimentha’s eyes widened for just a moment, and then it was as though a window shut within them, closing tightly. Her lips tightened, and the kindness went out of her face. She dropped the basket of tonics back onto the table where they clinked together violently, and she grabbed my arm with surprising strength.

“Get out of here,” she said stiffly, shoving me toward the door.

The old woman’s strength surprised me, and I took a stumbling step. But while she was strong, I was stronger, and I planted my feet.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said, ripping my arm from her grasp. I turned to look at her. “And I’ve come a long way to speak to you. If you know anything about my father, I’m asking you to please help me.”

Erimentha scowled at me. “I can tell you only what I know, girl—he’s dead. He’s been dead for about as many years as you have lived. But you are *not* his daughter. His daughter died.”

I gritted my teeth. This was going to be harder than I thought. “As you can plainly see, that was a lie. I am standing right in front of you.”

The woman looked me over, half-resentfully. “You do have his eyes,” she muttered to herself. “But that doesn’t prove anything. A capable glamour Fae could do that.”

This encouraged me, and I pushed a little harder. “I came here because I was told that you could help me.” This wasn’t strictly true, but I really wanted her to think it was.

It didn’t work.

Erimentha’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know who might have given you that impression, but whoever told you so was lying. *Leave*, girl.”

She didn’t bother grabbing me again, but she reached around me and opened the door.

I took a step toward the door but turned to look at her again. I had come this far, and I was *not* going to give up.

Neither—apparently—was she. “I don’t have what you seek, girl.”

“I am seeking the truth,” I implored. “Nothing more. The Order of the Winding Thorn wanted my father gone twenty-three years ago. That’s the truth. The same group tried to assassinate me just a day ago. That’s the truth too.”

This seemed to come as a shock to Erimentha, and she paused, surprised peeking through her anger.

This was an opening, and I took it.

“If you know anything about this, please, just tell me. Can you tell me why they kidnapped me all those years ago? Why would Kadmos have been said to be seen with you? Did you? Where is he?”

Her mouth worked. “I’ve never been with Kadmos. I don’t know who is telling those lies.”

I didn’t know whether she was lying. I guessed she was, but I didn’t want to press. I didn’t want to risk pissing her off. “Then what can you offer me?”

“I have an…ability.”  
 “What kind of ability?” I pressed when she didn’t go on.

“The ability to show memories of your bloodline,” she admitted. “But what makes you think he wants to see you? If Kadmos is alive, all these years have passed, and he’s never sought you out. Have you thought about that? Do you think that’s an accident?”

She was only asking the question that I myself had wondered about thousands of times before, but I shook my head stubbornly. I refused to believe that Kadmos had ignored me by choice. “There must be a reason. Please, if you can show me—show me.”

“*No*.”

I turned to see Adair behind me. He had come to the door while I was speaking to Erimentha and had overheard our conversation.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head. “What you are asking could obliterate your mind. Isn’t that true?” he asked Erimentha.

She nodded. “It is possible.”

I turned to the Dark Fae. “That’s a chance I’m willing to take.”

Erimentha made a frustrated noise. “Fine.”

She took my hands in hers, and as she did, the world around me began to spin like a top. The room darkened, slowly, then all at once. Suddenly I was falling down, down, down, into an endless black hole.

**Episode 5586**

**Orla**

“Mistress Orla, why are you so nervous?” Taleena asked me as she pushed a pin into my hair.

I looked up at her reflection in the mirror. Taleena was the youngest of my mother’s staff and the closest to my age, so she was the only one who would dare speak to me so casually. Almost like a friend.

“I’m sorry,” I said sincerely. I looked at the other gathered maids apologetically. I knew I was driving them into a frenzy, running them ragged as I changed my dress and my hair again and again. “But I can’t help it.”

“Kadmos is the most handsome man in all the Fae world,” Taleena noted, raising her eyebrows at me.

My face flushed. “He does appear to be—he has a very pleasing face. And I need to make a good impression.”

Taleena seemed surprised. “Do you? But you and Kadmos have met before, have you not?” she asked.

“Well, yes,” I admitted.

She smiled. “So if he has his first impression, then it must be a good one, because he is coming to see you again.”

I glanced behind me as the rest of the girls bustled around, preparing my cloak and my jewels. I knew they were listening closely, but I tried to ignore them. Taleena was the closest I had to a friend, and I wanted someone to talk to about this new and exciting development.

“That was different,” I told her. “That was before our marriage was arranged. And even then, we only saw each other across a room. We didn’t even exchange a word.”

We hadn’t said a word to each other, but I had never forgotten the way Kadmos had looked at me as he’d stared at me across that room—hungry, like a wild beast. I’d been terrified…and excited. His dark eyes had looked so powerful and so alluring. And there were all those stories about the Dark Fae, things that they did.

Was that *really* the man I was supposed to marry?

I shuddered, partly with fear, partly with some other kind of strange thrill I couldn’t quite name.

“Orla!” my mother called out as she and my father burst into the room.

I got to my feet as the rest of the maids all dropped into a bow at the sight of them. My mother ignored me and gave me a critical look.

“Is that the best dress for you?” she wondered.

“Hera, come now,” my father chided. “Our daughter is more radiant than the sun. The all-powerful Kadmos won’t know what hit him.” He gave me a wink, and my face flushed.

But my mother looked less convinced. “I’m not interested in taking any chances. I hope you both realize what this marriage represents, and what is truly at stake here, Innes. The union of Orla and Kadmos will bring much-needed peace between the Dark and Light Fae, and a final end to this never-ending war.”

“Yes, Mother,” I said, nodding, though her speech only added the knot of anxiety that had started to grow in the pit of my stomach. It had begun at that first meeting, and only grown. And now the formal meeting between the Light Fae and the Dark Fae was only a few hours away.

My mother frowned at me. “What’s wrong, Orla?”

“Nothing,” I said hastily.

She shook her head. “Before you start to complain about arranged marriages or telling me that you want some kind of a love match, please remember how lucky you are to be in such a pivotal position.”

“No—it’s not that,” I said, hesitating slightly. That wasn’t what was most concerning me at the moment, though I was secretly frustrated that my concerns about the arranged nature of the marriage had been so easily dismissed, and my desire for love was such an afterthought for my mother.

She sighed. “Then what is it? It’s clearly something.”

I shifted uncomfortably between my feet. “I’ve…*heard* things about Kadmos.”

My mother waited. She arched her eyebrow impatiently when I didn’t go on. “What things?”

I glanced at Taleena, who shook her head slightly, warning me to not go on, but I ignored this and pressed ahead. “They say that Kadmos has powerful, forbidden magic.”

My mother glanced at my father, and I could have sworn I saw a flash of concern in her eyes. But she waved an airy hand. “If that’s true, then it is far better to have him as your husband, is it not, than your enemy?”

I gaped at my mother. That was *not* the response I’d been looking for to my concerns, but that was apparently all I was getting.

My mother turned to Taleena. “Her hair is a mess, and she looks as pale as a sheet of linen. Have her ready by the time Kadmos arrives. We don’t want to keep our guests waiting.”

“Of course, Lady Hera.”

And without another word, my mother swept out of the room.

My father looked a little sheepish. He hugged me and gave me a glancing kiss on the cheek. “Forgive your mother, Orla. We are all nervous.”

He followed her out, and I returned to my seat before the mirror so that Taleena could fix the mess of my hair and carefully paint my face so I looked less ghostly. It wasn’t the work of but a moment, and she was finished. The rest of the ladies helped me complete my ensemble with a long cape and the jewelry my mother had picked out, then—finished with their task—everyone filed out of my chambers.

Taleena was the last to go. She looked hesitant, and I wished more than anything in that moment she was my friend, and not simply another maid, and that I could ask her to stay. I didn’t want to be left alone. I needed a friend.

But that wasn’t possible. She looked at me for a long moment, offering an encouraging smile. Finally, she leaned in and gave me a swift kiss on the cheek. “Good luck to you, Mistress,” she said quickly, then hurried out.

I dropped into a chair near my window to wait for Kadmos’s arrival.

The window looked down onto the blossoming gardens below, and as I looked at the bright yellow yew and the blossoming jasmine, I felt my heartbeat slow to a normal pace again. Even if this marriage to Kadmos didn’t bring me the love that I yearned for, I would always have my plants. They always brought me such joy, and I knew I could count on them.

I didn’t know how long I had waited before the door to my chambers opened and Taleena hurried in.

“Kadmos is here,” she squealed, giddy with excitement. Her face was flushed, and she danced on her toes as she stood before me.

“What is it?” I asked nervously. Something seemed strange.

Taleena’s eye darted nervously away from mine. “The Dark Fae is even *more* handsome than I thought he would be.”

I got to my feet and took a deep breath. I held my chin high as I followed as Taleena led me out of my chambers and into the passageway. As strange as it seemed, I was going into the grand room to meet my future *husband*.

My heart thudded in my chest as I walked into the giant room. The ceilings were vaulted, and my steps echoed against the stone floors.

A man stood in the room, his back to me, facing into one of the massive hearths. A huge fire blazed, and his figure was silhouetted against the flames. I was startled by his presence—I hadn’t remembered him so tall, but he was massive, with broad shoulders and dark hair. His ashy purple skin swirled with muscles, and I could tell even from here that he was a powerful warrior.

Perhaps he heard my footsteps, perhaps he merely sensed my presence, because he turned around suddenly, and his dark eyes locked onto mine.

The angry look I had noticed the first time we’d met was present, but this time it felt even more intense. There was a part of me that wanted to turn tail and run away—and a part of me that didn’t. A score of butterflies took wing in my belly as the man strode purposefully toward me, closing the distance with his long, graceful strides.

When he reached me, he bowed, his eyes never leaving mine. He took my hand and brushed a kiss across my knuckles. This light contact seemed to trigger the launch of another score of butterflies, and I wondered that such an insignificant touch could electrify me.

A doorman stepped to his side and cleared his throat. “May I introduce the heir to the—”

Kadmos shot the man a look that silenced him at once. The man paled and stepped back, and Kadmos turned to me once more.

When he spoke, his voice was deep and confident, like dark water flowing over stones. “It is good to meet you at last, Orla Wrenthorn.”

**Episode 5587**

**Greyson**

My mom looked at me, shocked. “Greyson! Why would you think that you’re responsible for something—for anything—that might be happening between Cali and Xavier? If there is something happening, isn’t that just a part of the *due destini*?”

I rubbed my hand across my forehead. “I don’t know.”

Sabine reached her hand across the counter and laid it on my arm. “Well, I know, and I can tell you that I’ve seen the way Cali is with you, son. She loves you, just like you love her.”

“I know that,” I said. “I would never doubt Cali’s love. But I just thought…” I shook my head. “I guess I foolishly hoped that Xavier would be happy enough with Ava.” I took a drink of the mocha and found the sweetness had turned bitter in my mouth.

My mother’s hand tightened on my arm. “But what about this makes you think that this is your fault?”

I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should say. But this was my mother. If I couldn’t speak honestly with her, who could I speak to?

“Kendall,” I said simply.

Sabine crinkled her brow. “Kendall? The woman who works at the college? Did—did something happen between you two?”

I swallowed another gulp of the mocha as I replayed the kiss we’d shared at the festival. Not just a kiss—a drug-fueled make-out. And then there was the pull I felt toward her, and the puppet…

“Greyson?” my mother said, her voice snapping me from my thoughts.

“There was a kiss,” I admitted. “There were drugs involved, which neither of us took intentionally.”

“Well, I’m sure the drugs probably had a lot to do with something like that,” Sabine said.

“But do you think it could be related to the stress of the *due destini*?” I asked. “Or maybe even just my own fears, pushing me toward Kendall as a way to avoid being hurt?”

My mother looked worried. “Hurt by what?”

I looked down into the swirling depths of the cup. “All I have is Cali.”

She moved her hand down to my hand and squeezed it. “Oh, sweetheart, I wish I had an answer for you, or something to say to you that would make everything you’re feeling all go away. I hate to see you so upset like this.”

*She* looked so upset that I shook my head, trying to downplay what I’d just revealed. “No, come on. I’m okay. Really. And I didn’t come all the way over here just to complain about my troubles and whine to my mother.”

I was trying to laugh it off, but Sabine didn’t smile. If anything, she looked more concerned. “It’s okay to admit when you’re having troubles, Greyson,” she said gently. “And I want you to come to me. I would never judge you for needing help. The mark of a strong Alpha is knowing when he needs to ask for help so he can be his best self for his pack.”  
 “Thank you,” I said gruffly. I knew she wouldn’t, and I appreciated her for that. I thought about what I’d said, and what I could do. “Do you think I should just tell Cali?”

She thought for a moment. “I think that keeping secrets from someone you love can be far more painful and destructive than just telling the truth—even if the truth hurts. It can feel scary, and sometimes we want to keep things to ourselves because we think we’re trying to protect someone, but in the long run, it’s just better to get it out there.”

I took that in for a moment, drank the last of my mocha, and got to my feet. “Thanks, Mom. That helps.”

She hugged me close. “My door is always open, Greyson. I’ll get the mocha for the girls. Lola called me once asking about it; I think she misses it.”

I laughed. “Maybe you need to open up another café, but just directly in the pack house.”

She busied herself and got the white chocolate mocha ready to send back to me. Outside, I shifted and she fastened it around me in a cross-body bag.

“Okay,” she said with a smile, petting my fur. “Don’t be a stranger, son.”

I nuzzled her, letting her know I wouldn’t, and headed back outside. The cold air felt good, and I shifted once I hit the trees.

As I ran through the woods, I thought about how incredible it felt to be one with myself again. Running as a wolf always cleared my head—always made me feel better. And after having to live with Xavier’s wolf—and then no wolf at all—this felt amazing. I was never going to take it for granted again.

But as the miles ticked by, I started to think about what my mother had said to me—specifically, about telling Cali the truth about what I’d been feeling.

But…what *was* the truth?

The woods were quiet and still. Winter still held tight, and the trees were bare of leaves. The streams were frozen solid, and the ground felt hard beneath my paws as I ran. There were winter birds nesting in the trees, but they lifted out—startled—as I ran quietly past.

I ticked through the facts in my head:

I loved Cali. That was a fact. That had been true since the moment I had met her. She had been Xaiver’s mate, but I had known from that first moment that she would mean something in my life, and that had never changed. Whatever these weird feelings I was having toward Kendall—and whatever the hell was causing them—they didn’t alter my feelings for Cali.

But I also knew that Cali was aware of my feelings for Kendall, and if I wasn’t careful, I could lose her. I could sense that.

I ran harder, dropping my head and breathing hard, seeing my breath making clouds of smoke in the freezing air. My wolf was loving this chance to stretch and having the chance to run hard and fast. I had been glad as hell to reunite in London, but this was the first time I’d really had a chance to let him run loose, and I didn’t hold back. Maybe I was hoping that I would somehow run myself into a solution or find the key to unlocking this growing obsession with Kendall. If obsession was the right word. Was it? Was that what this was?

*Fuck.*

I shook my head. I knew I was feeling something, but I honestly didn’t even know how to describe it.

As I leapt across a frozen stream, a glint of fading sunlight reflected off the ice, giving a flash of rainbow colors. That included a flash of violet, and I slowed to a stop. My thoughts went immediately to Kendall. I was so near to her now—no longer separated by an ocean, and I had a sudden strong desire to ride beside her on our motorcycles, to see her hair blowing out behind her from beneath her helmet. To see her strong legs gripping the sides of her bike.

I felt a pull toward the thrill of her—and that kiss. The feel of that kiss played in my head. It wasn’t just me, I could feel my wolf reacting too, pushing me to find her, to seek her out. She was so close now—

*No.*

I wasn’t going to do that. Not now. Not until I understood this all better and figured out what this was all about.

Throwing back my head, I let out a howl of frustration. I just wanted to make these damn feelings stop.

My heart was thudding as I shifted back to my human form, the pack swinging around me. I had hoped that would quell the push and pull of my wolf’s influence over me. It did, somewhat, but I couldn’t stop the thoughts from racing through my head. I thought about the *due destini* and the threads that Rowena had seen.

I looked into the trees of the bare, winter forest, unseeing as a slow fear crept into me. Was that what was happening? Were these the threads making themselves known?

I pulled the cross-body bag toward me and pulled out my phone.

“Damn,” I hissed, looking at the screen. “No signal.” It was no surprise—I was in the middle of the fucking forest. Of course there was no signal.

Shifting back to my wolf form didn’t seem like a good idea—not now, when my wolf was so desperate for Kendall—so I just walked through the woods until I got closer to the pack house. I was almost there, so it only took another ten minutes before I had enough bars to call Rowena.

I was about to send out the call when I realized with horror that I was actually about to call Kendall. I’d been distracted while I was walking, and when her name had popped up in my call history, I guess I’d just pressed it without thinking.

“Shit,” I breathed, quickly switching to Rowena’s number.

“Hello?” she answered after a couple of rings. “Greyson?”

“Hey, Rowena.”

“Hey. I’m surprised to hear from you. How are you—”

“Listen, I need to know something,” I said, cutting right to the reason I was calling. “You told me the *due destini* threads you saw coming off of me in that vision you had led to nowhere.”

“Um…yeah,” Rowena said slowly, clearly trying to figure out what the hell I was talking about. “Yeah, that’s what it looked like in the vision at the time.”

“But things can change, right?”

“I guess so—”

“Well, I think things have changed. I think they’re leading to someone… Can you help me find out who?”

**Episode 5588**

**Kendall**

I stared down at the report on my computer—the report from MI9 about two American Alphas showing up in England. Names: Xavier Evers and Greyson Evers, complete with photos.

But it wasn’t Xavier’s photo that had my attention—it was Greyson’s.

It wasn’t a glamor shot—the picture was probably from his driver’s license or passport. It was an older photo, a couple of years ago maybe. The lighting wasn’t great, but it couldn’t hide his bone structure, or his eyes, or the sharpness of his jaw, or how fucking kissable his mouth was. And I couldn’t take my eyes off of it.

“Hope I’m not interrupting.”

I flinched when Agent Imamu stepped into my office, but barely. I clicked quickly away from the report and turned to him, keeping my composure. “Of course not.”

He shut the door behind him and sat in the chair in front of my desk. “Why did you ask for a favor from MI9?” he asked without preamble.

“*What?*” I asked, caught off guard by the question.

Imamu leaned slightly closer. “Kendall, you asked for a favor from a counterpart at MI9, which is most irregular. You know you shouldn’t be doing that kind of a thing. Not without going through the proper channels.” He tapped his fingers irritably on the desk for a moment. “And why the Redwood Alpha?”

My mind flashed the straightforward photo of Greyson from the report. It was unsmiling and severe, and I couldn’t get the damn picture out of my head.

But when I looked at Imamu, I kept my expression impassive. “The Redwood Alpha asked me to do him a favor, and I tried to comply in an effort to gain his trust. There is something for us to be gained in fostering that relationship, Imamu. And he did help us out with the situation with Chessa, here on campus,” I reminded him.

The agent frowned. “That damn vampire was a pain in my ass. But still.” He shook his head. “Bringing in MI9… Did you know this Greyson Evers was a prime suspect in a couple of pretty grisly murders?”

I gritted my teeth. “I’d heard that, but I’m certain he had nothing to do with them. And all I did was ask MI9 to back off of him when he was just walking around London. It really wasn’t a big deal.”

Agent Imamu looked at me for a moment, then got to his feet. “You’re a good agent, but even good agents can get too close.” He opened the door, then paused. “If this is getting too much for you, I can always call in Agent Lopez. He’s always looking for an opportunity to—”

“That won’t be necessary,” I said quickly.

Imamu nodded. “Good. That’s the answer I wanted to hear.”

When he walked out, I leaned back in my chair with a sigh. “*Fuck*, *fuck*, *fuck*,” I breathed.

This was not great. Of course I had known when I contacted my counterpart at MI9 that I wasn’t just bending the rules for Greyson—I was damn well snapping them in half. And I knew just as well that doing that kind of shit could be a slippery slope. But it had been Greyson asking me, and—despite what I’d just told Agent Imamu—I *was* getting too close. And that wasn’t the only lie.

I had lied to him about why I’d done the favor for Greyson in the first place. Sure, Greyson had helped me with Chessa, but so had some of the others in the Redwood pack. It wasn’t that favor that had driven me to help him in such a significant way. It was that damn pull I felt toward him—and the insatiable desire I felt to fuck him, which had only grown stronger after we’d kissed at that festival.

Then, as if on cue, my phone buzzed.

I looked down to see a text from Tanner. He was the guy I’d been with when Greyson had called from London.

*Hey beautiful. Can’t stop thinking about you and that body of yours. We have some wild chemistry. How about we get together again?*

I rolled my eyes. The chemistry that Tanner was sure we had had very little to do with Tanner and everything to do with Greyson. It had been surreal when Greyson had called while I was in bed with that random hookup, and the sound of his voice had driven me wild, pushing my wolf to the edge. All I could think about while Tanner and I had anemic sex was how much I wished it was Greyson on top of me, pinning me down, thrusting into me and flipping me around like a fucking rag doll.

Even thinking about it now made my pulse race.

Ignoring Tanner’s text, I got to my feet and paced the length of my office, feeling suddenly claustrophobic. But nothing helped the burning desire that even *thinking* about Greyson had just ignited in my body.

I had to do…*something.*

I glanced over at my phone. Tanner might do, but he was too far away. I needed to take care of this…*now.*

Grabbing my keys from my desk, I reached for the door. I would use the admin bathroom at the end of the hall and take care of myself, just to get this feeling out of my system.

But when I pulled open the door, Cali was standing there, her hand raised, about to knock.

Her eyes widened with surprise, but she smiled, though it was clearly forced. “Hi,” she said with false cheer.

“Hey,” I said flatly. The heat I’d felt a second ago faded in an instant. Seeing Cali standing in front of me had the kind of immediate effect being shoved into an icy cold shower might have—and it was just as pleasant.

*What is she doing here?* was all I could think as I looked at her. Of all the times for her to show up.

I cleared my throat. “I didn’t know you were back from London,” I said. Though if she was back, that meant that Greyson was back, too. Which was…interesting.

Cali looked uncomfortable. “Can I talk to you?”

She shot a look past me, into my office, but I didn’t make a move to step aside so she could come in. I didn’t know what she wanted to talk to me about, but I did know that I really wasn’t in the mood for any kind of tête-à-tête with her, so I shrugged and jiggled my keys. “Sorry, not a great time. I was just stepping out for a staff meeting.”

I expected Cali to take the hint and hit the road, but she didn’t move.

“It’s important.” She looked into my office again.

I held my ground and crossed my arms across my chest. “Okay. Make it fast.”

Cali took a deep breath, like she was gathering her courage. Then she said, “What’s going on with you and Greyson?”

*I want to fuck him.*

The thought came to me so automatically and instinctively that it startled me, and I took a moment to make sure I hadn’t spoken aloud.

Honestly, I hadn’t expected such a frank question from Cali, who seemed like the type to beat around the bush a little more.

But I wasn’t a fucking secret agent for nothing, so I looked Cali cooly in the eyes as I answered, “Greyson and I are friends, Cali. If you’re asking this because of that kiss at the festival, I hope Greyson explained the circumstances to you. It meant nothing. We were drugged.”

Still Cali didn’t move. “Friends,” she repeated.

“Yes.”

“But you find him attractive, don’t you?”

I kept my gaze steady. “I wonder why that matters to you. As I said, Greyson and I are friends, and any interaction we’ve had beyond that was beyond our control—”

“I need to know,” she said, an edge to her voice.

I raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because whatever it is, it’s affecting *everything*,” she went on.

I looked at her, but I wasn’t really seeing her. I was thinking about the hookup with Tanner. I had met him at a bar and brought him back to my place because I’d been drunk and bored. We’d started hooking up, and it hadn’t been going great. I’d been considering kicking him out when Greyson had called unexpectedly, asking—no, *demanding*—a favor. I thought about how I’d responded to him.

How I absolutely should have hung up on him. How I didn’t, and how I made the calls he’d asked me to make, risking my career to help him out. And…*why* I had done that.

Something in the back of my brain itched, and I twitched my shoulders. I stepped out of my office, pulling the door shut behind me. I was finished with this conversation.

“I really don’t have time for this,” I said shortly.

Her face set, Cali stepped in front of me, blocking my path. “I’m not leaving until you tell me the truth.”

**Episode 5589**

**Orla**

I stood nervously beside Kadmos. His hand was large enough to engulf my own, but it felt strangely familiar, as though my hand belonged in his. Like two pieces of a puzzle finally fitting together.

“—and Innes and I are so pleased to announce the betrothal of our daughter, Orla, to Kadmos. Much anticipated, but now *fully official*!”

The room was packed with nobles and guests of the Fae court—both Light and Dark—and they burst into applause. Cheers filled the room as all eyes turned toward Kadmos and me.

“We look forward to the promising future this marriage will bring, and how it will serve to heal the wounds of the many years of war…”

The room listened with rapt attention as my mother went on, but I wasn’t paying attention. I wasn’t thinking of the good my marriage was going to do, or the diplomatic future we would forge. All I was thinking about was the handsome man at my side. How tall he was, how piercing his eyes were when he gazed at me, how dark his hair, and the way my body responded as I stood next to him. This was the man I was going to marry. This was the man I would soon call my *husband*.

The very word made my spine tingle.

I had feared him initially—I had nearly trembled at the thought of this moment—but that was gone. Ever since he had kissed my hand at our formal introduction, I had known with unwavering certainty that—though this union was an arranged marriage, and a peace treaty between two warring Fae factions—it was more than that. It was also destiny.

I wasn’t going to go so far as to say that I loved him, or that he loved me. How could I? We hadn’t had a chance to get to know each other well enough yet. We’d barely had a chance to speak. But there was something there, and I had no doubt that when we did, we would be madly in love, and we would never want to leave each other’s sides.

“—so will you please help me congratulate Kadmos and Orla on their blessed engagement!” my mother said, turning her glittering gaze to beam at us.

The royal court applauded once more, and my mother tipped her head toward the center of the room.

I knew what came next—my mother had advised me that at this point Kadmos and I were to present ourselves with a dance.

My stomach twisted. Apart from the formal introduction—which had gone better than expected—this was the part I had been dreading the most. I wasn’t looking forward to dancing in front of so many eyes. But Kadmos was firm as he led me forward, and when I turned to him, his hand at my waist felt sure.

And when the music started and we began to move, he surprised me again. For such a powerful man, he led me through the formal dance steps with astonishing grace.

There was light applause, and after a moment, the rest of the court joined in the dance.

As the others began to dance, Kadmos leaned in to whisper in my ear. “It’s getting crowded. Come with me.”

There wasn’t even a question, but I didn’t hesitate to follow as he led me through the dancers and to the terrace.

I took a deep breath of the fresh air, which felt amazing after the stifling heat of the great room. I felt Kadmos’s eyes on me and turned to find him smiling at me.

“You aren’t afraid of me anymore, are you?”

“Should I be?” I asked, surprising myself with my own daring.

His smile grew, which made my heart skip a beat. Then he leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. It was the same feeling I’d had when he’d kissed my hand, but multiplied. The ground seemed to fall away and every Fae royal in the court disappeared. In the whole world, it was just the two of us.

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When we wed, Kadmos’s eyes gazed into mine. I no longer cowered beneath their intensity, but basked in it as he spoke his vows to me:

“I vow to protect you, to cherish you, to honor you, and to always love you.”

My husband had never looked more handsome, or more powerful. I knew that I had been right—this was fate, and we had found our soul matches. Every guest at the wedding was moved to tears. Even my mother dabbed at her eyes.

Our honeymoon was a whirlwind of bliss—kisses and sunshine and making love. We spent our time in a cottage by the Ceruvela Mountains, and as I laid beside my husband, I wondered how it was that I could feel both so excited and so comfortable in his presence. It was as if we had always known each other—like our souls had always been acquainted.

It did not last long enough, but when my mother sent her carriages to bring us back to the Fae courts, we returned.

She had a healer waiting in my chambers, and after a bath, the healer took the water and dropped a tonic into it. She held it beneath a fire of herbs and announced that I was pregnant.

It didn’t take long for word to spread that I would bear a child. Birth of a baby—half Light, half Dark Fae—would cement the bonds between the two factions. My mother and the Dark Fae consort were beside themselves. It was exactly as they had hoped.

“This baby will bring an end to the wars,” my mother told me a dozen times.

I nodded, glad that she was glad. But that’s not what I thought of when I put my hand on my growing stomach.

When I lay beside my husband in our bed, and we spoke of our child, we spoke only of how this baby would be living proof of our undying love.

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I woke up one morning late in my pregnancy feeling achy, but well. My mother had always warned me about the misery of carrying a child, but I was finding it to be enjoyable. I liked to watch the growth of my belly and feel the small flutterings within me.

“Shall we go for a walk?” Taleena asked as she helped me dress and slip on my shoes.

“That sounds nice,” I agreed. “The gardens are in bloom.”

Taleena took my arm, and we walked into my mother’s gardens. I took my time, looking over the blooms, breaking off where the jasmine was going to seed.

“You look lovelier every day, Mistress,” Taleena gushed. “Glowing. That’s what everyone says.”

“Thank you,” I said, putting my hand on my stomach.

As we rounded the edge of the garden, I looked over the edge of the parapet. Down below, there was a steady stream of people entering the castle, and as I looked, I saw they were wounded soldiers returning from the war.

I frowned as I looked down at the limping, bloodied Fae. “I have heard rumors that not everyone is happy about my marriage, Taleena. Or my baby.”

“Not everyone profits from peace,” she said quietly.

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When I returned to my chambers, I was surprised to find Kadmos within. Even more surprised to see he had a trunk out, and he was filling it with clothes and supplies.

“Where are you going?” I asked, shutting the door behind me.

He stepped over to brush a kiss across my lips. “Orla, I believe you know the answer to that.”

My stomach dropped as I looked at the contents of the trunk. “The wars rage on.”

He nodded. “I believe that our marriage has helped to bring some diplomacy, and our baby could bring an end, but the war goes on, and I must go do what I can.”

I bit my lip. “You will be back,” I said, not allowing it to be a question.

He nodded. “I will be back—”

“Back to welcome our child into the world,” I clarified.

“I would not let anything keep me away,” he said, his gaze intent on me. He kissed me, then bent and kissed my stomach.

“Do you wish for a boy or a girl?”

“I would love either with all my heart, but if I had a choice, a girl,” he said.

That surprised me. “Truly? I would have thought you would have wanted an heir.”

He smiled at me. “Perhaps someday, but I would like to have a little girl, with your eyes and your smile. A copy of her mother, who I love so dearly. And why could she not be my heir?”

My eyes filled with tears.

He took my hands. “And when peace comes, we will return to the Cerulean Sea. We loved it before, and we will live there in peace. Protected by the mountains, you will have your gardens, and our child will flourish, without the threat of war.”

I nodded and rose up to kiss him.

He held me tightly, kissing me deeply. His servants entered the room and closed up his trunk, and then he was gone.

Days went by with no word. My anxiety grew as more and more wounded shambled into the castle. The fighting was raging on, and I had heard nothing from Kadmos.

And then, one morning I woke up screaming, my whole body alive with pain.

“Please,” I begged the child within me, “please, not yet. Please wait for your father. He’s coming. He promised. He’ll be here soon.”

“Mistress, please,” Taleena said quietly. She was at my side, a wet washcloth in her hand. “Please try to relax. I have something for you to drink. It will help ease the pain.”

The pain was so intense that when she pushed something to my lips, I drank it without thinking. She had been right—the pain eased immediately. It disappeared. And so did the rest of the world.

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When I opened my eyes again, I was confused and disoriented. I looked around, baffled and confused. I was in my bed, with my mother on one side of me, my father on the other. They both looked pale and drawn. They looked older, too. How long had I been asleep?

“Where is Kadmos?” I murmured. “Where is my baby?”

My father looked at my mother. I followed his gaze.

My mother leaned toward me and took my hand. “Kadmos was killed in the war, and your child—a girl—died during the birth.”

I pulled my hand from hers as the world began to spin. Someone was screaming—and then I realized—it was me. It was gone. All gone.

I had lost everything.

**Episode 5590**

**Xavier**

I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin. After we had gotten back to the pack house and been greeted by the Samaras, Ava had grabbed Knox by the arm and hauled him into the kitchen to address the issues that had happened while we’d been away. As Alpha and Luna, it was a job for us both, but while she was sitting at the table with him, I was pacing the room. I was having a hard time getting a deep breath. I knew it was crazy, but I felt like I was trapped inside the house.

All I could think about was Cali, and if I had to listen to Knox defend his dumbass behavior for one more minute, I was going to lose my mind—or kill Ava’s cousin.

Apparently, Marissa had been telling the truth—Knox had been pissing everyone off while we’d been in London.

“—and I don’t know why everyone’s so mad at me. It’s not like I did anything wrong,” Knox whined.

“Did you go out on *any* patrols?” Ava asked, looking through the Excel sheet Marissa kept of the schedule.

“Well…no, but that’s because I didn’t think there was a clear and present threat,” Knox said defensively.

“That’s *not* for you to assess—” Ava started.

I strode toward the back door and wrenched it open.

“Where are you going, Xavier?” she called over to me. “We’re kind of in the middle of something here.”

“I—uh—need some air,” I said, nodding outside.

She frowned and closed the tablet on the table. “Okay. How about we go for a run,” she said, getting to her feet and walking over to me.

“Maybe later,” I said. I noted the look of concern in her eyes, but I couldn’t deal with it, so I pushed past her and stepped outside.

I took a deep breath, hoping the cold air would change my mood—hoping it would somehow make my head right.

I knew I should stay here at the pack house. Ava was right—there were things that needed to get done, and I shouldn’t just leave it all for her to do. The stuff she had talked about in the car ride home—the risk assessment and the patrol schedule. I also needed to reassert myself at the house. I had only been gone a few days, but I was the Samara Alpha.

But how could I stay, pretending that I was back, when my mind was so clearly on Cali? And on the incredible, hot-as-fuck kiss that had not only brought my wolf back, but had proven that whatever had happened between us—whatever had forced us apart—had done nothing to stop the bond between us. Nothing—not Ava, not Adéluce, not Greyson. In the end, Cali was and had always been my mate.

I knew that, and I knew that she knew that too. If she had somehow forgotten it, or let herself ignore it, she had remembered it in London. The only question now was, what should be done about it?

I glanced through the window, back into the kitchen. Ava back was at the table. Knox was gone and she had the tablet open. It looked as though she and Marissa were running through more of the pack records and schedules.

That’s just not where my mind was, so I turned toward the woods and shifted. I headed straight for the trees, letting my wolf run as fast and as hard as he wanted. It was exhilarating to turn my wolf loose after all this time and I basked in the feeling of it. But after just a couple of miles, my mind had traveled back to London. In my thoughts I was kissing Cali again, wanting her back.

But that was nothing new.

I had wanted her the very first time she had shown up at my house—brought there thanks to Colton. She had been terrified, but somehow still defiant. I used to call her *tiger*. Not just because of her tiger-striped skin—*fuck* how I missed her skin—but because I always sensed that beneath her soft skin, there was something strong and wild, something that was just roaring, waiting to come out. And I had been right. Because that tiger was now a predator, one that had taken my heart and never really given it back.

As much as I had wanted her then, I wanted her even more now. What had happened between us in London was just a sample—a tease of what was possible between us if only we would give it another chance.

As I ran, my thoughts of Cali were interrupted by a scent I found annoyingly familiar.

Lucian.

He was the last person I wanted to see right now, so I made an abrupt turn, hoping to avoid him—but it was too late.

*Xavier!* Lucian called out to me.

Shit.

I shook my head. It was no use. I knew just ignoring him would never work, so I shifted to my human form.

Lucian did the same. “Welcome back. How was your trip to London? It’s so nice to have you back. Of course, many things happened while you were gone. I meant to send you a letter to keep you abreast, but I didn’t know how to reach you. You didn’t leave an address where we could reach you—”

“What do you want?” I asked, cutting him off.

“Well, I wanted to remind you that I am having my bachelor party this weekend,” he said.

“Yeah? So? I told you I wasn’t going.”

Lucian waved the comment off. “Of course you’re coming. You must. All the other Alphas will be there. It’s going to be the event of the year. Second to my wedding, of course.”

I sighed and pushed my wind-blown hair from my face. Maybe if I just agreed, Lucian would leave me alone. “Fine. I’ll come.”

“Glad to hear it!” Lucian said, clapping me on the shoulder. “Knew you’d come around. It’s going to be a weekend to remember—”

He stopped speaking, and we both turned when we heard the crack of a stick behind us. Someone—or something—was approaching, and we were quiet as we waited.

A moment later a wolf appeared through the trees. I recognized the sleek wolf at once—it was Ava.

Fuck. *So much for running free*, I thought to myself. Now my run had turned into a fucking party.

“There’s a pleasant sight,” Lucian said to me as Ava walked toward us, his voice low and sly.

I bristled, but Lucian turned his smile on Ava, bowing slightly.

“So nice to see you, Ava, but I must go. I must return to my precious Elle. She worries when I am not with her.”

The crack of bones echoed through the trees as Ava shifted to her human form. She tossed her dark hair behind her shoulders as she narrowed her eyes at Lucian.

“You should stop speaking of Elle like that. She was a natural wolf before she was turned. She’s not a fragile trinket, and you shouldn’t treat her like she is.”

Lucian’s smile was suggestive. “Yes, she *is* strong, isn’t she? We’re both quite lucky we found each other.”

Ava rolled her eyes in disgust. She had little patience for Lucian.

He took one sweeping look at her naked form, then turned to me. “I will see you this weekend, then.”

I nodded irritably, and Lucian shifted.

As he ran away, Ava gave me a curious look.

“This weekend?”

I sighed. “Yeah, I just agreed to go to his stupid bachelor party.”

She chuckled. “That sounds fun for you.” She took a step closer to me, and I noticed that her naked body was so warm it steamed in the cold winter air. “There better not be any strippers.”

I groaned. “I don’t see Lucian as a stripper kind of guy.”

She gave me a twisted smile. “That’s generous of you.” Then her smile turned coy, and she placed a hand on my bare chest. “I have an idea—why don’t you just tell him that you’re going to be busy this weekend.”

“Busy?” I asked.

She stepped closer and her blue eyes smoldered. She bit her lip as she looked up at me. “*Very* busy.”

My eyes raked down, taking in her naked body. I could see the hunger in her eyes—it was hard to miss. I thought about the dream I’d had on the plane ride back to Portland—and how incredible it would feel to make that real.

But that had just been a dream—and this wasn’t.

Guilt washed over me. My mind had been somewhere else—my thoughts, my heart—and I couldn’t handle the tension or the lies anymore. Ava deserved honesty. We both did. What would we be without it?

I put my hand over hers, then moved it away from my chest.

Her brows knit together, and I watched as a question entered her eyes. “Xavier?”

I had to say it. “I need to tell you something,” I said. “I want Cali back.”

**Episode 5591**

**Artemis**

Somewhere, I heard Adair’s voice…he was calling to me from somewhere far away. I felt like I was lost down a deep, dark well but that didn’t seem right somehow…so what was going on with me?

The last thing I recalled was being in Erimentha’s cabin…but now I had no idea exactly where I was, all I knew was that Erimentha had put me here.

“Artemis!” It was Adair calling out for me again. “Wake up. Come back to us!”

The panic in his voice made me all the more worried about what had happened to me. Was I okay? Was I ever going to wake up?

I opened my mouth to reply but nothing came out. My whole body felt heavy, including my mouth, lips, and tongue. Even if I could talk, I doubted they would hear me since I felt like I was so far away from them.

“Artemis, can you hear me?” It was Rishika this time.

I tried to move, tried to open my mouth to say something so that she knew I was here…even if I didn’t know whether I was okay. For all I knew I’d fallen into another world, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t feel anything, either. I’d never felt this way before and it was freaking me out.

*What’s happening to me…and am I going to be okay? Is Adair alright? Rishika? Will I be trapped in this strange dark place forever? This can’t be the way I go out. Especially before I find out what happened to my father…*

It was like I was stuck in a weird comatose state that I couldn’t pull myself out of no matter what I did. Even now, as I tried to connect to my fingers and toe and my limbs, nothing worked. I had no control over my body at all.

“Should we slap her or something?” Rishika said, her voice blurred by that strange far away quality. “Maybe that will jolt her out of this.”

*Out of what? Am I passed out somewhere? Stuck in a pit?*

A second later, I felt a slight stinging sensation on my cheek…but not enough to rouse me from the strange state I was in.

Then, I felt something else, the sensation of something pushing on my chest.

*Ouch, that hurts!*

It was a repeated, rhythmic pressure that took my breath away, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I couldn’t get away from the feeling because I couldn’t move, so I stayed where I was and hoped the feeling would pass.

But then something happened that I didn’t expect. I felt the soft press of lips against mine. I blinked my eyes open and finally was able to see…and I couldn’t have hoped for a better sight.

Rishika.

*Rishika’s kissing me?*

Wait, no, she was trying to do CPR. I groaned and gently pushed her away, and Rishika jumped back. Her face was frozen in shock and surprise, but then a smile slowly took over.

“Artemis. You’re awake! Thank god.”

“Are you okay? Do you feel like yourself?!” Adair asked.

“I think so. At least I can move again.”

I still felt quite sluggish as two pairs of arms gathered me close and held me tightly sandwiched between Adair and Rishika.

“How dare you scare me like that? I could kill you! You almost died!” Adair said.

I frowned at him, happy that I could finally move my face again. “Killing me would be counterproductive at this point, don’t you think?”

“Oh…right,” Adair said sheepishly.

Once Rishika and Adair were both all hugged out, they finally released me.

I turned to Erimentha, wondering just what she’d done to me to put me out of commission like that. “I have some questions about what I saw,” I said.

“Unfortunately, I won’t have any answers for you,” she said. “No one can enter blood memories along with you.”

“But the memories I saw…they belonged to my mother, Orla—not Kadmos.”

Erimentha grimaced and shook her head as she shrugged. “That’s the journey you were meant to take, then.”

“But I thought you were going to show me my father’s memories!”

Instead, I’d seen my mother’s memories and all the pain she’d gone through. The betrayals. It had been so hard to see all that, knowing the hurt it caused her. It wasn’t like I hadn’t been told all about what my mother had gone through, but to see it right in front of me…

Aside from the pain Mom experienced, I saw other things, too. Like her love for Kadmos, proof that if things hadn’t gone the way they had, I might have had the chance to grow up with a loving family instead of being alone for so long and only finding parts of my family so much later.

I tried to push all the difficult feelings away so that I could focus on the reason I was here.

“I didn’t learn anything new about where my father is or even if he’s alive!” I said.

“There’s nothing I can do about that,” Erimentha said. “The blood memories aren’t easy to control. I simply welcomed you to the process and allowed your blood to do the guiding.”

“But why would I see my mother’s memories?”

“I don’t know, but the fact that you saw anything at all proves that the process worked.”

“Do it again,” I demanded. “And this time, I want to see something different. I have to see Kadmos’s memories or else all of this is for nothing.”

“There’s no way we’re letting you do that again,” Adair said. “You’re so weak right now, and you almost died. It’s not safe, and it’s certainly not worth it.”

“Sadly, he’s right,” Erimentha said. “I can’t put you on the path again so soon. There’s no question that you will lose your life if I take you through those memories again.”

I wanted to scream in frustration. Why was it always like this? Getting so close to finding answers only to run into a dead end, time and time again.

“Isn’t there some other way? Something you can do to protect me while you put me under again?” I asked Erimentha.

“No. There’s only one way to expose you to your memories’ bloodline, and we’ve already done it. I don’t know you and I certainly won’t be responsible for putting your life at risk,” she replied.

“We need to get back before they realize we’re gone,” Adair said.

“I’m not leaving until I get access to my father’s memories!” I said.

“No,” Erimentha hissed through clenched teeth. “You don’t get to come in here and make endless demands. I did my part, and it was far more than I owed you, stranger. Now go before I make you!”

I wanted to say more…press her until I could get her to take one more chance on me, but I could tell by the determination in her eyes that there was no use.

“Come on, Artemis. Let’s go,” Rishika said, taking one arm while Adair took the other and leading me out of the cottage.

I was too weak to resist, too powerless to dig my heels in and demand that Erimentha give me what I came for.

“What exactly did you see?” Rishika asked as we began to make our way back down the mountainside.

“Almost nothing,” I said bitterly. “Just the betrothal and the wedding ceremony and snatches of memory of my mother being pregnant with me. Also, a bunch of weird romantic conversations between her and Kadmos that were kind of awkward to see.”

“Oh…yeah, that would be weird,” Rishika remarked.

“Exactly. No one wants to see their parents making out and talking about romantic dates to fancy restaurants and strange Fae events. It doesn’t matter to me that they went to the Fae opera or Mazell’s for dinner or something.”

Adair froze at the mention of the word “Mazell,” and I couldn’t help but notice.

“Wait…does that place mean something to you?” I asked him.

Adair shook his head slowly as if trying to sort through his own memories. “It sounds familiar. I think it might have been important to my brother, but I can’t remember why…or even if I’m thinking of the right place.”

“When Mom and Kadmos talked about it, he did seem to regard it like it was a secret, special place. I’m not even sure it’s a restaurant,” I said.

“Maybe it’s a clue?” Rishika said.

“If it is, maybe my mother would know more about it,” I said.

“What? How are you going to talk to your mother while we’re all the way in the Fae world?” Rishika asked.

“I can use the trees to call her,” I said.

“And how do we do that, exactly?” Rishika said.

I groaned at the thought of the price I would have to pay. It wasn’t something I wanted to do, but it was what I would have to do. I just hope it worked.

“I’m going to have to ask Kastian for another favor.”

**Episode 5592**

**Xavier**

The shock on Ava’s face pierced me through my core. My admission had left her shaken and confused and angry, and I couldn’t blame her. My honesty had shocked me, too.

“So what are you saying?” Ava said, her voice shaking. “Are you breaking up with me? After everything, you’re doing just what I thought you would—throwing me away for *Cali?*”

“No, that’s not what I want. I would never throw you away!”

“Is that so? Because that’s exactly what it seems like. Do you understand how hurtful it is to hear you say that? What am I supposed to think?”

“I know it sounds like I’m trying to push you away, Ava, but I’m just trying to be honest with you. I just can’t fucking keep this from you anymore.”

Ava looked away. I knew that she would rather I stop, but I had to get this off my chest.

“The *due destini* doesn’t care if I love you, Ava. I love Cali too, and the longer I’m away from her, the more it hurts.”

Ava finally forced herself to look me in the eye again. “So what are you saying? That you love her more than you love me?”

“Ava, *no*. Fuck, I don’t want this to be a competition. I just know that the more I try to get over Cali and pretend that being with you is enough, the more it tears me apart,” I told her.

“But this isn’t just about you and me, Xavier. It’s about the Samaras too. You’re the Alpha, and I’m the Luna. Are you just going to leave them in the dust to go back to Cali? There’s no way I’m going to let you do that. I won’t let you break up with me.”

“Ava, it’s not up to you. Being so torn up about the *due destini* isn’t good for the Samara pack, either. I need peace. I need to know that I’m living the life I want with the woman I love.”

Ava looked like I’d slapped her.

“So you don’t think I can make this work? Because I can. I’ve been by your side for so long. I’ve helped you rebuild the Samara pack from the ground up. I’m here to help you be the best Alpha you can be. Why can you just trust me?”

I bit my lip as my frustration grew. I wanted Ava to get it—even if to just make all of this easier on me—but she wasn’t understanding where I was coming from at all.

“It’s not about me trusting you, Ava!”

Ava’s eyes flashed as she stepped close. “If you abandon me and the Samaras, I will never forgive you. And not only that, but I will make you suffer for abandoning us.”

“Ava, this is getting out of hand,” I said sadly. “Neither of us are thinking straight. We need some space.”

“Of course that’s what you want. You just want to be free to leave me and go running to Cali,” Ava spat.

She was breathing heavily and opened her mouth to say more before she abruptly shook her head. “You know what? Fine. If you need time and want to be away from me, I’ll give you that. It’s probably for the best.”

Ava flipped her hair over her shoulder as she turned and stormed away.

I felt like garbage. Hurting Ava was the last thing I wanted. The *due destini* was flaring and driving me toward Cali more strongly than ever before, but that didn’t mean that I wanted to just leave Ava behind like she meant nothing.

What I wanted was to somehow spend enough time with Cali so that I could ease this aching in my chest. I needed her, and being away from her night after night and day after day just wasn’t working for me anymore.

I needed Cali in my life like she used to be.

*I don’t want to break up with Ava, but this is killing me. And it’s gotten worse ever since that kiss and Cali helped bring my wolf back.*

It was like our connection had been amped up tenfold, and I couldn’t get her out of my head. Every time I closed my eyes I saw her face, could feel her lips on mine and the passion and power of our kiss.

It was almost like the thought of Cali had infected me. My wolf was restless and cagey, yearning for Cali and nothing and no one else. Even now, it wanted to run to her. My wolf was crying out for me to take Cali in my arms and claim her as my mate right here, right now.

*Is this what the* due destini *has become? This overwhelming, all-encompassing desire? Does Cali feel this, too? And if she does, how is she dealing with it?*

I hated the thought of her feeling like this. Like something was missing deep inside of her, like she just couldn’t be satisfied no matter what. Ava sated a part of me, but not all of me. Not like Cali did.

Cali didn’t deserve to be in this position simply because my life had become so complicated. Simply because Adéluce had ruined the course of our relationship and made it so we couldn’t be together like we were meant to be.

*If I don’t figure this out—and soon—I’m going to hurt everyone I care about. Ava said it herself. She’ll never forgive me if I make the wrong move. I know her way too well to think that she won’t make good on her promise to turn my life into a living hell.*

It was just like the Burning Man dream showed me—Cali telling me that I would lose her and Ava if I wasn’t careful.

But maybe that was what I deserved after how badly I treated Cali when Adéluce was pulling my strings.

Still, how could I blame myself for that? Why should I deserve punishment for something that was out of my control? Maybe I didn’t deserve to lose Cali forever or to even be without her for a second more.

What I deserved was to be with the woman I loved without losing everything I’d built in the process.

I hated that things were getting so much messier than ever before. I wanted to simply push it down and forget about it, go back into the pack house, and continue my life as the Samara Alpha at Ava’s side, but I couldn’t do it.

Not when my hunger and intensity for Cali was burning out of control.

With a deep sigh, I returned to the pack house. I’d barely cross the threshold before Marissa was in my face.

“You shouldn’t come inside right now,” she said.

I stood my ground. “What? Are you serious? It’s not your place to tell me where I can and can’t go.”

Marissa looked torn, but she stood her ground, too. “I get that you’re the Alpha, and you’re right. I’m not trying to defy you, and you know I respect you as my Alpha. But right now I have to be loyal to my Luna.”

I wanted to lash out at her, but how could I when I knew just how much I’d hurt Ava? I didn’t want to hurt her anymore. If she needed to be apart from me—something I proposed first—then so be it.

Going all Alpha on Marissa and forcing myself into the house would only make things worse. And that was something my father would have done and every day I worked to be nothing like him.

“I told Ava I’d give her some space, so I will,” I said.

I turned away; my hands tightened into fists as I fought through waves of complicated emotions. I couldn’t believe it had come to this. The *due destini* was creating conflict between me and Ava and Cali and creating torn loyalties in my own pack.

The Luna and the Alpha were supposed to be a united front for their pack, but that wasn’t what we were. Not right now. We weren’t even close.

*Is Ava right? Are my feelings for Cali going to tear the Samara pack apart? We’re doing better than we were before, but we’re still on shaky ground and recovering from the damage that we’ve suffered in the past.*

As Alpha, it was my job—no, my duty to focus on my pack. They had to mean more than everything else, or it would all fall apart, and was that what I wanted? Was Cali worth sacrificing the Samaras?

*Cali’s worth that and more.*

Especially when even thinking about the Samara pack was starting to feel wrong somehow. I slammed a fist into my palm and gritted my teeth in frustration.

*What the hell is going on with me? Why is everything so fucked up?*

I wished that I could just start running and never come back…so I shifted and took off into the woods.

**Episode 5593**

**Greyson**

The one thing I was sure of was that I didn’t want to meet Rowena at the Redwood pack house. I didn’t want to risk someone overhearing what we were going to discuss. There were too many eyes and ears there, too many ways for what I was doing to get back to Cali.

It wasn’t that I didn’t think she would understand, because Cali was nothing if not understanding. I just didn’t want my goal to be misinterpreted, or communicated to her in a way that suggested that I was seeking out my other mate bond.

And I certainly didn’t want Cali to happen upon me and Rowena and get the wrong idea herself.

I took off deeper into the woods and raced toward the cliffs, one of the farthest points from the pack house. That was one of the few places where I knew Rowena and I wouldn’t be bothered.

I was suffering so many misgivings about what I was planning to do that I kept thinking about turning around and going back home and calling it off with Rowena. It was that thing where you wondered if it was better not to know the truth. But I knew that wouldn’t work. I needed to know once and for all.

Whatever was happening between me and Kendall, as confusing as it was, wasn’t just going to go away.

I’d tried to ignore it, and that hadn’t worked so far. I needed to understand why I was feeling this way and maybe proving that there was something more between us would allow me to figure out a way to dissolve it.

The Kendall puppet had proven that I could no longer deny how conflicted I was about where she and I stood. If there was nothing there, I would have just chalked the puppet’s actions up to witchcraft. But I couldn’t do that. There’d been more than magic at play there, and I needed to get to the bottom of it.

I turned at the sound of an echoing cracking noise that seemed to reach me from every direction—the telltale sound of a witch blipping in from somewhere else.

I followed the sound and arrived at a clearing where Rowena was busy setting up a bunch of shimmering crystals.

“Four crystals—one pointing south, one north, one east, and one west,” she muttered to herself before looking up and spotting me watching her. “Good. You’re here. Let’s get this over with. I have plans with Porter today, and, respectfully, you’re keeping me from them.”

“Sorry…and thanks for coming on such short notice,” I said. “I just have to know what’s going on with me before it drives me crazy.”

She gave me a small smile. “Let’s just hope you get the clarity you’re looking for.” She looked around and then back at me. “When’s Cali getting here?”

“Oh…she’s not. I’m here alone.”

Rowena looked surprised for only a second before nodding slowly. She’d clearly expected Cali to be here for moral support, and she wasn’t. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was judging me for keeping this from my mate.

“Step in the center of the crystals,” Rowena instructed. “Stay calm. It won’t hurt, but I need to have you clear and even if this is going to work.”

I took a deep breath and stepped into the middle of the circle the crystals made, then waited for the next instructions.

“Now, before we get started, are you sure about this? I don’t want to reveal anything to you only to get in the middle of a bunch of fallout if it doesn’t go the way you expect.”

“I’m sure,” I told her. “I’m ready to see whatever you have to show me. I’ve prepared myself.”

I wasn’t sure if that was entirely true, but there was no way I was going to turn back now. I had to see this through. I owed it to Cali and myself…and Kendall too, to be clear about what was going on with me.

Wordlessly, she pulled out a pouch of what looked like herbs and poured them into a goblet filled with water. She held it out to me.

“Drink it all, and make sure you get any herbs that gather at the bottom.”

I did as I was told, even though the herbs were super bitter and stuck in the back of my throat. I coughed once as Rowena turned her back on me to light a candle.

She began chanting, and it was jarring at first, but as time went on it became soothing, and I tried to think about the sound of her voice and not what the result might be. I wasn’t certain enough about what I felt inside anymore to assume that all my threads would lead to Cali.

And if I was already sure of that, I supposed I wouldn’t be here.

As Rowena’s chanting gained intensity and volume, she began walking around the crystals with her eyes closed. I wondered how she kept from tripping or knocking over the crystals, but figured she was enough of an expert that she knew how to do this spell easily.

Each crystal lit up as she passed. I watched with interest as a strange tugging sensation built in the center of my chest. I saw some sort of mist was rising and as it did, it lit up a bunch of threads. It reminded me of a smoky room filled with lasers…a dreamlike feeling that pushed me even further out of sorts.

As she walked, I noticed that two crystals were glowing brighter than the others. I gasped as I assumed that they were my two mate bonds…which meant that my concerns were right. I did have more than one bond tugging at me. The threads were there too, extending from my chest to the bright crystals.

I started to reach toward the crystals, but Rowena stopped in her tracks and turned a fierce gaze on me. “Stop! Don’t touch them.”

I pulled my arm back like I’d been shocked. “Why? Where do they lead?”

Rowena looked between me and the crystals once more before saying, “This is your last chance to stop all this before you learn something you’ll regret.”

“Tell me. I have to know,” I said.

Rowena stepped toward one of the thicker threads and held the candle underneath it. She started chanting again, words I couldn’t understand and could barely hear, and then she reached down and plucked at it.

The thread vibrated like a guitar string, and a moment later my head was ringing, too, and an image began forming in my mind.

It was Cali’s smiling face.

I smiled, reassured that I was truly bonded to Cali.

“Now for the other thread,” Rowena said.

Fuck. I was nervous as Rowena positioned herself beside the next thickest thread. She repeated the same process as before, chanting while hovering the candle flame beneath it.

Again, an image formed.

Kendall.

Kendall fucking King.

My stomach dropped, and my entire body flushed with nervous heat. “Shit,” I hissed under my breath.

I leaped out from the center of the crystals as if I were afraid of seeing something else I hadn’t wanted to face. The mist fell like rain and the threads disappeared.

Rowena let out a little cry and doubled over in pain.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“No!” she hissed. “You should have waited for me to end the spell properly!”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just—what I saw—I guess I just—”

“It’s fine,” Rowena snapped. She scowled at me as she plucked her crystals from the grass and threw them into her leather satchel. “You know, you have a nice way of showing your appreciation for me taking time out of my life to do this spell for you,” she grumbled.

“Rowena, I’m sorry. I fucked up.”

I felt awful, truly, but I was distracted, reeling from the confirmation. I didn’t want this. Now, I could see how having two mates was literally tearing Cali and Xavier apart inside.

It was a strange feeling, the most uncomfortable thing I could imagine. It was like my heart was ripped in two and beating in two different places in my chest.

And not only was it hurting them, it was hurting their other mates, too. I wasn’t about to put Cali through that. I didn’t want to do that to Kendall, either. I didn’t know her that well, but I still didn’t want to cause her pain because my bonds were going haywire.

The problem wasn’t that I didn’t know who to choose. Of course I would choose Cali over Kendall over and over again without question. But when I made that choice, it was going to hurt Kendall.

*I don’t want all this pressure on my shoulders. I need things to be simple again.*

Rowena looked like she was in a hurry to blip the hell away from me, but I stopped her before she could.

“Rowena, can *you* cut the second mate thread?”

**Episode 5594**

Kendall wasn’t telling the truth about her feelings for Greyson, and I knew it. She could barely look me in the eye, and that was enough of a sign to prove that I was on the right track.

I wanted to know if Kendall suspected what I did, that she and Greyson were mated somehow. But I didn’t want to ask that outright. Not only did I kind of not want to know the answer, but I wanted to see if Kendall sensed it herself.

And if I didn’t accuse her of it outright, no one could ever say that I came looking to start drama with her.

I didn’t know how I would ever get Kendall to admit something so big when she wouldn’t even reveal that she was attracted to Greyson—which she so obviously was.

“I’ve already told you everything,” Kendall said. “I’m not into Greyson, and that’s that. I suggest you get out of my face with all these accusations. I’m tired of it. I don’t steal other people’s mates. In fact, I don’t want anything to do with all this werewolf mate nonsense in the first place.”

“What do you mean? You’re a werewolf. Are you telling me that you don’t believe in mates?” I asked her, confused.

As far as I knew, almost every werewolf subscribed to the concept of finding that one person in the world that they were meant to be with—their mate. Was Kendall really claiming to reject all of that?

“I suppose I believe in it for other people, but for me it’s not a priority. I’m focused on my job, and I’m a lone wolf. I don’t buy into all that traditionalist werewolf mate bullshit.”

Her disdain was surprising, but she seemed to really mean it.

On the one hand, I could understand why she wasn’t so keen on falling into the whole arrangement. The werewolf mate dynamic had certainly given me a lot of headaches.

On the other hand, I couldn’t imagine *not* loving Greyson and Xavier, or worse yet, never having met them. I couldn’t even really remember what life was like before I loved them. These days, they were my whole world.

They were what I thought about when I woke up, the last thing on my mind before I drifted off to sleep every night. I hadn’t been raised with or exposed to the idea of werewolf mates, but that didn’t mean I felt my bonds with Xavier and Greyson less strongly.

I had to fight for my relationship, so I wasn’t ready to let her go with that. I had a gut feeling, and I was trusting it. Something was there between Kendall—at least on her side—for Greyson, and I wasn’t leaving until she admitted it.

“I’m not trying to accuse you of attempting to steal Greyson. That’s not what this is. All I’m saying is that if you have feelings for him, I need to know.”

Kendall glanced past me like she was trying to determine how many steps it would take for her to shake me altogether.

*If she wants to leave me in the dust, she can. She’s way faster than me, and I wouldn’t be able to catch her if she took off. I’m hoping that she’ll stay and face this with me. I deserve answers. She may not believe in mates, but I do, and Greyson’s mine. I need to know if someone else has eyes for him.*

“Where the hell is this coming from, anyway?” Kendall asked me. “I’ve been friendly with Greyson for a while now, ever since Chessa. Why is that such a problem? Why are you stressed about it all of a sudden?”

I didn’t answer right away, wondering how much I should admit to Kendall. We weren’t friends. We were barely acquaintances at this point, and today’s little chat wasn’t going well. But I was the one asking her a pretty personal question…even if it *did* have to do with my mate.

I supposed I could offer her a little context to help me get to the bottom of how she was really feeling.

“We were captured by a witch in London,” I said slowly, deciding how much more to say and then leaving it at that for the moment.

Kendall took a step back, surprised. “Really? Is everyone okay?”

I nodded, wondering if that question was really only for Greyson and Greyson alone. It wasn’t like she cared all that much if me or Ava or Xavier were caught.

*Why are you being this suspicious? Even if she does have feelings for Greyson, that doesn’t make her an awful person. She could truly be concerned about all of us…*

That level of paranoia and distrust of Kendall was exactly what I needed to fix. I wasn’t going to be able to live with this paranoia for much longer.

*Though that nagging paranoia you had about Ava way back when wasn’t wrong at all, was it? She really was after Xavier, and now look. They’re together.*

I tried to shake that off. That was an entirely different situation with a lot of history between Xavier and Ava. Greyson barely knew Kendall and hadn’t, at least with the real Kendall, shown any interest in her.

*He does seem a little preoccupied with her, though. Maybe if he wasn’t, I truly wouldn’t be here questioning her to see if she’ll admit that there’s more to them that meets the eye.*

“Everyone’s okay,” I said finally. “Though the witch tried her best to steal Greyson’s wolf,” I said before I could stop myself. I hadn’t wanted to reveal too much.

Kendall didn’t seem phased. “That’s…all pretty weird. Glad you all got out of it okay. But I don’t understand what any of this has to do with me and why it drove you here asking questions.”

“Because the witch used a puppet in your likeness to torture me and Greyson,” I said.

Kendall looked appropriately taken aback. “A puppet in my likeness? What does that mean?”

“Exactly that. The witch created a puppet of you because she says there’s a connection between you and Greyson. A thread of some kind.”

Kendall seemed to be processing that, and for a moment, I wondered if me coming here and telling her about some kind of cosmic connection between them would make her more or less interested in Greyson.

There was a chance that revealing these things could come back to bite me, but I was hoping that wouldn’t be the case and would simply push her to be honest, too.

“If this witch was as hell-bent on hurting you as you’re making it seem, don’t you think she could have been making that up?” Kendall said. “Who’s to say she knows the first thing about me or Greyson?”

That reasoning gave me pause.

*What if Kendall’s right? The witch obviously couldn’t be trusted, so maybe she’d just lied.*

Still, I couldn’t get that image of Greyson kissing the Kendall puppet out of my head. It was a surreal thing to see, especially since I knew I hadn’t imagined the connection I saw between them.

“Please. Just tell me. Do you have feelings for him? I have to know.”

Kendall rolled her eyes and sighed. She looked so uncomfortable, but I couldn't let up now.

“Yes. I do care about him. As a *friend*. Do I think he’s hot? Yes. I have eyes. Anyone in the world can see that Greyson’s attractive. He’s an Alpha besides, so it’s practically a requirement. But so what? That shouldn’t be a reason for you to be so upset. You have a boyfriend, and he loves you. It’s obvious. What does it matter if someone else looks at him a little too long?”

If only that were all it was, that she’d looked at him a little too long. But it was much more than that.

“I don’t know.” *I’m just worried.* “There seems to be something more between you two.”

*And I’ve seen it before with my mates and other mates.*

“I won’t go into detail…but I’ve witnessed someone swear up and down that someone didn’t matter to them and that they weren’t their mate only for them to realize that their connection is strong—mate-level.”

“Cali, I—”

“I know that you don’t want to hurt my feelings, and I fully appreciate that, but lying to me about this will only make the situation worse.”

Kendall’s face was drawn into a mask of anger tinged with annoyance. “How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not lying?! I’ve already told you exactly how I feel! I do *not* want your mate, and I never will.”

I was starting to realize that this was all a waste of time. Kendall didn’t want to be open with me right now…not that I could blame her.

“Fine,” I said. “Thank you for talking with me.”

With that, I left. Even as I headed back toward home, all I could think was that there was definitely something more there. Even if Kendall was in denial, the feeling in my gut was right.

There was some deeper connection between Greyson and Kendall.

**Episode 5595**

**Artemis**

Back in town, Adair and I snuck into our respective rooms. Just as I was about to fall into bed, I started to wonder where Kastian was.

Just before I got up to look for him, he came walking in. “Oh, back so soon?”

I sighed but stood up to face him eye to eye. “Obviously.”

“Do you have any idea how hard it was to cover for you? Celeste almost found out you were gone like a hundred times.”

“Well, I’m back now, so you don’t have to worry about covering for us anymore.”

“Did you find what you needed at least? Please don’t tell me that all that sneaking around and lying was for nothing.”

I winced as I remembered that not only had I failed to find what I’d been looking for, I was about to ask him for another favor.

“Not exactly,” I began. “And…I need something from you. A favor.”

Kastian’s face dropped. “You must be joking. I’ve already stuck my neck out for you way more times than is necessary!”

“I’m sorry, and I swear I don’t want to ask you for anything else. I know how helpful you’ve been.” Shockingly. “But I need to contact my mother and I need you to help me speak to her through the trees.

“Are you sure you want to increase your debt to me? I thought you were against owing me more.”

I scowled at him. “So maybe I’m not as against it as it first seemed. So…are you going to help me? Or not?”

Kastian smirked, looking very proud of himself and the situation he’d found himself in. He was the type who loved to have people in his debt, and now I was in that spot two times over.

“Yes, I’ll help you,” he said. “And I know the perfect tree to use.”

He took me to a small park in the middle of Embersy. The trees there looked a little frail in my opinion, but Kastian seemed to think these were the best trees to use.

“This one will make communication a breeze,” he said, pointing to a particularly bald pine tree in the center of the park.

“Are you sure, Kastian? That tree looks like it’s seen better days. And those days are long in the past,” I said.

“Who’s the flora specialist here? You? Or Me?”

I gritted my teeth. “You.”

“Exactly. Because I’ve never seen you call vines to your hands or make the very earth shake under your feet,” Kastian said smugly.

I gave him a stiff smile. “I get it, Kastian. You’re the tree whisperer. I’m just saying that this tree looks majorly puny. The Fae world is full of luscious, full trees. Just seems weird that this is the one you chose.”

“And this puny tree is connected to all the others…so it will work. Unless you want to do it yourself? I’m sure you can go online and search for tree mastery for dummies or something.”

I could tell he was getting annoyed, so I decided to bite my tongue. Like it or not, I needed him.

“Yes, sorry. Do your thing.”

“Great,” Kastian said. He put his hands on the puny tree’s trunk. “Now. Tell me what your question is.”

“Out loud?” I said awkwardly.

Kastian gave me an exasperated look. “No. Tell me with your mind. Yes, of course out loud. I can’t read your mind. If I could, we’d have a much better relationship,” he grumbled.

“Okay, okay!” I said. “Um…Mom?”

*This is so weird. What if Kastian’s tricking me and I’m not going to get to talk to my mother at all?*

My misgivings dissolved when I heard the whisper of a sound.

I leaned in and spotted a little notch in the tree between where Kastian’s hands were resting.

My mother’s voice drifted out of the hole. “Artemis? Is that you?”

“Mom! Yes, it’s me.”

“So good to hear your voice, Artemis. Are you talking to me through the trees? How?”

“Kastian is helping me,” I said.

“Kastian? Wait…is that the Dark Fae you married?”

I was shocked. “Wait, how do you know about him?”

“Cali told me!”

“Oh…okay. Well, I don’t have time to talk about that. I need to ask you about Kadmos.”

Her sigh was evident. “Artemis, really? We’re talking about this again? Please stop obsessing over him and come home.”

“I can’t do that!” I said. “I need to know. I know he had a secret special place he told you about. The Ceruvela Mountains. I…had some memories of your time together and—”

“Memories of our time together? How do you know anything about the things we shared? What’s going on here, Artemis?”

“Mom, I don’t have time to tell you that either.”

She was silent for a moment.

I nudged Kastian. “Did you lose the connection?”

Kastian shook his head. “No, she’s still there…though from the sound of it, she’d rather be talking to anyone but you.”

I gave him a sharp look. “Mom, I know this is a lot, but I need to know about Mazell’s. Why was it so important?”

“I wish you would tell me how you know about that!”

“I saw everything,” I blurted out. “I think if I could find more clues—”

“Artemis, stop. Please. This hurts me, don’t you understand?”

“Yes, but… Aren’t you the one who told me there were whispers that he was alive? I think that’s true. That’s why I need your help. I just want to be sure.”

My mother’s soft curse echoed out of the notch. “I wish you’d never gone back there to the Fae world. You were forced into an arranged political marriage! I can’t believe this. I never wanted any of this for you…”

“I did it for Cali,” I said. “And I would do it again. I would never allow my little sister to be trapped here in this world. At least I know how to navigate this place alone since I had to do it my entire life before I found you and Cali.”

“I appreciate you doing this for your sister, but that doesn’t make me feel any better.”

Her sobs rose from the tree, and a second later, Kastian pulled away from the trunk.

“I lost the connection,” he said. “She must have ended it.”

“Shit,” I said. I felt bad for making my mother cry. That wasn’t my intention. I’d just wanted to know more about the the Ceruvela Mountains. I’d never heard of that area, and I hadn’t gotten any answers out of my mom. Shit. “Now I’ve messed up really bad.”

“Are you coming back to the inn?” Kastian asked.

“No, not yet. I need a second to clear my mind.”

Kastian arched an eyebrow at me. “You’re not about to run off again, are you? Because if that’s what you’re doing, I’m not bending over backward to—”

“No. I swear I won’t go far,” I interrupted.

Without another word, I left, walking the streets aimlessly, my mind swirling with guilt and frustration and sadness. The bustle of people moving all around me was making my head hurt.

I kept walking until the town gave way to the woods, and I was happy for the peace. I wasn’t walking long before I heard a rustling sound.

I stopped walking and sighed. “Rishika, I know you’re following me.”

Rishika appeared from behind a tree, looking sheepish. “Sorry. Just saw you walking through town like you had the weight of the world on your shoulders and wanted to make sure you were safe.”

“I’m safe,” I said.

“Maybe…you do remember that there are still assassins out there, right?”

“I know. Just another detail proving that everything is a mess.”

“Come this way,” she said. “We have a small fire going and some blankets.”

That sounded good. I followed her to their little camp where, indeed, there was a little fire going. I plopped down and covered my face with my hands. Rishika brought a blanket over and sat down next to me.

Then she pulled out a flask. “Want a drink?”

“Where’d you get that from?”

“I’m crafty. Brought it along with me.”

“I’ll take that,” I said, reaching for it.

Rishika smirked as I took it, watching me with glittering eyes as I took a couple huge gulps. When I handed the bottle back, it was half empty.

“Wow. So you did need a drink.” Rishika tipped the bottle to her lips and took a huge gulp and handed it back.

“I did,” I said.

“Well, I’m glad I brought this along, then.”

I felt better already, but it probably had more to do with being with Rishika than the drink. “I don’t want to think about my father or my arranged marriage or how I just hurt my mother anymore. I want to think about nothing at all.”

Rishika leaned on my shoulder. “You should do whatever makes you happy. You deserve it.”

“I wish I knew what that was. I’ve lost my way. Don’t know what I’m doing half the time.”

“Just let go,” Rishika said. “Don’t think. Just do.”

I looked at her. “Okay.” I leaned in and kissed her, and finally, my frantic heartbeat slowed.

Rishika looked surprised at first, but then she pounced.

We rolled onto the ground, making out and laughing and pulling each other’s clothes off until we were naked amongst the blankets.

And then we heard someone gasp.

I looked up, my vision swimming from drunkenness, and spotted a very fuzzy-looking Marius.

“Oops, sorry,” I said, my voice sounding goofy to my own ears.

Marius was blushing. “No, I, um…I’ll go.”

“No, don’t,” Rishika said. She held out a hand. “Stay. Join us.”

**Episode 5596**

I returned to the Redwood pack house feeling conflicted about my conversation with Kendall. In fact, I was starting to feel guilty that I’d gone to see her at all—especially without telling Greyson.

I was going to have to come clean. I didn’t want there to be any secrets between us, especially when it came to me doubting his claims that there was nothing going on with Kendall. If it got back to him that I went searching for answers, he might start thinking that I didn’t trust him.

I went looking for him, but after searching the pack house top to bottom, I couldn’t find him.

I ran into Lola sitting in the living room watching a movie with Jay and the twins. “Hey, have you seen Greyson?” I asked her.

Without even taking her eyes off the screen, she said, “Nope.”

“Okay,” I said, starting to feel confused.

*Where would he go? He didn’t tell me he had any business to take care of outside the pack house. And we only just got back from London.*

I went into the kitchen to find Torin making something that smelled amazing. I would have loved to sit with him and chat while he cooked and get the first taste test of whatever delicious concoction he was whipping up, but there wasn’t time.

I gave him a hug since I hadn’t seen him since we got back.

“So glad to see you back safe and sound, Cali. You have to try my new roast recipe. I’m making it for Kevin and some of his friends. You know, trying to impress them.”

I glanced at the back door, thinking that I should probably keep searching for Greyson, but getting a taste of Torin’s food was difficult to turn down.

“Here you go.” Torin spooned a heaping serving of roast into my mouth where it proceeded to melt on my tongue.

“Wow, Torin, this is so good. Kevin’s going to love it.”

Torin beamed at me. “I know he is. I really outdid myself.”

“Have you seen Greyson?” I asked him.

“Greyson…Greyson…yes, I think I saw him leave the house a bit ago. Maybe he went on patrol? I saw him heading for the woods.”

I frowned. “Okay…thanks, Torin. And tell Kevin hi for me.”

I went out into the backyard, where I found Ravi heading toward the pack house.

“Hey, Ravi. Are you coming back from patrol? Was Greyson with you?”

Ravi shook his head. “Yes, coming back from patrol, but no, he wasn’t,” he said. He walked past me, looking exhausted, and disappeared into the house.

*Where the hell could he be?*

I was starting to get worried. He would have told me if he was going far…and he hadn’t mentioned doing any solo patrols today though that wasn’t necessarily out of the ordinary. He didn’t tell me his every move….

I pulled out my phone. I was about to call him when I saw someone emerge from the far end of the forest.

Greyson.

When he spotted me, he quickened his pace, and when he got close, I was surprised. He looked…harried.

“What’s wrong?” Greyson asked once he was close. “You look shaken up.”

“I was just confused about where you were,” I said.

“Oh…I had something to take care of. That’s all.”

“To be honest, so did I.”

Greyson frowned. “You did? What?”

I figured it was best to just come out with it. “I was having some concerns about your connection with Kendall.”

Greyson was shocked. “What? How did you know?”

It was my turn to be shocked. “How did I know what?”

“I just got back from meeting with Rowena. I called her here to test my connection to Kendall.”

“What?” I gasped. “When?”

“While you were on campus. I’m literally coming back from that.”

“And I just got back from speaking with Kendall.”

Greyson shook his head at me. “What do you mean…you *confronted* her?”

“Yes, but that wasn’t my intention…or at least that wasn’t what I wanted the vibe to be when I got there.”

I didn’t add that the vibe had grown into one of confrontation very quickly. Kendall hadn’t been happy about my questions, and I’d left without any more clarity than before we’d spoken.

Greyson groaned. “This is bad. We can’t make Kendall angry. What if this blows back on the pack?”

“Blows back on the pack? I don’t get it…what do you mean?”

Greyson pressed his lips together, clamming up. “Nothing. Never mind.”

“Never mind? Are you serious? You’re not going to tell me?”

I was already on edge. First, he’d emerged from the woods looking like he’d seen an army of ghosts, and the next he was trying to avoid telling me exactly what was going on.

“You’re keeping something from me, Greyson, and I don’t like that.”

Greyson sighed. “It’s not what you think, and it’s not important. I don’t want to get you all worked up for nothing. And anyway, I’d rather talk about what Rowena helped me figure out.”

My stomach dropped as I let out a shaky, “Okay…?”

Greyson took a deep breath and then said, “Rowena confirmed that one of my mate threads…leads to Kendall.”

My stomach dropped. I felt nauseous and dizzy. How…how could this be true? I’d known there was something, and now I had proof. Not that it made me feel any better. I’d known it all along, but I would have rather been wrong. Speculating about something and knowing it to be true were two different things.

This didn’t feel good at all.

“What, wait…so you…you and Kendall, you *are* mates?!” I asked.

*Kendall and Greyson are mates. He doesn’t belong to only me anymore. Now he has another mate bond just like I do…what does this mean for us? What’s going to happen now?*

I was staring at Greyson open-mouthed, so I quickly corrected that, snapping my mouth shut and trying not to show just how shaken up I was…though I couldn’t imagine that Greyson could blame me very much for that.

I didn’t know what to do now…or how to handle such shocking yet not completely unexpected news.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

“No, I’m not fucking okay,” he said. “I don’t want two mates, Cali. I don’t want to be responsible for making two other people’s lives a living hell!”

That felt like a slap in the face.

“Is that what you feel like I’m doing to you and Xavier?” I said, unable to lift my voice above a whisper.

Greyson seemed shocked by what he’d just said, too. “No…fuck. No, that’s not what I meant, Cali.”

“No. Tell me the truth, Greyson. Do I make your life a living hell?”

Greyson dragged a hand down his face and looked out into the distance for a few beats before his eyes came back to rest on me. “It’s not *you*, love. It’s the *due destini*.”

I choked out a sob. “I can’t believe this.”

I was already feeling guilty for my new and extremely intense feelings for Xavier that cropped up after kissing him in London, and now Greyson had basically admitted that I was making him miserable.

*It’s not like I can control the* due destini*. It does whatever it wants. Tosses us around and exacts its control over us always, like a dark cloud.*

“I—I’m sorry, Greyson. I try to ignore the pull, I swear. I do my best to be fair to you and Xavier. I just don’t know what to do half the time.”

“And this is what I’m talking about,” Greyson said. “I’m not miserable because I can’t have you all the time. I’m miserable because the *due destini* hurts you, and I can’t do anything to fix it. I know you love Xavier too! I hate it! But I know that I can’t forbid you from being with him, too.”

“Greyson, you’ve always been so supportive. But maybe I’m asking too much—”

“No. I don’t own you, Cali, and I know that. I don’t want to own you, either. I just want to love you. That’s all.”

“Wait, what are you saying? You want me to be with Xavier, too?”

I was getting more confused by the second.

“No, of course I don’t *want* that, Cali. But I’ll never blame you for being with him too because I know you can’t help it. And I know it hurts you to deny him.”

“This is too much,” I gasped out. “I’m so confused.”

“So am I,” Greyson said. “And as much as I hate to say this…I need space. There’s just too much happening in my head right now.”

He turned and left me standing out on the lawn. I watched him slip into the pack house without looking back.

I wanted to go after him, but I realized that my mere presence was hurting him right now. I felt so guilty. So lost. I walked off, leaving the pack house behind and wondering if Greyson had just broken up with me.

**Episode 5597**

**Xavier**

I almost ran right out of town, thinking that maybe I would just keep running until I was too tired to run anymore. But that could take a long time. Days, even.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d run so fast and far that I’d been truly tired out. Running could take the edge off the turmoil I felt inside, but I would have to run for years to drain it all out of me.

I wished I could escape all the confusion and the pain that hit those I loved most whenever I made a move.

There were so many people I cared about—loved—and I couldn’t seem to do the right thing for any of them.

That was really starting to weigh on me. I wished I could let it all go, but I knew I couldn’t do that. I had responsibilities…promises to keep not only to my lovers but to my pack.

No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn’t just run away from it all even though everything was all twisted and jumbled in my head.

I turned back around and made my way back toward the pack house…but then my legs seemed to carry me off in another direction.

I fought it at first, correcting course and heading back home, but the pull was too strong. My wolf obviously had other ideas.

Suddenly, I caught a familiar scent on the breeze. I quickly veered in that direction and found Cali sitting cross legged on the ground, leaning against a tree.

I rushed over to her, shifting just as soon as I got close. “What are you doing out here alone?” I asked her. “It’s not safe.”

Then I realized that she was on the verge of tears. In a flash, all other thoughts disintegrated, and a surge of protectiveness took over.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” she said, swiping away her tears. “It’s nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing, Cali. Tell me.”

She looked up at me, blinking and sending more tears cascading down her cheeks. “Greyson and I got into a fight. I don’t even know where we stand anymore.”

I took that in, hiding my shock at hearing that. I didn’t want to jump to conclusions, and I ignored that sliver of me that liked when Greyson screwed up with Cali. As much as I liked to look better than Greyson in Cali’s eyes, it wasn’t worth it if Cali was hurt.

*What did Greyson do to get her this worked up? I don’t often see her like this when it comes to Greyson.*

That made me think about myself and how I would have been less surprised to find her out here alone crying about me or something I’d done. Especially since lately, I didn’t feel like I could do anything right.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, Ava and I just got into a huge fight too.”

Cali frowned at that.

“Sorry, I understand if you don’t want to hear about Ava.”

“No, that would be hypocritical of me, wouldn’t it? I literally just brought up Greyson to you.”

I sighed as I took a seat next to her. We were both so messed up. In the back of my mind, I wondered if all relationships were this hard.

*No. Because not all relationships are dealing with the* due destini *and a bunch of tangled-up mate bonds.*

“I told Ava about my feelings for you,” I said.

Cali’s head shot up, and her cheeks turned pink. “Wh-What? You did? And how…did Ava take it? Though that sounds like a ridiculous question now that I say it out loud…”

“Ava was obviously upset…but I couldn’t lie to her anymore. In the past when I tried to keep these kinds of things from her, it always made things much worse than they had to be. She’s pissed, and I get it. Ava doesn’t understand what it’s like to have two mates.”

“Lucky her,” Cali grumbled before wiping away the rest of her tears.

“Yeah. And because she isn’t dealing with the confusion of being torn between two people, she doesn’t understand why I can’t just choose.”

“And why that choice isn’t her,” Cali added.

“Exactly.”

“Well, as much as I’d like to, I can’t blame her. It’s fucked up being forced to choose between two people you love with all your heart. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

We both went quiet, lost in our own thoughts.

“I told you that I would step away from this if you told me to, and I meant it. I don’t want to pressure you or make things any more difficult for you…but I don’t want that. I don’t want to step away anymore.”

Cali sighed, her eyes on mine. “I don’t want that either.”

Hope swelled in my chest, and then just as quickly I pushed it down. Her admission didn’t mean that she was going to be with me like she used to be. It only meant that she wasn’t going to ask me to leave. It wasn’t the same thing.

“I wish I could turn back time to when things were simpler.”

I laughed. “When was that? Before you knew werewolves existed?”

I could only imagine how much her entire world and frame of reference had shifted once Greyson and I came into her lives. My life had changed, too, for the better, but an entire new world hadn’t opened up for me like it had for Cali.

I’d always known about mates. Wonky mate bonds. Losing my wolf and getting it back. Witches, vampires, potions and spells and enemies from the underworld. But for Cali, she’d had to adjust to all that while also juggling a relationship with two brothers who loved her so much that conflict was inevitable and constant.

Cali frowned, shaking her head. “No. I wouldn’t want to go back to not knowing. You and the rest of the wolves are all my family now. But maybe…”

“What is it?” I pressed. “Maybe what?”

There was a subtle shift between us, something I might have missed if I didn’t know Cali so damn well. If we weren’t so connected.

“Say it, Cali.”

“Sometimes, I dream about when we first met, when it was just you and me. Life seemed so simple and straightforward then…after you stopped being a total asshole.”

I groaned as the memories of who I used to be flooded my mind. I also remembered the times Cali was talking about…the way we were so laser focused on each other. It was different now, and as far as I was concerned, that part hadn’t changed for the better.

*To think how it would have been to have Cali all to myself this entire time.*

“You can’t say that kind of stuff to me, Cali. You know how it sounds, and you know how I want to react.”

There was another shift, and darkness sprang into Cali’s eyes. “So what’s stopping you?”

I was surprised to hear her say that, surprised at the unmistakable heat in her eyes, the invitation…

Slowly, I leaned toward her. I didn’t want to move too fast. I couldn’t. I was testing the waters, checking to see if this was right, if this was what we really needed right now.

So much had happened over the past few days…could we be moving too fast? And if we were, did I care?

I was so damn close to her lips, now. Close enough to taste them. Close enough to capture them.

“Cali?” It was a question, a breath on my lips.

“Kiss me, Xavier,” she said. “Do it now before I change my mind.”

My breath caught. She didn’t need to tell me twice.

With a groan, I kissed her hard and with so much passion that we both toppled into the leaves. I teased her mouth open with my tongue, loving the way she melted into it instantly. I braced myself on the ground, trapping her beneath me but giving her room to escape if that was what she wanted.

But that wasn’t what she wanted. She wrapped herself around me, pulled me down so that the full press of my weight landed on top of her while our mouths embarked on a slow, almost languid exploration.

We were tasting each other, not moving too fast, both of us leaving room for doubt on either end.

On my end, I was being so damn careful. It was treating her like a skittish animal, even as the wolf inside me stirred, howled and surged to life, wanting more.

This was what I’d dreamed about ever since the kiss we shared in London. What I’d longed for after every other kiss we’d stolen over the time since I’d been with the Samaras and with Ava. This was what I’d wanted back, what I’d never wanted to lose.

Cali was mine.

“You’re mine.”

Fuck. I hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

But Cali didn’t stop. She didn’t freeze. Instead, her soft hands began roaming all over my body as mouths found each other again, and then the wind shifted, and neither of us held back anymore.

Our kiss grew hungry, desperate, and before I knew it, I was ripping off her clothes.

**Episode 5598**

When I really thought about it, there was no way things couldn’t have gone any other way. I had to have Xavier, and I wasn’t strong enough to think about the downside.

Not when I was so spent from my fight with Greyson. Not when I’d spent hours trying to push the power of that kiss I’d shared with Xavier in London out of my mind. Not when I missed the feel of Xavier’s naked body moving on top of mine.

It was easy to forget how much I longed for Xavier when we were apart…when we weren’t sharing kisses that ignited all the feelings I’d had to hold at bay for so long.

Deep down I’d known that kiss would lead to this sooner than later. That the intensity of it promised that we would have to finish what we started, even if it wasn’t the right thing to do.

*But who says it’s not the right thing? Xavier’s my mate, and that has never changed. Of course I want him. Of course we’re attracted to each other. Why do we have to pretend that this isn’t what we both want? Adéluce had forced us apart. Not to say things wouldn’t be just as messy, but…we’d probably still be together, wouldn’t we?*

That was why I didn’t have the strength or the desire to let cooler heads prevail and push Xavier away. I wanted him too badly for that. So I didn’t stop him when he peeled me out of my clothes until I was lying naked and panting with desire on the ground.

Then he got up and stood over me, his chest heaving, his eyes drinking me in.

“Fuck, Cali. You’re so beautiful.”

He stooped down and traced the tiger stripes on my thighs, letting his fingers roam to my ass where he squeezed me almost savagely, pulling a groan of pleasure from my lips.

“I missed you,” I whispered. My entire body was buzzing with anticipation. It had been so long since I had Xavier this way, and I couldn’t wait to have him inside of me again. I licked my lips, hungry for it. A woman possessed.

We’d had so many close calls. We’d kissed so many times since we’d split. We’d shared looks that could start a fucking fire…but to be lying here naked, my entire body shaking with pleasure simply from the way he was looking at me…that was something else altogether.

He’d shifted and had been naked from the start…but the entire mood had changed now, and his nakedness was a promise, a precursor for what was to come. Especially with his erection hovering over me, something I hadn’t laid eyes on in so long.

As if they had a mind of their own, my knees fell apart, and Xavier’s eyes watched the movement with a fierce hunger that took my breath away.

“Xavier, I-I want you…”

I wasn’t ashamed to say it. It was what I wanted, and I knew he wanted it too.

“Yeah, baby?” he asked. “Are you wet for me already?”

Shuddering, I nodded.

He reached between my legs to touch me, and I was so wet that his fingers slid inside without any resistance. I arched up from the ground, moaning so loud that a flock of birds lifted off the branches above us and took off into the sky.

I watched them as Xavier’s fingers explored me. Then his hand drew down my chin. “Watch me,” he said.

My breath coming in small gasps, I allowed my gaze to wander down his muscled toros to where his hand was between my legs. I watched as he fingered me, whimpering as his thumb brushed my clit.

“I missed you like this, Cali,” he said. “Spread out for me. All mine to devour.”

Then he pulled his fingers out and stuck his fingers in his mouth, tasting me.

“Xavier…”

Shaking, I spread my legs wider, and then he plunged his fingers in again and drove them in past the knuckle, his fingers working me over deep inside, finding all the right spots as if he were moving from memory, as if he’d waited for this moment to remind me of just how well he knew my body.

I was breathing hard, clawing at the ground, my eyes riveted to his cock where it stood up, proud and big. I reached for it, enclosing it in my hand.

“Cali,” he groaned. “Fuck… I can’t—”

He gasped into silence when I began stroking him slowly, smoothing my hand up and down his shaft and enjoying the sensation of him growing even harder in the palm of my hand.

His fingers left me as he moved to lie on top of me again. I let go of him, running my hand down his chest. His hard length pressed into my belly, bringing back intense memories.

His mouth found mine again, and I tuned into him and only him, was present in this moment. I took the time to enjoy his lips and tongue as he kissed me hard, almost lewdly, before trailing his tongue across my lips and dropping his mouth down to nibble at my neck.

“This is what I’ve been waiting for,” he said, his voice deep with desire. “I can’t wait to taste you.”

I ran my hands over his body, enjoying every inch of him that I’d been deprived of for so long. But soon he was moving his way down my body. And when I felt his lips and tongue on my clit, I couldn’t help the cry that escaped my lips.

“You taste so good, baby.”

“Xavier,” I panted, my voice a shrill echo in our little corner of the woods. “Oh god… *Please*…”

He pulled away to look up at me, his cheeks shining. “Please what? Want me to stop?” He had that crooked grin on his face that I missed so much.

“N-No. Please don’t stop.”

His head dove back down, and in seconds, sharp, mind-numbing streams of pleasure seized my body, making me go rigid. His tongue circled my clit, licking, sucking, savoring. My hands tangled into his hair, needing something to hold onto as my legs started to shake. Then Xavier pushed my legs open wider, driving a finger inside of me while his mouth made a proper meal of my sex.

I’d missed this. How sure of himself he was, how he played me like an instrument he knew backward and forward.

I clamped my thighs on his head as the first spark of my impending orgasm lit me up from head to toe.

Sensing it and predicting what was coming next, Xavier pulled away, lifted his heavy cock in his hand.

“You missed this cock, didn’t you?” he said.

“Yes,” I gasped, unable to stop myself.

Then he pressed into me, keeping himself buried inside of me to the hilt. He stayed there, pulsing his hips, driving in deep, finally pushing me over the edge. Crying out, I clung to his shoulders, my orgasm washing pleasure all over me as I squeezed my thighs around his waist.

He kissed me hard, and I tasted myself on his lips, his tongue, and I kissed him back, unable to form words.

“Come for me again,” Xavier said. “It’s been way too long. Show me how good I make you feel.”

I took his head between my hands and kissed him hard while he found a rhythm, pushing me over the other side of my climax and sending me on a renewed path to another orgasm that I could already feel waiting in the wings.

Suddenly he pulled away and barked, “Get on your hands and knees.”

I did as I was told, liking the way the wind felt blowing across the hot, wet throb between my legs.

I gasped when I felt Xavier’s mouth on me again, sucking and licking and kissing me, and then his strong hands were on my ass, spreading me open, and then he entered me again, slowly, dragging in inch by inch until he was fully sheathed inside of me.

My hands clawed at the earth, and my entire body went weak, but Xavier held me up, his body curved around me as he thrusted hard. I felt like a rag doll, my mind was blank and receptive only to the sensations of pleasure and need coursing through my body.

By the time I was able to hold myself up again, I was pushing back against him, twisting and pivoting my hips, satisfied by the moans of pleasure that spilled from his lips.

With every pivot of his hips, I felt so much pleasure that I could barely think straight.

“Yes, Cali, yes. Fuck me,” he said. “Show me how good you fuck me.”

And that opened up something in me, and I rose up to my knees so that my back was pressed against his chest. I took his hands and placed them between my legs, and as his shaft plundered and pushed into me, his fingers explored, a gentle reminder of how well we moved together.

We’d been through so much, and somehow we’d still ended up here, sliding against each other, moving as one. Then I felt Xavier’s cock harden, and in the next second, he was pulling my hair as his thighs quaked against me.

“I’m coming, baby,” he said, and then he turned me around and picked me up, using his strong arms to slide me up and down his shaft while he grunted out his satisfaction.

He held me against him, and like a crack of thunder, my own orgasm flared, and I clung to him, rolling my hips against him until I was spent.

We collapsed on the ground together, my head lying in the crook of his arm.

We were quiet for a long while, and I thought maybe he might have fallen asleep. But when I looked up at him, his eyes were wide open. My mind calm and my entire body still reeling from sex, I asked what we were probably both thinking.

“So…what does this mean?”

**Episode 5599**

**Greyson**

I was brooding…pouting, even, and I knew it. Cali had taken off after our fight, and I wanted to go find her…but what sense did it make to go running after her after telling her I needed space?

Especially when it was the truth.

I needed some time to clear my head. I hated to do that, hated that I needed space from Cali, but I deserved to be sensitive to my own feelings.

There was nothing wrong with allowing myself a few moments to sort through all the complicated feelings Rowena’s revelation had left me with.

And I didn’t want to say or do anything that might make things worse between us. It wasn’t right to go chasing after her to backtrack and confuse her after telling her I needed to be alone, and it wouldn’t look good for me to change my mind on the dime just because she wasn’t around when I wanted to see her.

I was going to have to respect her boundaries, too, especially when I was the one who’d erected them with only a few words.

Even if I did go running after her, what then? What would I say? What could we talk about other than Kendall after a revelation like that? And Kendall was literally the last thing I wanted to talk about with Cali.

Especially when I wasn’t even sure what to do about this whole second mate thing.

My phone dinged in my pocket, and I was shocked to see a text from Kendall. It was uncanny how she always seemed to pop up in some way, shape, or form whenever I was thinking about her.

Was she reading my mind?

*No…she’s a wolf, not a witch. But dammit if her timing isn’t always spot on. Or bad, depending on how I look at it.*

I read the text and then re-read it, kind of shocked by what it said. She was apparently here, outside, and wanted me to come talk to her.

I frowned. Clearly she didn’t want anyone to know she was here, or she would have knocked. And I couldn’t blame her for laying low. If I were her, I wouldn’t want to announce that I’d arrived somewhere after Cali had just confronted her.

I went back outside and spotted Kendall waiting just beyond the tree line.

As I walked over to join her, I tried to decide what I was going to say to her. I could tell her to leave…especially since I didn’t want Cali to come back and see us together, but that didn’t seem right.

*It doesn’t seem right because you don’t want her to leave. You want to talk to her. You need to, after what Rowena showed you.*

“What are you doing here?” I asked her.

“Funny, that’s the same thing I wondered when your mate showed up at my place of work! You need to tell your girlfriend once and for all that there’s *nothing* between us. I can’t have her showing up out of nowhere and making a scene. It’s unprofessional. If I’d done something wrong, overstepped somehow, I’d get it. But I haven’t. So tell her that she’s imagining things and we’re just friends.”

“But I can’t do that,” I said.

“Do it,” Kendall snapped. “I’m not interested in dealing with Cali’s suspicions. If she keeps barging in on me like she did today, she might end up finding out that I’m in the MIB, and that’ll open up a whole can of worms I’ve warned you about, Grey.”

Kendall was angry, but I noticed that she wouldn’t look me in the eye. In fact, she was looking at everything but me, almost like she was afraid to meet my gaze.

I didn’t know why she was behaving that way, so I tried to focus on what she was saying, because she did have a point. Cali couldn’t just pop in like that at the risk of exposing Kendall—it wouldn’t be good for the pack.

“I didn’t even want to ring your doorbell today because I didn’t want Cali to see me. It would make things even worse, and it’s already bad enough as far as I can tell. She really believes there’s something going on between us.”

“Cali’s not even home, so there’s no issue there.”

I was still worried about where she’d gone. She was undoubtedly upset and not thinking straight. I didn’t want her to wander into a situation she couldn’t get out of just because we’d gotten into a tiff.

“Are you even listening to me?” Kendall said. “She came to my office and accused me of being into you! She was talking about puppets that looked like me and threads and all kinds of weird shit. Is it possible that she’s hallucinating again because of the *due destini*?”

“No, I—that’s not it.”

“Then what is it? This is my life we’re talking about. You all can do whatever you want to here—get into whatever drama helps you pass the time, but I’m not interested, and I told Cali as much.”

I went quiet, realizing that I couldn’t keep the news Rowena had revealed from Kendall. Not when she was here being so adamant about our relationship being fully platonic when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

“Here’s the thing, Kendall… Cali’s not wrong.”

Kendall looked taken aback. “Not wrong? About what? The giant puppet of me? Or what?”

“Well, yeah, she wasn’t wrong about that either.”

Kendall shook her head. “This is rich. Maybe you’re hallucinating too.”

She turned as if to disappear into the woods again, but I rounded on her, blocking her path.

“Kendall, wait. Everything Cali said…it was true. There was a witch and deadly crows and puppet shows…”

Her eyes went wide, and she looked at me really closely. “Okay, so you *are* losing it. That’s all fine and good. Lose it without me, okay?”

“Wait, just please hear me out. I know it sounds off the wall, but it’s all true, and it’s part of what happened to us in London. But none of that matters. What matters is that today I found something out.”

Kendall waved her hands at me as if to urge me on. “And what is it that you found out?”

“I have two mate threads. That was what Cali was talking about. That’s why she’s suspicious. She can feel it. It’s the truth.”

Kendall put up both her hands and took a step away from me. “Okay…fine…but what I don’t get is why Cali’s coming at *me* about that. I don’t have these threads or whatever. She should be worried about you, not me.”

“Come *on*. You can’t be that clueless about what this means, even if you want to pretend that you are. One of the threads leads to Cali, and the other leads to you. A witch confirmed it for me today.”

Kendall laughed. “So you’re really going there, huh? Saying that I’m attached to one of these ‘threads.’” She threw up a set of air quotes. “But I’m not, and I don’t like being messed with. I’m not mated to anyone. Never have been, never will be.”

I was surprised by her reaction. I didn’t know what I expected, but this wasn’t what I was used to seeing when people found out they were mated.

“Never have and never will?” I repeated. “You really don’t think you’ll ever have a mate?”

“No,” Kendall said simply. “Nor do I want one. And truthfully, seeing all the drama it causes you and everyone in your circle certainly doesn’t make it attractive.”

*She’s really convinced that she’ll never have a mate…as if it’s a choice. But how can she even think that? She’s a werewolf. Mates are part of our lives…it’s inevitable.*

“It’s obvious that you don’t *want* this mate bond, but it exists. At least for now. I’m trying to figure out how to cut it.”

“Okay, well, good luck with that. Just leave me out of this, okay? And share that message with Cali, please.”

For the third time, she tried to leave. I rushed to grab her arm, stopping her.

“Kendall, are you serious? This is your problem too.”

She grabbed my wrist, and in one smooth motion she had me on the ground lying on my back. She kneeled over me with one arm jammed against my throat. She’d gotten the jump on me, but with one move, I could have her on the ground just as quickly and just as easily.

I suspected she knew that just as well as I did.

She leaned in close so that all I could see was the violet shine of her eyes.

“Don’t manhandle me again, or else,” she hissed. “Or else…”

She wanted to say more, but it was clear that she was at a loss for words. Her eyes moved to my lips.

“Or else what?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

Then we both moved at the same time, colliding into a kiss.

**Episode 5600**

**Greyson**

Part of me—most of me—was lost in the kiss. Another part of me was panicking, thinking about how I hadn’t really kissed anyone like this and felt this way since being with Cali. There’d been some close calls with Maren and maybe Aysel…but this was something else altogether.

It didn’t help that the kiss was good. Could that be true? Was I really enjoying kissing someone other than Cali? And why hadn’t I pulled away? Why was I still kissing her and wanting more?

I wasn’t sure how or when it happened, but Kendall was straddling me. Her strong hands ripped my shirt over my head, and then she was kissing me again with even more fervor.

But she wasn’t just kissing me; I was kissing her too.

Fucking hell. I wanted more. The taste of her, new and sweet and spicy and energized by the news of the bond between us was driving me crazy.

I didn’t feel like myself. Or maybe I felt too much like myself…like that part of me that died when I met Cali, the part of me that enjoyed kissing different women and playing the field felt charged back to life.

But that wasn’t it either. Was it?

I was confused. My mind was hazy with desire, and the strangeness of feeling this level of attraction for someone other than Cali was taking me for a spin.

My hands had a mind of their own, roving over every peak and valley of Kendall’s body, enjoying how soft and warm she felt under my fingertips. I tore at her shirt, trying to get it off, wanting to see her breasts, needing to—

“Grey,” she moaned against my lips.

I grunted when I felt her hips moving against me, a slow, humping motion that sent my blood flowing south.

*Is this really happening? She’s got me all worked up. We can’t…we won’t…I’m not going to let this go any further.*

But I was starting to wonder if it was within my control. One of my threads was linked to Kendall, but that didn’t mean I was going to betray Cali…though I was having a hell of a time convincing my body of that.

“We should stop,” I said between kisses.

Kendall’s strange eyes locked onto mine. She was breathing hard, and she looked like she was in a trance. I had a sneaking suspicion that I looked the same.

She kissed me again while she rocked her body against mine.

I hadn’t succeeded in freeing her breasts, so when she laid down and pressed them against me, I wished I had, that I could feel her bare skin against mine.

And then, all at once, so abruptly I was left hanging, she ended the kiss.

“You’re right. We have to stop. This can’t happen.” She rolled off me, and we were both lying on our backs in the grass.

My mind was everywhere. Mostly, it was caught on the way my erection was straining against my fly, how it kind of hurt but kind of felt good at the same time.

And then my mind was drifting, wondering what it would have been like to throw away all caution and bury myself inside of her.

I covered my face with my hands, wincing. Fuck. I hated myself for doing this to Cali.

The fog of my desire for Kendall left like a storm blown out by high winds, and I cleared my throat, trying to figure out what I could say to cool this moment and peel away the thick awkwardness I could feel creeping in.

I finally hazarded a glance at her. She was watching me but jerked away as if she weren’t. In the next moment she was scrambling to her feet and adjusting her shirt and smoothing her hair.

She shook her head, her arms wrapped around herself. “You’re mated to Cali. Go do…that. That’s better for you. That’s the right thing to do. As far as I’m concerned, this never happened, and whatever thread the witch told you exists between us is nothing.”

I got up and pulled my shirt back on, shocked that she was dismissing this so easily. I wished I could do the same, but maybe because I’d seen the threads with my own eyes, maybe because I felt it in the center of my chest, it wasn’t as simple for me.

“This wasn’t my idea,” I said. I couldn’t ignore how gruff my voice sounded. Thick with need.

“You kissed me!” Kendall said.

“What? Fuck that. You kissed *me*! Do you think I want to do this? Do you think I want to betray my mate like this?”

Kendall sighed, and her expression softened. “No, I don’t. And you don’t have to. Whatever attraction we have, and I can admit it’s there, we have to squash it. We’re werewolves, not barbarians. We can control ourselves.”

“Right. We have self-control. Let’s use it.”

She nodded. “Exactly. There’s no mate bond between us. I meant what I said about that. I don’t have a mate. I don’t want one, and so that’s that.”

“I can get behind controlling ourselves, but the mate bond is an absolute, Kendall. A witch confirmed it. A witch who wouldn’t lie to me.”

Her expression darkened. “Stop it. It’s not true. I feel nothing.” She pushed me toward the pack house. “Now go. I’m done with this. I’m done with you, I’m done with Cali, all of it. I don’t need or want the drama, okay? And if you come to me again for help or otherwise, I’ll report you to MIB.”

Now I was getting pissed. “Really? This is how you want to handle this? You really are a piece of work, you know that?”

Kendall had pulled out a mirror and wasn’t looking at me anymore; she was busy fixing her makeup and combing her fingers through her hair. It was like I wasn’t even there anymore.

“Fine,” I said. “Have it your way.”

I stormed back to the pack house, the only thing on my mind telling Cali everything. I wasn’t going to hide this from her. Kendall and I had crossed a line, blown past the line, and kept going.

There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that if we both hadn’t forced ourselves to cool down, we would have had sex right there, mere yards from the pack house.

I was ashamed of myself but unnerved at how hard it had been to control myself around Kendall.

I had to admit that it reminded me of when I’d first met Cali, that unmistakable draw between us that made not making a move on her almost impossible.

It had been torture, holding back from pursuing Cali. Respecting her bond with Xavier, avoiding all the chances we had to take things too far.

I still felt as strongly for Cali as I had the first time I laid eyes on her. I loved her with everything I had in me. But it wasn’t lost on me how familiar this felt.

*Is this what Cali goes through all the time? Trying to hold back from hurting me or Xavier when the desire gets to be too much? Is this the passion she feels for Xavier? That overwhelming need to make love to him? To kiss him? To press her body against his?*

It was strange thinking about my mate and my brother in that way, but how could I not after what had just happened between me and Kendall?

I was going to have to find a way to undo this. I needed this bond with Kendall broken if I was ever going to get back to any semblance of normalcy.

I’d broken my sire bond with Elle. I’d gone to the three witches…even though I’d dreaded it…and they’d freed me from it.

Was a mate bond as easy to break? Could they remove it so that I could get back to what mattered—me and Cali?

That spell hadn’t been without risks, but in the end, the benefits had far outweighed the cons. The only way I’d been able to make it happen was by calling in a favor with the witches and as of now, I didn’t have any spare favors lying around.

And without the witches owing me something, the magic would cost me…and I couldn’t be sure it was a price I could pay.

Or perhaps any price was worth it.

Could I really live this way? Wanting Kendall and having to deny myself for the sake of my relationship with Cali?

And now, since Kendall and I had made things physical, she was on my mind like never before.

I had to break the thread.

I didn’t want to be with Kendall despite our crazy attraction. I didn’t want to feel this way around her…so out of control that I could cheat on Cali with her the next time I saw her because the pull was just that strong.

I couldn’t betray Cali. I wouldn’t. That wasn’t me. This had to end.

I pulled out my phone. If Rowena couldn’t do it, I knew someone who could. I called Chloe. I was relieved when I heard her voice, but that relief ended as soon as I said, “Chloe, I need a favor.”

**Episode 5601**

*So…what does this mean?*

I flinched. As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew they were a mistake. I wished I could snatch them back again. But whether I regretted it or not, the question was out there, hanging in the air between us.

Next to me, I could feel Xavier tense. After a moment he relaxed again, but it was gone. I could feel it. The words I’d uttered had already broken the strange, suspended relief we’d both felt when we’d given in and thrown our arms around each other.

Feeling frustrated, I started to pull away, but Xavier had other plans, and his arms tightened around me.

“No, don’t,” he said quietly. “Let’s just stay here. Just for a little while longer.”

I didn’t try to resist. Even with the guilt already settling into the base of my stomach at the thought of what I was going to tell Greyson about where I’d been, it just felt so good to be with Xavier again. I knew that a big part of what had landed us here was the *due destini*, but I also knew that the tricky fated nature of our destiny wasn’t the only reason I’d found myself here.

Deep in my heart, I knew that even without the *due destini*, I’d still be in love with Xavier. I was in love with Xavier. *And* Greyson.

Xavier sighed. “I don’t know.”

It took a moment for me to realize that he was answering my question. I looked up at him and found him gazing down at me. In his blue eyes I saw a softness I hadn’t seen in a long time. Too long. His eyes had been so guarded when he looked at me lately, like he was trying to hold back. Trying not to give into me, or into any urges he felt toward me. I could recognize this, because I’d been feeling the very same way.

And then we’d shared that kiss in London where I’d brought his wolf back. And everything had shifted.

“All I know is that I don’t want to go back,” Xavier said. “I can’t go back to what we’ve been to each other lately.”

“What do you mean?” I asked quietly.

“You know what I mean,” he said, looking meaningfully into my eyes. “Ignoring what we both obviously want. You not trusting me. Us not talking.”

I let his words wash over me, and I gave myself a moment to bask in the feeling of his love for me. But only for a moment. Because there was another question, and I had to ask it, even though I knew it was going to shatter the moment:

“What about Ava?” I looked up at him. “And don’t just tell me that you’re going to handle it.”

Xavier looked away, and—predictably—his jaw tightened when I said Ava’s name.

“You still love her too,” I said.

He didn’t tell me I was wrong.

I nodded. “I know you do. It’s just like I love Greyson. I don’t want to go backward either, Xavier, but…” I trailed off. I had no idea how to even finish that sentence. I didn’t want to go backward, but I didn’t know what it would mean for us to go forward, either.

I let my head fall onto his shoulder and closed my eyes, trying not to think for just a moment. How did it all get so complicated and messed up? Not that it was ever really simple. But it was hard enough when it was just me, Xavier, and Greyson. Now there was Ava involved, and Kendall in the mix too?

My chest felt tight as I thought about it. I had no idea how I was supposed to navigate it all, and I didn’t think Xavier did either. How could he? How could any of us?

Xavier’s arms tightened around me. “I don’t have any easy answers, Cali. I wish I did, but I don’t. I just know that I love you.”

I looked up at him again, and he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. I melted into his kiss, feeling all my anxieties wash away, letting the warmth of my love for him fill that empty space.

When I pulled back, Xavier leaned his forehead against mine. *I’ll always be there for you, no matter what*, he said through the mind link.

Ava’s face flashed in my head. I could see her as clearly as if she was standing right in front of me. I saw her sharp blue eyes and her long dark hair. She was beautiful and she was powerful. She was a werewolf, and Xavier’s Luna. He loved her, and he felt connected to her. All of that worried me, but I nodded, hoping that what Xavier had said to me was true.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

It was time for us to go. The sun had started to sink in the sky. We both knew we had stayed too long. Xavier helped me to my feet and handed me my clothes. When I was dressed, we walked back to the edge of the Redwood property line.

He leaned down and kissed me goodbye. This kiss was tender, loving as he cupped my face in his large hands. “I’ll see you soon,” he said, brushing my hair back from my face.

I nodded, but as I watched him turn to walk away, it occurred to me that he had never answered my question about Ava. He hadn’t even tried.

I blew out a frustrated breath. I knew that Xavier loved me, but I also knew that we couldn’t keep dancing around the hard issues. No matter how much he didn’t want to talk about Ava, we were going to have to at some point. We couldn’t just keep putting that conversation off. We would see each other soon, and when we did, we were going to really talk it through.

Feeling firmly resolved on the matter, I turned toward the pack house and walked through the last few trees and onto the lawn, which felt dry and brittle. It was still frozen, and it crunched under my feet as I walked across it.

As I approached the house, which was lit cheerily in the falling twilight, I wondered if Greyson was back. I knew I needed to talk to him. We had just had it out over my feelings for Xavier—and the *due destini*. His words—about making his mate’s life a living hell—had been ringing in my head when I’d run into Xavier in the woods, and they were still. My stomach twisted with guilt.

Greyson and I had argued, and then the next thing I knew, Xavier had been standing in front of me, and everything in the universe had told me to simply fall into his arms. And I had listened.

It wasn’t that I thought that Greyson had broken up with me, but it was hard to know where we stood now that he had acknowledged that he had a mate bond with someone else. And that that someone else was Kendall.

I frowned as I considered this. I knew what it was to have more than one mate bond, and I wondered what it felt like for Greyson. Did he feel the same kind of strong pull toward Kendall that I felt toward Xavier? Was it fair for me to fault him for whatever he might do, when I was going to tell him about being with Xavier in the woods?

Looking up at the darkening sky with a shaking sigh, I shook my head. Greyson was right. This did feel like hell. Sometimes. But it was worth it for those sweet moments of love and happiness I felt when I was with each of my mates.

“Cali!”

The voice broke into my thoughts, and I looked up to see Lola on the porch of the house. She headed down the steps and jogged toward me.

“There you are! Finally! I’ve been looking for you.”

“Hey, Lola, what’s up?” I asked.

“The guys are all heading to Lucian’s bachelor party, so we’re going to do a girl’s night tonight.”

“Oh, that sounds fun,” I said, still feeling a little distracted.

“Yeah, we can do masks and have pizza, watch some movies, and…” Lola trailed off as she eyed me suspiciously. She stepped forward and took a deep breath, smelling me.

“What?” I asked, squirming under her gaze.

“You’re fucking kidding me.” She grabbed my arm and pulled me across the lawn and into the house.

“Cali!” Sage called from the living room as Lola and I came in. “Girl’s night!”

“Yeah, I heard,” I called, but Lola didn’t pause.

She dragged me up the stairs.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

But she didn’t stop until we got to her room, where she pulled me inside and slammed the door. Then she rounded on me, crossing her arms and glaring.

“What?” I asked.

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “You had sex with Xavier, didn’t you?”

**Episode 5602**

**Greyson**

I revved the motorcycle, pushing it even faster as I headed down the darkening road toward the pack house. The highway was nearly empty, so I floored it, feeling the power of the bike rattle through me as I cut through the cold winter air.

I was frustrated that Chole had told me she couldn’t talk right now. I told her to call me back as soon as she could. I could only hope that she would pick up on the urgency of it all.

I felt like I was fucking crawling out of my skin. I didn’t want to have this connection to Kendall for a second longer than I needed to. For a lot of reasons. But the big one was that it just made everything a lot more complicated.

I never wanted to hurt Cali, and as far as I could see, that’s all this new mate bond would do. There was no other purpose it could possibly serve but to put a strain on my relationship with Cali—and on Cali herself. Like she needed that.

Now I just needed to think about how I could convince Chloe and her sisters to help me, once they got back to me. The last time I’d been in touch with them, they had wanted me to deal with their trickster brother. Shit. I still owed that brother a favor too.

My mouth twisted beneath my helmet. I was starting to rack up a lot of debts with all this bullshit.

I leaned to the right as I took a curve. I was close to the pack house now, and I grimaced at the thought of getting home. I was going to have to tell Cali what had just happened between Kendall and me—and I had no fucking idea how I was going to even start that conversation.

My stomach twisted as I thought about our encounter, and the explosive nature of it. I couldn’t even figure out who had kissed who. It had been like…spontaneous combustion or something. That’s just how it was with Kendall.

I shook my head. This fucking sucked. I’d seen how much it tore Cali up to watch Xavier and Ava together. I saw how much it hurt her. I was her solace in those times. The reminder that she was loved. But now I was going to be the one to hurt her.

*Fuck.*

The wind was cold on my face as I raced toward the house. It stung my skin, but I didn’t mind it. It felt good. I didn’t feel cold, and the bite of it didn’t bother me. I preferred it to the heat of summer. Dusk was falling, and when I pulled up in front of the pack house, the lights were on inside.

I parked the bike and pulled off my helmet. I sat for a moment, thinking about what I was going to say. But nothing came to me. I just kept thinking of Kendall, and the way she had looked at me when she’d had me on the ground.

*Fuck.*

I flipped up the storage compartment on my bike and stowed my helmet, then headed into the house.

It was too warm inside, and I pulled off my jacket. I threw my keys on the table near the door, and my jacket into the hall closet.

A few pack members hailed me from the living room, but I only waved. I wanted to find Cali. She wasn’t in the kitchen, so I headed upstairs.

Just as I hit the hallway, the door to her room opened, and she stepped out. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a cozy sweater. She had her hair piled in a damp bun on top of her head, and her cheeks were pink. She looked as though he just stepped out of the shower. She stopped when she saw me, and her cheeks went even pinker.

“Hey,” she said quietly.

“Hey,” I said. I sighed, and steeled myself, figuring I might as well just rip off the Band-Aid. There was no point in dragging this out.

I stepped forward and reached for Cali’s hand. “I need to talk to you.”

Cali looked up at me. Her mouth tightened, and I could practically feel her anxiety spike. I almost took a full step backward. I didn’t want to do this—I didn’t want to be the person making her feel that way—but I didn’t want to be in the same house with her, not telling her something so significant. It would be lying to her by omission.

She nodded and turned, opening the door to her room again. She stepped inside, and I followed, shutting it behind us.

When I turned to look at her, there was an uncharacteristically awkward silence. I wasn’t used to feeling like this around her, and I hated it.

So I just started talking.

“Cali, I went to see Kendall,” I blurted out.

Her face fell, and I had to look away. Maybe it made me a coward, but I couldn’t bear to see the anguish in her eyes.

“I told her that we were mates.”

Cali took in a sharp breath, but I forced myself to go on.

“I kissed her, and—”

“Wait!” Cali interrupted. “Please, Greyson, stop. I don’t think I can listen to this.”

My heart broke when I heard the pain in her voice. I looked back at her, but her eyes were down, so I couldn’t see their expression. I stepped toward her, reaching for her, but then I stopped myself and let my hand drop back down to my side. What the hell was I doing? Why did I think I got to try to comfort her? I didn’t get to touch her—not right now.

“I’m so sorry, Cali,” I breathed.

Cali shook her head, still not looking at me. “No, don’t apologize—”

“I want to—I have to—”

“I saw Xavier.”

My whole body tensed at her words. I looked at her again, viewing her through a new lens. Instead of seeing the pain I had caused, I saw the nervous way she was wringing her hands, how she wouldn’t meet my eyes, the wet hair—and I understood in a moment.

She hadn’t just seen Xavier—she’d had sex with him. Hadn’t she?

And it hurt as much as it ever did.

A rush of anger hit me like a fucking freight train, but I had to force myself to breathe. I couldn’t react. I didn’t have the right. Not after what I had just done with Kendall.

But this did mean I could touch her, so I reached for her and pulled her into me, pressing her against my chest.

Cali took a deep breath as her arms came around me. She pulled herself close and rested her head against my shoulder.

And for a moment, I breathed easier. Despite the pain, and the anger, it felt good to have her with me like this. There was still a comfort to be found in our closeness. I dropped my head and pressed a kiss against her hair, smelling her almond shampoo, glad at least that I wasn’t smelling Xavier on her.

Just the thought of them together turned my stomach, and a fresh wave of anger washed over me.

“I’m going to fix this,” I ground out. “Now.”

She pushed herself back and her head snapped up to look at me, alarmed. “What do you mean? What are you talking about? How are you doing to fix it?”

I shook my head. I was sick of being jerked around by fate or destiny or whatever the fuck was happening with the mate bond and the *due destini* and whatever else. I was glad for whatever forces had brought me to Cali, but I was sick of the feeling of being acted upon, rather than having my own fucking agency. I didn’t like the idea that I had just woken up one morning with another bond.

“I’m going to solve this fucked-up thing with Kendall. I don’t want it, and she sure as hell doesn’t fucking want it,” I snapped, feeling that strange frustration I’d felt during our conversation.

Cali started to pull away from me, but I held her close. I didn’t want her to pull away, and I tightened my hold.

“She doesn’t?” she asked.

I shook my head. “She was pretty clear.”

She bit her lip nervously. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. “This whole thing is just an added complication. One that we do not need.”

“What are you going to do?” Cali asked. “How are you going to fix it? This isn’t something Big Mac can do—”

“I’m not going to ask Big Mac,” I said, shaking my head.

“Then who?” she asked, frowning.

“I’m going to see the three witch sisters—Chloe, Posie, and Lauren.” I held Cali close. “I’m going to sever this bond with Kendall if it’s the last thing I do.”

**Episode 5603**

**Xavier**

When I got home, I headed right to my room, glad to find it empty. I heard Ava’s voice in Marissa’s room, and I wanted to check on her, but I was worried that she would smell Cali on me.

I had bathed in a stream before I’d gotten home, but I wasn’t convinced that had worked well enough. So I flipped on the shower and stepped into the warm spray. We’d been rolling around on the forest floor, so I shampooed and soaped up, scrubbing Cali’s scent off of me, along with the mud and dirt and leaves. I was trying to hurry, but I kept zoning out—I just kept thinking about Cali—the feeling of her under me, over me, and all around me.

Fuck—I was getting hard just thinking about her.

This was not good.

But I flipped off the water and stepped out of the shower, trying to shake off the feeling. I couldn’t do this—not right now. There was way too much to think about, and I had to figure out what all of this meant.

I loved being with Cali like that, but the question she had asked was a valid one—what did this mean? What were she and I now? Where did this leave us?

It had been amazing to be with her again, and I know she’d felt it too, but she’d seemed pretty confused, and even a little freaked out afterward.

She’d gotten dressed and taken off quickly afterward too. Maybe she had been cold, or maybe it had been something else. I’d wanted to take her back to the pack house, but I knew that wasn’t an option—or not a good option, anyway. It would have been awkward as hell if Greyson had seen us. There probably would have been some very strained questions.

There were going to be, no matter what, but I wanted to delay that conversation for as long as I could.

I rubbed the towel through my hair and tossed it onto the counter, then I walked into the room and pulled on a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt. When I picked up my phone again, I saw that I had a dozen texts—all from Lucian.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me,” I muttered, scrolling through them. They were all bugging me about his stupid bachelor party. It was the last thing I wanted to do tonight, but I didn’t see that I had a choice about it—the guy just wasn’t going to ease off.

*Fine, I’m coming.*

Hopefully that would shut him up.

Three bubbles popped up, meaning Lucian was writing back. A moment later, he sent a thumbs-up emoji.

I rolled my eyes again and slipped my phone into my pocket.

When I walked into the hallway, I could still hear Ava in Marissa’s room.

My stomach dropped as I listened to Ava’s voice through the door. I felt so fucking guilty. I had to tell her about what happened with Cali, didn’t I? I did—of course I did. It was the right thing to do. Even though Ava knew I was mated to both her and Cali, I knew this happening was going to change the dynamic between us. I knew *her*. She was going to be livid.

I pushed my hand through my damp hair with a frustrated sigh. I just had to figure out the best way to do this to make sure no one got as hurt as they could be. I just didn’t happen to know what way that could be. Maybe there was no damn way that was possible.

Maybe I could figure this out later. After Lucian’s party. I would get through one unpleasant task at a time.

I headed downstairs, grabbed my keys, and drove over to the Vanguard estate.

When I pulled into the driveway, it looked as though I was the last person to arrive. But there was another car pulling in just as I did, and when I got out of my car, Greyson climbed out of his.

*Shit.*

He looked at me, and I looked at him. I wondered if he’d spoken to Cali. I wondered if she had told him what happened between us. I wondered if he was pissed.

But I sure as hell wasn’t going to ask any of those questions.

I didn’t say anything but watched as Greyson strode toward me.

“Hey, how are you recovering from the jet lag?” he asked, clapping me on the shoulder.

I looked over at him, surprised. If Greyson *did* know about Cali and me, he probably wouldn’t be pretending that everything was good between us, would he?

“Fine,” I said warily. “How about you?”

“Oh, it’s not the jet lag that’s bothering me,” he said casually.

I frowned, baffled. My brother didn’t sound *mad*, exactly, but there was…something. “Is something going on I don’t know about?”

Greyson sighed. “Later, huh?” He tipped his head toward the house. “Let’s get this over with first.”

“Yeah, probably a good idea,” I agreed.

We walked up to the house and rang the bell. When the massive doors opened, I stared inside the giant entrance hall, stunned.

“What the hell,” I muttered, gaping.

The place looked like a carnival had crashed into a zoo. Peering into the mansion, I saw an elephant passing through. A real, live elephant. There were acrobats swinging from the ceiling on ropes and silks. All of them half-naked, of course. This was Lucian’s party.

“Unbelievable,” I said to myself as Greyson and I walked inside.

The place was crowded, and I spotted a guy in thick, white makeup and black triangles painted over his eyes. A clown.

I took a step to the left, away from the clown. I didn’t like clowns, and I made a mental note to avoid the creep.

“I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this,” Greyson said, shaking his head as he looked around the place.

Music blasted from the speakers, and strobe lights shone from every corner of the massive great hall.

“Greyson! Xavier!”

I looked over to see Mace walking toward us. He looked grim, and he was holding an armful of glasses. “Hey, man. What’s going on?”

Mace handed Greyson and me each a glass. “It’s whiskey. A double. You’ll need it.”

“Thanks,” I said, and gratefully shot the whole thing back. Whatever I thought about Lucian’s party planning, he always had great booze, and the whiskey burned all the way down.

Gripping my glass and wishing I had another, I looked around, astonished at the place.

Mace followed my eyes. “I know. It’s like a nightmare in here. Lucian seems to think that a bachelor party needs to be a fucking spectacle.”

“Whatever,” I said, shrugging. As horrifying as the place was, it was probably better than something like an intimate dinner with friends. That would be hard to slip out of. But this—I could just walk out the door right now and who would notice?

I spotted Porter and Duke across the room and raised a hand to wave. They nodded back. They were both holding drinks and looking miserable. I looked around, but I still didn’t see Lucian.

I did catch sight of Ravi and Jay, who were standing near the bar, drinking beers.

It surprised me slightly to see them, and I wondered when they had gotten invitations. But Lucian was certainly someone who thought, “The more the merrier.” But Greyson had gotten out of his car alone. Why had the other Redwoods come without Greyson? Maybe it had something to do with him dealing with whatever was bothering him.

Glancing around the crowd, I also spotted Torin, Geraint, Donovan, and Fausto. But when I saw Lilac and Charlie, I frowned. Was it a good idea to have those two here? I hated to be a fucking prude, but weren’t they a little young? I guess I’d been up to shit when I was eighteen.

I glanced at Greyson, wondering if he was concerned at all—after all, they were his pack members—but he didn’t seem the least bit bothered to see the youngest members of his pack staring up at the topless trapeze artists swinging from a hoop above our heads.

Whatever. If Greyson didn’t care, then neither did I. They were both werewolves—they’d seen a lot of naked bodies before this party.

Anyway, I needed to find the bar. One drink was not going to be enough to get me through this night, even if I was just staying for an hour.

But before I could locate it, the sound of fucking trumpets startled me.

I turned around to see Lucian descending the grand staircase. He was wearing a tuxedo jacket, though without a shirt beneath it.

He held a champagne glass in his hand, and when he raised it, a pack of women wearing bikini tops made of beads poured onto the marble floor of the great hall. They carried trays of champagne, which they passed out to every guest. When everyone had a flute, Lucian raised his glass.

“Let the party begin!”

**Episode 5604**

**Artemis**

*Join us.*

Marius hesitated. He looked at Rishika’s outstretched hand, then at me, his gaze raking over us. It occurred to me that Rishika and I had been making out and pulling each other’s clothes off, so we were probably kind of a sight to behold, but I didn’t care. I felt warm and happy, and I wanted Marius to stay.

He shot a glance over his shoulder, back toward the town, before looking back at us again. “Are you sure?” he asked, raising his eyebrows, and I could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

*He’s not sure that I’m sure.*

My heart beat hard as he asked the question. My head was fuzzy, and my body felt warm, but as he looked at me, it occurred to me that not only did I want him to stay—I *really* wanted him to stay. I wanted Marius, and I wanted Rishika. I cared about them both so much, and I was so grateful they were here with me, helping and protecting me, and I wanted to be with both of them right now.

So I reached my hand out too. Marius took my hand and Rishika’s hand, and we pulled him down to join us where we sat before the small fire.

When he turned to me, I slipped my hand around the back of his head and kissed him, hard. This seemed to please him, and he made a satisfied sound in the back of his throat. He opened his mouth to mine, his hand sliding in to cup my neck.

I pulled away and looked him straight in the eye. “I want this. *We* want this. Do you?”

Marius’s eyes wandered to Rishika, then back to me. The uncertainty faded, and he nodded, then leaned in and kissed me again.

As I kissed Marius, I felt Rishika’s hands on my body. Marius’s tongue caressed mine, and I opened myself to it. I grabbed onto him desperately, my arms around his neck as Rishika pressed into my back, her hard nipples sending a jolt straight to my core. She ran her hands up the inside of my thighs, then her finger slipped into me, and I moaned into Marius’s mouth.

Rishika kissed my shoulder, then moved her mouth up to kiss my neck. As she did, Marius cupped my breasts, running his thumb over the tight peaks of them. Gasping, I began to push his shirt away. He pulled away for a second, and as he tugged his shirt over his head, revealing his defined, strong chest, Rishika slid another finger into me.

I couldn’t hold back the moan that escaped my lips. His eyes went dark as he took in the two of us, and he reached again for my breasts, his touch frustratingly light. It almost matched the movements of Rishika’s hand as she pulled her fingers out and swirling them both around my clit in slow, lazy circles.

“You look so fucking good like this, Ari,” he said.

Then he kissed me again, palming my breasts as Rishika pushed her fingers inside me again. I grasped onto Marius tightly, running my hands down his chest, his arms. After a moment, he broke the kiss, moving to take one of my nipples in his mouth as one of my hands threaded into his hair.

Turning my head, I searched for Rishika’s mouth. I captured her lips with mine, biting down on her bottom lip, and fumbling to twist around enough to cup one of her breasts. She moaned into my mouth as I pinched her nipple. Her moan with Marius’s heady breathing was like music.

“Are you wet?” I asked her when Marius’s teeth grazed my own skin, making my entire body shudder.

And then, without being able to stop it, my knees began to shake. The warmth of the fire and the warmth of the booze made me feel strangely suspended, like we were in a place far from anywhere else. There was no town, no Celeste, no Kastian, no Adair. Not even any father to look for or mystery to solve. There was only this.

Rishika’s mouth descended on mine once more and Marius grabbed my thighs, squeezing as he continued to suckle my breasts. Rishika curled her fingers inside me, but I needed more. Without needing to ask, Marius’s thumb found my clit, his rhythm matching Rishika’s as pleasure exploded behind my eyes.

Heat flooded through, and I gasped and cried out as my orgasm broke over me like a wave. “*Gods*.”

“Fuck,” Marius whispered. He pulled away from me and looked down at Rishika. “I need to fuck her, is that okay? Ari, gods, I need to be inside you or I’m going to lose my fucking mind.”  
 “Since you asked so nicely,” Rishika said, giggling.

I could barely form words, the . “I-I…Yes.”

Rishika pulled her hands away and moved up to kiss me. Her hands went to my breasts, fingering my nipples as Marius fumbled his trousers open and let them drop. His cock sprung free, hard and glistening in the fire light. An empty ache pulsed between my legs as I looked at him, taking in all the hard muscle of his chest and the light trickle of dark hair down his stomach. He kicked his clothes away and spread my legs apart.

“You like this?” he asked as he grabbed his cock and ran it up and down my slick entrance. “You like us both fucking you, hm?”

“I think she does,” Rishika said, positioned near my head.

“Don’t stop,” I moaned.

When he entered me, I sucked in a breath. I was still tingling, but the pleasure and slight pain were exquisite, and I sighed as I arched back, taking more of Marius into me.

“Fuck, Ari,” he murmured. “You feel so good.”

Rishika leaned over me as Marius drove into me, letting her hands roam down, cupping my breasts and taking in my curves. But as we went on, her hands slid lower, moving to where Marius and I were joined. He grunted at the sight of it, thrusting deeper into me.

I reached up and let my hands roam over Rishika, arching up to tease her nipples with my mouth as my hands ran down her hips and her thighs. Then, hooking my arms around her, I pulled her over my face. Needing to taste her, I jerked her down to sit on me. I flicked my tongue over her clit, running my tongue through her wetness. As I began tasting her and fucking her with my tongue, she moaned her legs squeezing my head just as Marius hooked my legs onto his shoulders, driving in deeper.

Something inside me broke open, and a wave of release started to wash over me. It was exquisite torture as Rishika rode my face and Marius took me, and my whole body began to tremble. Marius moaned as I rocked my hips against him until the pressure building inside of me.

“Come,” I said to both of them, sounding desperate. “I need you to come.”

Marius heard that, and it pushed him over the edge. “Fuck,” he grunted, and gripped my hips as he roared into a gasping climax of his own.

Rishika cried out as I sucked on her clit, and as soon as I felt her tremor against me, my orgasm took over. My body clamped down on Marius’s cock and he groaned, making my entire body flush with heat.

As all of us came down from our climaxes, we fell into a puddle of limbs together amongst the blankets.

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When I woke, the sky overhead was still dark. Before me, the fire had burned down to cherry-red coals and was sending its smoke twisting up into the air. I took a deep breath, trying to remember where I was.

I was lying between Marius and Rishika, with my head resting on Marius’s shoulder and with Rishika’s arm thrown over my waist. None of us were fully dressed, but we were lying on a camp blanket and had another thrown over the top of us. I was safe and warm, and I smiled to myself, content to lie in the arms of two people for whom I cared so deeply.

I must have been lying on a stone, because something was digging into my hip, but when I shifted to get more comfortable, Rishika groaned slightly, and her eyes fluttered.

Dammit. I should have stayed still. I didn’t mean to wake her up.

I held my breath, hoping she’d stay asleep, but it was no good. Her eyes opened slowly, and she smiled at me.

“Morning,” she murmured, her voice a low hum.

“Is it morning?” I wondered. But when I looked at the sky, I saw that there were streaks of light just at the horizon, so it must have been, but just.

Rishika pulled away, withdrawing her arm, and reached for her clothes, which we’d strewn around the night before.

That movement made Marius stir, and I turned to look at him as he opened his eyes slowly.

He smiled as he woke, and—like Rishika—he moved to kiss me as well. But—*unlike* Rishika—he suddenly stalled just before making contact. It was as though he just remembered everything that had happened, and his eyes went wide.

As I looked at him, I could practically feel his anxiety spiking, and I felt for him. It had been an unexpected night, but I didn’t want to ruin the mood of our peaceful morning, and I wanted him to know that it was okay. Everything had been more than okay.

So I closed the distance between us with a soft kiss.

In a moment, then tension went out of him, and he kissed me back.

When I pulled away, he was smiling, though the expression was slightly wary. “Last night was…good.”

“Yeah, it was,” I agreed. Then I sat up to gather my own things. I looked over at Rishika. “Have you seen my clothes?”

She laughed softly and tossed them over. “Here you go.”

I pulled it over my head, then got to my feet to hunt for my shoes.

Eventually Marius got up, and once we were all up and dressed, we went to work breaking down the campsite and putting out the fire.

Finished, Rishika looked at me. “So…what’s next?”

I combed through my tangled hair with my fingers and shrugged. “I still need to find the location of that place in the mountains from my mom so I can start searching.”

Marius made a face. “That’s going to be hard, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, won’t it be difficult to start looking when Celeste won’t let you out of her sight and is tracking your every move?” he asked.

“And the tour,” Rishika put in. “Don’t forget about the tour.”

“Sure. Can’t forget about the tour,” Marius agreed, nodding solemnly.

I let out a frustrated groan. “Shit. The tour.” I rubbed my forehead. “I have to get out of it.”

**Episode 5605**

**Ava**

I looked up as Marissa came back into her room. “Well?”

She looked grim. “He’s gone.”

“What did you say?” I asked.

“Just what you told me. That he needed to give you space,” she said, dropping down to sit next to me on the bed.

I nodded, but even as I did, a wave of irritation rolled through me. I gritted my teeth as I tried to think it through. I wasn’t sure if I was mad that he even tried to come back, or if it was that it was so easy for Marissa to send him away. That he hadn’t tried harder to fight to get back to me.

“God, why does this always happen?” I groaned, falling back on the bed and staring up at the ceiling.

“What?” Marissa asked.

“*This!* All of this!” I shouted, gesturing vaguely around. “It just seems like every time I think me and Xavier are starting to be okay again, Cali just has to come along and ruin it,” I said bitterly.

Marissa was quiet for a moment, then she dropped back onto the bed next to me. “I’m sorry.” She turned to look at me. “Are you okay?”

I shrugged miserably. “I don’t know.”

“Okay, so what *do* you know?” she pressed.

I thought about the question. “I know that I love Xavier. I know that I’m his Luna, and I know that he’s the Alpha of the Samara pack.” I realized how much I loved saying those words. “It just *sucks*, you know, because this is everything I’ve always wanted, but it’s like the universe had to take my dream and turn it into a fucking nightmare.”

And it *did* feel like a nightmare—because despite having all the things I had wanted—my pack back together and Xavier at my side—there was still Cali, always lurking in the background. No matter what was going on with our pack, or how great Xavier and I were doing, she was always there, like a fucking specter in my life. Like a shadow or an unwanted ghost. And Xavier just couldn’t let her go.

Yes, Xavier always said he loved me, but he said that he loved Cali too. But that made no sense to me. How could it? How could he love us both?

The way I felt about Xavier didn’t leave room for anyone else. I couldn’t imagine loving anyone as much as I loved Xavier. He was my whole heart. My world revolved around him. He was the Alpha of my pack, and of my heart—and I could never split my heart in two. He told me he loved us both, but I just didn’t buy it.

I *couldn’t*.

I felt angry and unsettled. I didn’t deserve this, and I wanted something to blame. All of this nonsense had to be happening because of the *due destini* bullshit. If it wasn’t for that, I just knew that Xavier wouldn’t give a shit about Cali.

Anger surged through me, and I curled my hands into fists, feeling my fingernails digging into my palms. Tears stung my eyes as I bit down hard on my lip. I was just so goddamn angry at the unfairness of it all. After everything I had been through, didn’t I deserve to be happy?

Marissa’s face was grave as she looked over at me. “So I take it Xavier told you he’s still in love with Cali?”

I nodded and threw my arm over my eyes. I felt like I was going to cry, and I hated it. I hated that anything to do with Cali was going to make me cry—I hated that she had that power over me. But while she held any power over Xavier, she held power over me.

That pissed me off too.

“This is all so fucked up,” I groaned miserably.

Next to me, I could feel Marissa shaking her head. “I know, I’m sorry… But something like this happening was kind of always possible, wasn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” I asked quickly, looking over at her.

“I mean that it’s not like werewolves—especially Alphas—are famously monogamous all the time,” she pointed out. “Quite the opposite, actually. I mean, we run around naked ninety percent of the time. Shit happens. And yeah, sometimes there are some hurt feelings or whatever, but people kind of fight it out and move on. So what’s so different about this? I know Xavier loves you too. That’s what really matters, right?”

“Yeah, I get what you mean, but that’s just sex, Marissa. Sex with no emotional attachment is completely different. You’re not talking about people having multiple *mates*,” I shot back. “That’s different. And they’re not mated to someone from another fucking pack altogether.”

Marissa nodded. “Yeah, that’s a good point. This is different. I guess you’re in kind of uncharted territory.”

“You’ve got that right,” I muttered. “I mean, I don’t want to force Xavier to ignore his instincts, or something. I understand what it’s like to have your wolf pushing you to do something, even when you don’t totally understand it with your human mind.”

“Sure, who doesn’t know that feeling,” Marissa agreed.

“But he’s the Samara Alpha,” I said firmly. “And he should fucking act like it. The pack should come first. *Always*. And he’s been super distracted. And if he’s going off to who is effectively the Redwood Luna? That kind of shit makes the Samaras look weak. That undermines us in front of the other packs, and I can’t deal with that. I’ve worked too damn hard to get this pack back on track to let that kind of bullshit happen.”

Marissa nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, I know you have.” She went quiet for a long time. Then, “Hey, I know you said something about space. But are you two done? Like, is this over? I mean, Xavier’s still Alpha no matter what, so…”

I tried not to hear what Marissa wasn’t saying. And I blinked quickly, also trying not to cry. I hadn’t been lying—I’d had worked so long and so hard for this pack, bringing it back from the brink of complete extinction. When I think of what the Samara pack had been when I’d first come back from the spirit world…

It had been *nothing*. A couple of people in scattered tents, and Knox. That was it. Nolan’s betrayal with Silas had nearly cost the Samaras everything, and it had taken everything I had to gather the pack members again and convince them that the pack was worth fighting for.

And what Marissa *wasn’t* saying was that if Xavier and I were over, his position as Alpha was still more important than mine. They would need him as Alpha of the pack more than they would need me as Luna.

Maybe Marissa realized what she had just said, or where my thoughts were going, because her eyes went big, and she started to backtrack.

“Not that we would—I mean, we care about you—obviously. No one is abandoning you. It’s just something we would have to figure out—”

“No, I get it,” I said, shaking my head. “But I don’t intend to let Xavier go. We’re not broken up. I’m still his Luna. Nothing about what’s happening right now is going to hurt the Samaras,” I said, saying the words as much for my benefit as for Marissa’s. “I’ll make sure of that.”

“I know you will, Ava,” she said quietly. “No one cares more about this pack than you do.”

“Damn right,” I muttered. “Xavier is the Alpha of this pack, and I am the Luna, and that counts for something. That counts for a hell of a lot. He might think he’s in love with Cali, but you’re right. He does love me too. He doesn’t want to break up with me any more than I want to break up with him. And that matters.”

“Yeah, it does,” Marissa agreed.

I thought for a moment, letting the ideas spin in my head as I stared up at the broad beams spanning Marissa’s ceiling. Then an idea hit me, and I sat up quickly.

“What is it?” Marissa asked, startled.

“This is all happening because of the *due destini*,” I said, the answer dawning on me clear as day.

“Yeah, that’s true…”

“The fucking *due destini*.” I shook my head. I couldn’t believe I’d missed the obvious answer for so long. “I’ve been fighting the symptom, but that’s been a huge mistake. This isn’t just about Cali—if I want to deal with this once and for all, I have to deal with the root cause.”

Marissa had sat up and was staring at me, a baffled look on her face. “Okay, that makes logical sense, but what does that *mean?*”

I slammed my fist into my palm. “I have to go see a witch.”

Marissa’s eyes went wide. “A witch? What do you need a witch for?”  
 I raised my eyebrows. “I’m going to break this *due destini* bullshit once and for all.”

**Episode 5606**

**Greyson**

I could feel the beginnings of a headache as the spectacle of Lucian’s bachelor party began to unfold, but I resisted the urge to rub at my temples.

It wasn’t that I was against having fun or attending a raging party, but something about the way Lucian went about executing his parties literally went against everything I found enjoyable.

Lucian was still taking his time descending the spiral staircase, too busy showing off his awful outfit and soaking in the confusion and exasperation of his guests, at least his non-Vanguard guests, while mistaking it for admiration.

“No party would be complete without the best props I have to offer!” Lucian announced. He waved a hand and a group of uniformed men wheeled out a fucking cannon.

*He can’t be serious. This is an awful idea. A cannon? Why?*

This was a brave move considering the last time Lucian presented a statue of himself, the dick was blown off by a cannon that looked just like that one. Maybe he’d enjoyed defacing his statue in such an epic way. Otherwise, why would he bring *another* cannon to another one of his parties?

Honestly, the only way this party might become remotely enjoyable was if that happened again.

But, as if I weren’t overstimulated enough, a second later the cannon exploded, spraying out a cloud of fireworks and sparklers.

Everyone but me cheered. Apparently, I was the only person who wasn’t impressed by discharging heavy artillery at a party.

One of the acrobats closest to the cannon flinched at the sound and grabbed at his chest as if the sudden, ear-splitting explosion had nearly given him a heart attack. He and I were on the same page. Cannons weren’t fun. Never had been, never would be.

Clearly, Lucian hadn’t thought to prep his performers for that little party trick. Hopefully they were getting paid a lot to deal with all the ridiculousness they were going to be forced to put up with tonight.

Lucian was beside himself with excitement and grinning at the cannon before he swung his gaze out to all the people gathered in his honor.

“Now that I’ve started this party off with a bang, welcome to my bachelor party! We’re here to celebrate *me* and, of course, my forthcoming nuptials to the love of my life, my sweet, beautiful Elle. My mate. The woman I would give anything to and do anything for.”

I flinched at that. Part of me had hoped that the out-of-control nature of one of Lucian’s parties would distract me from everything going on in my life. It was about the only plus about attending what I knew would be a flashy nightmare.

But hearing the way Lucian talked about Elle only made me think about Cali. Lucian was an ass, but his love for Elle was real, and it reminded me of my tender, strong feelings for Cali.

Inevitably, thinking about Cali drove me to consider the latest threat to the peace of our relationship—my other mate thread with Kendall.

If only I’d found a way to sever it already. I didn’t want to walk around with this weighing on me for much longer. What I wanted was to feel one single connection with the woman I loved, and that was Cali.

Right now, I felt so disconnected with her for so many reasons, but I was going to do my best to forget about it for the time being…because obsessing over it was too painful when I didn’t know when I would be able to fix things.

Lucian gestured to the rooms around us. “In the many rooms, you’ll find a myriad of attractions and distractions. And you may have noticed the champagne fountains and nymph troupe swimming around merrily on your way in. Don’t forget to enjoy that amazing sight. You may never see anything so magical again.”

Xavier and I exchanged a look. This was going to be the longest night ever, and it was only just beginning.

“Please enjoy yourselves—partake in the entertainment. All the joy we feel tonight will manifest in my marriage tenfold! So, in short, no bad vibes, please!”

Lucian jogged down the steps, heading right for me. I looked around for a place to escape to, but Lucian was too fast, and stepping into any of Lucian’s rooms of entertainment seemed like a worse fate than speaking to the man himself.

“Oh, Greyson! My best man! So happy you made it!”

My mouth dropped open.

*Wait, did he just…*

Xavier laughed and immediately tried, unsuccessfully, to turn it into a cough.

“Wait, Lucian, did you just call me your best man? Because—”

“Oh, did I forget to ask you?” Lucian interrupted, his smile saying that he knew damn well he hadn’t taken the time to ask me that because he knew what the answer would have been. “My mistake, an oversight on my part. Well, no matter. We’re best friends, so of course you’re my best man!”

*If I take off running now, will Lucian follow me? This is the last thing I need. Doesn’t the best man role come with all kinds of responsibilities? Doesn’t it mean I’ll have to spend more time with Lucian than I can stomach?*

Xavier stepped forward to take Lucian’s hand. “Congratulations, Lucian. I’ll let you two discuss the wedding party details.” Then he turned to me. “Good luck, man.” And then in a low voice: “Because you’re going to need it.”

My hackles shot up. Xavier probably had no idea that I knew he’d been with Cali while I was gone. I tried to shift my thoughts away from that and focus on Lucian’s nattering, hoping that it would distract me from the rage I was suddenly feeling toward my brother.

*The first chance he got, Xavier made his move on Cali. And now he has the nerve to look me in the eye like he didn’t just fuck my mate? What an asshole.*

In that moment, it didn’t matter that Xavier was Cali’s mate too. Not when the two of them weren’t even officially together. Not when Xavier had run off to head his own pack and had a Luna of his own to sleep with.

While Ava wasn’t my favorite person, I had to wonder how she felt about this information, though something told me Xavier hadn’t bothered to come clean to her either.

Why did he always have to push himself between me and Cali? Why couldn’t he just respect my bond with Cali and stay away from her?

Why did any of that bullshit with Kendall have to happen?

“So, as my best man, you’re responsible for making sure I don’t make any bad decisions tonight,” Lucian said. “We wouldn’t want Elle to get wind of any…impropriety.”

“Lucian, I can’t—”

I stopped myself from bowing out of that role because chasing after Lucian and keeping him in line was exactly what I needed. It was the perfect way to get out of my own head, which was what I desperately needed right now.

If I focused on Lucian tonight and not the awful state of my life, I would be able to forget how hurt Cali looked earlier. Or…what she’d been doing with Xavier out in the woods.

One thing I knew for sure was that I had no desire to spend even another second around my brother’s smug face.

*To think…he slept with Cali and doesn’t even have the decency to admit it to me. He’s such a snake.*

“Come, follow me!” Lucian said. “First up are body shots.”

I bit back a sigh and followed Lucian to the bar in the front part of the hall. Several pretty young women with bare midriffs were there waiting.

“Hey, Greyson, enjoying the festivities?” a familiar voice said.

“Colton?” I turned around to greet my brother, surprised to see him standing nearby waiting for a drink. “Wow, didn’t expect to see you here,” I said after breaking away from Lucian. “What brings you to Lucian’s latest shindig from hell?”

Colton leaned close and whispered, “I don’t think the guy has a lot of friends, so I got invited. And you know I never say no to a good party.”

“A good party?” I said. “This?”

“Come on, you don’t think this is epic? Beautiful women everywhere? Aerial artists? A fucking cannon? All the liquor you can drink?”

“No, none of this is my style,” I said, wishing that I was at home with Cali. Things were a bit awkward between us right now, but seeing Cali always made me feel better.

“Anyway, I had a hell of a time convincing Maya to let me come,” Colton said. He looked past me out into the crowded room. “I thought I saw Xavier. Where’d he go?”

Before I could answer him, a violent, high-pitched noise sliced through my head. I had to grit my teeth to keep from crying out in pain.

All around me, other wolves were pressing their hands against their ears and dropping to the ground.

What the hell was going on here?

**Episode 5607**

I was lying across my bed and struggling to wrap my head around everything Greyson had said to me.

If only he were still here so that we could talk everything through…or maybe it was for the best that he had Lucian’s party tonight.

Earlier, he’d asked for space, and now we were going to have space whether we wanted it or not.

Greyson had to be as preoccupied with all this as I was. We were in the middle of a difficult spot in our relationship, and all I could think about was how nice it would’ve been to take some time to ourselves to sort everything out together…but maybe that was unrealistic.

I recalled how difficult it had been to sever the sire bond he’d had with Elle, so what the heck was he going to have to give up to solve this thing with Kendall?

If he was really going to go to the three witches—even one of them—for help, they might ask something big in return. As was always the case whenever I thought about having to pay a witch for their help, I pictured Jay and his missing eye.

Was Greyson willing to sacrifice something as important as part of his sight to rid himself of his link with Kendall?

Was it worth it?

I shuddered even thinking about it. True to form, Greyson insisted on trying to take care of this all on his own. Why didn’t he ever ask for help?

I rolled over onto my stomach and pressed my face into one of the pillows, inhaling Greyson’s scent. Why did everything have to be so difficult? No one had prepared me for these types of complications.

Why couldn’t love be easier?

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts, and I was almost grateful for it. Pity parties never led to anything good in my experience.

I got up and opened the door to find Violet standing on the other side. “Hey, Cali, did Lola tell you? We’re having a girl’s night!”

At my best friend’s name, my stomach dropped. Lola and I hadn’t spoken since she’d figured out that I’d been with Xavier. There’d been something in her eyes… An anger. I thought she’d eased up on Xavier after everything, but I was clearly wrong. Uncomfortable, I’d run off to shower, and then Greyson had shown up, and then…well, maybe it was better that I just stay in my room for the night and hide under the covers.

But how could I do that when Violet was looking at me with so much anticipation and excitement? I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I thought it best I skip this little hang session.

Against my better judgment, I followed Violet down the stairs to where Sage, Zainab, Dani, and Lola were waiting in the den. There were snacks and drinks spread out on the table, and everyone was already in their pajamas. Violet took a seat next to Zainab all the way at the end while I stood awkwardly off to the side grinning weakly.

I could feel Lola’s eyes on me, and it was taking everything in me to avoid her gaze. I was not looking forward to discussing what had happened between me and Xavier.

Sage gestured to the table. “While the boys are out getting debauched with Lucian, we can get schnapps’d right here in the pack house.”

Despite my guilt and anxiety, I couldn’t help but laugh at Sage’s plan. Maybe hanging with the ladies and cutting loose was exactly what I needed.

It was high time I took a load off and simply enjoyed life without worrying about Greyson or Xavier or what Lola was going to think of me once we had our inevitable talk.

“I like to think that we’ll have way more fun than the boys tonight,” Sage continued.

“Doubt it,” said Zainab. “Lucian’s parties are epic. I know some of the boys and Xavier and Greyson hate them, but they’re in the minority. I think Lucian knows how to have fun.”

I couldn’t remember any party at Lucian’s that had been fun, but then again, Zainab had never been in the middle of even half the conflicts that always seemed to come to a head while partying with Lucian and the Vanguards.

Deciding to take tonight in stride, I joined the rest of the girls on the floor and reached for a glass.

“Ready to get schnapps’d,” I said, winking at Sage, who picked up the bottle and gave me a generous pour of the peach liquid.

I sipped from my glass, winced at how syrupy sweet it was, and then sat back and enjoyed the banter.

Violent leaned over and bounced her shoulder against mine. “So happy you guys came back safe and sound from London. Everyone was so worried while you were gone.”

I smiled at her, pleased by Violet’s positivity. It was almost enough to make me forget the hellfire Lola was sure to rain down on me once she got a chance to drill me about my dalliance with Xavier.

“I’m glad to be home,” I said to Violet.

“Did you all see anything really fun? Any cool sights or good places to eat? That sort of thing?”

I thought back to all the awful things we had to see, and of course, the ravens and Cordelia’s house of horrors with its endless hallways. I pictured Greyson kissing that puppet version of Kendall.

No, we hadn’t seen anything good in London. And even if we had, the awful things had blotted them all out of memory.

All that strangeness had come between me and Greyson. It was not a vacation I would ever look back on with fondness. If it could even be called a vacation. It was simply a trip we had to take that turned into one of the worst excursions ever.

I shook my head at Violet. “Unfortunately, we didn’t really get a chance to do any fun touristy stuff.”

“Saved all the fun stuff for when you got back home, I guess,” Lola muttered.

An uncomfortable silence settled over our little get together, and in that instant, I wished I’d told Violet I couldn’t make it tonight and stayed in my bedroom. I wasn’t in the mood for Lola’s ire. Not when I was already dealing with everything going on between me and Greyson.

I looked around at the others and could sense that they were picking up on the strange mood between me and Lola. And how could they miss it? Neither of us had really spoken to each other since I came downstairs, and now that Lola was speaking to me, it was some obvious dig.

I reached for the deck of cards sitting on the table between us and picked it up. “Should we play a game?” I suggested, trying for a fun tone but instead sounding fake and stilted.

Sage nodded, passing a darting glance between me and Lola. “Sure…how about we play never have I ever.”

Sage’s suggestion was immediately met with a bunch of groans.

“Come on, it’ll be fun!” Sage insisted. “It’s the perfect way to get to know each other’s deepest darkest secrets…in an entertaining way!”

My stomach twisted at that. Fun? Revealing things that I was embarrassed about? Things I hadn’t told anyone because I was afraid of their reactions?

I was about to object a bit more strongly but then Lola slammed a fist on the table. “Fine. I’ll start.” She looked right at me as she said, “Never have I ever slept with my ex-boyfriend who’s Alpha of another pack and then acted like nothing happened.”

I’d never in my life heard a room go as quiet as this one. For a second, I wondered if my hearing had gone out.

My cheeks were on fire, and I didn’t know if it was from embarrassment or pure, unadulterated anger. Either way, Lola had gone from my throat in a very public way.

“What the *hell*,Lola?! Why would you say something like that?”

Lola shrugged and looked away.

I couldn’t believe my best friend would just throw me under the bus like that. We were supposed to have each other’s backs no matter what—even if we were angry at each other.

And who said that I had to tell Lola every detail of my life? I was an adult, and that meant I didn’t have to run all my choices by her.

Honestly, maybe it was good for me to play my life choices close to the vest from now on if Lola was just going to air out my secrets and private moments the second she got angry.

Lola was mad at me—that much was clear as day now—but that was no excuse for telling everyone what happened before I’d even had time to process it for myself.

Perhaps if the pack wasn’t so close, they wouldn’t know what or who Lola was talking about…but that wasn’t the case. Everyone knew. It was obvious.

Violet spoke up. “Wait, what does that mean for the Redwoods? Are you getting back together with Xavier?”

**Episode 5608**

**Xavier**

The ringing in my ears remained, but at least the shrill, painful noise had ceased. I straightened up and looked around at all the other wolves doing the same, recovering from that random assault on all our ears and trying to get back into the spirit of the party.

Lucian was yelling at the top of his lungs and moving toward the DJ booth. He looked like he was beside himself with anger and seconds from shifting and ripping the poor scrambling DJ apart.

“What the hell did you guys do to my sound system?” Lucian shouted. “You almost blew everyone’s damned ears apart!”

I was surprised when I spotted Colton standing with Greyson. I caught my twin’s eye and Colton waved and made a face that said, *What in the hell is going on here?*

“Hell if I know,” I mouthed back.

Honestly, I wasn’t all that surprised that I’d nearly lost my hearing at a Lucian event. I didn’t think I’d come out of many of his parties unscathed, so it tracked.

Greyson turned to see who Colton was waving at and scowled when he saw that it was me.

*Wow. That was a cold stare. What’s up with him?*

There was undoubtedly something going on there, but I wasn’t about to get into it with Greyson. I had enough going on in my life with Ava and Cali without adding my brother’s grievances to the pile.

When it came to my relationship with Greyson, there was almost always something wrong or off between us, so Greyson’s reaction wasn’t all that strange except that he hadn’t seemed so put off by me earlier.

Had something happened in the few minutes since I left him in Lucian’s clutches? Or maybe that was why he was upset. Perhaps he thought I’d abandoned him.

Greyson had to understand that if I saw a chance to get away from Lucian and not be roped into his shenanigans or asked for something I wasn’t willing to give, I was going to take it.

Lucian was like a virus that infected you the longer you stayed in his presence. As of late, I’d done a decent job of staying out of his messes and parties and problems, and I wanted to keep it that way.

It was too bad that Greyson had been roped into the best man thing, but better him than me.

I saw Colton say something to Greyson, and then he came walking over. “What’s up bro!” Colton said, punching me lightly in the arm before we hugged.

“Pleasant surprise seeing you here,” I said.

“Yeah…but I’m starting to wonder if this party is worth getting Maya annoyed with me. This shit is crazy, isn’t it? I didn’t come here to get my eardrums blown out, I know that much.” He looked around. “And why the hell does he have an elephant? Is that even legal?”

Colton’s energy was exactly what I needed. He never took anything seriously and was always good for a joke or two. I’d only been in my twin brother’s presence for less than a minute and could already feel my spirits lifting.

“You know Lucian…he’s a lot,” I said.

“In truth, I barely know the guy at all, but what I do know of him is, you’re right, a lot. He likes all this ridiculous shit. The spectacle and the shock value are his thing.” Colton looked down one of the hallways. “Which means that we have to go check out one of the other rooms, right?”

“It can’t get any worse than it is right here, right?” I said.

Together, Colton and I started walking toward one of the rooms, choosing at random. I was sure that whatever we found in any of the rooms would be equally bad and off-putting. He already had one illegal animal roaming around—maybe there would be more?

Colton elbowed me in the side. “Wait, I meant to ask. How’s Ava?” He was trying to make it sound like a light question, but it was anything but. I could hear the hints of old anger and resentment in his voice. Colton couldn’t stand Ava, and he was too real to hide it.

Still, I appreciated my brother’s effort to make good on his promise to try to accept Ava. Too bad I didn’t know how to answer his question. I didn’t want to lie to my brother about what was really going on between us, and I supposed there really wasn’t any reason to.

*I don’t want to prove Colton’s point about Ava. He never felt like we would last. Sucks to prove him right.*

“Wait, did something happen already?” Colton asked, obviously picking up on my hesitation. The hopeful note in his voice irritated me. Obviously, he would be happy to hear that Ava and I had fallen apart even though breaking up with Ava would be more complicated than he could ever understand.

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it,” I snapped at him.

Colton noticeably schooled his features so that he didn’t look as excited as he obviously was. “What? Me? Excited about you possibly breaking things off with Ava?” He pointed to himself with faux indignation. “Me? That doesn’t sound like something I’d do at all.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Save the theatrics, Colton. I know how you feel about Ava. You don’t have to pretend.”

“Me? Pretend? Never.” He smirked as he dropped the act. “Listen, we all know how I feel about Ava, but you look down. I don’t want you to be upset. So, tell me what’s going on?”

I looked around to see who was nearby. I didn’t want to share this issue with a bunch of randoms at Lucian’s. Werewolves were such gossips, and I didn’t want anything to get out. Nor did I want Greyson to overhear.

Just before we reached the party room, I gestured for Colton to follow me and took him down a dark, deserted hallway. Once we were far enough away from the party that I didn’t hear the blaring music or the din of voices, I told Colton what was on my mind.

“I slept with Cali.”

I let out a rush of breath after I said it, almost giddy with the relief of telling someone something that I’d been prepared to keep secret for at least as long as it took for me to get the guts to tell Ava.

Colton’s jaw dropped before stretching into a huge grin. “Hell yeah!” He gave me an excited shove.

“Shut up,” I said, feeling warm. “I’m still with Ava.”

“Oh… Uh, that’s not good. I mean, Cali has never been my *favorite* person in the world, but I was excited because I know how you feel about her. And let’s face it, anyone is better than Ava in my book. Even the ultra-bubbly ‘whoops I blasted you with a stray magic bolt’ Cali.”

I rolled my eyes at that. “She’s a lot more…intentional these days,” I said. “And anyway. I’m only telling you this so that you can give me some advice, make me feel better.”

Colton nodded slowly. “Okay…well…was it good? You know, the sex?”

I scowled at him. “Obviously I know you meant the sex.”

I thought back to the feeling of having Cali pressed against my body, right where she belonged. She had felt absolutely perfect.

In fact, my entire body warmed at the memory, and in the back of my mind, or maybe even closer to the front than I realized, I longed for more.

I nodded at Colton. “Yeah. It was very good.”

Colton took that in, giving me a long look. “So…both of them. Gotta say, between those two women, I’m definitely team Cali. She’s a little too sweet for my taste, but that’s not a bad thing. On the other hand, Ava is the devil incarnate—”

I glared at Colton until he shut his mouth. “Thanks for that super helpful contribution.”

Colton shrugged and took a long sip of his drink. Then he turned heel and hustled off to plop down into one of the plush couches that were set up lounge style around the room.

I joined him even though he was getting on my nerves, and I was starting to regret telling him about my predicament.

“Listen, I don’t know what you’re going through, Xavier. I’ve tried to put myself in your shoes, but it’s too hard. Two mates? Sheesh. Who knows how you’re dealing with that? I have one mate, and it makes my head so full I can barely think of anything else.”

I dropped my head into my hands, wishing, hoping that Colton could say something that would fix everything. But there wasn’t a quick fix. I was smart enough to know that.

“Love shouldn’t be this hard, right? It should be simpler. It should be even a touch more enjoyable?” I said.

Colton sighed. “Here’s the question you need to ask yourself, Xavier. If you hadn’t gone through all that shit with Adéluce, would you even be thinking about Ava right now?”

**Episode 5609**

How was I even supposed to answer Violet’s question? I didn’t want to say anything about any of this right now because I still hadn’t figured it out myself. Everything was up in the air, especially where Xavier and I were concerned.

Violet was asking me about where I stood because she wanted to make sure that the Redwood pack didn’t get compromised by my actions. I didn’t feel like she was judging me, but she was certainly calling me to task and asking that I address the true consequences of what I’d done.

That was what made it all so hard. I’d known before Xavier and I went to the point of no return that there were going to be consequences, and I was in no state to face them.

That didn’t make it any easier to come up with an answer.

No one else was saying anything, either, and the longer the silence stretched on, the more awkward it became.

And what would be the right answer, anyway?

Now that Lola had revealed my indiscretion with Xavier…were the others judging me? Did they think that I should leave Greyson because I’d betrayed him? Did they want me to stay with the Redwoods no matter what and just forget about Xavier altogether?

That was something I could never do. I was stuck between Greyson and Xavier in a real way, just like I’d always been.

Would it matter to them that I had no idea who I would choose if it came down to that?

*And isn’t that always what it comes down to? The choice I must make between Greyson and Xavier? The choice that has haunted me for so long that it’s become a part of me?*

I hadn’t been able to make the choice before, so there was no way in hell I would be able to do it now.

Despite my confusion about the matter, I knew I had to speak. I owed Violet and the others an answer, even if it wasn’t a complete one.

“Greyson and I are still together,” I said. “That hasn’t changed.”

Better to stick to the facts than get into anything that would suggest I had a clue about how my future would end up.

“And Xavier’s still the Samara Alpha, right?” Violet asked. “He isn’t thinking of coming back to the Redwood pack?”

My guilt shot up to an eleven. I hadn’t even considered what this would mean for my pack or even Xavier’s. All I’d had time or energy to consider were the feelings between me, Greyson, and Xavier. In the moment, it was just me and Xavier, but it was so much larger than only the two of us wasn’t it? All the pack members were involved indirectly too.

How could I have ignored the reality of Xavier’s situation? Of course Xavier’s role as the Samara Alpha mattered. I was basically the Redwood Luna, and I was kicking myself for overlooking how much more complicated things would become for all of us after sleeping with Xavier.

What if Xavier decided to pursue me fully and left the Samaras behind? Ava was a good leader, but she was no Alpha. The Samaras would flounder without Xavier, and it would be all my fault, wouldn’t it?

The pit in my stomach that had blossomed after sleeping with Xavier grew even larger. Somehow, things had gone from bad to worse.

For a while, all I felt was regret. I shouldn’t have given in to my desire for Xavier…no matter how much I wanted it. My actions had been pushed on by the *due destini*. Even after all this time, I was still powerless against it.

*Will I ever be able to resist the* due destini’s *pull?*

“Oh yeah, he’s still the Samara Alpha,” Lola answered for me.

Her voice was cold, and she wouldn’t look me in the eye. Her tone was what cut me deeper than anything. She was being so judgmental, and that was shitty of her. She was my best friend. Why couldn’t she understand that this was hard for me?

*Better yet, why isn’t she taking the* due destini *into account? It’s so easy for everyone else to forget or ignore how much of a pull it has over me. It’s not so simple for me to do what others think is the right thing with the curse breathing down my neck.*

I stood up abruptly. “Lola, we need to talk.”

I turned heel and stalked off without waiting to see if Lola would follow. I held my breath until I finally heard her footsteps, and I didn’t stop until I was in the kitchen.

“What the hell is your problem?” I asked as soon as Lola was in the kitchen with me. “Why would you just blow my stuff up like that in front of everyone? None of that is anyone’s business but mine. I’m not saying what I did wasn’t impulsive or impactful for all of you, but it certainly isn’t the type of thing for you to blurt out in front of everyone! How could you?”

I was overcome by a mix of emotions—anger and disbelief mostly. But by the time my tirade was over, I knew I sounded more hurt than angry.

*That’s because I’m so hurt. I trust Lola with so much, and it never feels good to have sensitive things thrown in your face. And that’s exactly what Lola’s doing.*

“I’m supposed to be able to trust you over everyone, no matter what,” I said.

I felt the hot sting of tears behind my eyes. The last thing I wanted to do right now was cry.

“Shit.”

How was I going to resist it? How could I when everything was so messed up? All my feelings were building to a fever pitch and overwhelming me. It was all hitting me at once. Not even a girls’ night was safe.

Greyson had another mate. There was no speculating about it anymore, because it was true. Rowena had shown him the thread, and that meant that Greyson didn’t just belong to me, but to Kendall, too.

Xavier had another mate, too. Always had. I thought I’d gotten used to having to compete with Ava for Xavier’s time and attention, but sleeping with Xavier had shown me the truth.

I was still wrapped up in Xavier, and I wanted him all to myself. I wanted Greyson all to myself, too.

But how could I want something that I couldn’t even give them?

Both of my mates were being pulled away from me, and I was coping the best I could.

I’d had one moment of pleasure with Xavier, and now my best friend was making me feel like trash for it.

“None of this is fair,” I said, my lip quivering. “I didn’t ask for this. Any of it.”

A tear rolled down my cheek, and I quickly wiped it away, furious with myself for getting so emotional. I should have been able to talk to Lola without crying.

Lola was finally looking at me with something other than cold detachment in her eyes.

“Cali, oh no, I’m sorry! You’re right, I shouldn’t have done that. Don’t cry!”

Lola hugged me, and I hugged her back even as I responded, “No, you shouldn’t have. It was a messed-up thing to do.”

“It was, but I’m just so angry at you for getting wrapped up in his tangled web again. I’m scared that he’s going to hurt you…again!”

I pulled away at that. I could see the truth of it in Lola’s face.

“Maybe he will,” I said. “But being with Xavier was my choice to make. You shouldn’t judge me for it. And you can’t protect me from this stuff as much as you want to. All it does is make things harder for me because I need you in my corner.”

“I’ll always be in your corner, Cali,” Lola said. “But I feel like there’s stuff you’re not telling me. And it’s about more than you sleeping with Xavier. That wouldn’t get this kind of reaction. It hurts that I have to wonder if you would have told me about Xavier if I hadn’t figured it out on my own.”

“I would have wanted to,” I told her. “I get no pleasure in keeping things from you, Lola. I would have told you about it eventually…but you’re right. There’s more.”

I turned my back on Lola for a few beats, twisting my fingers together and wondering if this was something I should share. She was my best friend, and I trusted her and cared for her, but I almost didn’t want to say this out loud.

Once I gave voice to it, there would be no going back. It would make it too real the second I let it outside my circle of mates.

“What is it, Cali? I can tell that whatever it is is tearing you up inside.”

“Greyson has another mate,” I blurted out. “It’s Kendall.”

Lola’s expression turned from concern to anger in seconds flat, and she turned and stomped off.

“Where are you going?” I asked her.

Lola swiped her car keys off the hook near the front door. “Where do you think I’m going? I’m gonna go kill Kendall.”

**Episode 5610**

**Xavier**

I considered Colton’s question, but he was looking at me like he already knew the answer.

Why hadn’t I asked myself that same question? Maybe I didn’t want to think about Adéluce and how much of an impact she’d had on every aspect of my life.

But now that Colton had posed the question, it was all I could think about. *Would* Ava mean that much to me if Adéluce hadn’t gotten all mixed up in my life?

If not for her, would I even be thinking about Ava right now at all? Would I even know where she and the Samaras were?

Was it true that I wouldn’t have even given being with Ava a second thought if Adéluce hadn’t terrorized me?

*Is my devotion to Ava nothing more than remnants of what the vampire-witch forced me to do? And if that’s the truth, now what? Do I overhaul my entire life and change things back to the way it used to be?*

There wasn’t any easy way to admit that the vampire-witch had had a big impact on where my life had ended up. She’d wanted to torture me by putting me through a series of changes I didn’t want or need, and she succeeded.

Before Adéluce came and flipped my life upside down, I’d never actually considered leaving Cali to go be with Ava.

Sure, at the time, there’d been some unrest about my role in the Redwood pack and my position living under Greyson as Alpha, but would it have pushed me so far off course without Adéluce’s influence?

I could ask myself all sorts of questions like that, but it didn’t really matter in the grand scheme of things.

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said. “But the fact is, I love her now.”

Colton opened his mouth to say something, but whatever it was dissolved when Ravi came running up to us.

“Xavier! I’ve been looking for you everywhere! Did you break up with Ava?!”

“What? No. Why the hell would you even ask me that?” I snapped at him.

Ravi threw up his hands in apology. “Oops, sorry, man. Marissa might have mentioned something along those lines…which is why I raced over to find out if it was true.

“What the fuck did she say?” I growled.

“Calm down. It’s not anything for you to get all wound up about. I only came over here as a friend to check on you,” Ravi said.

I didn’t need this right now. It was embarrassing that everyone seemed to know that my Luna and I were having problems.

This was the sort of thing that was best kept between me, Ava, and Cali for the time being…but obviously that wasn’t in the cards.

*If Ravi knows…then shit—Greyson must know, too.*

“Have you talked to anyone else about this?” I asked Ravi.

He just shook his head. “No. When I found out, I came straight here.”

“Okay…good. And Ava and I are fine,” I said. “We just had a disagreement, and it sounds like Marissa’s blowing it up for no reason.”

“Uh-huh…” he said.

I wasn’t sure if Ravi believed me, but it was the best I could do right now. I was in no position to come up with a better excuse, and I was pissed that I had to explain myself to people.

*Werewolves can’t ever keep their mouths shut about anything.*

“Just keep quiet about this, please,” I said to Ravi. “Especially since it’s not true. I wouldn’t want people to get the wrong idea.” I looked around. “And we’re in mixed company here. Lots of other folks in attendance. Don’t want them thinking there’s trouble in the Samara pack. Could make us look vulnerable.”

“Yeah, man, everything’s perfect with X and Ava,” Colton added. I didn’t miss how he used Ava’s nickname for me. “In fact, Xavier was just telling me just how much he loves Ava, so I feel like they’re probably fine. Nothing to worry about.”

I knew that Colton was just trying to help, but it sounded bizarre coming from him.

“Anyway…we’re all here to have a good fucking time,” Colton continued. “Can we stop talking about mates?”

That was enough to send Ravi in the other direction. “Yes, couldn’t have said it better myself.” Ravi looked back toward the event rooms. “I think I saw a burlesque room on the way over here. Marissa would kill me if she knew the kinds of things Lucian’s offering us.”

Colton pushed himself up off the couch. “Well then, I suppose we should go do something that will get you in even more trouble. That’s the point of a bachelor party, isn’t it? To do things that would drive your other half up the wall?”

Ravi still didn’t look convinced, but he followed Colton toward the rooms anyway.

I was grateful for my brother’s help. All I could do was hope that Ravi hadn’t spread the shit Marissa was saying anywhere else. If it got out that Ava and I were having problems, and if Greyson got wind of it, I knew he would be suspicious.

We hadn’t recently spoken about the dynamic between me, him, and Cali, but if Greyson heard Marissa’s rumors, he wouldn’t waste any time rushing to get in my face about my relationship with Ava and what that meant for me and Cali.

I followed the others back to the party and was greeted by a pleasant surprise. Gabriel and Mikah were standing at the bar, taking in the festivities with amused looks on their faces.

“What are you two doing here?” I asked them, surprised.

Gabriel shrugged. “We got invited.”

“Not that we’re sure why the hell we showed up,” Mikah added. “This isn’t quite our scene, and I can tell that the night is only going to get a lot stranger.”

“Oh, it’s going to get weirder for sure. And same here about wondering how I ended up at Lucian’s bachelor party,” Colton said. He gestured around the house. “Especially since this guy kind of sucks, right?”

“Obviously doesn’t suck enough to keep us from coming into his house and drinking his liquor,” Gabe said.

“Exactly,” Colton added. “And in my case, I’m just excited to be away from all the craziness at home for a while.” He gasped and quickly cast a glance around at everyone. “Please, nobody repeat that. Maya would literally kill me if she heard me say that I needed to get away.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” I said.

“Me too,” Ravi said.

“Good. Because I don’t want to upset Maya. Believe me, I love being with her and the twins, but stepping away to let loose for one night—how could I resist?”

“Don’t worry, Colton. We get it. And I think this is the type of party where pretty much anything that’s said by any of us will stay between us forever,” I said.

“Good.” Colton looked relieved. “Let’s go see what else is going on. I’m thinking that these rooms Lucian mentioned will not disappoint.”

Even though I was curious, the only room I could think about being in was Cali’s. A quiet night in with her was worth a million crazy nights with the boys.

Sure, there were beautiful women here, drinks, and all kinds of temptations, but in truth, if I wasn’t with Cali, then Ava would have been a better person to spend my time with, too.

I missed Ava and was suddenly disappointed about how bad things had gotten between us. So much so that Marissa had felt compelled to tell people that it was over between us.

I’d snapped at Ravi about it, pretending that it couldn’t be further from the truth when in reality, I didn’t know where I stood with Ava right now. I just knew things weren’t good. Any way I wanted to look at it, Ava and I were on the rocks.

As we walked by the rooms, I poked my head into a few. We bypassed the burlesque room Ravi had seen earlier, but not before I got a glimpse of a very intense show and a very satisfied audience.

We passed by a room filled with wall-to-wall cocktails and a huge room where the lights were dim and flashing and everyone was dressed in the loudest colors I’d ever seen.

“Wow. A rave,” I said to Colton. “Lucian really did think of everything. Where did he even find enough people to attend a rave and pack the house like this?”

We kept walking until we reached a room full of card tables. There were several games of poker going on at once. This wasn’t my scene, either, or rather it wasn’t enough of a draw to keep my attention when my head just kept going back to how messed up everything was.

We were about to leave the poker room when someone called my name.

I turned to find Knox striding toward us, his face screwed up in fury.

*What now? After everything I’ve gone through today, now I have to deal with the shrimp?*

“I don’t know what the hell you did to Ava,” Knox hissed, “but Alpha or not, I’m going to beat the shit out of you!”

**Episode 5611**

**Greyson**

My ears were still somewhat ringing from Lucian’s DJ, and I stretched my jaw, trying to ease the aching. I sighed as I looked around, wishing heartily that I had never shown up to this funhouse bachelor party. I was just pissed—at basically everything. I was mad at Lucian for throwing this absurd nightmare of a party, mad at myself for getting talked into coming, mad at Xavier for sleeping with Cali, mad at the fucking mate bond between me and Kendall and the ways it was making it impossible to get her out of my head.

And I was mad at Cali. I think that was the hardest to deal with. Because I knew that I *shouldn’t* be mad at her. None of what had happened between her and Xavier wasn’t her fault. And she had been honest with me about it. But it still got to me. It still ate at me. It still made me feel like shit. And I was just struggling to get past it.

I’d gotten used to having Cali all to myself after Xavier had taken off and joined the Samara pack. And then we’d gone into the Fae world to find Artemis, and Xavier and I had swapped wolves when we’d passed through the portal back into the mortal world, and nothing had been the same since. Not even after we’d finally gotten our wolves back.

Xavier was back in Cali’s life. And now back in her bed.

Maybe it wasn’t fair to blame Xavier either. It wasn’t his fault for the same reason it wasn’t Cali’s—none of this was anyone’s fault. Neither of them was out there trying to hurt me, or each other. Same as when I’d realized Cali was my mate. I hadn’t been trying to hurt my brother.

All of this was just the *due destini* wreaking its usual havoc on all of us. Per fucking usual.

I shook my head, frustrated with myself. I had been a fool in a lot of ways. It had been naïve of me to think that my time with Cali to myself was going to last. I’d fooled myself into thinking we could carve out a life together, separate from Xavier and the *due destini* shit, but that clearly wasn’t to be.

And now things were even more complicated because of this new bond with Kendall. A bond that she very clearly wanted nothing to do with.

I made a low growling sound in my throat as I pushed a hand through my hair. Of all the things that had to happen—why this? And why the hell now? It just all felt like too much. I was really hoping when we’d finally gotten our wolves back, things would return to normal, but I suppose that had been too much to hope for.

I pulled out my phone and checked my notifications. Nothing. I was annoyed that Chloe hadn’t bothered to call me back.

I tapped the side of my phone, thinking. I was tempted to step out of the party to try to call her again. I wanted to get ahold of her—but more than that, I was looking for any excuse to get out of this madness.

“Hey.”

I looked up to see Jay walking toward me. “Hey, man. What’s up?”

Jay had a drink in his hand. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

He tipped his head toward Xavier, who was across the room. “What’s going on with you and your brother?”

I hesitated. I probably should have seen this question coming, but somehow hadn’t. I hesitated. The thing was that I liked Jay. He had been a steady hand throughout the chaos of the Redwood pack. But he was still Xavier’s friend. And while I trusted Jay, I wasn’t going to open up to him about what was happening with my brother.

Besides, I didn’t need to. I could handle this on my own.

“Oh, nothing. I think we’re all just a little on edge. Neither of us really wants to be here, do we?” I asked. I looked down at my glass, which was empty. “I could probably use another drink.”

Jay chuckled. “Yeah, well, that’s probably true for everyone here, Greyson.” But he looked at me, his eye steady. “But that still doesn’t explain what’s happening with you and Xavier.”

Jay clearly saw more than I had given him credit for, but that didn’t mean that I was going to tell him anything.

I shrugged. “Nothing big. Just one of our usual dustups.”  
 Jay still wasn’t buying it. He shook his head. “I don’t think so. I saw the tension between you two. I’ve known you both long enough to know when it’s usual, and when it’s special shit. And this was special shit.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what you want me to tell you, man.”

He sighed and took a drink. “I thought once you two got your wolves back, everything was going to go back to normal.”

“Yeah, you and me both,” I muttered darkly.

Jay gave me a long look. “You know, normal between you and your brother comes in a lot of shades. But whatever’s happening here”—he gestured between Xavier and me with the hand holding the drink—“it’s not normal.”

I could feel a muscle in my jaw start to twitch. I was already tense, and this conversation was only making it worse. I liked Jay, but I didn’t like getting the fucking third degree. “Why don’t you go talk to Xavier about it if you’re so curious?”

Jay eyed me. “So there *is* something to ask about, then.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. “That’s not what I’m saying. Fuck, man, why do you even care so much?”

Jay stepped back as a waiter passed by carrying a tray of champagne flutes. I grabbed two and downed them both like shots, then looked angrily back at Jay, who was giving me a baffled look, like I was missing something completely obvious.

“I care because at the end of the day, Greyson, you’re my Alpha,” he said. “What affects you affects me. And not just me—it affects all of us. The whole pack. I know you wish you existed in a vacuum, but you don’t. You’re the Redwood Alpha, for better or for worse, just like Xavier’s the Samara Alpha. I care because what my Alpha is going through matters.”

I was immediately ashamed of being so short with the guy. Jay had never been anything but loyal to me, and I clapped him on the shoulder.

“Your Alpha is fine, Jay,” I assured him. “Now go enjoy yourself. As much as is possible.”

Jay still looked skeptical, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw Porter approaching, which was as useful an out as any other.

“Listen, I’m going to talk to the Cobalt Alpha. Go find something to drink. I heard there’s a burlesque act somewhere around here,” I told Jay, giving him a push.

Jay snorted. “Sure. Lola’s going to love that.” But he walked away.

I turned to Porter, who walked over to me and handed me a whiskey.

“You look like you could use one of these,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said, taking it gratefully. I put the champagne flutes on the tray of a passing waiter and took a long pull of the liquor. “I’m surprised to see you here. I didn’t think you were a big fan of Lucian’s.”

Porter nearly spit out his drink. “Oh, I wouldn’t call myself a fan. But I think we both know how persuasive—and fucking annoying—Lucian can be when it comes to invitations. I wasn’t planning on coming, but he blew up my phone until I agreed.”

“Yeah, that sounds familiar.”

We both looked over to see Lucian across the hall. He was gathering people up to form what looked like a can-can line.

I rolled my eyes. “Fuck, will the hell never end?”

Lucian was having trouble getting party guests to join his can-can line, so we watched as hapless waiters were pressed into service as dancers. They dropped their trays and began to dance with Lucian leading the line. They looked miserable.

“Rowena mentioned you reached out to her,” Porter said quietly, his eyes on the dangers. “Two mates.” He shook his head. “That’s rough. Is there anything I can do?”

“Does everyone know all my fucking business?” I muttered, mostly to myself. It wasn’t even Porter who I was mad at—it just seemed like nothing in my life was private anymore. Everything was suddenly for public consumption.

Porter looked over. “Rowena and I are really close, man.”

“No, I know. Sorry. That wasn’t about you. I should have figured a married guy would hear about it from his wife. But, unless you know how to break a mate bond, then there’s probably not much you’re going to be able to do—”

I stopped talking when I heard angry shouting from the other side of the hall. I looked over to see Knox and Xavier facing off, looking ready to fight.

**Episode 5612**

Horrified, I raced after Lola. “Stop! Lola! Stop! Oh my god, Lola!”

But Lola was already out the front door.  
 I sprinted after her and through the door. I tackled her just as she reached the steps, and together, we went flying off the porch. We landed hard on the frozen grass of the lawn, and I pinned her down. But that only lasted for a moment. I didn’t know what I was thinking—Lola was a lot stronger than I was, and she easily flipped me onto my back, pinning me beneath her.

I groaned and looked up into Lola’s eyes, which had taken on a frighteningly vampire-ish look.

“Don’t try to stop me,” she growled. “That bitch has gone too far.”

“Lola, stop,” I heaved breathlessly. “You can’t go after Kendall.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Why not? Why are you trying to stop me, Cali? You should be egging me on. Kendall deserves anything that’s coming to her.”

I shook my head. “I really doubt that. She’s just as much a victim in all of this as I am.”

“What are you talking about?” Lola demanded.

“Same with Greyson and Xavier. Even Ava,” I argued.

Now Lola looked completely shocked. “Are you fucking kidding me? You’re defending *Ava* now, too? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Well, for starters, I’m getting cold,” I said, trying to shift beneath her. “Can you get off of me and let me get up? I’d really rather talk about all of this inside the house. Maybe with a cup of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha in my hand.”

Lola groaned. “Fine,” she said. She looked annoyed but rolled off of me and reached out a hand to help me to my feet. As we headed back up the porch steps and back into the house, she shot me a frustrated glance. “You know what your problem is, Cali?”

“What?” I asked with a sigh.

“You’re too soft.”

“This isn’t about how soft you think I am,” I protested. “Going after Kendall because she ended up mated to Greyson serves no purpose. If anything, it would just make things more complicated for everyone. And—believe me—everything is complicated enough already.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Lola said fervently. “Let me *un*complicate things.” She flashed her fangs.

“Put those away,” I said, waving her away.

She shook her head in amazement. “I don’t get it. How can you be so casual? Why aren’t you pissed about this?”

“I *am* pissed,” I insisted. “I *am* unhappy. I *am* upset.”

“Are you? Because you don’t look it.”

“What do you want me to do?” I asked as we walked into the pack house.

“Why aren’t you using all your Fae magic to do something?” she asked. “Why aren’t you blasting Kendall back to wherever the hell she came from?”

I let out a frustrated growl and grabbed Lola’s arm, pulling her around so I could look straight at her. “God—listen to me, Lola! I’m not doing any of that because this isn’t Kendall’s fault! If I didn’t do it to Ava, why the hell would I do it to Kendall? Does it fucking suck? Yes! But I don’t think going after either of them will do anything except piss them off and make me feel much worse. And Greyson specifically warned you to not go after Kendall!”

Lola looked a little shocked by my outburst, but she shrugged. “That was different. He was talking about me going after her because she had kissed him. But now that she’s mated—who knows what she’s done or how far she’ll go? Cali, can’t you see? She’s ruining everything for you!”

“Lola, please, just stop,” I pleaded, feeling desperate.

Lola took a deep breath. “Will you just admit that you’re mad about this?”

“Fine,” I said, exasperated. “Fine, I’m mad. Are you happy?”

Lola shook her head. “No. I’m not convinced.”

I rolled my eyes. “What the hell, Lola? What do you want?”

“I want you to say it like you mean it.”

I ground my teeth. “I’m *mad*!” I bellowed, the scream hurting my throat.

Lola smiled. “That’s better. And I have just the solution.”

My heart leapt, and I grabbed her arm again. “You’re not going after Kendall after all that, are you?”

“That would be fun,” Lola admitted, “but no. What I have in mind is even better. Come on.”  
 She marched into the den, and I trailed behind her, baffled.

“Come on, ladies,” Lola announced, “pack up the schnapps.” She looked at Dani. “Can you drive?”

Dani looked confused. “Uh, no.”

Lola pointed at Violet. “What about you?”  
 Violet looked just as baffled, but she nodded. “Sure. What are we—”

“Great, then you’re the designated driver,” Lola said crisply.

“Lola, what are you talking about—” I started, but she plowed over me.

“We’re leaving!” she announced, waving her hands, motioning us all to move. “Let’s go!”

We all exchanged confused looks but followed Lola from the den to the front door. We pulled on coats, and Violet grabbed the keys.

Sage, Zainab, Dani, Lola, and I all piled into the car. Lola sat in front, directing Violet into town. She gave the directions piecemeal and refused to answer any question about where we were going, though we all kept asking.

“You’ll see when we get there,” was all she was saying.

“Is she going to have us murdered?” Zainab asked quietly.

Sage giggled.

Violet was a nervous driver, but it didn’t take too long, and a short while later, Lola directed her to parallel park against a sidewalk, which caused Violet to go pale, but she managed it.

When she turned off the car, we piled out and looked up at the building we’d arrived at. I couldn’t help but eye the place skeptically. It was a squat, dilapidated building in an industrial part of town. The sun had gone down hours ago, and if I hadn’t been surrounded by a group of badass werewolves and a vampire, I probably would have been a little freaked out.

“Lola, what is this place?” I asked.

Lola grinned at me. “This is the place I was thinking of.”

“Okay, but *where* exactly is that?”

“It’s the place where we can all settle our anger issues,” she said, as though that should answer all my questions.

It didn’t, and the rest of us all exchanged confused looks as Lola strode confidently toward the building.

“I don’t even have anger issues,” Dani said quietly.

“Of course you do,” Lola shot back, turning around to look at her. “Everyone does. If you don’t think you do, it’s because you’re repressing them, and that’s very dangerous. So let’s go,” she said, waving us toward the door.

The door was a nondescript glass door with nothing but the address printed on the glass, but when we walked through, I saw a sign in the building lobby:

*Welcome to Outrageous Fury!*

“What the hell is this place, Lola?” I asked, looking at my friend.

She grinned at me. “It’s a rage room. And we’re here to smash!” She turned to the woman at the front desk. “Party of six, please.”

“Sure thing,” the woman said with a cheery smile. “First time here?”

“Yep, but not the last,” Lola told her.

The woman laughed and handed us each a clipboard. “Waivers, just need your details and signature on the front and back.”

When we’d finished the waivers and handed them back to the woman, she handed us each a pair of safety goggles and pointed to a caddy.

“Sledgehammers are over there.”

“*Sledgehammers?*” I repeated, baffled. I looked at the goggles. “What are these for?”

“To protect your eyes from flying debris,” Lola said simply.

“Why would there be flying debris?” I asked.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Because we’re here to smash things.” She walked over to the caddy and pulled out a sledgehammer. “Who’s going first?”

We were all a little hesitant, but finally we’d all chosen hammers, and the woman behind the desk directed us to an empty room big enough for all of us.

Lola pointed toward a stack of plates and pushed me toward it. “Smash them!”

I adjusted my goggles, raised my hammer, and brought it down, managing to crack the first few plates.

Lola huffed. “No. Picture Ava and try again.”

I lifted my hammer again. This time the plates transformed into Ava—then Kendall, then Adéluce, then Silas, Seluna, Letifer, Cenwyn, Cordelia—and I brought the hammer down, shattering all the plates in a single, explosive crash. My heart was thudding in my chest, and I turned to an old computer monitor. All the people I’d encountered in this crazy, supernatural world faded away, and the one single thing came to the forefront of my mind—the *due destini*.

I lifted my hammer again and smashed it down with a furious roar, wishing there was a way to fix everything that was hurting me.

Was it even possible that there was?

**Episode 5613**

**Xavier**

Knox was in my face, but what the hell was new?

I would have normally just laughed in his stupid face, or at the very most, just told him to go fuck himself, but he’d caught me at a particularly bad time. What with everything going on with Ava and Cali and Lucian’s party clowns wandering around, freaking me the hell out, I was feeling a little more keyed up than normal, so I shoved the shrimp back. What the hell did he think was going to happen? Did he really think he had a chance against me?

“Come *on*,” he threatened.

“You should show your Alpha some respect,” I snapped at him.

Knox gave a derisive snort. “Yeah, sure. Like the kind of respect you show your Luna.”

Shit. I had to admit that stung, and I ground my teeth. “That’s none of your fucking business,” I growled.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that our raised voices and the shoving was starting to draw some curious looks. Fuck. The last thing I wanted was spectators here. Maybe I should just clock the shrimp and put an end to this whole conversation before the entire bachelor party knew what was going on in my private affairs with Ava and Cali.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen!”

I looked over to see Lucian striding toward us. He had pulled himself away from his can-can line, and while I expected him to look annoyed that we were making a scene, he actually looked kind of excited.

“What?” I snapped.

“What, indeed,” he countered. “I don’t know what is going on, but this *is* my party, and this is *exactly* the kind of energy I want for this evening. Look around,” he said, throwing his arms wide. “I am actively trying to foster debauchery, and this is exactly what I’m looking for. I knew I could count on your support, Xavier. Everyone is already taking bets,” he added with a wide smile.

Looking around, I saw that even more people were paying attention now, and I saw that money was changing hands.

Shit. Lucian had gotten involved, which meant that he had made this stupid dustup between Knox and me a whole thing. Which was just great. This had gone from bad to worse. Which was my own fault, really. What was I even waiting for? I should have just kicked Knox’s ass and forgotten about it, but now it was snowballing into something much more absurd. Like a formalized challenge or something. Not exactly a Lupo Finale, but still.

“But we can’t have a proper battle *here*,” Lucian said, shaking his head. “There’s not nearly enough room. This way, everyone!” he called out. “This way!”

He put his hand on my back, and I saw that Armin had appeared and was doing the same to Knox. They ushered us out of the main hall and out into a courtyard. Well, it looked like a courtyard at first, but then I noticed that it had seats all around an open center. I had never seen this part of the manor, but it looked like an arena.

I rolled my eyes when I saw it. *Of course* Lucian and the Vanguards would have a fucking arena.

As the rest of the party followed us into the courtyard arena, Jay caught up with me, looking concerned.

“Hey, Xavier,” he said, stepping next to me. “Are you really going to do this?” He cast a dismissive look at Knox. “Come on, Xavier, the guy’s not even worth your time.”

I opened my mouth to answer him, but before I could even get a word out, Colton appeared on my other side—

“Xavier, you better kick that clown’s ass,” he said sharply. “You need to put that little prick in his place, once and for all. Besides, I just put some money on you, so yeah, you need to take him down.”

I glared at my brother. “Whatever this is, it’s not about making money, Colton.”

Jay eyed me warily. “But it’s not about Knox either, is it?”

I looked over at him and saw a knowing look in his eye. I knew what he was saying—or what he wasn’t saying. That whatever frustration I was feeling wasn’t really about Knox’s stupidity—it was about Ava and Cali and Greyson. And the whole fucking complicated mess of my life.

But I didn’t answer him.

I looked out into the arena, where Knox was striding around, fucking peacocking like an idiot, gesturing and yelling to the crowd, trying to get the partygoers on his side.

Gabriel and Mikah showed up, looking confused.

“What the hell is going on?” Mikah asked. “What the hell kind of party is this?”

“It’s a Lucian party,” Gabe said, as if that were the answer to everything.

I shook my head and started to step forward, into the arena.

Gabe grabbed my arm, looking uncharacteristically somber. “Xavier, man, you need to be careful out there. If you’re not careful, you could kill him.”

I looked at my friend, then over at Knox, and I knew what Gabe meant. I was so angry right now—angry at the whole fucking world. I was happy about getting back with Cali, but not at Ava’s expense. I was really upset that I’d hurt her, and I knew that was why Knox was raging. And not that I would ever be willing to admit it, but maybe Knox had a right to be. For all his many, many, *many* flaws, he looked out for his cousin.

Like he could feel me looking at him, Knox looked over at me. He narrowed his eyes, glaring daggers at me. The crowd behind him was egging him on, but even without them, I don’t know that I’d ever seen Knox as worked up as he was now. Not even when he’d been foolishly trying to become the Samara Alpha.

I shook my head at the memory of that strange, dark period. Like the dumb kid had ever stood a chance against me. The Samara pack had been devastated by their losses, and had been ready for a new leader. Ava had poured everything she had into that pack, and she still did. As I looked through the crowd of partygoers turned audience members, I spotted Samara pack members, and I was filled with a sudden longing for Ava—my Luna.

But that feeling was cut short when Knox let out a primal scream and charged toward me. I wasn’t expecting it, so he managed to drive me back a few steps before I planted my feet and stopped his attack.

I put my hands on his shoulders and threw him back, drawing mostly cheers from the crowd.

Knox landed hard on his back, but he jumped to his feet and came at me again, nearly frothing at the mouth.

“You never learn, Knox,” I growled.

The center of the courtyard was stone, but it had been covered over with fine dirt, and it puffed up, and Knox and I moved around, creating a filthy fog around us.

Knox shook his head, his beady eyes shining through the dust. “It’s not me who can’t learn, man. It’s *you* who can’t stop hurting my cousin.”

It sucked to hear the words coming from Knox, but they barely had time to land before he took a swing at me. The punch was wild and landed on my ribs. His comment had hurt a lot more than the punch, and I pushed him back.

“Is that all you got?” I asked and aimed a blow myself. It landed on his jaw—probably a tad harder than it should have—and Knox reeled back.

“That’s my brother!” Colton shouted proudly behind me.

I ignored him and jumped onto Knox, who was staggering. I drove the guy to the dirt.

“You need to stop,” I hissed angrily.

“Get off me,” Knox grunted, struggling under me, trying to unseat me. “Get the hell off me you bastard!”

I gave a frustrated growl and pinned him down. “I said *stop*! I’m your Alpha!”

Knox glared up at me, his eyes flashing with anger. “Then fucking *act* like one! You want me to respect you? Then fucking *earn it*!”

I shoved Knox’s shoulders down and got up, waiting for his next move.

Knox jumped to his feet, reading to come at me again, but his words echoed in my head.

*Then fucking acting like one.*

*You want me to respect you? Then earn it!*

Knox had never been great at listening to me, but to disobey a direct order from his Alpha like he was doing now was on a whole other level. As I watched him snort and stamp like a bull, it suddenly occurred to me that he was willing to take me on like this—in as public a place as Lucian’s party—because he felt betrayed by me.

So what was going to happen when the rest of the Samara pack found out what was really going on?

**Episode 5614**

**Kendall**

I rocked back on my heels and looked up at the closed. “There,” I said quietly. It was a thing of fucking beauty, organized to perfection. Every last thing in its place. I stood and—with one last look inside—shut the door. That was the last of my closets that I’d had to organize, and now my apartment was fully unpacked.

I sighed as I stood up and looked around. Moving into a new place was always a pain, but I really hadn’t had a choice. After my last place had gotten destroyed because of the vampires and everyone, it really did feel good to have a new place. It was smaller than the first place, but I liked it. It felt secure, and I liked having fewer windows and exit points.

Glancing around, I took in all the paraphernalia I kept around to keep my cover story in place—a diploma for an undergraduate and graduate degree. Photos of me hiking on various peaks around the world, a massive tea collection, and a huge library. Even to my trained eyes, I looked exactly like what I was supposed to be—an educated, single woman who had a stable job at a small university in the Pacific Northwest. One chosen for its proximity to hiking and camping locations, as well as good food and coffee.

If there was anything MIB had taught me over the years, it was that the details of any cover story mattered. I had to immerse myself into who it was to be Kendall who worked at CCU. Program Coordinator Kendall liked her tea and her books. She liked the outdoors, and she ate a mostly vegetarian diet.

But what the *real* Kendall—Kendall King—wanted to do was to sit down and watch some trashy TV and drink a beer and forget about her problems for a minute or two.

I sighed and pushed a hand through my hair. It was hard to believe, but that almost felt possible. There were no reports to file tonight—no nothing. So I dropped onto my couch and reached for my remote. I only had basic cable, so I flipped around until I found a show about people on an island telling each other how much they either loved or hated each other. I hadn’t watched it before, so I wasn’t sure of the players, but I figured I would catch on pretty quickly.

But I found that as soon as I sat down, my mind started to wander. I’d been working hard to keep myself busy, and that was for a reason. Now that I was sitting, doing nothing, I started feeling…achy. And needy.

I bit my lip and grabbed my remote again. I needed something else, so I flipped to another channel.

Big mistake. I had no idea what kind of movies they were showing on cable these days, but the scene was a man and a woman making out, and I had come in right when this guy grabbed the woman by her ass and lifted her up onto a table. She gave a groan of approval and laid back, the guy stretching out on top of her.

I stared at the TV, open mouthed, practically drooling as my mind began to wander. I thought of Greyson, stopping by my office at school. I thought of him closing the door behind him and walking around to my side of the desk. I thought of myself, bending over the desk as he—

*Fuck.*

The ache inside me was getting a lot worse. This was fast becoming a need that there was only one solution for—and only one person who could provide it.

I grabbed a pillow from my couch and shoved my face into it as I groaned. I fucking *hated* this. I wanted to rip my hair out. How could I have done that—with Greyson Evers? Especially when he was *mated*. And especially after Agent Imamu had to show up to keep me in line.

That felt like the worst part of it. I had never before let my personal problems interfere with my job—or my duty to the agency.

My phone dinged, and I pulled the pillow away to check the message. It was Tanner—the guy I’d been hooking up with when Greyson had called me from London. He was convinced we had great chemistry, but I had my doubts.

*Out for a drink, beautiful. Want to join me? Maybe later we can get together again?*

I rolled my eyes. He’d sent a purple devil emoji. I deleted the notification. I wasn’t sure seeing Tanner was a good idea either. He was a human, and I was in a precarious position. I didn’t want anything horrible to happen…but I did need this grinding, incessant need for Greyson Evers to *stop*.

Tossing my phone onto the couch, I got to my feet with a frustrated growl. I would eat first and decide on something to watch later. I stepped into the kitchen and started to assemble the ingredients for coq au vin. It was time-consuming, but it was my go-to comfort dish, and the long cooking process was almost meditative.

As I got started seasoning the chicken, my phone began to ring with a video call. I quickly washed my hands and hurried to grab it. When I saw it was my brother, I answered right away.

When Emory’s face popped up on the screen, he looked good, and I smiled to see him. He had his hat on backward and he was moving, like he was walking somewhere.

“Hey, Em, what’s up?”

“Hey, Kenny,” he said, smiling at me. He looked happy, and I heard a couple of voices in the background. It sounded like he was with friends. “What are you doing?”

“Just making dinner.”

He squinted at me. “Are you seriously cooking right now?”  
 “Yeah, why?”

He laughed and shook his head. “You are so boring, Kendall. Staying in, making dinner. Did your shipment of cats come in yet?”

“Not yet, but I hear they’re very loyal pets,” I shot back. “How are classes going?” I asked.

“Good, good,” he said. “Bio Chem is killing me. I swear, I think it’s taking years off my life.”

I smiled as I listened to him talk about his lab. I loved to hear from my brother, and it was a good reminder for me of what was really at stake here—Emory’s happiness. And his future.

I *had* to protect him. If I let my guard down and fucked up my position with the MIB, I wouldn’t be able to give my little brother the life he deserved. And it was my life, too.

When MIB first reached out to me, I had only been seventeen. My parents had just died, and the agency had felt like a lifeline. They’d needed someone exactly like me—a young, female werewolf to act as bait—essentially—to help find a predatory Alpha who’d been targeting and killing other female werewolves. And human girls.

They hadn’t called me bait, but that was what I’d been. I’d understood my role, and I’d done it well. I’d made myself available and the Alpha had found me. The sting had been successful, and that had been the start of my career with them.

MIB had given me everything when I’d had nothing. So I couldn’t screw this up. I just couldn’t.

“Anyway, I was just calling to say hi,” Emory said. We’re just heading to dinner.”

I nodded. “Okay, have fun. Be safe.”

He waved and ended the call.

*Safe.* I leaned against the counter and thought about the word—and about how far my work was from safe. It was funny that Emory was convinced I was boring. If only he knew how *un*boring my life actually was. How I always had to be on the lookout for signs of danger or trouble. Sometimes I wondered what he would really think about me then.

I shook my head. I must be slipping. I was usually pretty good at spotting shit a mile away, but I hadn’t seen the trouble with Greyson coming. I probably should have, but I also wanted to be realistic. How could I have guessed at what it had turned into? Being mated to someone—to anyone—had never even been on my radar.

I was pulled from these thoughts when my phone buzzed with a text, another one from Tanner.

*If you’re interested, I’ll be at the Shamrock until 10.*

I looked at the message for a long moment.

“Fuck it,” I said aloud and grabbed my phone.

*I’ll be there soon.*

I started putting the ingredients away. I was going to go meet Tanner. I needed to sate this feeling inside of me. I had tried to deny it, but I knew that I was Greyson’s mate. I also knew that if I mated with him, that would only ensure his very quick and very painful death.

**Episode 5615**

**Xavier**

The thoughts on my head were growing increasingly thorny, but they were knocked out of my head in a second as Knox lunged at me. While I’d been thinking, the shrimp had been winding up and when he swung, he managed to get one really good blow in.

Shit. My head spun and dark, exploding spots appeared in my vision as I stumbled back a step. I wouldn’t have expected such a strong blow from the shrimp, but he’d managed it somehow while I was distracted.

I shook it off and gritted my teeth, trying to pay better attention. I didn’t want to let that shit happen again.

Then I was frustrated with myself again—letting Knox get that cheap shot was just another example of how all this shit with Cali and Ava was affecting me—which I guess just served to support Knox’s beef with me. He’d been yelling at me to act like the Alpha, though I suspected he was probably more concerned about what was going on with Ava than what was going on with the pack.

Dimly aware of the cheers and groans from the crowd all around us, I lowered my head and charged at Knox. I grabbed the guy by the shoulders and swung my fist back. I was about to land a ringing blow to his stupid face when I stopped myself.

I don’t know if I’d ever done that in a fight, but suddenly I found myself hesitating and asking some questions. Like why was I doing this? What was I even doing here, in this fucked-up arena, surrounded by Lucian’s friends, fighting a guy who was barely a challenge to me? I didn’t even want to be doing this. I hadn’t asked to settle any score. I could have taken care of Knox in the great hall when he’d first gotten into my face if I’d just been thinking faster.

Hell—I could probably take care of Knox in my sleep—so this wasn’t about proving something to myself, or to him. He knew that and so did I. So did everyone here. Knox wasn’t worth my time. And fighting within the pack wasn’t going to accomplish anything except drive the Samaras apart. And that was something that no clear-thinking Alpha would ever allow.

Especially with a pack like the Samara. My pack had been so fractured, and Ava and I had worked so hard and for so long to bring them back together. Especially Ava. She’d poured everything she had into the pack, and I wasn’t going to let Knox ruin that.

And Gabriel had been right—if I wasn’t careful and lost my shit, I could seriously hurt Knox. Maybe even kill him if I wasn’t careful enough. And that would hurt Ava even more. And I wasn’t going to be responsible for hurting her any more than I had to.

So I lowered my hand and shoved Knox back. “I’m done with you.”

Knox stumbled back in the dirt, then stared up at me in disbelief. “*What?*”

“You heard me.” I spit into the dust at my feet. The fog of it had gotten into my mouth and it felt gritty between my teeth. “I’m done.”

Knox’s look of confusion quickly morphed into anger as I turned my back on him and started to walk away.

The crowd seemed to share his confusion and anger, and there were some jeers and boos. It was clear they had wanted a fight and didn’t like being disappointed.

“Don’t you walk away from me!” Knox yelled after me.

I stopped, and the crowd grew quiet again, thinking Knox had gone too far. I turned and stepped back to him, grabbing him by his shirt and pulling him close.

“Consider this your ‘get out of jail free’ card, kid,” I hissed. “But enjoy it, because you’re not going to get another. Try this again, and—I swear—I’ll make sure you never have a chance to mouth off again.”

I gave Knox a shove that sent him stumbling back. He tripped over his feet and fell—hard—in the dirt, right on his ass.

Then I turned and stepped out of the arena, ignoring the cheers and jeers and boos. Who the hell cared what these assholes thought of me? I didn’t.

As I started to push through the crowd, Colton grabbed my arm.   
 “Hey,” he said.

I pushed him off of me. “Hey yourself.”

“What the hell was that?” he asked. “You had the guy. Why’d you walk out? You just lost me a thousand bucks.”

I looked at my brother, wondering for a moment who Colton could have bet against—and who would have bet a thousand dollars against me, and in favor of Knox.

I shook my head and walked away from Colton. “Not now, man.”

There were other familiar faces—Ravi and Gabe and Mikah and Porter—but I ignored them all. More even, but I just kept moving. I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I had too many thoughts racing through my brain.

Lucian was waving his arms, gesturing more people into the courtyard. “Who else?” he called merrily. “Would anyone else like to come and settle their scores in the ring? Now’s the time! Air your grievances!”

“Fucking hell,” I muttered.

That was it. I’d had enough of this. I’d said I’d come to this party, and I’d come. I’d made my appearance, but it had been more than long enough. It was time for me to leave before I changed my mind and went back into that ring and pounded Knox into a bloody pulp.

I stopped in the hallway and looked around, unsure for a moment which way to go to get out of this hellscape. Between the massive size of the Vanguard manor and Lucian’s hellish decorations, I felt all turned around.

I couldn’t tell which way I was supposed to go, so I just picked a direction and started off. But a few steps down the passageway, I picked up a familiar scent.

Greyson.

Suddenly Greyson stepped out of a doorway in front of me, but he stood with his back to me.

I stopped and stared at him. I had a decision to make. I really didn’t want to talk to my brother—not now. So I needed to decide if I wanted to disappear.

But before I got that chance, Greyson turned around and saw me standing in front of him.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” I said stiffly back.

Greyson gave me a cool look. “You finished Knox off pretty quickly, didn’t you? Even for you.” I thought he would have lasted a little longer—”

“I walked away,” I said, cutting him off as I pushed past Greyson.

Greyson turned again to face me. “Oh, I see. So you could walk away from that, but you couldn’t walk away from Cali, is that how it is?”

I froze in my tracks, then turned slowly. “What did you say?”

Greyson’s face had gone cold and stony. “You heard me.”

I felt my wolf stirring within me. “You got a problem, man?”

Greyson shrugged, but the gesture was anything but casual. “I heard what happened.”

“Did you?”

“Of course. That surprise you?”

“I don’t know,” I ground out.

His eyes were hard as flint. “Did you think Cali wouldn’t tell me what happened?”

*Yes*, I wanted to say. But I kept my mouth shut.

Greyson took a step closer to me. “She tells me everything.”

I was thrown by this. I hadn’t known that Greyson knew about what had happened between Cali and me. I suppose that it made sense, but still…it was strange. When I thought back to when I’d seen Greyson in the driveway when we’d first arrived at the party, it made even less sense. Greyson had acted as though everything was fine between us. But then he’d started acting more and more like a prick as the party had gone on.

And I had to admit that it stung that Cali had told Greyson what happened. Why hadn’t she told me that she planned to tell him?

But when would she have had a chance?

I shook my head, trying to shake off those questions, and looked over at my brother. “I don’t know what you want me to say to you, man. It’s not my fault you fucked up with her and that the mate bond pulled us toward each other. It was bound to happen eventually.”

Whatever composure Greyson was holding onto snapped, and he lunged toward me. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” he snarled.

I’d walked away from Knox because that fight hadn’t made any sense, not because I wasn’t fucking angry—and it didn’t mean I was going to walk away again.

My hands closed into fists, and I stepped right into Greyson’s face. “What do you want, Greyson? Are we going to do this or what?”

**Episode 5616**

**Ava**

Marissa pressed a hand to my forehead, looking concerned.

“What are you doing?” I asked, pushing her off of me.

“I’m worried about you,” she said.

“Why?”

“You might be ill. I’m worried you have a fever or something.”

“A fever? What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I just can’t think of why else you would want to talk to a witch,” she said incredulously.

“Oh my god, *stop*,” I groaned, sitting up and getting to my feet. “I’m not feverish, I’m just frustrated with this whole situation. And I’m angry, and I’m hurt.”

Marissa nodded. She looked understanding, but worried, too. “I get that, I really do, but there have to be other ways to deal with it besides resorting to literal witchcraft, Ava.”

“None that I can think of,” I snapped. “And I have been thinking. Anyway, why are you so against witches, anyway?”

“Are you *serious*?” she asked, gaping at me. “You’ve seen what happened to Xavier’s friend. Jay? The guy with one eye. I heard he lost the other eye to a freaking witch! She took it as payment, or a curse, or used it in a spell or something. That’s what happens with witches. *That’s* why I’m against it.”

I shook my head. “Whatever the price is, it worked, didn’t it?”

Marissa stared at me. “So you’re ready to lose an eye?”

I raked my hands through my hair. “I don’t know what else to do,” I said desperately. “I’m just so sick and tired of the *due destini* screwing everything up for me and Xavier. The easiest solution I can think of is to get rid of Cali once and for all. But that would only hurt Xavier. And I won’t hurt him—I love him. Besides, that would turn him against me again, like he turned after I killed his mom.” I bit my lip. “Do you know how hard that was for me?” I asked, looking at Marissa.

She shook her head, looking sympathetic. “I don’t, not exactly, but I know it must have been.”

“I fought my way back from death to get to him again, and he hated me. It was awful,” I remembered, my heart aching at the memory. “It was hell. Worse than death. And I won’t go back there. He loves me now, and I’m not going to let Cali and the *due destini* destroy that for me.”

“I get it,” Marissa said. “I mean, I don’t, I guess, not exactly. I don’t have a mate, so I can’t speak from experience. But I do know that making a deal with a witch should be your last possible option, Ava. I know enough about spells to know that trying to break something as powerful as the *due destini* could have some serious consequences. Like, what if something happens that fucks up Xavier?”

I hadn’t thought of that, and I felt a pang of fear in my chest. But I didn’t want to let Marissa talk me out of this.

“But what if it frees him?” I countered. “What if I figure out a way to free him from the *due destini*, and it takes him away from the torment he’s been under with this two-mate thing? Think about it,” I said, dropping down to sit on the bed as I warmed to my subject, “once he’s free from this forced mate connection with Cali, then he’ll be free to love me completely.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Marissa said, though she didn’t sound completely convinced.

“The whole mate thing with Cali doesn’t even make any sense,” I growled. “She’s not even a werewolf. She’s Fae—not even, she’s *half* Fae. So how is she supposed to be Xavier’s mate? It’s bullshit.”

“That’s true,” Marissa conceded.

“And I was his mate long before she ever entered the picture,” I snapped.

“Listen, Ava, I get what you’re saying here, I really do,” Marissa said reasonably. “And it all makes total, rational sense. But it still comes down to the same thing—the *due destini* exists. Cali might not be a werewolf, but for whatever reason, she *is* Xavier’s mate, and trying to break that bond—and whatever created the *due destini*—is going to take a lot of magic. You just have to ask yourself if you’re willing to take the risk necessary to break it.”

I leapt to my feet with a growl and slammed my fist into Marissa’s bedside table. The wood crunched, nearly splitting in half.

“Hey! Watch it!” she protested.

“I just can’t take this anymore!” I exploded. “I’ve tried! I really have! I’ve tried making room for Xavier’s mate bond with Cali, but I just can’t deal with it! It always hurts, no matter how much I try to pretend like I’m fine with it! And I know it’s hurting Xavier too.” I turned back to Marissa, who was watching me pace the room like a caged animal. “I just think that if there’s a way to end this—even if it has some risks—it’s that worth taking a chance?”

Marissa gave me a long look. “I’m not going to be able to talk you out of this, am I?”

I shook my head. “No, you’re not. I’m decided.”

She heaved a sigh. “Do you have a witch in mind? Or is there a directory or something we can look through? How does one find a witch?”

“I know a black-market witch I can get in touch with,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes. “Of course you do. She got a name?”

“Tanya.”

“How do you know her?”

“She made the sedative I used on Knox when he was jacking himself up to try to defeat Xavier during the Lupo Finale,” I explained.

Marissa’s eyes went wide. “Okay,” she said slowly. “And do you trust this black-market witch Tanya who can make dubious sedative potions?”

“No,” I admitted. “But it’s not like we’ve got a lot of good options. We don’t have a witch on call like the Redwoods do.”

“No,” Marissa agreed. She sighed. “Okay. When are you going to go see her?”

I shrugged. “Why not right now?”

“Now?” Marissa asked.

“Yeah. Why not? Are you busy?”

“No,” Marissa said warily. “But what’s the rush?”

I twitched my shoulders nervously. “I just know that if I wait too long and think about it too much, I’m going to change my mind or talk myself out of it.”

“Yeah, that would be terrible,” Marissa muttered sarcastically.

I shot her a dirty look. “Or worse, Xavier might give in to the mate bond’s pull and end up back in Cali’s lair again.”

“Is that what we’re calling between her legs now?” Marissa said dryly.

I snorted. “Anyway, that’s the last thing I want. Anyway, you don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

Turning, I headed for the door. Downstairs, I grabbed my coat—more out of habit than necessity—and my keys and headed out the door to the driveway. I didn’t need to drive, but I figured that if I shifted and ran to where I knew Tanya was, it would only put the witch on edge. Well, *more* on edge. Witches tended not to like werewolves.

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith seemed to be an exception to that rule, but generally wolves made witches nervous, so coming in human form was the best approach.

Marissa came down the steps after me, and I looked back at her.

“You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want,” I told her. “I know you don’t like witches.”

“Of course I’ll come,” Marissa said, pulling her jacket. “I always have my girl’s back.”

But as we stepped out onto the driveway, she put a hand on my arm to stop me.

“What?” I asked, looking over at her.

“I’m just thinking about what witches charge for their services,” she said. “And I know that the price gets higher as the ask gets more complicated. And I’m thinking that breaking the *due destini*—if that’s even possible—it’s going to come cheap.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. I hadn’t really thought of it, but now that Marissa was pointing it out, she was probably right.

Marissa darted a nervous glance at me. “I just don’t think you want to be in a situation where the price is going to be more than Xavier would even give you—”

“He would give me *anything*,” I snapped angrily at her. “Anything. All I would have to do is ask.”

She pressed her lips together, then took a deep breath, like she was building up her courage. “But if it involved giving up Cali—”

“Stop,” I commanded, holding up my hand. “Just stop. I don’t want to think about this anymore.”

“Okay,” Marissa said. She looked around. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head restlessly. “I want to run, or drive, or do something that will take my mind off all this.”

Marissa smiled at me. “I know how we can take your mind off all this…”

**Episode 5617**

**Kendall**

When I got to the Shamrock, I stopped in the doorway and looked around for Tanner. If I looked thirsty as hell, it was because I was. Luckily for me, the dim bar was packed with dudes. Which meant if Tanner flaked on me, there were plenty of other guys here who I was sure would be happy to scratch my itch. It wasn’t like I had a thing for Tanner. He literally just happened to be the guy who’d texted. He could believe whatever he wanted to about our magical connection, but for me it was nothing more than convenience.

I twitched my shoulders as I looked around the bar. My itch was driving me crazy. I felt like I was about to break out in a rash if I didn’t spot Tanner soon.

There.

He was over at the far end of the bar. It looked like he was with some friends. They looked vaguely familiar. I thought I had met them in passing the night Tanner and I had hooked up the first time. All locals, if I recalled—which I did. That was a trick of the trade. I had great recall. They had all grown up locally, gone to school together. It was a little lame—a little too wholesome. But there was a part of it I really envied.

The idea of having a connection to people and a place you’d known your whole life was something I’d never known. In fact, it was something I’d worked pretty hard to avoid.

Tanner spotted me, and he waved at me over the heads of his friends. He really wasn’t a bad-looking guy—dark blond hair, blue eyes, nice jawline. Tall and had a nice body. Both in clothes and without them.

I felt my own body react when I caught sight of him, and I walked toward him.

“Hi,” I breathed, sidling up to him.

“Hi there,” he said softly, smiling at me.

I looked around at his friends. “Hi everyone.”

His friends smiled and nodded. I noticed a few of the guys looked me up and down, but Tanner was already leaning close, so I didn’t bother paying attention to them.

“Glad you could make it,” he said, whispering in my ear.

I felt my wolf stirring, and I leaned in to whisper back to him. “Hey, about getting together later…what if we get together now?”

Tanner looked at me, surprised. I watched as he realized what I was saying, and as the surprise turned to desire, and then to lust.

“Right now?” he breathed.

I nodded and looked back at his friends. “Will you excuse us for a minute?”

Without waiting for an answer, I grabbed Tanner’s hand and pulled him toward the Shamrock’s tiny bathrooms.

Tanner was more than happy to follow me, and I shut the door behind us and locked it.

His hands were on me in an instant, and I immediately remembered why I’d agreed to hook up with him more than once—he always got to the point. I liked that. I didn’t like a lot of conversation or pretending like we were going to do anything other than what we were there to do. Tanner got that, and so did I.

He was adept too, and he pushed me up against the door, shoving his knee hard between my legs. That’s what I wanted. I was needy as hell, and I wanted something hard and fast.

I grabbed his neck and pulled him into a kiss, biting at his lip with a little more aggression than I’d dared to show in the past. It was always a balance when it came to hooking up with humans. I could never fully let go for fear of freaking them out—or worse.

But Tanner didn’t seem to mind the biting. He gave an excited, throaty groan and pushed his hips against me so that I could feel his erection hard against my leg.

“Fuck, Kendall, I never expected this. Not like this. I’ve been thinking about you all day—hell, I’ve been thinking about you all week. Sometimes when I’m working, I get so fucking hard it’s all I can do to just—”

“Be quiet,” I said, putting my finger against his lips. His voice was fine, but it was distracting me. It was throwing me off, and I just wanted to concentrate. “Just shut up and kiss me, okay?”

He grinned at me. “Fuck it, I love it when you’re bossy.”

I closed my eyes and pulled him close, kissing him as he pushed his hard on against me in the small, dim bar bathroom.

His hands picked me up and swiveled me, placing me on the cold porcelain of the bathroom sink. I knew it was Tanner, but when I opened my eyes, I was looking at Greyson. It wasn’t Tanner’s blue eyes looking back at me, half-lidded with lust, it was Greyson’s stormy greys.

So when he put his hands on my thighs and pushed them apart, I dropped my head back and moaned.

“You’re driving me fucking crazy,” he growled, his voice deep and throaty with desire.

“How do you think I feel?” I panted. “I can barely think I want you so fucking bad.”

I grabbed him and kissed him, moaning into his mouth as he stroked up my thighs, his thumbs slipping up my skirt and into my panties. I was already soaking wet, and he could feel it. I felt his smile against my lips.

“You want this?” he asked, rubbing my sex.

“Fuck yes,” I said, practically begging.

In whatever part of my brain that was still capable of rational function, I knew I was about to fuck Tanner. And I knew imagining Greyson in his place was completely deranged. I also knew that imagining myself having sex with Greyson while having sex with someone else—while not remotely mentally healthy—was also not something I should be doing for the security of my cover, but I just couldn’t stop myself. It was like my body was hot-wired for Greyson Evers, but I knew I couldn’t have him, so I had talked myself into this cheap substitute.

*Shut up shut up shut up!* my body screamed at me. I shoved the thoughts away. I was trying to do something here, and my rational brain was just making it harder.

I looked into Greyson’s storm-clouded eyes, biting my lip when he dropped his pants, shoved my panties to the side, and pushed his condom-sheathed cock into me.

“Oh *fuck*,” I moaned.

“Say my name,” he said, grabbing my hips and thrusting into me.  
 My heart was thudding in my chest as I braced my hands on the walls of the tiny bathroom. “Oh god! Oh *fuck*!”

“Say it,” he groaned. “Say my name.”

My orgasm was building. I closed my eyes as every muscle in my body tightened.

“Say it,” he demanded, digging his fingers into my flesh. “Say it when you come!”

“*Greyson.* Oh god, Grey, *fuck*.”

“Ouch!”

I blinked, and suddenly Tanner was in front of me. He was frowning and twisting, trying to look over his shoulder. “What?” I asked blearily.

“Your nails, they’re really sharp. You’re really digging into me,” he said. He looked flushed and sweaty. I hadn’t been paying a bit of attention, but it looked as though he’d finished, too. But his words snapped me out of my post-orgasm haze, and I flexed my fingers, which were still around Tanner’s back.

Oh shit. I had partially shifted.

*Shit.*

I had been completely in my own world, and the passion of imagining Greyson was apparently so much that my wolf had burst out?

I quickly shifted them back to human hands, hoping Tanner wouldn’t notice, and trying very hard not to panic. I was just extremely lucky that Tanner *hadn’t* noticed. But that was too risky, and way too close to being discovered.

But I must have looked flustered enough that he smiled at me, chucking me under my chin.

“Hey, you don’t need to be bashful about liking it rough. You can like it any way you want. And you can call me any name you want too, babe. That was fucking amazing.” He pulled his pants back up as I slipped off the sink.

“Yeah, that was…great,” I said. “Should we go back out? Get that drink we were talking about?”

“Sure,” he said, smiling.

“Do you mind giving me a minute? I just want to…freshen up.”

He winked. “Yeah, sure thing. I’ll meet you out there.”

I nodded, and when he’d left, I locked the door and turned back to look at myself in the mirror. “What the hell is *wrong* with you?” I demanded, glaring at my reflection.

I had just *partially shifted* in front of a human. That was so fucking irresponsible on so many levels—both as a werewolf and as an MIB agent.

I shook my head, washed my hands, adjusted my clothes, and fixed my hair. I was about to head back out when my phone rang.

When I looked at it, I saw that it was a blocked number, which could only mean one thing, and I answered right away:

“Yes?”

“Agent King,” Agent Imamu said evenly, “I have a new assignment for you.”

**Episode 5618**

**Greyson**

I glowered at my brother, more than ready to get into it with Xavier. This anger coursing through me had been building for a long time—ever since London. If I was being totally honest with myself, I’d have to admit that things were always tense between us. I didn’t always like it, but that was just the nature of our relationship. But things had gotten worse after the wolf swap, and then really gone to shit when I’d had to stand there and watch as Cali kissed Xavier in order to get his wolf back.

I had been standing in the fucking room. That hadn’t just been any kiss. I had eyes, and I knew something had changed between them in that moment. Even Ava knew, and she hadn’t even been there when it happened.

Then I had seen Xavier and Cali huddled together, under the scaffolding. I knew it was more than just a conversation about seeing the sights.

I was mad as hell, but I wasn’t a fool—I was still clearheaded enough to know that Xavier hadn’t actually planned any of this. Whatever was, it had to do with the *due destini*, or the mate bond, or our wolf swap. Or maybe all of it. Any of it would be enough to drive Xavier back into Cali’s arms—as much as I hated to admit it.

“—up with Kendall?”

The name snapped me back to the moment and grabbed Xavier roughly by the collar of his jacket.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I demanded.

Xavier shoved me away. “I was asking about you and that college administrator you care so little about that you fucking jump when I say her name. Are you going to tell me I was wrong about you and her?”

I frowned at him, thrown, and the first emotion I felt was confusion. Had Cali told Xavier about what happened between me and Kendall?

I tried to figure out if she would—Cali didn’t lie, but would she really have opened up to Xavier about that?

The thought of that conversation happening between the two of them made my stomach turn. I had told Cali about Kendall and me in confidence, expecting that to stay just between us, and to think that it hadn’t stung like a betrayal.

“What the hell does it matter to you?” I demanded.

Xavier gave me another shove. “At least I told Ava what I was doing.”  
 I glared at him. “But you didn’t have the balls to tell me?”

Xavier lunged at me and swung hard. I was about to duck the blow when Colton appeared and caught Xavier’s fist in his hand.

“Whoa. Slow down, bro,” he said evenly.

“Get out of here, Colton,” Xavier growled. “This has nothing to do with you.”

“You’re right about that,” Colton admitted, but he didn’t leave. He stepped between us, staring down Xavier.

There was a tense moment where Xavier and I glared at each other over Colton’s shoulder, but as Colton didn’t seem inclined to move, nothing happened.

Finally, Xavier shook his head and turned away, looking disgusted. “Fuck this. I’m out of here.”

Colton grabbed his arm. “Hang on. You can’t go—not yet.”

“Why not?” Xavier demanded.

Colton grinned in that slightly deranged way he had. “I just got here.”  
 Xavier shot another glare at me, then threw his arm around Colton. “Fine. Let me buy you a round.”

Colton laughed. “I mean, it’s an open bar, but yeah, sure.”

I watched as the two of them walked off, heading back toward the party. It wasn’t until they were gone that I realized that my heart was thudding hard in my chest.

Fuck—that was too close. I’d almost completely lost it. I couldn’t let Xavier taunt me so easily. That couldn’t happen again. And certainly not in front of an entire party.

Alphas weren’t exactly shy about fighting, but fighting with my own brother was always going to raise some eyebrows, no matter what kind of reputation the Evers brothers had.

“Greyson!”

I felt my shoulders tense. Lucian’s drunken voice grated on my raw nerves like nails on a chalkboard. I turned to look at him. “Lucian.”

He grinned at me and threw his arms wide as he neared me. “My best friend, Greyson.”  
 “I’m not your best friend, Lucian.”

“Let’s forget about your petty sibling rivalry,” he said, ignoring my comment and waving a hand in the direction Xavier and Colton had disappeared. “You and I should be celebrating me! And what will be my amazing nuptials!”

He was holding a shot glass in each hand, and he offered me one. I took it reluctantly.

“To best friends!” he declared.

I downed the shot, grimacing as the liquor burned my throat.

Lucian swung his arm around me. “And what do best friends do?”

“I have no idea,” I said, glancing around. Right now the only thing I wanted was a fucking exit. This party had gone on way too long for my taste, though I was sure Lucian had plans for it to continue on long into the night.

“They look out for each other,” Lucian said, pulling me close so he could whisper in my ear. “That’s what best friends do.”

I didn’t like being whispered to—not by Lucian, anyway—and I pushed him away and took a step back. “Lucian, we’re *not* best friends.”

Lucian waved an airy hand. “What could we possibly gain by labeling what we have between us, Greyson? The bond we share clearly goes far beyond mere words.”

“What the hell are you talking about—”

“And speaking of bonds,” he interrupted, his eyes going wide.

He paused dramatically and I cringed, just knowing that whatever he said next was going to be absolute bullshit.

“Tell me if that trouble with Xavier just now was due to the infamous *due destini* you share with the luscious Caliana,” he said, his eyes somehow growing even wider.

I tried not to groan. “It might have had something to do with it,” I said evasively. I had no interest in confiding in Lucian, though he was clearly hungry for gossip. I could see it in his eyes. Hell, I could practically see into his orbital sockets his eyes were so damn wide.

He nodded sagely. “Yes, I understand your pain with that.”

“I doubt that,” I muttered.

“I certainly do,” he continued. “You see, when I first met my beloved Elle, I thought I was going mad.”

“Did you?” I asked warily.

He nodded. “As you know, I am a man of great self-control.”

I rolled my eyes, remembering all of Lucian’s attempt to get to Cali—and marry her—not to mention when he had fallen for Seluna’s demon and every single one of his lascivious, over-the-top parties all centered around excess and debauchery. But—sure—Lucian was a model of self-control.

“So I had to learn to take my mind off the things that chipped away at my control,” he went on.

“Is that right,” I muttered. I was barely listening. I was trying to figure out where the nearest exit was. The Vanguard estate was confusing to navigate at the best of times, and now Lucian had decorated the place like some kind of nightmare carnival, which made it even harder to tell where things were. But I thought that if I took the passageway to the left, I could make it to the solarium and out to the side entrance, and then I’d just have to jog around to the front of the house to get back to my car.

“—which is why you must go see Olga.”

I looked quickly at Lucian. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Olga.”

“Who the hell is Olga?”

“Our resident masseuse,” he said, like this was the most obvious thing in the world. “Does the Redwood pack not have a masseuse?”

“What? No? Why would we—”

“However do you get on?” he asked, shaking his head. “In any case, all the more reason.”

“No, thanks, Lucian, but I really don’t think—”

“No, Greyson, you are my friend—my best friend—and I insist.”

“I really don’t want—”

“I will not take no for an answer,” Lucian said, putting his arm around my shoulder and starting to pull me down the passageway, the opposite way I wanted to go.

I pulled away and planted my feet. “Lucian, no. I’m mated.”

He shook his head at me, “Tsk, tsk,” he chucked. “Do you think I forgot, Greyson? Do you think I would do anything that would compromise your bond? I am far too classy for something like that. And so is Olga. She is an amazing masseuse. Licensed by the state of Oregon. And Washington. The whole Pacific Northwest. And Florida, though I’ve never asked her why.”

“Lucian—”

He clapped a hand on my shoulder and frowned. “Your shoulders are so tense,” he chided. “They’re like steel! Go see her. I *insist*!”

**Episode 5619**

I was feeling pretty good after I smashed a bunch of shit, but after we piled back into the car and Lola started giving Violet directions again, the adrenaline started to wane. I sank into my corner of the back seat and started to think. And the only thing I could think about was the *due destini*, and how it was just hanging over my head.

I felt like I was letting everyone down—especially Xavier and Greyson. And we still had Ava and Kendall to contend with. I closed my eyes as my head started to ache. Just thinking about all the moving parts made my heart ache. I wasn’t *trying* to think about it all—it was just really hard not to.

Here I was, surrounded by my friends, who were trying to support me, even if they didn’t fully know what was going on with me. I knew they could tell something was happening, and even probably knew the *due destini* between Xavier, Greyson, and me was back in full swing.

As I looked out the window at the dark night passing quickly by, I wondered if my pack mates hated me. I wondered if the *due destini* seemed so far removed from their own experience, and if they were confused as to why I couldn’t just make an easy decision between my two mates and just end it, once and for all.

If only it was that easy. The thing was—it wasn’t even fully my decision. Not anymore. Xavier and Greyson could each choose someone else now—which might leave me alone.

The thought of that made me feel so sick I thought I might throw up—and it definitely wasn’t from the schnapps, though that wasn’t helping.

I took a shaking breath and faced the thought again. They could both choose their other mates. Xavier could choose Ava, and Greyson could choose Kendall. That would be within their rights, and then what?

Then I would have to let them go.

I tried to imagine it. I would be happy for them. Maybe not right at first, but eventually. And maybe me ending up alone—and going mad—was how this was meant to be. How this was all meant to end. Maybe I was like Icarus, who had flown too close to the sun. I had too much…

Except that I had never asked for any of this. I had never asked for two mates. I had never asked to love these two incredible men with my entire being.

“Oh fuck,” I groaned. I dropped my head between my knees just as the car pulled to a stop.

I felt Sage’s hand on my back. “Cali? Are you okay?”

I shrugged.

Someone swatted the top of my head.

“No moping,” Lola snapped. “And get out. We’re here.”

I heaved a sigh and sat up, feeling tired already. I looked out the window to see that we’d arrived at a bar. I looked around to see that we’d driven to Bend.

“Can’t we just go home?” I moaned.

“No!” Lola said, twisting around in her seat. “We’re cheering you up from your men problems and we’re going into this bar and we’re going to ride a fucking mechanical bull if we have to.”

“Ugh, sometimes I’m so glad I’m gay,” Sage muttered, glancing at Zainab.

“I don’t think this place has a mechanical bull,” Zainab pointed out.

Lola glared at us all. “Are you with me? Or are you with me?”

“*Woo!*” Dani called from the far corner.

“Thank you, Dani!” Lola said, with the energy of a drill sergeant. “Now let’s *go*!”

We all climbed out of the car, and I looked miserably up at the bar. This was the place we’d gone to and run into Kendall, back when we were trying to figure out why she had two phones.

*Ugh.* The very thought of Kendall made me want to crawl back into the car, but I knew that Lola was trying to help take my mind off things, so the least I could do was try to get into the spirit. That was what my friends wanted to see from me right now—me trying. So I followed them into the bar.

Lola spoke briefly to the bouncer, and he waved us all in, though how Violet and Dani got in was a mystery, and I probably wanted to keep it that way.

“Let me get a round of lemon drop shots,” Lola said to the bartender, leaning over so she could be heard.

The bartender nodded and a moment later a row of bright yellow shot glasses appeared on the bar top. Dani reached for one, but Lola was faster.

“No you don’t,” she said.

I took one and downed the thing. It was good, but it burned going down, and I started to wonder if this was a good idea.

“I’ll take another one of those, but a whole drink,” Sage said, leaning over to speak to the bartender.

The rest of us ordered regular drinks, Lola ordered Shirley Temples for Dani and Violet, and when we had them in hand, we started looking around for a table.

“This place is packed,” I muttered, taking a sip of my vodka cranberry.

Suddenly Lola turned to me, looking strangely pale. “Actually, let’s go.” She slammed her drink back onto the bar top and grabbed my arm.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, baffled. “You made such a big deal about coming here.”

“Yeah, well, I changed my mind. Let’s get out of here. Zainab was right—there’s no mechanical bull. This place sucks.”

She glanced nervously over her shoulder, and when I followed her sightline, I saw what was freaking her out.

Sitting at the bar were Marissa and Ava. And Ava was staring right at me.

“Shit,” I breathed.

“I know, let’s go,” Lola muttered.

I shook off her arm. “I can’t go now; she saw me already.”

Lola groaned. “This is not what I had in mind for tonight.”

“I know that, but if we leave now, Ava will think it’s because I’m afraid of her.”

“Aren’t you?” Lola asked. “She’s kind of scary.”

“No,” I said, maybe a little too quickly. “We’re both adults. We can be in the same space without tearing each other’s heads off.” I took a breath. “I might as well get this over with.”

Lola grabbed my arm as I started forward. “Are you sure you don’t want to just leave?”

I shook her off and pushed through the crowd, trying to ignore the tight knot in my stomach. Ava was looking at me. It wasn’t a glare, but there was an icy coldness in her blue eyes that chilled me to the bone. It was worse than a glare—the look was one of pure loathing.

Marissa leaned in and whispered something to Ava, which made Ava laugh.

It was clear they were talking about me, but it was too late to turn around now.

I stepped in front of them and glared. “If you have something to say to me, just say it.”  
 Ava raised a dark eyebrow, as though mildly surprised. “Oh. I didn’t even notice you were here.”

I rolled my eyes with a laugh. “I would have thought you’d be a better liar, if I ever bothered to think of you at all.”

She tipped her head, her cold blue eyes assessing. “I know you think about how Xavier comes home to me.”

I ground my teeth.

Ava stood up and picked up her drink. “I feel a bit sorry for you, Caliana,” she said. She wasn’t speaking loudly. She wasn’t yelling. But her tone dripped with contempt. “I’m sorry if Xavier’s giving you false hope. He’ll never leave the Samara pack. He’s the Alpha of the pack, and you’re nothing to us. If you think that any of this is enough to break the bond between an Alpha and a Luna, you’re more delusional than I thought.”

“Yet *I’m* the one who helped bring his wolf back,” I snapped.

There it was. The pain in Ava’s eyes. I could see it behind the ice. She flinched, just a little, but it was like I’d slapped her, and I instantly felt a wave of guilt. That was a shitty thing to say—the only card I could play—and it was a low blow. I’d been able to bring Xavier’s wolf back, but I couldn’t bring Greyson’s wolf back, so I knew what it felt like, and I knew it felt like shit.

Ava downed her drink, which looked like straight vodka, and ordered another with a tip of her chin. When she looked back at me, her eyes were ice shards again. “He’s into you now, but mark my words—you’re incapable of giving him what he needs. He’s got a dark, insatiable side, and only I can fulfill that. You’re not even capable of getting up on this bar, let alone fucking Xavier Evers the way he needs. The way he’s *always* needed.”

The bartender appeared with her drink, and Ava turned her back on me. The dismissal was so cold and so final, I felt a rush of anger flow through me.

“Cali?” Lola asked, stepping to my side. “You okay?”

The fire in my blood was a mix of alcohol and fury, and before I even knew what I was doing, I pushed my bag, my phone, and my jacket into Lola’s arms—then I climbed up on the bar.

**Episode 5620**

**Kendall**

I had to think fast. I was in a tiny bathroom, still reeling from a very strange, slightly dissociative sexual encounter, and I needed to focus. But a new assignment could be just the thing I needed to help get my mind well and truly off Greyson.

Because obviously hooking up with Tanner hadn’t cured anything at all. All I’d done the whole time was just imagine Greyson.

“Is this a bad time, Agent King?” Agent Imamu asked, interrupting my spinning thoughts.

“No, not at all. I’m sorry, I’m in a bar, it’s a little hard to hear, but I’m listening. What’s the assignment?”

“We’ve had several reports of strange vibrations coming from the Vanguard territory,” he said.

“The Vanguard?” I asked, intrigued. I was only slightly familiar with the Vanguard pack, but I’d heard some rumors. “Any idea what they could be?”

“That’s why I’d like you to go over there. The Vanguard Alpha is having some sort of a bachelor party tonight.”

I frowned, thrown by that. “Wait—*tonight*?”

“Is there a bad connection, Agent King? Yes, tonight.”

My frown deepened. Imamu was never exactly cuddly, but he seemed more terse than usual tonight. I wondered if it was because he was still upset with me about the favor I had done for Greyson.

Well, if that was the case, then this was a chance to get back on his good side.

“I’ll check it out,” I assured him.

“The vibrations are highly irregular, so be careful, Agent King,” he said, and ended the call.

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An hour later, I was walking toward the Vanguard house—more like palace. I adjusted my disguise, making sure all the elements were in place. I knew I couldn’t just show up. Imamu had said this was a bachelor party, which probably meant that the only women there were hired help. And from the little I did know about “Prince” Lucian of the Vanguard pack, I knew what kind of hired help they would be. I had a feeling there were going to be a lot of strippers around the place.

I also had a feeling there were going to be a lot of guards.

Which meant that I wasn’t just going to be able to rely on a simple disguise—the kind that I used at the university that easily fooled humans. I knew going in that I was going to have to pull out the big guns and use a bit of magic. But that was fine, because disguise magic was something MIB agents were well-versed in. It was part of the training process, and we were regularly supplied with everything we needed.

The large circular driveway was lined with cars, and a valet stood at the top of the archway. He smiled at me as I stepped toward him.

“Your keys, miss?”

I smiled back and handed them over. Then I pulled a compact out of my tiny purse and when I flipped it open, the face staring back at me in the small mirror was not my own. I rubbed my lips together, tasting the strangely sweet taste of the witch’s lipstick I wore. As long as I wore it, my face would be unrecognizable to anyone who knew me. The spell used was called The Stranger—it allowed the wearer to be a stranger to absolutely everyone.

I tried not to think too much about the loneliness of it when I used it.

I pulled a small vial from the purse and sprayed myself with the perfume. I already wore it, but I liked the jasmine scent, and it was specially formulated—also by witchcraft—to completely mask my scent.

I was perfectly concealed. The only thing that was bothering me was my wardrobe. I was dressed as a burlesque performer beneath my trench coat, and the straps of red spangled dress were digging into my shoulders.

I adjusted them as best I could, and before I closed my purse, I discreetly checked the vibration meter reader I had secreted in my purse, making sure it was on. If there was something rumbling around this place, that would be sure to pick it up.

The thing was on, so I snapped my purse shut and headed into the house. I flashed my costume at the door, and the guards waved me in. Inside, I pulled off my trench coat. It was probably going to be easier to blend in without it, so I found a corner and stashed it, hoping I’d remember where I’d left it. Even between the university and the agency, I still didn’t make enough money to be leaving coats at parties.

As I wandered into the party, I noticed I was catching a few long, strange looks from a few of the guests. But I wasn’t worried about that. They were reacting to my enchanted looks, not to who I really was. No one here had a clue. I was a complete stranger to everyone.

The place was a madhouse. I noticed some kind of carnival theme, maybe? But it was hard to tell. The music was loud and strobe lights were flashing. There were aerial acts flying over my head, but that wasn’t what I was here to watch, so I didn’t pay any attention.

I looked around, trying to assess where I should start looking. If I was looking for vibration, my instinct was to check the basement. I figured I’d have the best chance of picking anything unusual there.

I wasn’t sure how to get there, but I figured maybe there might be an entrance through the kitchen. I just had to follow the food coming in and out on trays.

Figuring that was as good a place to start as any, I started after a uniformed waiter carrying an empty tray, but just as he was about to walk through a swinging door, I ran into Armin. Literally.

I walked right into the guy’s chest just as he came out of the swinging door and stumbled back a step.

I recognized him immediately—Armin was Lucian’s right-hand man. I had studied the files on Lucian and the Vanguard pack, so there was no mistaking him, but I tried to keep my face neutral.

“Excuse me,” I murmured, and was about to step around him when he held up a hand to stop me.

“Yes, Aysel,” he said, speaking into an earpiece. “Yeah, I’ve got that covered. The champagne is on ice. Of course. Hang on, sweetheart.” He looked over at me. “Excuse me, you’re going the wrong way. The party is that way,” he said, grabbing my shoulders and turning me around.

I shot a glance over my shoulder at him. “Thanks,” I called back, and walked in the direction he’d indicated.

But as soon as he was out of my eyeline, I slipped into another hallway and started opening doors. The hallway was too well lit to be part of the party, so I felt like I was onto something, and I nearly shouted for joy when I finally opened up a door that had led to a flight of stairs leading downward.

I managed to keep my celebration to myself and headed down the stairs. I pulled out my meter and walked slowly along the corridor at the bottom.

At first, the meter showed no readings. I frowned and tapped it, hoping it was working properly. I really didn’t want to have to go back to Imamu with nothing. But as I continued onward, the meter indicated a steady, increasing rumble.

That was interesting.

I reached a place where the passageway intersected with another. I continued to walk straight, and the vibration reading diminished. So I turned around and took the other direction at the intersection.

But I had only just started walking when I heard rapid footsteps. I had only just shoved my meter back into my purse when a woman in a beautifully cut black pantsuit and a sleek bob hurried toward me.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded when she saw me.

I stared at her, stunned. Had I just been found out?

She grabbed my arm and led me back the way I had come, up the stairs and back along the hallway, chiding me all the way.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you! The prince’s very good friend is waiting for you!”

For *me*?

“You need to get going. The prince has paid a lot of money for this!” She stopped me in front of a door and gave me a critical look. “Well, at least you look right. That all comes off, right?” She didn’t wait for me to answer before she nodded to the door. “Now get in there and dance.”

Shit.

I grasped the doorknob and went through the possibilities in my head. Worst-case scenario—I was going to have to do some kind of strip tease. It wouldn’t be the first time. I’d worn a lot of hats as an agent with the MIB, and a private dance was something I could do convincingly.

Best-case scenario, I could just ditch whoever was waiting for me inside, slip out, and get back to my own investigation.

“Go!” the woman said, giving my shoulder a little push.

I opened the door and stepped inside. “I’m here for your private dance,” I said, but as I spoke, I was hit with a very familiar, very intoxicating scent.

The man turned around, and the thunderous realization hit me that the man in the room was Greyson Evers.

**Episode 5621**

**Greyson**

Against my better judgment, I was sitting in a chair looking at the woman who just entered the room dressed in a very revealing outfit. I tensed up immediately and sat up ramrod straight.

At the top of my mind was what Cali would think if she saw me in a darkened room with a woman who was damn near naked.

“Hey, I’m not here for a dance, I’m supposed to have a massage,” I said. “I think you may be in the wrong room.”

The woman looked around the room. “Massage?”

She looked as puzzled as I was. I should have known something was up when I came in here and saw a chair and not a massage table. For a split second, I’d thought it was one of those chair massages that concentrated on the face and shoulders, but now I knew that wasn’t the case at all.

I’d obviously stumbled into the striptease room, not the massage room. Just my luck. I asked the woman, “Wait, you’re not Olga, are you?”

The woman’s uncertain look deepened. “Yes, I’m Olga. Weren’t you expecting me?”

I’d never seen Olga before, so it wasn’t like I could deny it. But my wolf was champing at the bit as she took a few steps in my direction.

*What the hell is up with me? Why am I responding to her like this?*

I gritted my teeth and took a few deep breaths as I tried to rein in my wolf, but it wasn’t easy. I didn’t understand why I was reacting this way. Cali was typically the only person to stir my wolf into a frenzy like this.

“I’m not a masseuse,” Olga explained. “But I *am* a dancer.” She sashayed her hips a little and my wolf went wild.

“Wait—” I said, but it was no use. Before I knew it, she’d climbed onto my lap.

I stiffened and leaned away from her. “Like I said, I’m here for a massage, not a dance. You should stop and go find…another taker. I’m sure there’s plenty tonight.”

But when she wrapped her arms around me, gently brushing my skin with her soft fingertips, my wolf went bonkers, and in that instant, I realized that this wasn’t Olga.

This was *Kendall*.

She was the only person aside from Cali that could even threaten to drive me to the brink.

*But what would she be doing here? This can’t be Kendall, right? Why would she be at Lucian’s bachelor party? And dressed like an exotic dancer?*

The woman stopped moving and looked at me. “Wait, what’s the matter? Am I not doing a good job?”

She did a few more gyrations before I swiftly lifted her up off my lap.

“Are you really asking me what’s wrong? For one thing, I’ve already told you I don’t want a dance…and for another…something’s off. Why do you smell that way? Why do you look like that?”

Kendall ran the back of her hand across her lips, wiping off the dark red lipstick and her disguise in the process. Now there was no mistaking it. Kendall was staring back at me in all her glory.

I stared at her, not shocked anymore since I’d already sensed that it was her, though I was still wondering what the hell she was doing here.

My wolf didn’t seem to care about the details and compelled me to take all of her in. Slowly so that I didn’t miss a thing, my eyes swept slowly up and down her body. She had on fishnets, thigh highs, and a black silk leotard with a lowcut front.

“What are you doing here?” Kendall asked. “This isn’t the type of place I’d expect to run into you.”

“I could say the same thing about you.”

With a lot of effort, I tore my eyes away from her and stared at the floor.

“I’m here on business,” she said.

“And I’m here because Lucian convinced me to get a fucking *massage*—”

I stopped myself, wanting her to come clean. Was she here because I was here? Was she feeling drawn to me because of the mate bond? If that were the case, would she even tell me? It wasn’t something I’d even be able to admit.

“This is a bachelor party, if you haven’t noticed,” I said. “I was invited. But somehow I don’t think you were. You say you’re here on business, but what kind of business has you dressed like that and wearing a stranger’s face?”

I was doing my damnedest to keep my eyes above her neck. Why was the universe toying with me? I was already struggling with my discovery about the depth of our connection, and now I was in a room with the one person who could cost me everything?

*She won’t cost you a thing…as long as you keep your damn wolf under control.*

“Isn’t it obvious?” Kendall said. “The business of giving you a lap dance.”

My wolf stirred ferociously at the suggestion, but I ignored it.

“I wasn’t about to let you give me a lap dance,” I said. “That wouldn’t be right under the circumstances.”

Defiant and dripping with confidence, Kendall stepped closer. “Are you sure about that?” She dropped to her knees and flipped her hair so that it slowly dragged down my chest, and then stood up and moved her body in impossible ways.

It was acrobatic, impressive, and driving my wolf to the brink of insanity. My mind was in cooler places even if the rest of my body was flushed with heat and struggling to keep my hands to myself. I didn’t even want to know how she’d learned to move like that.

I unexpectedly get a whiff of something—a trace of another man’s scent radiating from her. That agitated my wolf even more.

I tried to calm it, knowing that this wasn’t going to end up anywhere good if I didn’t get control. I’d only just revealed to Cali that I shared a mate bond with Kendall, and now here I was locked away in a room with her.

I had to defuse this situation fast, and I had to do it now. As each second ticked by, my wolf was gaining its footing, taking control of me and urging me to act on the desire building in the center of my chest.

“You jumped in my lap, you know,” I said, on the defense.

“And you let me!” Kendall shot back.

“*No*,that’s not what happened. And besides, you still haven’t answered my question. What kind of business are you here for? And don’t say it was to get me a lap dance, because that’s bullshit. We both know it.”

Kendall eyed me. “You know I can’t give you any more information than that, Grey.”

I paused. “I get that, but why would you have a mission here at Lucian’s? Is there something I should be aware of?”

“No,” Kendall said, backing toward the door. “There’s nothing you need to worry about.”

Before I could press her on the subject, the door opened, and Duke stepped in. At the sight of Kendall, the Aspen pack Alpha paused in the doorway and looked between us, but his eyes didn’t linger on me for long.

He eyed Kendall hungrily for a few long beats before saying, “Well, isn’t this a pleasant surprise.” He stepped in and closed the door behind him. “Lucian really knows how to throw a party.”

He started to take off his shirt.

“What the hell are you doing?” I said.

Duke paused, his shirt half off. “What? I didn’t think you would mind.” He looked back at the door. “Wait, am I in the wrong room?”

I was getting angrier by the second, overcome by a burning jealousy that surprised me. I tried to think rationally—I had no claim over Kendall, and that meant that in theory, Duke could ogle Kendall all he wanted…but my mind wasn’t interested in that reasoning.

Sensing the shift in my mood, Kendall stepped between us. She appeared now as Olga, or whoever. She must’ve enacted whatever MIB spy shit she was using to do that again. “It’s okay, Alpha Greyson. Why don’t you go find your masseuse? I’ll stay behind and take care of this gentleman.”

“I think that’s a good plan,” Duke said through his leer.

“He’s no gentleman,” I growled. “And no, it’s not okay.”

Duke held up his hands in surrender. “Easy, tiger. If you don’t want to share…”

“What would Paige think about you being in here?” I asked.

Duke smiled. “She asked me to record it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course she did.”

It didn’t really matter to me what Paige let Duke get up to in their quest to satisfy their kinks, I wasn’t about to let Kendall give Duke a lap dance.

“Leave, Duke. She’s not about to dance for you, on you, any of that,” I snapped.

Duke frowned. “What’s your problem, man?”

He draped an arm around Kendall’s shoulders and moved toward the chair.

“You should relax,” he said. “In fact, why don’t you watch?”

My wolf exploded, and whatever small amount of control I had over myself slipped. I shoved Duke. “Get your hands off her!”

**Episode 5622**

I steadied myself on the bar, suddenly very aware of what I was doing and that everyone in the bar was watching me. I couldn’t back off now. Not with Ava smirking like she knew I was horrified and frozen with second guessing.

*I’ll show her. I’m not about to fuck Xavier right here, but I can dance my ass off while she watches and seethes.*

“Turn up the music!” someone shouted.

“Yes, turn it up!” I said, my voice shaking a little. “And make it something good and lively!”

Someone I couldn’t see shouted, “Yeah!”

My stomach was full of butterflies. This was it. I was ready to show Ava that everything she thought about me was wrong. She thought she knew me so well, but I was about to demonstrate just how wrong she was about me.

Lola was right below the bar, cheering me on. “You got this, girl! Show them who’s the sexiest of all!”

The music started, and it was blaring so loud I could feel it in my chest. It was loud and as lively as I’d asked for, a top 40 hit that everyone knew.

I began a cautious little dance. I was nervous and as each second passed, I considered hopping down off the bar and running out into the night, but I kept going, determined to prove a point. I wasn’t the best dancer in the world, but I wasn’t the worst, either.

All I had to do was be confident and make sure I didn’t trip and fall off the bar.

*That should be easy enough.*

I began exaggerating my moves a bit more, taking a few risks, and was met with a bunch of shouts of encouragement that gave me even more confidence that I was doing a good job.

I started moving across the bar, realizing how much I liked the song that was playing, gaining confidence and making sure to jut my hips at Ava. I was lucky I’d had a couple of drinks—my inhibitions were nowhere to be found.

I saw Lola pick up my phone and start recording. I was glad. It would serve as proof that I could hold my own against Ava…or documentation of the moments just before disaster struck.

*No. No disaster. This is going perfectly. I’m showing Ava that she can’t shake me up and having a good time while doing it!*

I shifted my hips and pumped my fists, remembering a performance I’d seen someone do…a simple couple of steps that worked perfectly with the fast beat of the music. Everything was coming together, and I felt more at home in my body than ever.

The more I moved and the more cheers I got, the more Ava appeared angry and annoyed, and that made me smile. She’d asked for this, and it was a lot better—and a lot more satisfying—than getting into some kind of physical altercation with her.

The song finally ended, and I hopped down off the bar to a chorus of thunderous clapping and whistles. I’d done it, and I hadn’t tripped and fallen on my face. It was a win all around.

Lola, Sage, Zainab, Violet, and Dani rushed up to surround me.

“That was incredible!” Violet said. “I got so pumped watching you!” She did a little dance, emulating a few of the moves I’d put on display.

“Where’d you learn to move like that?” Zainab asked. “It was so good!”

“I feel like I’ve seen you dance at the pack house before, but nothing like that!” Sage said.

“I don’t know what got into me,” I said. “It’s almost like I was moving on autopilot. It just felt right, I guess.”

I was breathing hard, and not just from exertion, but from excitement, too. People were watching me and lifting their glasses in my honor. I felt really good and really proud of myself.

“Look how hot you are,” Lola said. She showed me the video she recorded of me, and I beamed, admiring my own moves and how sure of myself I looked.

“Damn, I *am* hot!”

I took the phone so that I could get a better look and rewind to look at all the good parts.

Someone shoulder checked me, and I lost my grip on the phone. I scrambled to catch it before it hit the ground, causing the screen to go haywire.

I turned around to see who’d bumped me and wasn’t surprised in the least by who I saw.

*Ava, of course. She couldn’t beat me by embarrassing me, so now she’s going to try to get physical anyway.*

She rolled her eyes at me. “Wow. So you danced on a bar like a drunk co-ed. What’s that supposed to prove?”

Lola snatched my phone and shoved it in Ava’s face. “It proves that my girl has all the moves!”

Ava ignored Lola and kept her eyes on me. “You should be embarrassed,” she sneered. “Everyone was laughing at you; hope you know that.”

“Liar. They weren’t laughing, and I’m not embarrassed. You were the one who thought I couldn’t do it, and I just showed you that not only can I do it, but I can do it right.”

“Good for you,” Ava said. She gestured to Marissa. “Come on, let’s go play pool. This bar scene is getting dumber by the second.”

Lola chuckled and turned to me with a huge smile on her face. “I think that’s code for, I just got my ass handed to me.”

Our entire Redwood group whooped and laughed. I felt so supported and so happy. This had to be one of my favorite girls’ nights ever.

Lola handed me a shot of something that I downed without looking. It burned like crazy on the way down.

“We should celebrate on the dance floor,” Sage said. “Cali, maybe you can show us some of those moves?”

As we started toward the dance floor, I spotted Ava angrily hitting the pool balls with the pool cues. There was no doubt in my mind that Ava was pissed that I’d made her eat her words, and she deserved it.

If she wanted us to keep fighting over Xavier and insisted on throwing insults at me, I wasn’t going to feel bad about giving her a taste of her own medicine. Ava thrived on putting me in my “place,” and I’d just proven that she couldn’t do that anymore.

Years ago, I was sure I would have been too intimidated by Ava to do what I’d just done, but things had changed, and I was so happy about that.

We’d been on the dance floor for a while when I suddenly became aware of two things. One—I probably shouldn’t have downed that lost shot, and two, I needed to go to the bathroom.

I excused myself and walked toward the bathroom. I basked in the nods of approval I got from some of the other customers as I passed them.

“You really looked great up there,” one guy said. “Would you like to dance with me?”

I laughed. “I would, except my boyfriends wouldn’t like it,” I said. “And believe me, you wouldn’t want to face either of them when they’re mad.”

The guy gave a confused nod and then went back to join his friends.

As I stalked past Ava with all the defiance I could muster, I realized that I’d just called my mates “boyfriends.”

*Crap.*

It was probably just as well, and I’d gotten my point across. And it wasn’t like that guy would have understood what I meant if I’d called them my mates.

Ava shot an icy glare in my direction, and I gave her a sugary sweet smile in response.

“Forget about her,” I heard Marissa say. “She’s not worth it. So what if she gyrated around in a dive bar?”

My smile wavered for only a second. I hadn’t done much gyrating…and this wasn’t a dive bar, was it?

I looked around. Okay, it was kind of divey, but who cared? Ava was here just like me, so it wasn’t like she could pretend that she was too good for this place.

I pushed into the bathroom, and not a moment too soon because I was getting drunker by the minute. I braced myself against a bathroom stall door, happy that Lola had the foresight to make Violet the designated driver. I doubted any of the others would be sober enough to drive home tonight.

I leaned against the sink and replayed the video, just wanting to see how good I looked for the second time. If I hadn’t seen it for myself, I never would have believed that I actually danced on a bar in front of everyone!

I was glad that Lola had thought to record it. Now, I would be able to remember it forever. I navigated away from the video and started scrolling through my messages. My jaw dropped in horror…I’d somehow forwarded the video to Xavier!

**Episode 5623**

**Xavier**

I was standing in the big hall where everything had begun, but now the entire scene had turned into a rave.

*Great. Things are fast turning from bad to worse.*

I glanced toward the front door, which Lucian had strung with “Do Not Enter” tape. He was serious about everyone seeing this bachelor party from hell through to the bitter end. Little did he know, I had no qualms about tearing the tape off that door and leaving the moment I’d had enough.

And that moment was fast approaching.

I was with Colton, Jay, and Mikah. Out on the dance floor, Charlie and Lilac were dancing like their lives depended on it.

Torin came walking by with a bubble machine, and he aimed it in our direction, laughing like it was the funniest thing he’d ever seen. Then he aimed it at a laughing, shirtless Ravi, who began dancing in the bubbles, obviously having the time of his life.

I felt a little like a killjoy as I sighed and leaned against the bar, the music thumping all around me.

“Come on dude, live a little,” Colton said. “I haven’t had a chance to get out much since the twins were born.”

“You’re more than welcome to dance with Gabriel,” I said. “Just be sure to ask Mikah for permission first.”

“Wow. So I don’t get a say? Only my mate does?” Gabriel said sarcastically.

“Whatever gets Colton off my ass,” I remark. “So the answer is yes.”

Colton turned to Jay. “How long has he been this way? All sulky and hard to be around?”

“Beats me,” Jay said with a shrug. “He’s not himself, I know that much.”

Things got a little more awkward for a few beats. Jay was one of my best friends, and I’d barely spent any time with him lately. Between the weird wolf-swap debacle and my duties as Samara Alpha, I didn’t have much free time to just hang out.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out to look at it. It was a message from Cali. I smiled as I opened it and pressed play on the video she’d sent.

My eyes went wide as I watched her sexy dancing across a bar top. She was wearing a cute, cropped red top and tight black jeans. I watched, mesmerized, as she swayed her hips to the song playing. Even though I’d never seen her do anything like this, she was obviously in her element. It was…shocking.

It was arousing.

“Fuck,” I said under my breath, not wanting to attract attention. I didn’t want anyone else to see this. This sexy dance was getting me hard, and as far as I was concerned, it was all for me.

Colton, never one to mind his business, leaned over my shoulder and stared at my screen. “Wait a minute, is that Cali?”

“Where?” Gabriel said, rushing over to look.

My wolf was starting to get jealous as the others gathered around.

“Wow, she’s a way better dancer than you are,” Gabe said. “Girl’s got some moves.”

Colton snatched the phone from me. “Honestly, never noticed how hot she is until now. She’s hands down the best thing I ever did for you. You’re welcome.”

I snatched the phone back. I wasn’t about to argue that—Cali had changed my life for the better, and I would never have met her if not for Colton’s meddling, but I didn’t like him calling her hot.

“Watch it,” I grumbled at him. “This is my mate we’re talking about.”

Colton shrugged. “So what? She *is* hot. Probably as annoying as ever, but hot.” He grabbed the phone back and showed it to Jay. “Tell me, objectively, is she hot or not?”

Jay looked at the video and then at me. “Why is she sending you this?” he asked me.

I yanked my phone back again. “Just…everyone stop talking. Enough of my brothers think she’s hot as it is.”

Jay was staring at me, the only one who didn’t look all worked up by the video. “Wait a minute, does her sending you a sexy video mean you two are…back together?”

I felt bad. I hadn’t told Jay anything about what was going on between me and Cali, but it wasn’t like I’d had much of a chance. Aside from that, whatever I told Jay about Cali and me would make it to Lola in record time, and Lola would spread it around through the Redwood pack house.

I had enough trouble on my hands without getting everyone else and their opinions involved. I could see it now—word somehow making it to the Samara pack house and Ava growing even more pissed at me than she already was.

No, I needed to keep a lid on this until I knew exactly where things stood between me and Cali…though it was clear that soon, we were going to have a lot to answer for. This kind of thing never stayed under wraps for long no matter how hard Cali and I might try to keep it to ourselves.

Not to mention that speaking on it now was risky since there were more than a few Samaras here tonight at Lucian’s—Geraint, Donovan, and Fausto were nearby and not that far out of earshot.

“Cali and I are…talking,” I said to Jay.

He nodded. “I guess that’s a good thing?” He smiled at me. “And maybe a little confusing?”

I laughed, realizing that telling my closest friend was supposed to be easy, and it was. “That’s putting it mildly,” I said.

I pocketed my phone, but my mind was racing. Why had Cali sent that video to me? Had she sent it to Greyson, too? Did I care if she had?

I sighed and slumped against the bar. Sleeping with Cali had complicated things…but it was a symptom of the feelings that had come roaring back…the feelings that had never really left in the first place.

Still, when I was all in on Ava and the Samara pack, I hadn’t thought much about what Cali did or didn’t do with my brother…or at least not as much. Now that we’d shared that special moment, all the same feelings were back in full force.

That was what sparked my fight with Greyson earlier. My feelings were raging, and that meant I didn’t want to think about Cali being with anyone else—especially Greyson.

Speaking of, where was he? I looked around and didn’t see him. Maybe he’d left. I wouldn’t mind leaving myself, and it wasn’t just because I was sick of this party. That video had done something to me. Triggered me.

I wanted—no, needed—to talk to Cali.

I couldn’t help thinking about getting her alone and her dancing like that just for me.

Colton interrupted my thoughts. “I heard Lucian has some crazy rooms in the basement—real edgy stuff. Want to go check them out?”

I groaned at the thought of experiencing anything edgier than was already happening in front of my face here on the main floor. I didn’t want to go, but I hadn’t seen much of Colton lately, and I knew it was best to get our quality time in where we could.

Also, if I went with him to the lower level, I could keep him out of trouble so that Maya wouldn’t be pissed. If Colton messed up, everyone who knew him or was party to the mess-up would pay, and I had enough trouble on my hands without inviting Maya’s ire.

“Come on, let’s go,” I said, leading the way to the basement. Gabriel, Mikah, and Jay joined Colton and me, everyone chattering excitedly about what we were going to find once we went downstairs.

“I wonder if there’s a casino,” Colton said.

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “A casino? Really, man?”

“Why is that so hard to picture? This is Lucian we’re talking about,” Colton said. “I’ve known the guy for five minutes practically, but he seems like the kind of guy to have a fucking casino somewhere in here.”

“Well, you got me there. Lucian doesn’t know the meaning of lowkey,” Gabe replied.

Once we were downstairs, we gazed down a long hallway lined with closed doors.

“Which one’s first?” Colton asked, champing at the bit.

“This one.” I pushed the first door open and saw a nearly naked woman covering a man in bright blue paint.

“No, thanks,” Colton said before slamming that door closed.

Gabriel opened a door across the hall to reveal an indoor pool where a heated volleyball game was taking place. Not a stitch of clothing in sight.

Another door led to an intimate setting, a library where fancily dressed waiters served cocktails. Colton shut that door, cursing under his breath.

“Okay, all of this is boring and not even weird in a good way. Where’s the damn casino?” he said.

Colton seemed genuinely disappointed while all I wanted was to satisfy my twin brother’s curiosity so we could get the hell out of there.

I wanted to see Cali more than ever, and somehow it seemed that every second I spent away from her was a waste of time.

We approached a door at the end of the hallway. “Maybe we’ll find your casino in here,” I said.

Just before I opened the door, Greyson and Duke came crashing through it, fighting.

**Episode 5624**

**Greyson**

With both hands wrapped tightly around Duke’s throat, we both tumbled to the ground in a tangle of flailing limbs. Duke was snarling like he wanted to kill me, and my wolf was dying to break free and answer his challenge.

I knew that once I did that, all bets were off. Duke was going to shift, too, and we’d both be too worked up to back down.

I’d gone after him because Duke couldn’t keep his skeevy eyes and hands off Kendall, and he was doing what any Alpha would—defending himself. I didn’t know how things had gotten so out of control, but there was no turning back now.

“What the hell are you doing?” Xavier shouted, ripping me off Duke.

I hadn’t even noticed that we weren’t alone, too focused on trying to subdue Duke so that this fight wouldn’t go too much further.

Colton yanked Duke in the other direction and pulled him out of my reach. Duke was wild-eyed and panting, trying to break free of Colton’s hold and come at me again.

I felt the same. I kept seeing the way he looked at Kendall, and each time the memory flowed through my mind it stoked my anger to dangerous levels.

“Let me fucking go!” I shouted at Xavier. “He needs to be taught a lesson.”

“You’re the one who’s going to learn something today!” Duke bellowed. “You decided to kill my vibe, and you’re going to pay for that!”

“Who the hell is in that room?” Colton remarked.

Colton tried to look over Duke’s shoulder to see who else was inside just as Kendall edged out of the room and took off with a frantic, “Excuse me, fellas!”

My wolf had stopped trying to get at Duke and was now watching Kendall go, wanting to follow her.

*Fuck! Now she’s leaving. Fucking Duke!*

Xavier was watching Kendall’s fast retreat, too. “Who the hell was that?” Xavier asked me.

I was relieved, glad that my brother hadn’t seen Kendall’s face. I didn’t know how I would explain myself if he realized who we were fighting over.

Duke glared at me, still twisting around and struggling to get out of Colton’s hold. “She was supposed to be my lap dancer!”

Everyone started whistling at that, and Gabriel did a little gyration that sent the entire room into hysterics. “Lucian really knows how to throw a bash! Lap dances so great it makes wolves fight each other to get a taste!”

Mikah looked surprised. “Were you two were fighting over a lap dance?” He shot Duke a look. “Don’t you have a mate?” Then he looked at me. “And so do you.”

Duke frowned. “It’s none of your business, vampire…but trust me, my mate approves, or I wouldn’t be here. In fact, she encourages me to enjoy myself in whatever way I see fit. I tell her to do the same.” Duke glared at me. “Don’t know that I can say the same for Greyson. Doesn’t he have a pretty traditional situation with his mate?”

Not needing to hear any more details about Duke and Paige’s arrangement and not willing to comment about my own relationship in the face of what could be seen as some betrayal against Cali, I interrupted Duke before he could say anything else that would damn me.

“It’s okay! There was actually nothing going on. We both just got caught up in the spirit of Lucian’s party. There was some…um…miscommunication, that’s all. I overreacted. I’m sorry,” I said. “No hard feelings?”

I held out my hand, hoping that Duke would take it and choose to not make more of this than he needed to.

“I’m sorry, too,” Duke said. Then he grinned. “Nothing like two Alphas going at it. Now it’s a party!”

Colton finally released Duke, who made a show of dusting himself off.

“Now Greyson can have that little beauty all to himself. Remind me to never stand between Greyson and a little erotic entertainment.”

“What?” Xavier said. “So you *were* fighting over the woman?”

“No, and I’m not interested,” I said before things could snowball.

Duke scowled. “You’re not interested? After nearly ripping my head off because I wanted a lap dance from her?”

“Like I said, a miscommunication,” I snapped.

Duke shrugged and then started in Kendall’s direction. “Well then, if you don’t mind…”

My wolf snarled inside of me, wanting to kill Duke. It took everything in me to calm myself enough just to step into Duke’s path without decking him again.

If we got into another fight, I wasn’t certain that we would stop before one of us did some damage, and then we’d have even more to answer for in the aftermath.

I leveled my eyes with Duke’s, angling my body so that no one else could see the intensity in my stare. “I’m sure there are other dancers who would be happy to entertain you, Duke.”

Duke pulled back in confusion, but then smiled. “Uh…fine. Got it. Maybe I’ll go look for a double lap dance. Has to be something like that behind one of these doors, right?”

Duke headed off, but my wolf was still on edge. I hated that I was reacting this strongly to the thought of someone else even touching Kendall. As much as I wanted to pretend that this whole double-mate thing wasn’t a big deal, it was obvious that wasn’t true.

“Glad you two worked that out,” Colton said. “So…Greyson, is there a casino down here by chance?”

“What? No idea,” I replied distractedly.

“I’m not giving up until I find one,” Colton said. “I’m feeling lucky tonight.”

Colton and the others started down the hall, but Xavier lingered.

He stepped close and lowered his voice, unable to disguise his suspicion. Everything that had gone on between me and Duke had gone over the others’ heads, or maybe they didn’t care as much. That wasn’t the case with Xavier. His hackles were up.

“You want to tell me what the hell is really going on here?” he said.

I wasn’t about to get into it with Xavier of all people. “I don’t know, I thought it was pretty clear,” I said. “Duke and I—”

“What isn’t clear,” Xavier interrupted, “is why Kendall was here dressed up like a stripper and about to give you and the Aspen Alpha a lap dance.”

I was surprised, or at least tried to act like I was. “Kendall?” I started looking around. “Where?”

Xavier shook his head. “Don’t even try it. I picked up her scent—it was faint, but there—so I know you did. Especially since you were just closed in a room with her.”

I hesitated. Xavier was smart, and more than that…he knew me. A lame excuse could fool anyone else, but not him. No, we weren’t close, never had been, but there were certain things that we knew about each other as brothers even if we didn’t want to admit it to ourselves.

Even so, I couldn’t tell him the truth. At least not as much truth as Kendall offered. She was here on some assignment, but hell if I knew the details. There was no way I was going to blow her cover and tell Xavier that she was an MIB agent.

“So? Cat got your tongue or what?” Xavier said. “Something’s going on here, and I want to know what the fuck it is.”

“It’s not what you think,” I said.

Xavier laughed, but it was derisive. “Do you want to know what I think?”

“Not particularly,” I said.

What I wanted was to get the hell out of this party and find Cali. I needed to cleanse my palate of Kendall by seeing and touching and smelling the only woman I loved and cared about. Sure, I was still a little miffed that Xavier and Cali had been together, but not enough to want to avoid Cali.

“I’m going to tell you anyway,” Xavier said. “I think Kendall is your mate.”

I was stunned. “What, did Cali tell you that?”

Xavier narrowed his eyes at me. “So, I’m not wrong? I bet that’s what you and Cali fought about.”

“I don’t have to stand here and listen to this when none of it is any of your business.” I pushed past him, knowing that if I stayed a second more, we were going to pick up where we left off upstairs.

“Don’t leave on my behalf,” Xavier called after me. “I’m going to go find Colton and help him gamble away his life savings…if he’s even found the casino,” he said. “Enjoy the party.”

He looked down the hallway in the direction that Kendall had gone and then gave me a pointed look. “Don’t have too much fun, okay?”

Then he turned and left.

I watched him go and then leaned back against the wall. Even before Xavier held my feet to the fire, I thought this night had gone off the deep end, but it had somehow gotten worse.

*Fuck. Xavier knows.*

Maybe Cali had told him, maybe not. But what troubled me worst of all was wondering what would have happened between me and Kendall if Duke hadn’t interrupted us.

*Fuck.*

**Episode 5625**

A drunken, giggly, rambunctious mess, we all stumbled into the pack house. We were way too loud, but we were too wasted to care—laughing and cheering and telling bad jokes that didn’t even make any sense. Not that any of us noticed since we laughed anyway.

Luckily, the pack house was nearly empty, so I doubted we’d get any noise complaints or angry shouts for us to keep it down.

“Do your bar dance again!” Lola shouted. “I want to memorize it for the next time I’m compelled to jump on top of the bar and dance!”

I pranced around the living room a bit, narrowly avoiding falling through a coffee table and sending everyone into laughing fits.

“What a night,” Violet said. “Movie?” she asked Dani. “I’m not ready to go to bed yet, but I do need to sit down and not move.”

“Movie,” Dani replied. “Great idea. Something funny. Or no! Something romantic. I know, something romantic *and* funny!”

The two of them rushed off to watch something, and I pulled Lola into a sloppy hug.

“Thank you for tonight,” I said. “It was exactly what I needed.”

“You’re welcome. It was way better than I thought possible. You really showed Ava.” Lola mimicked the way I’d swung my hips around in Ava’s face. She was full of energy but light on her feet, throwing her hips and butt around while saying, “Take that, Ava! Uh! Uh!”

I was doubled over laughing and collapsed onto the couch. It took me a while to catch my breath enough to speak. “So I guess that means you’re not angry with me anymore about what happened between me and Xavier?” I said.

Lola pulled me into another hug. “I’m sorry I slut-shamed you.” She smacked a kiss on my cheek. “You are a liberated woman, and I love that about you. Plus, I don’t know how the hell I would handle a supernatural love triangle, so I shouldn’t talk, huh?”

I laughed and draped my arms around her neck. “Apology accepted!”

As I headed for the stairs, I felt good. I knew I probably wouldn’t feel so good in the morning since the bartender enjoyed my dance so much that he gave us another round on the house. A hangover was inevitable.

Right now, though, I was just pleasantly buzzed and excited to end my night on a high note.

No matter how much my head hurt in the morning, I promised myself that I’d remember that it was all worth it. Lola and I weren’t on the outs anymore, and I’d taught Ava a lesson she’d never forget. All was right in the world.

*And you and Xavier had started…something. That’s worth getting excited about all on its own*.

I paused before I reached the top of the stairs and took a quick look around the house. The girls had all made their way into the living room and were arguing about what movie to watch, but the rest of the house was quiet and empty.

Greyson wasn’t back yet, and I wished he was. I missed him. Things were a little tense between us right now, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want to see him.

In fact, I wished he were here so I could tell him all about my epic night out.

I finally made it into the upstairs hallway and paused at Greyson’s door. Seeing it only made me miss him more, but what was happening to me right now was so confusing… *Ugh.*

It wasn’t new. I’d been torn between Greyson and Xavier for so long that it almost felt normal…except it would never feel normal to be in love with two people the way I was—and with a curse hanging over us to boot.

I went to my room and flopped down on the bed then pulled out my phone to watch the video. I’d really done it. I could admit that my moves were as good as everyone had told me they were, and I looked pretty and confident and like I belonged up there on that bar.

No matter how much Ava had tried to hate.

And then I remembered that I’d mistakenly sent the video to Xavier. I had to have done it when Ava slammed into me. Another sign that Ava was and would forever be a thorn in my side.

I could see that Xavier had opened the message, but he hadn’t sent a response.

*WTF?*

It wasn’t like I’d sent a normal, *hey, how’s it going?* text! I’d sent him a video of me dancing on a bar!

Before I knew it, a bit of insecurity edged its way around my excitement. As much as I wanted to leave Ava out of the equation, I couldn’t help wondering if she was right about me. Maybe I didn’t look as good as I’d thought in the video.

More than that, what if Xavier wasn’t as into me as I thought and our lovemaking was nothing more than him giving me false hope about what could be reignited?

But then I closed my eyes and remembered what it felt like to be with him again. There was no denying it. I knew Xavier well, and there was no way our connection was an illusion or some mind game Xavier was playing with me.

He had never played games with me before, so why would he start now? I wasn’t going to let Ava get into my head. I wasn’t going to let his lack of a response to my dancing video send me into a tailspin.

I was going to allow myself to remember our time together again, to trust in it. It was real despite what Ava said or believed. She was only trying to hurt me because it hurt her to know that my connection with Xavier was back and stronger than it had ever been.

*Then why didn’t he respond to my text? And why do I care so much? Sending it was a mistake in the first place!*

I tried to think about the reasons he’d left me on read. He was at Lucian’s party, and I knew firsthand how overwhelming his events could be. Chances were that he hadn’t had a chance to reply because he was having too much fun.

I’d never seen Xavier have fun at one of Lucian’s parties, but maybe tonight was different. It wasn’t like any of the other guys had come back to the pack house yet. Lucian’s bachelor party was probably a rager and would be going on all night.

I likely wouldn’t see Greyson until morning, and that was probably when Xavier would reply to my text…if he wasn’t too hungover to see it.

I decided to stop overthinking everything and get ready for bed. As I stood up to get into my pajamas, my phone buzzed. I dove to the bed to check it and almost squealed with glee when I saw that it was from Xavier.

I was about to open it, but then I hesitated. He was going to respond to the video, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to see what his reaction was.

What if he told me he didn’t like it…or worse yet, what if he asked why I would send him something like this?

We hadn’t talked about where we stood, and technically, he was still with Ava. What if he thought it was thirsty and inappropriate to send him something like this unsolicited?

I cautiously opened the text and read his response: *Nice moves*

There was no exclamation point, no period, no nothing. No way to know if he liked it or if he was just saying something neutral. Maybe he was appalled at my dancing and his response was all sarcasm.

I texted back a simple, *Oh god!!*

Xavier was typing back, and I fell onto the bed as the world began to spin a bit. I didn’t know if it was from the drinking or from anticipation of what he was going to say next.

His text finally came through. *Do you do private bookings?*

I rolled my eyes and typed back, *That’s the best you can do?*

*Is this how you conduct business?*Then he followed up quickly with, *Do I book through a website? Cali-is-hot.com?*

I scoffed, a little too giddy as I responded. *Subtle you are not. Juvenile you are.*

I watched the pulsing dots with excitement until his reply came through. *You know I can do better. A lot better.*

I felt a rush of warmth on my cheeks. I settled back into the bedspread, my entire body tingling, and then wrote back, *What do you have in mind?*

*It depends.*

*?????*

*Where are you?*

I stared at the phone in confusion. What kind of response was that?

*I’m at the pack house…in my bed.*

I waited for his response and could see that he was typing, but then the dots disappeared and nothing else came through. Was he going to ghost me?

I started to type another message to call him out for not saying anything, but then my phone started to ring.

I yelped and nearly threw it across the room.

Xavier was video calling me!

**Episode 5626**

My heart started racing at the sight of Xavier’s picture on the incoming video call. Why was he video calling me, anyway?

Did he want to say something to me that he couldn’t say via text or with a phone call? Or did he want something else?

Maybe he just wanted to see me in living color, which made me blush.

I was about to answer, but then I quickly jumped up to check my reflection in the mirror. I realized at that moment that I hadn’t looked at myself since coming home from the bar.

I didn’t look bad at all. I adjusted my hair a little and swiped a smudge of mascara from under my eye, then rushed back to the phone and answered.

Xavier’s image appeared on the screen, but it was hard to tell where he was calling from. He frowned at me.

“I thought you weren’t going to answer,” he said. “It rang a lot…I almost hung up. Am I bothering you? Are you busy?”

“No!” I said a little too loudly. Thinking quickly, I added, “I wanted to make sure I was alone.”

Xavier’s frown deepened. “Why wouldn’t you be alone? Didn’t you say that you were in your bedroom?”

“I am,” I stammered. “But um, Lola, you know? Wanted to make sure she wasn’t hanging around so that we had our privacy.” I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt. “When it’s you on the phone, privacy is a must, don’t you think? We don’t need anyone spying or listening in.”

I was blabbering, and I knew it. I told myself to stop.

*It’s not like Xavier is some new crush I barely know. He and I have so much history and know each other so well…so why does this feel so new to me?*

Xavier smiled, and it was the kind of smile that sent fire coursing through every single inch of my body. God I’d missed that smile, and everything behind it.

“Show me,” he said.

I gulped as it felt like someone released a bunch of butterflies in the pit of my stomach. “Show you?” I squeaked out. I was afraid to ask what he wanted to see. I looked down at myself, suddenly feeling nervous.

“Show me that you’re alone.”

I laughed at my own foolishness. What did I think he wanted to see? My cheeks warmed at the thought. He could have asked me to show him anything…and I may have been willing to do it.

I moved my phone around the room to give him a good look at what was going on in my world. “See? Nobody here. Just me, you, and our cell phone carriers.”

Xavier chuckled at that. “Just how I like it.”

“I showed you mine, now show me yours,” I said.

Xavier grinned and moved the phone around to give me a look, but it was so dark wherever he was that I couldn’t make anything out.

“Where are you?” I asked.

The camera shifted to a Christmas tree, and I stared in surprise. “Wait, what are you doing at the lake house?”

The camera was back on him now. “What do you think? Missing you.”

My breath hitched at his words. In that moment, I realized how long I’d waited to hear them. We’d spent so much time apart lately, and we were both occupied with our relationships, but at moments like this, I realized that neither of us had ever been very far from the other’s thoughts.

“You are? Missing me?”

He nodded. “Do you really need to ask me that? You know how I feel about you, Cali. At least I hope you do.”

I let out a deep, shuddering breath. I liked this feeling…this gleeful expectation. Thoughts about all the things that were in store for us now that we were slowly moving onto the same page.

“If you’re missing me, why did you go to the lake house?”

Xavier smiled. “Because it’s one place where I can still pick up your scent. I needed it tonight.”

I gasped as inaudibly as I could as a warm, bubbly sensation washed through me.

No, Xavier wasn’t some new crush I was getting to know, but it certainly felt like it. I was hanging on his every word and excited by all the things he was saying to me—clear indicators that what had happened between us wasn’t a fluke.

There was no reason for me to worry about Xavier having second thoughts because he was doubling down in every way that counted.

In the back of my mind, I wondered if things were moving a little too fast. He was still with Ava, and I hadn’t talked to Greyson about where things stood with me and Xavier, either. I wanted to be with Xavier, and all of this was fun…but I didn’t want to hurt anyone in the process.

As if that could be avoided…

I tried to steer the conversation somewhere. Anywhere.

“So you went to the lake house because you miss me?” I asked.

Xavier nodded. “It’s the truth. I needed to be close to you in some way, and this was the next best thing.”

I bit my lip. “And are you going to stay there all night?” I tried to picture him there alone, his nose pressed to something that I’d touched or laid on.

He stared at me, and even in the near darkness I could see his blue eyes clearly and the affection he felt for me.

“I don’t want to go back to the pack house yet,” he said.

My voice cracked as I asked, “You don’t?”

I couldn’t help but think about Ava and that this was yet another thing she’d gotten wrong. She’d bragged that Xavier was going to come home to her…but he hadn’t. Maybe he hadn’t come to me, but this was awfully close, wasn’t it?

“I like being here. It brings back so many good memories. Memories of before…”

He trailed off as if it were painful to finish the sentence, but he didn’t need to. I knew exactly what he meant.

Before Adéluce. Before she forced us apart and made Xavier start up a new life with someone who wasn’t me.

All of that was behind us now.

“How was Lucian’s bachelor party?” I asked.

Xavier laughed, and I took it in, loving how genuine and deep his voice sounded, enjoying the smile in his eyes.

“Where should I begin?” he said. “We both know Lucian, and it checked all the boxes we expect—loud, over the top, extravagant, and full of Lucian.”

I laughed. “Tell me more.”

“In some ways, it was tamer than I expected,” Xavier said.

“Oh yeah? I’m going to start getting ready for bed, but keep talking,” I told him.

“Yeah…or maybe I’m just desensitized now and so used to his stunts that nothing I saw there shocked me.”

“It’s probably that. I don’t believe for one second that his bachelor party was tame by anyone’s standards. I have to sit the phone down for a sec,” I told him. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead.”

I set my phone on my dresser, listening while he described some of the more shocking parts of the night. A casino? Another statue of Lucian after the first had gone so, so poorly?

I put on my night clothes and brought the phone with me into the bathroom while I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and applied all the lotions and potions that would have me smelling good and my skin glowing the next day.

By the time I picked the phone back up and aimed the camera at myself, Xavier was finishing up.

“I don’t know…just happy to be out of there, really. I couldn’t take any more Lucian. I’d had enough. Colton was still there when I left. I just hope he stays out of trouble. My brother can get a little crazy if left to his own devices.”

“That’s an understatement,” I said.

“I know. And Maya would never forgive me if he got into anything that he couldn’t get out of.”

Xavier adjusted his phone, and I was gifted with a glimpse of his bare chest. My heart went into overdrive. No matter how many times I saw it, it took my breath away. I guess that was normal when someone was in as good of shape as Xavier was.

“Why did you take your shirt off?” I asked.

“I’m hot,” he said nonchalantly. “Aren’t you hot? Also, you know me. How often have you known me to sleep in clothes?”

I blushed. “Not often. And now that you mention it, I *am* pretty hot.”

“You going to sleep now, baby?” Xavier asked, his voice low and husky.

Sleep was the last thing my wired body was prepared for. I gave a noncommittal “Mm-hmm.”

“I’m bummed that I’m not there to help you sleep. Even though I suppose you’re here with me right now…sort of.” He laughed, and I felt it all the way through to my core. “Tell me, Cali, what would you do if I were with you right now?”

**Episode 5627**

My body was on fire, so hot that I had to whip the covers off even though I knew that it wasn’t that type of heat.

“If you were here?” I said breathlessly. “I’d lay my head on your chest and listen to your heart beating.”

Shit. Even saying it made me miss sleeping next to him. That was the type of thing you didn’t realize you would miss until you didn’t get to enjoy it anymore. I missed snuggling up to his big, warm body, feeling safe and protected in his arms.

It wasn’t that I didn’t feel that way with Greyson…but my mates were so different, and the feelings each of them gave me when we were alone together was so different, too.

“I’d like that,” Xavier said, his voice husky and warm. “Fuck, I’d like that a lot, baby. More than I can ever really explain.”

His words were so sincere, and I loved hearing them. I closed my eyes and let his voice flow over me, imagining that he was here with me right now, running his hands over my body, leaving goose bumps all over my skin.

“What would you do if I were there with you?”

Xavier sucked in a breath. “That’s easy. I’d kiss you.”

I opened my eyes and gulped, shocked by the desire I saw on his face. He wanted me, and that made me want him even more. “Where?” I asked, unable to stop myself. “Where would you kiss me?” My breathing grew deep and rapid.

Xavier’s eyes went dark. “Everywhere. There isn’t one place I wouldn’t put my lips. I’d kiss your neck, then your ears…right around the outside like you like it. Then I’d nibble on your earlobes and make you arch your back for me.”

I closed my eyes and imagined the sensation…and I even arched my back like he was here driving me to do it.

“Then I would move to your lips, and I’d kiss you so slow and explore that sweet, warm mouth of yours with my tongue.”

My head was spinning. It was unbelievable how real it felt…I could feel his lips all over me, kissing me with adoration.

“Then I’d move down to your neck and run my tongue along the soft spot under your jaw…and after that I would move down to your chest, kissing you between your soft, perfect breasts before I turned my attention to each one, taking each nipple between my teeth and nibbling until you cried out.”

“*Xavier*—”

“But I still wouldn’t be done. No. I’d take my time. Commit every part of you to memory so that even when we’re apart, I can live on knowing just how you feel, how you smell, how you taste.”

“A-And how do I taste? How do I smell?” I asked, my voice almost a whisper.

“Like honey, but sweeter. And I can never get enough,” he said huskily. “That’s why if you were here, I would hold your arms pinned to the bed while I kissed down your stomach, and then you know what’s next.”

“Wh-what?”

“The sweetest part of all.”

My body flushed. “*Xavier*,” I said, breathless. “I wish you were here—”

“I do, too. But we’re going to have to make do, aren’t we?”

“What?” I asked, looking at him on the tiny phone screen. Had I heard him right?

“I want you to touch yourself for me. Do it, baby. Show me how good I can make you feel with only the sound of my voice and those beautiful, slender, soft fingers doing to you what I wish my tongue was doing to you right now.”

I was startled at first…but only for a second. I knew and trusted this man, and I wasn’t ashamed of sharing my pleasure with him in person or over a video call that was growing more heated by the second.

In fact, I was eager to take things further, to steal some kind of release while Xavier’s eyes drank me in.

Still, Xavier knew me so well that he sensed my second of hesitation, and his expression softened. “Wait, did I take things too far? Was that too much?”

I shook my head. “N-no. Not at all.”

To prove that I was still lost in the moment with him and I didn’t want him to stop for a second, I angled the phone so that he had a good view of me and the outline of my breasts.

Slowly and using just my fingertips, I slid the collar of my satin nightshirt down so that my breast was exposed down to the nipple. I pinched it between my thumb and forefinger while imagining it was his teeth clamping down and pulling, delicious pleasure and pressure driving me to the brink.

He groaned. “Yes, baby. Now, do the other one. That’s right.”

I followed his directions, my actions made all the more intense when I saw the way he was looking at me—hungrily, like he wanted to come through the phone and take over.

Before I knew it, I was moaning Xavier’s name, and it was like he was lying on top of me, driving me wild.

“Now take your shirt off. I want to see as much of you as I can.”

I quickly slipped out of my shirt and then laid back on the bed with the phone hovering over me. A second later, it slipped out of my hands, and I had to duck out of the way to keep from being clobbered in the face by it.

When I picked the phone up again, my cheeks were red, and not from arousal.

“Oh my god,” I said. “You didn’t see that, did you?”

“See what?” he said with a smirk. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I said sheepishly. “Phone sex is a hazard to my health I guess.”

“Well, maybe you should prop the phone on something and do it hands free from here?”

I giggled. “Good idea. A concussion is not sexy,” I said. Then I gulped, taking a deep breath. “So…once again, I’ve shown you mine. Why don’t you show me yours?”

I waited with bated breath as Xavier aimed the phone down to show his sweatpants. At first, I wondered what he was showing me, and then I saw it—the unmistakable bulge of his cock showing through his pants.

Without realizing it, I licked my lips. I wanted him so badly that I couldn’t help but touch myself, and in the new position, my phone captured it all.

“That’s the reaction I was looking for,” Xavier said, his voice a low rumble.

I watched as he reached down and grabbed himself through his pants.

“It’s hard to believe that you can make me this hard just from looking at you.”

“I’m so wet, Xavier. Talk dirty to me. Tell me what you’re going to do to me with your cock the next time I see you,” I said hungrily, barely recognizing my own voice.

Xavier flashed a wicked smile, and I bit my lip as I cupped my sex with my hand, my fingers glancing across the warm, damp heat there.

As hard as I fought it off, I realized that this was something Ava probably didn’t think me capable of. Phone sex with my mate, saying dirty things to each other.

*I guess I’m proving her wrong in more ways than one tonight, even though she’ll never know anything about this.*

Something about that thought turned me on even more. Ava thought she had Xavier in the palm of her hand and that he was only toying with me, and now look…he was avoiding her…locked away in the Redwood lake house moments from making me come over a video call.

I gasped when Xavier pulled his erection out of his pants and wrapped a strong hand around his shaft and squeezed.

“How wet are you? Put a finger in and tell me.”

I followed his directions and then looked at him. “Very wet. And you won’t believe this…” I parted my legs and changed position so that he could see exactly what I was doing to myself. “…But I think I’m about to come.”

The feeling only intensified when Xavier began stroking a hand up and down his cock, shifting the phone so that I could see. I heard his breathing speed up, almost in sync with my own.

“Yes, drive those fingers in deep. Pretend it’s me inside of you. Plunging in and out, so hard and long and thick.”

“*Xavier*,” I moaned out as I pushed a finger inside me. “It’s not enough.”

“I know, baby,” he said. “I’d fuck you so well.”

Whining, I ground into my hand. It felt good, and knowing Xavier was watching me made me hot. I could already feel the pressure of an orgasm building inside me. I watched him as he stroked, his eyes half closed as he touched himself too.

“That’s it, tiger,” he said, grunting when I palmed my own breast with my free hand. “Come for me.”

Hearing his voice felt so good. I sped up my movements, watching him on my phone do the same. Then my thighs started to clench around my hand and I cried out as pleasure shot through me, a powerful orgasm overtaking every inch of my body.

A second later I heard him say my name in a gruff moan, and then we both went quiet.

By the time I opened my eyes again, I was nothing but a pile of mush on the bed. My entire body felt like jelly, and my brain was humming and buzzing all at once.

The only thing that could have been better than that was having Xavier right here, live and in person.

“That was great,” Xavier said, breaking the silence. “But not as great as it would be to have you in my arms. You know, I could make that happen.”

After I pulled a sweatshirt over my head, I looked at the time. “When? *Now?*”

Xavier smirked. “I’m a wolf, Cali. I’m fast. I could be there in minutes.”

I flushed. The thought of him coming here was tempting, but we both knew he shouldn’t do that. “I know, but you should get some sleep. We both should. It’s late.”

Xavier nodded at that. “I love you, Cali.”

My heart squeezed at the words I’d longed to hear for so long. I didn’t think I’d ever get tired of hearing him say them.

“I love you too, Xavi—”

I gasped, my words cut short by the sight of Greyson standing in my doorway.

**Episode 5628**

My heart plummeted, and my body went ice cold. I always loved to lay eyes on Greyson, and I’d been longing to see him since I arrived home…but not this way.

Xavier’s voice cut through the awkward silence, now sounding a little too loud through the phone. “Cali? You there?”

In a panic so extreme I could barely think straight, I ended the call. Greyson stayed where he was but leaned on the doorframe. His expression wasn’t angry, but I could see that he wasn’t pleased.

It was then that I remembered that I was half dressed, and I whipped the covers up over myself.

*How much did he hear? How long was he standing there?*

I didn’t want to hurt him, yet these days I felt like that was all I was doing. How could I have been so thoughtless?

I hadn’t thought to lock the door, and even if I had, why hadn’t I considered the reality that Greyson could come home at any minute?

“Was that Xavier?” he asked quietly.

He knew the answer, I was sure of that, but I wouldn’t dare try to lie my way out of this horrible situation even if that seemed like the easier way out. I nodded, not sure that I could make my voice work.

Coming down from the high of that call was too much to bear. My emotions were still trying to catch up with the shock of Greyson appearing out of nowhere at such a pivotal moment.

*And what does Xavier think of me right now? Hanging up on him mid-sentence when I was seconds from telling him that I still loved him.*

Greyson said nothing, but the hurt in his eyes said it all. I wished it was the first time I’d ever seen that tortured look in Greyson’s eyes, but it was far from it.

*Fuck.*

I cleared my throat, knowing that I was going to have to say *something.* I was sure that my silence was making things worse. It certainly wasn’t up to Greyson to keep breaking the silence that settled between us like a lead balloon.

“I’m sorry. It just sort of…we kind of…I didn’t…” I was struggling, and I couldn’t think of anything I could say that would make this sting any less. “I didn’t mean to surprise you like that,” I said.

Greyson finally stepped into the room. “I expected to find you in my room when I got home…but now I see why you weren’t there.”

I sat up, every ounce of the joy and comfort I’d felt a few moments ago gone like they’d never been there at all.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. “I don’t want you to apologize.”

“I know…I just…I know I hurt you. I feel horrible.”

Greyson wasn’t looking at me and was, instead, staring into the distance.

“I’m not going to lie, it hurts, it sucks, and I will never be happy about it. I will never get used to having to share you…but I’ll never blame you, and I’ll never expect you to apologize. We’ve been here before, love. So many times. And we’ll get through it just like those other times…”

I took his hand in mine and kissed him across the knuckles, hoping he knew how much I cared for him and that whatever I’d been into with Xavier had no bearing at all on how I felt about him.

“Even if I can’t apologize for what happened, I can apologize for you having to see it…for walking in on me like that. I won’t let that happen again, okay?”

Greyson’s rueful smile panged something deep in me. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” he said. “I don’t ever want you to feel like you have to lie to me.”

A rush of emotion filled me. Even when I’d obviously hurt him and should have been the one in the wrong, he was looking out for me. Taking care of my heart even at a moment when his had to be hurting.

Greyson had always put me first, and I knew he always would.

I reminded myself that when I first got home, the first person I wanted to see, the first person I looked for, was Greyson. And here he was sitting right by my side.

I leaned against him, still fielding a rush of confusing emotions. He stroked my hair and kissed my forehead.

“The *due destini* runs both ways, you know. I love you, Cali. Sometimes the situations we find ourselves in test that love. But my love for you has never wavered, not even one time. You know that, right?”

“I know that,” I said, my voice still raw and dry in my throat. “And I love you. I know what it’s like to be on both sides of this.”

Greyson didn’t say anything else, and in the silence, we held each other close.

Downstairs, I heard the girls reacting to the movie, and even though it sounded like fun and Greyson and I were going through a hard moment right now, there was no place in the world I would rather be.

“One of the reasons I’m gaining a better understanding of what you’re going through is because…well…Kendall showed up at Lucian’s.”

I pulled away in shock.

“Kendall? Why was Kendall there?” I grimaced at my own reaction, feeling foolish about it after what Greyson had just caught me in the middle of doing. “I didn’t mean—”

Greyson held up a hand to stop me. “It’s okay. I was puzzled about seeing her, too. But she was there, and I thought you should know.”

A million questions were already flooding through my mind. I remembered what happened between them before—their drugged-up kiss and Greyson’s confession about how hot and heavy he and Kendall got that day…

Nothing happened, but to think of what could have…

*How do Greyson and Xavier deal with this? Sharing me and things like walking in on me in a compromising position with another man? I’ve had practice with it too with Ava, but… Just thinking about Kendall and Greyson alone together triggers me.*

I took a breath before I spoke, but I couldn’t prevent the panic in my voice. “Do you know why she was there? Did she say?”

While I waited for his answer, my mind conjured up all kinds of images that took my breath away.

Kendall was beautiful and had a great body. If she was at Lucian’s, she’d probably been dressed to the nines, and I knew that if that were truly the case, it would have been hard for Greyson to keep his eyes off her.

I was starting to spiral, and I needed to shut that down before it overwhelmed me.

Greyson grabbed me and looked me in the eye. “I see that look on your face, and I don’t want you to worry, because nothing happened.” He sighed and looked away. “I mean, not really.”

I snapped to attention, my few moments of relief his words had given me fading away.

“What do you mean not really? Did something happen? Tell me, Greyson, even if it was something small. I can handle it.”

I braced myself, internally preparing for the worst. After all the things that both Greyson and Xavier had walked in on in the time since we’d all been under the control of *due destini*, I was prepared for the worst.

“Of course I’m going to tell you,” Greyson said. “I have nothing to hide, and I did nothing wrong, so I don’t have to hide anything from you. I hope you know that.”

I took his hands in mine, his words filling me with relief. “Go ahead, Greyson, tell me what happened.”

“I was fine,” he began. “But my wolf had other ideas. It was acting up, and it was a struggle. There was this room and she was in there, she wasn’t supposed to be, but—”

It was my turn to stop him. “Wait, sorry… I’m sorry, I changed my mind,” I said quickly. “I get what you said a few moments ago about understanding whatever I’ve been through. I don’t think hearing about exactly in detail what…did or didn’t happen would help either of us. None of this is easy for either of us, and it’s not going to get easier anytime soon…

Greyson hung his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, but I wish it would. A break from all of this would be wonderful.”

“Wishful thinking,” I said. “Knowing how difficult the *due destini* is, it would be hypocritical of me to ask you not to see for yourself what’s going on between you and Kendall.”

Greyson straightened and looked at me head-on. “I don’t follow, Cali. What are you saying?”

What was I saying? Just because I understood the effects of the *due destini* in a way no one else could didn’t make what was about to come out of my mouth any easier to say. But I had to do it. I had to give Greyson the respect and space that he’d given me time and time again.

“What I’m saying is that you should see what’s going on with Kendall, and I won’t…I won’t stop you.”

**Episode 5629**

**Artemis**

Our quarters were a flurry of excitement as our assistants went about packing my and Kastian’s things for our departure from Embersy.

We couldn’t get out of here fast enough in my opinion.

As if things weren’t crazy enough, Celeste came bursting in to give us our itinerary for the next leg of our trip. And, of course, she couldn’t give us our schedule without giving us a talking to regarding proper behavior and protocol.

At first, I listened with more interest than usual, just happy that I’d managed to make it back before Celeste realized I was gone. Kastian hadn’t even commented on it, which was so unlike him.

He typically never missed a chance to throw my “bad behavior” in my face.

“Where did you two manage to get all this stuff in such a short time?” Celeste asked as she watched our things being stuffed into bags, boxes, and cases. “It’s unbelievable. Clothes and shoes and trinkets. I gave you a shopping allowance, but I didn’t expect you to blow it.”

“Well, we do like to take a little bit of the world home with us when we travel,” Kastian said distractedly. “How else will we make this insufferable trip palatable?”

While Celeste went on about the schedule, it became harder and harder to focus. All I could think about was what happened last night between me, Rishika, and Marius. It felt like it was a dream, a figment of my imagination…but it wasn’t.

The three of us had taken things to a place I hadn’t expected, and I was still reeling from it, wrapping my head around it and what it meant for us going forward.

I kept circling back to the conversation we’d had this morning, and apart from that, I needed to find a way to get out of this tour so that I could go after Kadmos.

That was truly the most important thing to me right now—finally finding the answers I’d been seeking for so long.

It wasn’t going to be easy to do. Every time I tried to come up with an excuse that would get me out of the rest of the tour, my mind slipped back to the sensation of having two sets of hands on me at once, pleasuring me in ways I never imagined.

*Focus, Artemis. You must be on your game if you’re going to get what you want.*

“And next, I would like to talk, in depth, about some of the next stops on the tour. They’re very important locations, and we can’t have you going in unprepared,” Celeste continued.

“Great,” Kastian deadpanned.

Celeste gave him a sharp look, and he snapped his mouth closed.

“Next up is Hylix, another town on the border between Light and Dark Fae territories. Most of this town is situated on Light Fae lands, and the population reflects that.”

I blinked when Celeste snapped her fingers in my face.

“Artemis, are you even listening to me? This is important.”

“She would never dream of not listening to you, Celeste. Surely you realize that by now,” Kastian remarked with a grin. “But you could stand to speak about something even marginally more interesting.”

I tried not to snort at the look on Celeste’s face. She was seconds from slapping Kastian, that much was clear. I was surprised that Kastian saved me like that.

*Unless it’s going to cost me another favor…which it very well may.*

“So we’re going to Hylix. Great. The place sounds…great…so great. But isn’t this tour about the people? Showing them through our union that the Light and Dark Fae courts are finally united?” I said.

“Of course, I’m the one who told *you* that,” Celeste snapped.

“Yes, I know. But I just want to make sure we’re keeping to the spirit of that. How do the people feel so far? How was our parade received?”

Celeste gave me a long look that suggested she didn’t want to hear that question. Unfortunately for her, Kastian was more than willing to pick up my thread.

“Yes, Celeste. That grand parade of yours, did it spread any goodwill?” he said. “Do the people feel more unified? Do they love us yet? Are they ready to never fight each other again due to the power of love?”

The biting sarcasm in Kastian’s tone forced me to hold back another laugh. I never would have guessed that I would ever find Kastian funny not once, but twice.

Celeste glared at me, and I blinked as innocently as I could. She gave Kastian a death stare until he put his hands up in surrender.

“It’s too soon to tell,” she finally said. “But any gesture of goodwill is something.”

“Unless they don’t believe it,” was Kastian’s flippant reply. “We had a parade, not a giant donation to their orphanage. Shouldn’t we do stuff like that? Things that count.”

“That doesn’t seem very sincere,” I grumbled.

“And a parade through the city center is? Anyway, it’s politics, my dear wife. Nothing is sincere,” Kastian said.

“Anyway, it’s too early to know what effects we’re having. We’ve only just begun the tour. Give it time. Showing is different from telling. It’s good to be inclusive, and we’ll continue the tour. We’ll see results and the effects on the Fae world in due time.”

She snapped her fingers again, and I hoped this wasn’t turning into a new habit.

“Now, both of you, get going and meet by the carriage outside. I’ll finish up in here.”

Happy to be free of Celeste, at least for the time being, Kastian and I left.

Once we were out of her earshot, Kastian said, “When we reach Hylix, where will your little wolf and bounty hunter sleep? In between us in our bed, perhaps?” He flashed a sweet smile. “I’m just trying to plan.”

“It’s none of your damn business!”

“No…but you also owe me multiple favors…but I suppose we have the remainder of the tour to figure that out.”

“I’m not going on the tour,” I said. “I have other things to do.”

Kastian stopped me outside just before we reached the carriage.

“Excuse me? What do you mean you’re not going?”

I didn’t answer him right away, my attention snagged by Adair and Tabitha talking in the distance. Adair was affectionate to her—the only person he ever showed his softness to.

Adair caught me watching them and nodded in my direction.

I looked back at Kastian. “That’s what I said. I’m not going.”

“I would love to know how you’re going to pull that off. And I thought you cared about uniting the Light and Dark Fae…or was that one of your lies?”

“What? I don’t lie. And of course I don’t want a war. I grew up in it, and I know how bad it can get. But I also need to find Kadmos.”

“Yes, of course, your mysteriously missing, probably dead father. Where is this magical place where you think you’ll find him?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I said.

“Oh, so your mother didn’t give you any hints?”

“You were there,” I snapped. “She mostly panicked about *you*!”

Kastian was unfazed. “Yes, with no reason to. But if you plan on finding your dad, how do you expect to keep the Order of the Winding Thorn from tracking you down and ending you in the process?”

I bristled as Adair and Tabitha came walking over.

“There’s no guarantee they won’t try, but that’s all they can do—try. I won’t be alone, and they won’t succeed.”

“Do you think they’ll be alone?” Kastian countered.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve taken care of everything they’ve thrown at me so far, and I’m not going to suddenly lose my advantage now.”

“Fair enough,” Kastian said. “But Celeste will never let you leave. You know that, right? This tour is the best thing she’s ever done for herself. Also, wherever you go, even if you find a way to leave, don’t forget one important thing.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Yeah? And what’s that?”

“That you owe me.”

With that, Kastian went off to the carriages just as Adair and Tabitha approached.

“I need your help,” I said to Adair.

He and Tabitha exchanged a look. “With what now?” he said with a sigh.

“I have to find a way to leave this tour.”

“Celeste will kill you if you do. Or she’ll want to,” Adair said.

“I know, but finding Kadmos is too important to wait.”

“I don’t disagree, Artemis, but this tour is about you and Kastian… She’ll know you’re gone the second you leave. She’ll make it her mission to find you, and you know how Celeste is when she puts her mind to something.”

Tabitha grabbed Adair’s arm. “But not if no one knows she’s gone.”

“What are you suggesting?” I asked Tabitha, hoping that she’d thought of something that I hadn’t.

Demonstrating how they were always on the same page, Adair finished Tabitha’s thought. “We’ll glamour someone to be you.”

**Episode 5630**

**Xavier**

As good as my night ended, I woke up feeling like complete shit. I was in my old bed at the lake house feeling like I’d been attacked with a sledgehammer even though I hadn’t even drunk that much the night before.

My head was throbbing in time with my heartbeat, and I had a subtle swirl of nausea in the pit of my stomach. The sunlight streaming in through the windows wasn’t helping matters.

I groaned and rolled over onto my stomach to check the time. Not too early, not too late…but I hadn’t slept many hours, so maybe I felt lousy due to a lack of sleep.

I’d tossed and turned all night thinking about Cali. Greyson had walked in on her…on us. I’d heard his voice and there was no question that he knew exactly what was going on. He had the same wolfy hearing as I did. We didn’t miss much.

Fuck.

I knew this would be the path I’d have to take when I started seriously pursuing Cali again. I knew that it would throw Greyson and I back at odds…though we were never quite out of odds ever.

But when Cali was in the mix between us both we inevitably ended up fighting viciously over time and intimacy with her. Our disagreements tended to reach a fever pitch at times like this and neither of us could ever find common ground.

What I hadn’t predicted was the role Kendall would end up playing in all this. I didn’t know if she would make things better or worse for us.

This whole thing was turning into a very tangled web, but…Cali. It had felt so fucking good to be with her like that last night.

So good that I was getting hard again just thinking about it. I loved dominating her over the phone like that…the way she’d said and done things I’d never seen her do before.

It was so unlike her…

Even while we were in the middle of it, I almost asked what had gotten into her. Our time together last night was a far cry from the gentle, sweet lovemaking that Cali was so good at. I loved that part of her…but this new brand of lovemaking…even over the phone…had opened me up to a new frontier I was excited to explore.

If we could figure everything else out and not nuke our lives in the process.

I ran a hand down my face and got up. A shower sounded like a good idea, and I was sure there were some clothes around here that I could change into.

I was glad that this house was still available as a safe place to escape from everything when I needed it.

Even so, I thought about the Samaras and our pack house, where I wasn’t exactly welcome at the moment.

Though that wasn’t entirely true, either. I was the Samara Alpha. Ava might be pissed but I called the shots. I could go home if I wanted to…but did I want to?

Right now, it sounded like a better idea to stay here for a bit. Ava needed space, and I was happy to give it to her.

Ava.

I hadn’t thought about her much since Cali had taken over almost every thought over the past few hours.

I wondered how she was doing. How she was feeling. If I called, would she answer? Probably not. Or maybe she would. Ava seemed to have endless patience for me. I wondered when that might run out.

*Never. She loves you. She’s completely devoted no matter what.*

But I still felt like shit.

Maybe I would stop by the Samara pack house later, just to see her face and know that she was okay even if she was still pissed at me. It could bite me in the ass, but I would feel better if I at least did that.

I was on my way to the bathroom when I heard the sound of running water. I was obviously really out of it, because only now was I picking up a familiar scent.

I knocked on the bathroom door. “Colton? You in there?” No answer. “Colton?”

I pushed the door open to see my brother jerking off. I flew out of the bathroom like I’d been physically pushed out.

“Come on, man. What the fuck?!” I shouted. “Lock the fucking door if you’re going to do that!”

“And have you ever heard of not coming in without being invited? If you knock and I don’t say shit, it means go away!” Colton shouted. “Anyway, I’m busy.”

“What’s going on?” It was Maya’s voice coming from the phone. “Who is that? Xavier?”

“And you have your *phone* in the shower with you?” I said, incredulous.

“Yeah, and?”

I slammed the door shut, wishing that I could rewind the past few seconds and never have lived them.

“You’re fucking weird, man!” I shouted at the door.

“You’re the weird one!” Colton shouted back. “Next time, knock and wait to be invited in!”

I stalked away from the bathroom, annoyed, but remembering all the times that Colton had walked in on me and Cali.

I was fully awake now. Disgusting. I considered washing my eyes out with soap, but I knew that would burn, and I would never forget the image for as long as I lived anyway.

*What are the odds that me and my twin brother would have phone sex within hours of each other? Guess there’s something to that twin link thing.*

At least I’d locked the door and kept the conversation with Cali private…at least on my end. Cali should have locked *her* door too.

Downstairs, I heard movement in the kitchen.

*Just how many people use this place? Sheesh. I thought I would have a nice quiet morning alone, but obviously that isn’t in the cards.*

At least I was confident that I wasn’t about to walk in on another intense jerk-off session. And if I did, I would just get my things and go.

What I needed was a strong cup of coffee to get that bad taste out of my mouth. I didn’t smell any brewing, but I was still hoping for the best. Whatever there was, if there was any at all, I could at least count on it being better than Lola’s.

That was one thing I didn’t miss about the Redwood pack house. The coffee there was criminally bad if Lola made it, which she usually did.

I found Mikah and Gabriel in the kitchen, searching through the cabinets and drawers.

“You two? What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

Gabriel rubbed at his temples. “Coffee. Where the hell is the coffee? This big, beautiful house and not a stitch of coffee anywhere?”

“Whoa, did you drink that much?” I asked.

Gabriel gave me a look that said, *What the hell do you think?*

I put up my hands. “Got it. I wish there was coffee, too.”

“Well, I didn’t drink all that much…and honestly, Gabriel didn’t drink any more than usual. It was Lucian’s karaoke that did us in,” Mikah said.

I grimaced. “Ouch. Seems like I left just in time.”

“I didn’t have the heart to tell him that he’s completely tone deaf. I’d never used the word ‘caterwaul’ before, but that’s what it was. Violent caterwauling,” Gabriel said. “Maybe if I *had* drunk a little more, it would have sounded better.”

“We’ll remember that for next time,” Mikah said.

“Even if you’d told him he sounded like shit, it wouldn’t have made a difference. Lucian has no self-awareness and thinks he’s perfect in all ways,” I said.

Gabriel slammed a drawer shut, his eyes wild. “Seriously, where’s the coffee?”

“I hate to break it to you, but if you didn’t find it in that cabinet or that one,” I said pointing to the usual spots, “there is none.”

“That’s so you,” Gabriel said. “First you invite us over to spend the night—”

“What? I didn’t invite you,” I said. “You invited yourselves in a text I didn’t see after I let you know that I’d left the party. You never got confirmation.”

“Which means you didn’t *not* invite us,” Mikah said.

Gabriel frowned. “But if I’d known there was no coffee…”

“Gabriel, there’s a whole big world out there. If you want coffee, go get it,” I snapped.

Colton came downstairs, now fully dressed. “If you’re all that crazy for coffee, we can hit the Rockaway Diner. Plenty of coffee there and food, too.”

Mikah cocked his head. “Isn’t that place run by vampires? Would you really want to go there?”

“I’d go to the depths of hell if there was coffee there,” Gabe said.

“I love vampire coffee. It has a certain umph,” Colton said.

“That’s blood,” Mikah said. “I mean, probably. I don’t know for sure, but vampires, if you don’t recall, put blood in everything.”

“Whatever it is, it’s great,” Colton said. “But before we go, I have an important announcement.”

“Oh god,” I grumbled, glaring at him. “What?”

Colton beamed. “Maya, the twins, and I are moving back!”

**Episode 5631**

**Greyson**

*I won’t stop you.*

I looked over at Cali, confused. “I don’t know if I understand you. What exactly are you telling me I should do about Kendall?”

Cali looked uneasy. I could see this was painful for her, which was exactly why I hated even bringing up Kendall in the first place.

But she took a deep breath. “I can see how much this is hurting you,” she said. “So, I’m thinking that if the only way to stop the pain is to confront it—then that’s what you should do.”

I frowned, hesitant at her suggestion. “But do you understand that what we’re talking about—the problem here—it has to do with the mate bonds—”

“I *do* know that,” she said, her voice growing firmer. “I do know that. And that’s why I’m telling you this. That’s why you need to find out what’s going on. You need to figure things out between you and Kendall—before it destroys you.”  
 I was struck by her words, and the pain in her voice. I knew how much the *due destini* had hurt her—or thought I did. But it killed me to hear her admit to that pain so plainly.

She reached her hand out, stroking her fingers down my cheek. “Believe me when I tell you that if you don’t, resentment will only build. Not just between you and Kendall, but between you and me too.”

I hated to even think about that, but I had a feeling that Cali knew more about this than I did. I sighed. It seemed that there just was no easy way to deal with this, which made me even more angry that Chloe still hadn’t responded to my calls and texts.

If the witch would just get back to me, I would explain what was going on to her. Then she could tell me that she would be willing to break the bond between us, then there wouldn’t be any problem with Kendall—because there wouldn’t be anything at all with Kendall. I just wasn’t all that keen on exploring things with Kendall. As it was, things between us had already gotten out of hand a few times. I honestly didn’t know if I trusted myself around her.

I was haunted by the idea that something might have happened between us tonight if Duke hadn’t come along and interrupted us. The way I’d been feeling, there was no telling how I would have been able to stop myself—and my wolf.

I looked over at Cali. “And what about you?”

She smiled, but I could easily read the sadness in her eyes. “I’ll be okay, Greyson. And *we’ll* be okay. You know that, right?”

I thought about that, trying to decide if I *did* know that. “I know that I love you, and that hurting you is the last thing in the world I want to do.”

“Greyson,” she said softly, taking my hand in hers, “nothing will ever change our love for each other. Nothing.”

I nodded, but in a dark corner of my brain, I wondered if she was just telling me that to make us both feel better. There was something in her voice that gave me pause—it was a note of doubt. And I couldn’t blame her for that. After what had already happened with Kendall, I could understand why she might be hesitant.

But I was sure that no matter what—no matter how much my wolf might crave Kendall—I knew the *man* in me would be able to shut that down. It wasn’t as though I didn’t have any control over my wolf. Of course I did, and I wouldn’t allow anything—not even my wolf—to threaten what Cali and I had together. It just meant too much to me.

Besides, my wolf loved Cali. I was sure that—however much my wolf wanted Kendall—it wouldn’t want to hurt Cali either. And why should I even take that chance by exploring things with Kendall? It just seemed so…risky.

“Greyson?” Cali asked, looking into my eyes. “What are you thinking right now?”

I sighed. “I was just thinking that, instead of having to make things messier for us, why don’t we just wait to see what Chloe says about being able to break the bond between Kendall and me.”

Cali looked uncomfortable. “I don’t know…”

“What?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I just don’t know how I feel about the idea of you making a deal with a witch, Greyson.”

“I understand your concern, love, but being stuck with a double mate bond—while you’re under the *due destini*—is just too much for any of us to handle. And if Chloe can put an end to the bond, then our problems will be over.”

Cali bit her lip. “But what if she can’t?” she asked. “And what if things go wrong? What if things only get worse?”

I understood her reservation, but I still felt determined. “It can’t hurt to talk to her. If she ever calls me back,” I added with a growl.

I nearly jumped when a phone buzzed, but it turned out to be Cali’s phone. It was on the bed—where she’d left it after hanging up with Xavier, I remembered with a pang—and she reached for it.

“It’s Gael, from the crew team,” she said, opening the message. “He’s letting me know about practice. It’s my last chance.”

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her temple. “Go talk to him, love,” I told her. “I’ll let you know if I end up getting in touch with Chloe.”

She looked over at me. “You promise you’ll let me know?”

I smiled at her. “I would never lie to you.”  
 She returned my smile. “I know that.” She reached up to kiss me, then slid off the bed.

I got to my feet and headed to my own room, leaving her alone to change and get ready to go. As I walked into the hall, I checked my phone, but there were still no messages or calls from Chloe.

What the hell was going on with her? She must have known I was trying to get ahold of her. So what was her deal? Was she ghosting me?

I tried calling again, but it didn’t even ring before the call went straight to voicemail.

Dammit. I was starting to get really pissed now. When I heard the beep, I briefly considered leaving an angry message, but I stopped myself. As good as it might feel in the moment, I really didn’t have any leverage here. She had everything I wanted, and I had nothing she wanted, so I wasn’t in any position to pressure her to do anything. I couldn’t afford to piss her off.

I ended the call with a sigh and slipped my phone back into my pocket. As hard as it was, I was just going to have to be patient. That was not one of my strengths, but it was more concerning than just that. Did the bond with Kendall even *allow* for patience?

The thing was, Chloe didn’t work alone. She had two sisters, and I pulled my phone out again as I thought about getting ahold of one of the other two sisters. It was an option—if any one of them would pick up, I would work with them. But the three sisters were so close, I just wasn’t sure what good it would do to try to call them. If Chloe wasn’t going to return my call, then there probably wasn’t much point in trying to get ahold of Lauren or Posie. They likely would ignore me too.

When I stepped into my room, I started pacing, though the room wasn’t nearly big enough for that. It was a large room, but if I wanted to pace in a way that would actually make me feel better, I’d need a much larger space than my bedroom.

I glanced out the window, wondering if I should head outside. Maybe a run would be the best thing for me to vent some steam.

And as I looked out, I thought about what Cali had just said. And about the fear that was taking root in my heart. It wasn’t that I was afraid of losing Cali—not exactly—but now that I had a chance to think, I was unnerved about the reason she might have been pushing me to explore things with Kendall.

I had just caught her with Xavier. Yes, they were just on the phone, but they were together just the same. Whether I liked it or not, he was back in her life. I knew they’d already slept together, though Cali had never explicitly said so.

So was *that* the reason? Was she pushing me to explore the bond between Kendall and me so that she would have more room for Xavier in her life?

**Episode 5632**

**Xavier**

I stared at Colton in shock. “What the hell do you mean you’re moving back?”

He rolled his eyes and smacked me on the shoulder. “What the hell don’t you understand? We’re moving back.”

I still couldn’t get my brain around it. “But what about your new pack, man?” Even as I spoke, I had to admit to myself how weird it sounded to point out that my brother was no longer a member of the Redwood pack. Especially when I considered that *I* wasn’t a member either. Colton wasn’t even a member of the Samara pack.

Colton shrugged. “I dunno. Maya and I haven’t worked out all the details yet, but we’re hoping that since the Redwood isn’t using this house, we could move back here.”

He stared at me, waiting for me to respond, but I wasn’t sure what to say.

On the one hand, of course I would love to have my brother move back. Even if my twin was a royal pain in my ass, he was my brother, and I loved the guy. Maya was a pain too, but I could put up with her if I had to.

And things were deteriorating with Greyson—and probably bound to get worse—so I could use the kind of unwavering support Colton always seemed to provide.

But that would mean having to give up the lake house. Even if the house technically belonged to Greyson.

I pushed a hand through my hair with a frustrated sigh. The property management of this all was a complicating factor I hadn’t been expecting. But when I drilled down and actually thought about it, it was all pretty fucked up. Colton and I technically owned the Redwood pack house. Ava technically owned the Samara pack house. And Greyson owned the lake house—the house we were currently in.

What a fucking mess it all was.

I’d been quiet for a while, thinking all of this, which Colton had clearly clocked.

He raised an eyebrow. “Except for last night, it’s obvious no one’s been living here, so why let it just go to waste, right?”

I shrugged. “I guess that’s true, but I’d talk to Greyson about it if I were you. Things between Greyson and me aren’t so great right now, so you’re better off talking to him alone.”

Colton laughed, looking unbothered by this news. “I think I can handle Greyson. Just leave it to me—”

“Hey!” Gabe called. “Whatever happened to breakfast? I thought we were going to the diner!”

I rolled my eyes. “Alright, alright. Let’s go.”

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When we rolled up to Rockaway Diner and I stepped out of the car, I stopped for a moment, looking up at the strange little roadside restaurant. I hadn’t been back for a while, and seeing it again brought back those memories of Ava, when she had really been getting her footing back. Back then, every feeling I had about her had been strange and messy and convoluted. It felt odd to be on this side of those feelings—and it felt better, too. However we’d gotten here, I was glad we’d made it.

Gabe and Mikah and Colton were headed inside the diner, and I followed them in. We walked in and sat down at a booth near the window.

“It’s a hell of a place,” Colton said, looking around. Though I couldn’t tell if he was disgusted or appreciative. Maybe both.

“Fellas,” a voice said.

I looked up to see a woman walking toward us. She reached the table and slapped four sticky-looking menus down on the table. When she looked at us, her eyes looked red and bleary, and she smelled strongly of weed. When I looked at her, I realized that I recognized her.

“Mabel, right?” I asked.

She slid her red-rimmed eyes toward me, so I suspected I was right about her name.

I shook my head. “Some things never change.”

She narrowed her eyes and walked away.

“Hey!” Gabe called after her. He glared at me. “I really wanted some coffee.”

“Call someone else over,” I muttered.

Gabe waved as another waitress walked by. The Rockaway Diner was always filled with strange characters, and today was no exception. Seeing Gabe’s wave, the woman walked toward us, looking us all over.

She had dark red hair and looked young. She smelled like a vampire—though the place probably lost a lot of the staff after Iñigo was killed and his cousin, Rosaura, took over for him.

She leaned her hip against the table and smiled down at me. “What can I get for you all?” Though she was clearly speaking to the whole table, her eyes never left me.

“Coffee,” Gabe said firmly.

She nodded and gave me a sultry smile. “You don’t look like you need anything to perk you up.”

I sighed. I really didn’t need this shit today.

“I’ll take three cups,” Gabe went on. “Black. Strong.”

The waitress nodded and, with one last look at me, walked away.

“*Three?*” Mikah asked warily. “We have a long ride today, Gabriel. You’re going to make me pull over every half hour.”

Colton elbowed me in the ribs. “I think someone’s got a crush on you.”

I shook my head. “Not interested.”

The waitress returned with the pot of coffee and four mugs. Gabe grabbed three of them.

“Leave the pot,” he told her.

She handed him the pot and looked at me. “I don’t know that I’ve seen you in here before. And I think I’d remember a face like yours.”

Colton elbowed me again, and I elbowed him back, harder.

“I’m just here for the food,” I said flatly.

She smiled slyly. “There are a few things that aren’t on the menu.” She leaned in close to me, speaking right into my ear. “Why don’t you ask me about today’s special.”

I ground my teeth and pushed the menus back toward her. “No thanks. I’ll take two eggs, bacon, and potatoes.”

“That sounds good, I’ll do the same,” Colton said. “And sourdough toast. And a glass of orange juice.”

“I’ll just have coffee,” Mikah said.

“More coffee,” Gabe said, “and a short stack of pancakes with extra butter, two eggs, over easy, home fries, wheat toast, and a bowl of fruit.”

The waitress kept her eyes on me while everyone else ordered, and when she walked away, Colton started to snicker.

“That’s enough, Colton,” I growled.

I must have looked dangerous enough, because Colton sobered up.

“Okay, okay,” he said, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “I guess you know you have enough romance problems with two mates.”

“I don’t understand why you even have these conversations,” Mikah said, shaking his head.

“I’m only kidding,” Colton said.

“I know, but we’re all mated,” Mikah said.

“Some of us more than others,” Gabe quipped, looking at me.

Colton had just taken a drink of coffee and choked at this, nearly spitting it out.

Mikah elbowed Gabe. “Come on, man. Your friend is going through some real shit here. You shouldn’t make light of it.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” Gabe said. “Maybe the best thing would be for you to come with us, Xavier. You could come on whatever out next case is with us. It’d be like old times. Could be fun to have you along.”

I sighed and leaned back in the booth. “It does sound tempting,” I admitted. “It would be a welcome distraction from everything I’m dealing with here.”

“Come on, that’s something I would have done before Maya,” Colton chided. “But you can’t just run away from your problems.”

“It wouldn’t be running away,” Gabe argued. “It would be more like getting a restraining order on your problems. Just a little reprieve from them. Give you a chance to sort things out.”

Colton didn’t look convinced. “The only sorting Xavier needs to do is with Cali and Ava,” he said firmly.

Before I could answer that, the red-haired waitress returned with another pot of coffee. Gabe had drained the first one. She put the new one down, and when she reached for the empty one, she leaned close to me again.

Close enough that she leaned her boobs against my shoulder and whispered in my ear, “Have you ever fucked a vampire?”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up as her cold breath hit my skin, but the sensation was eerie, rather than sensual. I turned slowly and gestured for her to lean even closer.

She smiled at me, clearly thinking I was going to take her up on the offer and kiss her or something.

But instead I leaned past her lips and whispered in her ear, “No, baby, but I have staked a few.”

I felt the waitress tense, but before she could respond, the bell over the door chimed as the door was pulled open.

I looked past the waitress to see Ava walking into the diner. She looked around, then stopped in her tracks when she caught sight of me and the waitress.

What the hell was she doing here?

**Episode 5633**

**Greyson**

As I hit the punching bag, the seams started to split. It probably had something to do with the amount of force I was coming at it with, but I just kept going, over and over and over. I couldn’t help it. The little fan in the pack house basement weight room was going at top speed, but it wasn’t doing much, and I was pouring sweat, but the fury inside me kept me going.

It was just all this stuff going on with Cali and Kendall—it was really getting to me, maybe more than I should let it. I knew I should try to let some of it go, but whenever I tried to think of something else, my mind would just find its way back to Cali. And then, by extension, to Kendall.

I punched the heavy bag again, making it swing.

I kept telling myself that Cali would never push me away to allow more room in her life for Xavier, but I just couldn’t stop the doubts that were creeping in. And that’s why I was killing the punching bag.

There still weren’t any messages the last time I checked my phone, but I was still holding out hope that Chloe was going to come through. I had to believe she was going to come through. Because I just wasn’t sure how much more of this tension I was going to be able to take.

The bag gave a mighty swing, making the mount groan, and I took a step back. I was breathing hard and sweating even harder, and I figured I should probably give it a rest. I hadn’t bothered with boxing gloves, and my knuckles stung, but I didn’t mind. At least the pain was something to distract me.

Turning away from the punching bag, I stepped toward the bench press and started loading the plates on. I was in the mood to do some heavy lifting, but I had only just laid down and started my reps when I heard my phone buzz with a new message.

Thinking it had to be Chloe, I re-racked the bar in a hurry, making the weights clank loudly, and sat up, diving for my phone.

But when I grabbed it and saw the name on the screen, my wolf reacted before I even could. Because it wasn’t Chloe—it was Kendall.

I stared at the screen for a moment, surprised. Why the hell was she texting me?  
 Maybe she wanted to apologize for coming onto me the night before—or whatever the hell that was.

I stared down at the screen as the phone buzzed with the reminder. Part of me—a big part of me—wanted to ignore it. Whatever the reason she was texting me, it couldn’t be good. What the hell could she want from me?

But I knew that wasn’t going to be an option. My wolf was agitated, and I knew the only way to calm it down was to read whatever message she had just sent.

My heart pounded wildly as I opened the text, but when I read what she’d written, it seemed to stop completely:

*I need you.*

What the *fuck*?

I sat down on the weight bench, staring at the message in disbelief.

*I need you.*

There were only three words, and not a lot of ways to interpret their meaning.

*I need you.*

For what, though? That seemed like a pretty important question. And one I’d like to have an answer to before I went any further. Was this about whatever secret mission she was on when I ran into her at Lucian’s party? The one she swore she couldn’t tell me about, but that had her dressed like a goddamn stripper and giving me a fucking lap dance?

Or did she need me for something more troubling? Like to scratch the itch I knew we were both feeling—the one that was spreading like a damn rash.

“Fuck that,” I breathed, pushing a hand through my sweaty hair. That wasn’t going to work. I just couldn’t risk that. Kendall and I had had a few close calls recently—the lap dance incident at Lucian’s party being top of mind—and I really didn’t want any more.

It was too stressful and too risky, and I didn’t want to do that to Cali. Even if she was sort of encouraging me to explore whatever there was between Kendall and me.

I put my phone down, then added more plates to the weight bar. I needed to push to failure. I needed to completely max out, so I just wasn’t even thinking anymore. I couldn’t think about Kendall, or Cali, or whatever the hell that message meant.

I had just laid down and was ready to start another set of reps when my phone buzzed again—another message.

“Fuck,” I breathed.

I reached for my phone, which I’d tossed on the floor, though I knew who it was without even bothering to look.

Kendall again.

*On my way to the pack house.*

I closed my eyes and shook my head. I couldn’t allow that. Kendall coming here to the house would be rubbing whatever was going on between us right into Cali’s face. And despite what she said, I remembered how conflicted she’d sounded when she was even talking about Kendall.

Gritting my teeth, I texted back begrudgingly. *Why?*

*I need you*, she messaged back, setting off a set of fireworks inside my chest. *What don’t you understand about that? The message was pretty clear. And in English too.*

I sat up with a groan. *Just call me then*, I told her. *I need you to tell me what’s going on with you.*

She didn’t respond for a moment. Then, *I can’t do this over the phone. It’s got to be in person.*

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Of course it does,” I muttered to myself. Obviously, it had to be in person. What a perfect excuse.

*Fine*, I texted back. *I’ll meet with you, but you can’t come to the pack house.*

*Where?* she asked shortly.

I thought for a moment. *Meet me at the scenic overlook on Route 17. I’ll be there in 15 minutes.*

She didn’t respond, but she didn’t need to. I knew she would be there.

I grabbed my towel and wiped my face. I tried calling Chloe again, but she still didn’t pick up.

“Chloe, it’s Greyson. It’s urgent, call me back,” I said to her voicemail. Then I hung up and headed upstairs to change.

Five minutes later I was on my motorcycle, heading toward Route 17. I was speeding along the road, going over the speed limit. Though I wasn’t sure why. I wasn’t in a hurry to get where I was going—seeing Kendall was the last thing I wanted to do at the moment, but my wolf did not agree.

*You’re betraying Cali*, I snapped, speaking to my wolf. We were usually so in sync, especially where Cali was concerned.

But it didn’t answer, and I didn’t expect it to. I didn’t even blame it—not really. I knew what was going on wasn’t actually my wolf’s fault. A mate was a mate, and Kendall was a mate, no matter how much she didn’t want to admit it.

The scenic overlook was at the highest point of Route 17, on a hidden outcropping of the road, and when I reached it, I saw that Kendall had already arrived. She looked over when she heard my bike and pulled her helmet off.

Shaking out her hair, she ran her hand through it, smoothing her brown hair, which caught red and golden highlights in the sunlight.

My eyes slid over her hair, and then her face, and then down her body, which looked perfect in her tight jeans and the leather jacket that pulled across her chest. I wondered if it would help the situation between us if she wasn’t as smoking hot as she was.

It probably wouldn’t make any difference no matter what she looked like—the mate bond knew no bounds. The attraction between mates wasn’t merely physical. It ran much deeper—and was far more dangerous than just simple appearances. It was a soul connection—a connection between beings. That was what made it so fucking hard to deny.

She shook her hair behind her shoulders and looked over at me, her purple eyes flashing in the light. “I wasn’t sure if you’d actually come.”

“What is it you need me for?” I grunted, trying not to betray the tumult of emotions I was feeling as I looked at her.

“Right to the point,” she said with a chuckle.

“I’m not in the mood for banter,” I snapped. “Just tell me.”

She sighed. “I want to make sure you understand. This isn’t what you think.”

I gave her a long look, wondering if she had any idea in the world what I was thinking at the moment.

Kendall’s gaze was even as she looked at me. “I need you to help me get back into the Vanguard palace.”

**Episode 5634**

**Artemis**

I looked around nervously. “We shouldn’t talk about this so openly. Not when there are so many people around to hear.”

“No, probably best not to,” Adair agreed, glancing over his shoulder.

Even Tabitha looked nervously about.

“Let’s go over this way,” I said, nodding toward the side of a small building.

Adair and Tabitha and I walked over to a small alleyway. It was dim and narrow and smelled wet and dank. But it was quiet and perfect for a confidential conversation. Or perhaps not quite as confidential as I thought, but because when I turned to look at Adair, I nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw two additional figures approaching.

My heartbeat regulated slightly when I saw that it was Rishika and Marius, both wearing their hoods up to hide their faces.

“What are you two doing here?” I hissed as they stepped behind Adair and Tabitha. “Where were you?”

“Over there,” Marius said casually, tipping his head across the lane. “We were watching you.”

“From a safe distance,” Rishika assured me, seeing the startled look on my face. She looked between Adair and me. “What’s up?”

“What if Celeste saw you?” Adair asked her irritably. “That was very risky.”

“Perhaps for some.” Rishika narrowed her eyes, bristling. “I’m pretty good at avoiding people. I’m not a werewolf for nothing.”

“And I’d be a pretty poor bounty hunter if I allowed myself to be noticed by every passerby,” Marius said shortly. “Considering my life could depend on it.”

I put a calming hand on Rishika’s arm but spoke to both of them. “He’s just looking out for us,” I said softly.

“So what’s going on?” Marius asked briskly. “Why are we hiding back here?”

“I want to leave the tour,” I explained, “but there’s no way Celeste will ever let me—”

“Doesn’t seem like something she’d do,” Marius muttered darkly.

“—so I’m thinking that someone will need to take my place. Glamour someone to look like me, but who are you suggesting taking my place?” I asked, looking at Tabitha.

Marius cleared his throat. “I’ll do it.”  
 I looked at him. And so did everyone else.

“What?” he asked innocently.

“Absolutely not,” Adair said firmly.

“Why not?” Marius asked, looking deeply offended. “Let me remind you that I am not just a peasant off the streets. I am a bounty hunter—and a damn good one. It’s not as though I’ve never had to disguise myself before. And I know Artemis about as well as anyone.”

I felt my cheeks flush when he said this, remembered exactly *how* well he knew me. I was still distracted by the afterglow of having both Rishika and Marius sleep with me. Remembering it felt like a dream—one that I wouldn’t mind having again.

“Hello?” Marius’s voice cut into my thoughts. “What do you say?”

I pulled myself from my steamy memories and shook my head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” I answered honestly. I saw the look on his face and quickly went on. “It’s not that I don’t think you could pull it off, I just think you’d be far more helpful coming with me and Rishika on the journey to find my father, since you two are the only two in this group who would go unnoticed if you took off. It’s not likely Celeste would notice you were gone.”

Marius eyed me. “You know I would do it for you.”

My face flushed hotter. “I do know it. And I appreciate it,” I said softly.

“Do you have anyone else in mind?” Adair asked.

“I can only think of one other person,” I said, turning to him. “Aelwen.”

“Who?” Adair asked.

“One of the kitchen maids from the Dark Fae court that Celeste brought along.”

Marius snorted a laugh. “Aelwen? Seriously? She’s here? Why didn’t you tell me? You trust her?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t know she was until recently. Besides,” I added, glaring at him, “didn’t you trust her enough to sleep with her?”

Not looking the least bit sheepish, Marius grinned. “I don’t think trust had anything to do with that, sweetheart.”

“Come *on*,” I groaned.

“On the other hand,” Marius reasoned, “I’ve never heard Aelwen show any love toward Celeste.”

I nodded, but I was having a hard time concentrating. The way Marius was smiling at me, I couldn’t think of anything except last night—and the things he and Rishika did to me…the way I forgot everything but the two of them.

But I couldn’t do that now. Not when I had some actual hope about finding my father. Not when I was so freaking close.

“Is Aelwen even here?” Rishika asked, peering out into the street beyond the back alley where we were clustered.

“Yeah, she’s here,” I confirmed. “Celeste brought her along. I saw her when we first got to the inn.”

Rishika nodded, looking thoughtful.

“What do you think?” I asked warily. I knew I could always trust her to give me an honest answer.

She tipped her head, as though weighing the question for a moment. “I think the idea is all fine and good—a kitchen maid isn’t too likely to be missed, though I suppose it’s possible if Celeste went to all the trouble to bring her. But I think the bigger concern is can you really trust her. I mean, no offense to Marius’s taste in women, but she does work for Celeste, after all.”

I ignored the comment about Marius’s taste in women and shrugged. “I don’t think working for Celeste could engender much of a sense of loyalty in anyone.”

“No?” Rishika asked.

“Celeste can be a…” I trailed off, trying to find the right word or phrase.

“A pain in the ass?” Marius offered.

“Yeah, that’s probably about right,” I said. “And that’s even putting that mildly.”  
 Rishika still didn’t look convinced. “Okay, so say that you’re right. Say that she’s not loyal to Celeste. Who’s to say she’s going to be loyal to you. And would she even agree to do this? How are you planning on talking her into it?”

That was a good question. I didn’t think Aelwen was loyal to Celeste, but I also didn’t think she was loyal to anyone else—except maybe to herself. “I think she can be bought,” I mused, “for the right price. I have my doubts that she wants to stay Celeste’s kitchen maid forever. And she helped me once before.”

Marius looked a little disappointed. “I still think I’d be a better choice. I even have an Artemis impression, not that you’ve ever asked to see it. But I suppose we better find out about where Aelwen stands on all of this.”

I watched as Tabitha gave Adair a nervous glance, which he returned with a dark shake of his head. I knew how he felt about this, but I also knew that looking for my father was why I had come to the Fae world—not to progress Fae politics or elevate Celeste’s ambitions. This tour was nothing to me other than a way for me to gather information about where I could find him. Now that I had, it was time to start looking.

I stepped to the edge of the passageway and peered over at Celeste, but she was deep in conversation with her counterpart from the town and wasn’t paying any attention to anyone else. This was my chance, so I strode over to the carriage where Aelwen was standing, loading supplies onto the back.

She was wearing a cloak, but the cold of the morning stained her cheeks red. She looked up in surprise as I approached. Which was fair, we hadn’t spoken in quite a while.

“Hello, *mistress*,” she said, glancing around as she spoke to me. “If you would like something to eat, I’m afraid we’ll have to go find something in the village. We’ve already packed all our supplies.”

“No, no. No, thank you. I’m not here for that,” I said, shaking my head. “Could I speak to you?”

“Of course,” she said, still looking nervous.

I cast a look around. Celeste was still engaged elsewhere, but I didn’t like talking out in the open. I waved for her to follow me, and we walked around to the far side of the carriage, away from the rest of Celeste’s staff.

When we had stepped around the back, I looked at Aelwen. Away from the rest of the staff, she looked directly at me, having dropped the deference she was probably supposed to show to those above her in the social structure, but that she clearly struggled with. That would probably work for this ruse, *if* she agreed.

“What do you want?” she asked, dropping the niceties.

“I have an offer for you, Aelwen,” I said without preamble.

She frowned slightly and pulled her cloak more tightly around her as a chill wind blew. The cloak was thin and didn’t seem to do much good against the cold. “What kind of an offer?”

I took a deep breath. There was a lot riding on her willingness, and I just had to hope she would agree. “Would you be willing to be glamoured as me?”

**Episode 5635**

**Xavier**

My eyes widened on Ava, and I jumped to my feet. What was she doing here? My sudden movement sent the vampire waitress stumbling back. She crashed into the small table behind her, knocking their glasses to the ground, which broke, and suddenly every eye in the diner was on me.

Fantastic.

“*Really?*” Ava hissed, her blue eyes icy. She stepped toward me in an instant, crossing the diner faster than I could track her movement. “So it’s not just Cali you have your sights set on, I see. It’s just any skank who comes onto you?” Her eyes narrowed. “Or did you come onto her first?”

I gritted my teeth. “It wasn’t like that, Ava, and you know it.”

The waitress had gotten her feet back under her again and looked between Ava and me, apparently unbothered. “I don’t know who the skank is that you’re talking about, but I’ll just leave you two alone to work it out.”

She turned and walked away. A scared-looking busboy who couldn’t have been older than sixteen scurried out and started to sweep up the broken glass, but Ava ignored him. Her eyes were icy slits, following the waitress as she stopped at another table to take an order.

I felt my wolf stir excitedly within me. Ava was pissed, and my wolf and I both liked her when she was angry. Luckily for me, she was almost always angry, like a low-banked fire. It was just in moments like these that the flames rose up, and I couldn’t help but appreciate the way her eyes flashed and her jaw grew sharper. Everything about her seemed streamlined and sleek when she was like this—like a panther ready to pounce.

“Listen—” I started, but Ava didn’t want to hear it.

“Don’t you dare tell me I’m overreacting, X,” she said sharply, her eyes snapping back to me.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I said honestly. “I just wanted to point out that I clearly had no interest in that waitress. She was screwing around and came on to me. And if you don’t believe me, I have three witnesses here who will back me up.”

Ava glanced past me at Colton, Gabe, and Mikah, who had all suddenly developed a devoted interest in the menus. Her eyes were cold with disdain.

“*Very* reliable sources,” she said contemptuously. “They’d back up anything you said.”

I shook my head and glanced around. We were still earning a lot of looks from the other eaters in the diners. “Maybe we should take this outside.”

“And why is that?” Ava asked, tipping her head mockingly. “So you won’t be distracted by the waitress you claim to have so little interest in?”

My wolf growled, and I sighed, taking her arm and pulling her toward the door. “Let’s just go.”

As I pushed open the door for Ava, I glanced behind me and caught Colton, Gabe, and Mikah all watching me closely. But when they saw me looking at them, they all looked quickly away.

I shook my head and walked after Ava, pushing her a little more roughly than I intended against the side of the diner. My wolf was going crazy with lust for her, and I was having a hard time controlling myself.

“What are you even doing here? Are you following me?”

She yanked her arm away from my grip. “I’m not allowed to eat now?”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“If you really think I followed you here, you’re fucking delusional,” she snapped. “I came to pick up a few bags of coffee for the house. I should be asking *you* what you’re doing here.”

I pushed a hand through my hair, starting to feel crazed. “We’re having breakfast,” I said. “I’m—I’m sorry.”

My apology hung between us as she glared at me.

“So,” she finally said, crossing her arms across her chest. I tried not to notice how that action pushed her boobs together, but my wolf certainly did. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“I said, we’re having breakfast.”

“Xavier, come the fuck on. You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

I blew out a breath, wondering what the hell I should say. I wanted to tell her the truth about what happened with Cali—that we had slept together. But I knew that would just make a bad situation worse.

On the other hand, when have my lies ever proven to be good for my relationship with Ava?

“I know what happened with Cali,” Ava said, making my inner calculations moot.

I hesitated, wondering what exactly she knew.

She rolled her eyes. “God, Xavier, do you really think I’m that fucking stupid? You tried to cover it up, but I could smell her all over you. Like some goddamn cheap perfume.”

The insult about Cali stung, but I let it go. “I’m not going to deny it.”

She eyed me coldly. “No? But were you ever going to admit it?”

That stung too. “I was waiting for the right time, but I guess there was never going to be a right time to say something like that. I didn’t want to hurt you.”  
 “It’s a little late for that,” she said, and I could hear the pain beneath the chill of her voice. “Hurting me seems to be your favorite thing.”

That comment sliced into me like a knife, and I felt a flash of anger. “Do you think that this is my fault?” I nearly snarled at her, stepped toward her, backing her against the wall again. “I’m mated to Cali. That’s just a fact.”

She didn’t cower. “And you’re mated to me, too, Xavier. That’s also a fact. Maybe it’s inconvenient for you, but it’s a fucking fact.”

I closed my eyes for a moment and shook my head. “I hate that I’m hurting you, Ava, but there’s no easy answer.”

When I opened my eyes again, she was looking at me, her blue eyes searching my face like she was looking right through me.

“I am your mate, X,” she finally said, her voice low and throaty. “But even mates shouldn’t be taken for granted. Figure this shit out.”

And without waiting for me to answer, she pushed past me and strode to her car.

I turned and watched her climb inside. I almost went after her, but I wasn’t sure what I could accomplish. I didn’t have the answer she wanted. I didn’t have any answers at all. This was all just so fucked up.

As she pulled out of the diner parking lot—tires squealing—my wolf urged me to shift and run after her. I was tempted enough that I took a step after her, but then the diner door opened, and I turned to see Mikah, Gabe, and Colton walk out. Colton was finishing the last of a pancake taco he’d made, and he looked after Ava’s car.

“Don’t say a fucking word,” I warned all three of them.

“Hey, the offer to come with us at any point still stands,” Gabe said.

Mikah clapped me on the back. “Whatever’s going on, I hope you’re able to sort all that out.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, and as I watched the two of them head off, I almost wished I could take them up on their offer and leave all this shit behind. When they were gone, I turned to Colton. “What about you? I suppose you’re going to run back to Washington?”

Colton wiped syrup from his mouth with the back of his hand. “I suppose I could use another breakfast. And come on, do you really think I’d leave you at a time like this?”

I shook my head. That was classic Colton—total bullshit, immediately followed by loyalty and support. Which I appreciated more than he knew.

I looked down as my phone rang, but when I pulled it from my pocket, I groaned.

“What the hell does Lucian want?” I wondered. “What?” I answered angrily.

“Xavier,” Lucian said urgently, too worried to be bothered by my tone. “I am calling an urgent meeting of the Alphas to talk about the Grimcrest pack moving into the area!”

I glared at Colton. “You told Lucian before you told me?” I hissed at him.

He shrugged. “I had a few drinks at the party. It just sort of came out.”

“Xavier!” Lucian called. “Are you coming?”  
 “I’m on my way,” I snapped. I nodded toward my car. “Let’s go.”

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When Colton and I arrived back at the Vanguard estate, I got out of the car with a groan. I did not appreciate being back on the Vanguard grounds so soon.

“Let’s get this over with,” I muttered, certain that whatever Lucian had to say, it was going to be absurd and overblown.

But as we walked toward the door, I caught wind of a familiar scent, and I narrowed my eyes. I looked around, then walked away from the door, and toward the trees that grew close to the palace.

“Uh, Xavier, where are you going?” Colton called after me. “Meeting is this way.”

“Hang on,” I said, waving him off.

I walked into the woods. I heard the sound of footsteps and looked into the gloom. There were two people sneaking through the trees, and I took a deep breath, taking in the familiar scents.

And then I realized who it was—Kendall and Greyson.

What the hell were they doing here sneaking around? And *together?*

**Episode 5636**

I scrambled around my room, scurrying around and grabbing my stuff to get ready for crew practice tomorrow. I wanted to have everything ready so I could grab the bag and go. Everything was in odd places—it felt like it had been eons since I’d gone.

Lola had said she would help, but she was mostly just standing in the doorway, holding a water bottle and watching me. “Are you *sure* you don’t want me to do a little more digging into Kendall?” she asked, tossing the water bottle back and forth between her hands.

I stuffed my sweatshirt into the bag, punching it inside. “I am absolutely sure I don’t want that,” I said firmly.

“Cali—”

“First of all,” I interrupted, “Greyson will go through the roof if you even think about it. Second of all, regardless of how anyone feels about this, he told you not to, and we can’t forget that he is our Alpha. We have to accept his word on the subject regardless of how we feel about it.”

Lola sighed and handed me the water bottle, which I shoved into my bag too. “I know you’re right,” she said, pouting slightly. “I just don’t trust Kendall.”

“I’m not so sure I do either, but if there’s anything to be learned about Kendall, then I want to learn it from Greyson. And I want you to respect that,” I added pointedly.

Lola nodded and threw her arms around me. “Okay. You got it. I won’t say another word. And I won’t mention that werewolf’s name again.”

I smiled at my friend, gave her a quick hug, then pulled away and looked around my room, making sure I had everything I was going to need. “I actually might be ready for tomorrow. And I will arrive on time,” I said hopefully.

“I hope so,” Lola said. “There’s only so much hacking into a university’s computer program I can do.”

I rolled my eyes and shouldered my bag, then I headed downstairs.

Lola was right behind me, and when we reached the foot of the stairs, I nearly ran into Torin, who was just coming up from the basement. I took a surprised step back and looked him over. He was wearing a pair of overalls, a straw hat, and he was holding a hand trowel.

“Um, why are you dressed like a farmer?” I asked him.

He grinned at Lola and me. “I’ve decided to grow my own vegetables.”

“Oh. Okay, That’s cool. But it’s winter, Torin,” I pointed out.

“And it’s Oregon,” Lola added.

Torin waved that away. “I know that. “Have you two ever heard of hydroponics?”

“Of course,” Lola said with a scoff.

“Kevin explained it all to me,” Torin said excitedly. “It’s fascinating. I’m going to start small, maybe some herbs for cooking, but then I think I could move to lettuces, which really interest me…”

As he went on, I slipped away from the conversation and headed outside. As much as I loved Torin, I really couldn’t let myself get drawn into a conversation about hydroponics. Not today.

I was running toward my car when I saw another car coming up the long drive. I stopped and stared. It was Maya’s car—what was she doing here?

Maya stopped the car and stepped out. She didn’t wave when she saw me, but she did lean into the back seat, grab a baby, and walk over to me, thrusting her into my arms.

I grabbed for the tiny girl, making me drop my crew gear bag. “Hey, Maya.”

Maya looked around. “Where the *hell* is Colton?”

“Colton?” I repeated, baffled.

“Yeah, Colton,” she said, eyeing me warily. “You know him—that big-mouthed mate of mine.”

I shook my head. “I have no idea where Colton is. Why would he be here?”

Maya rolled her eyes. “Didn’t Greyson go to that so-called prince’s bachelor party last night?”

“Yeah, but what does that have to do with…” I started, but I trailed off. Maya wasn’t listening to me anymore; she had grabbed the other baby and was walking toward the house, like she didn’t believe my claim that Colton wasn’t there.

“What happened?” I asked her, hurrying to catch up with her.

Maya rounded on me. “You don’t know?”

“Know what?” I asked, exasperated. I couldn’t imagine what Colton had done that had upset Maya so much.

Maya narrowed her eyes, then looked at the house again. “Is Greyson here?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I thought I heard him take off on his motorcycle a little while ago.”

She looked at me for a moment, then sighed. “So you really don’t know?”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” I told her. “I have no idea.”

“Then let me be the first to tell you,” she said. “Colton and I have decided that we’re moving back to be closer to the packs down here.”

“*Really?*” I asked excitedly. “I had no idea! That’s so great!”

Maya did not look nearly as excited as I sounded and felt.

“But—why are you so upset about this if it’s what you both want?” I asked cautiously.

“Because he told everyone at the stupid bachelor party,” she snapped, her eyes flashing angrily. “And we hadn’t actually made it official yet.”

“Well, I’m really excited,” I said honestly. Sure, Maya could be a little prickly—okay, a lot prickly—but I really liked her. And I missed her. Things were never the same after she left. Sure things were good, but she was *Maya*. And I knew that both Greyson and Xavier were going to be happy to have Colton around again—maybe Xavier a little more than Greyson, but Greyson and Colton were making progress with each other. And everyone loved them.

“See?” Maya shoved her phone into my face. “I got this weird text from Lucian. He’s demanding to see me.”

I frowned at her, trying to see the phone she was holding an inch in front of my nose. “Why does he want to see you?”

“I’m the Grimcrest Alpha, and he’s holding some important, urgent summit involving all the Alphas and I unfortunately got an invite,” she said irritably.

I looked at the text, which basically said just that. “I have literally no idea what any of this is all about, but—knowing Lucian—it really could be anything. I get why you’re upset, but I wouldn’t get too worked up about it if I were you,” I told her.

Maya glared at me. “Well, that’s not what I want to hear.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I drove all night with two crying babies, so this better be pretty damn important,” she said. She paused, thinking. “Okay, if Colton isn’t here, then where the hell is he?”

I shrugged and shifted the baby in my arms. “I don’t know. Have you tried texting him?”

“I was a little busy driving and caring for two tiny babies,” she snapped. “I just assumed he would be here when I arrived. Where else would he be?”

That was fair.

I tried to smile, but I was feeling uncomfortable. “I’m sure he’s just somewhere with Xavier. Maybe at the Samara pack house. And if Lucian called all the Alphas, then the chances are high that Xavier and Greyson are going there too.”

I stopped for a moment and thought about that. If that was true, then why hadn’t Greyson told me that was what he was doing? There was no reason he couldn’t have texted me his plans, and I hadn’t heard anything from him.

“Cali, what are you doing? Did you lock your keys in the car again—” Lola stepped out onto the porch, but stopped when she saw Maya, and her eyes went wide when she saw the twins. “*BABIES!*” She hurried down the steps and took the baby from Maya, then the one from me. “Hello, babies!” she cooed.

“Hey, can you watch them?” I asked. “I’m going to drive Maya over to Lucian.”

“Of course,” Lola said in a singsong voice, looking down at the babies in her arms. “You never need to ask Auntie Lola that. I’m always glad to see my favorite little wolf babies.”

Maya rolled her eyes at that, and she reached into the car for a bag, which she walked into the house as Lola made her way up the porch steps. “They both need new diapers, but they just ate and slept, so they should be good for a couple of hours. Give me a call if they start fussing.”

“We’re going to be fine,” Lola assured her as she walked into the house. “Jay! Come on down! Guess who came for a visit?”

Maya pulled the door shut and headed back down the steps. “Okay, let’s go.”

She slid into the passenger seat of my car, and I headed down the long drive. Most of the drive to Lucian’s, Maya vented about Colton and his inability to communicate.

I sympathized, but I was really only half-listening. I couldn’t stop wondering why Greyson hadn’t bothered to tell me why he had been invited over to Lucian’s place for this meeting. It seemed like such an innocuous piece of information—why would he keep it from me?

I was baffled by it, so when Maya and I finally pulled up to the Vanguard palace, I stepped out of the car, determined to find Greyson and find out what this meeting was all about.

**Episode 5637**

**Greyson**

“This is a terrible idea,” I said, shaking my head.

Kendall made a sound like a growl in the back of her throat. I tried not to think about how fucking hot it was.

“I heard you the first time, Greyson,” she said quietly. “And I admit that this isn’t the best idea in the world, but I need to get in there, and I have to keep this on the down low.”

We looked at the Vanguard palace from where we stood, hidden in the trees. It looked as it always looked—like a massive fortress masquerading as an elegant palace.

“You’re still not going to tell me what’s going on?” I asked.

She shot me a pointed look.

I shook my head. “You know, at some point, you’re going to have to decide that you can trust me.”

“Trust has nothing to do with it,” she muttered. “It’s better for you—and for everyone—if you stay well out of MIB business.”

That sounded like something she’d said a thousand times before. It occurred to me that Kendall did a lot of work to keep everyone at arm’s length—or further, if she could help it. But that was going to be hard for us going forward, all things considered.

I blew out a breath as I looked at the palace again. “What did Lucian do to warrant a top-secret MIB investigation?”

Kendall shook her head. “You know I can’t tell you anything about that.” She looked at the Vanguard palace. “I’m going to need you to create some kind of a distraction so I can sneak in. I’m going to need to get to the basement.”

I nodded, but I had only been half-listening as she spoke. She’d shaken her hair out of her face, and the action had released a wave of her scent, which had completely distracted me. For fuck’s sake, why did she have to smell so good?

“*Hey!*” Kendall snapped her fingers in front of my face. “Greyson? Are you listening to me?”

I snapped back to the present moment, flustered, and annoyed with myself for being so flustered. “What kind of a distraction?”

“I don’t care, as long as it gives me enough time to sneak inside. Just use your imagination,” she suggested. “You know Lucian well enough to figure out what would work—”

There were rapid footsteps behind me, and I spun around just in time to see Xavier striding toward me. Colton was right behind him, but my eyes were on Xavier, who looked pissed.

He looked past me at Kendall. “Why’d you bring *her* to the meeting?” he snarled.

For a moment I was too surprised to put together an answer. I was thrown by their sudden arrival in the woods, and I was obviously aware that it didn’t look great that they’d come upon Kendall and me lurking in the woods together.

But I had no idea what Xavier was talking about.

“What meeting?” I asked.

Xavier looked surprised for a moment. “Didn’t you read Lucian’s text?”

I shrugged. “I usually don’t, when I see they’re from him. His messages have never brought me any good news.”

Colton laughed at that. “You can say that again. Though the guy does know how to throw a party. I think I might still be drunk from last night.”

Xavier shot his twin a dirty look, then turned back to me. “Lucian called a meeting of the Alphas. I’m sure he’s going to want to see you there. If you’re not, he’ll get suspicious.”

I couldn’t help but notice that Xavier’s eyes kept darting toward Kendall, though I couldn’t exactly tell if it was just suspicion or if he was checking her out.

Shit—I must have it pretty bad, when I was thinking everyone was checking her out, even my own brother.

“Fine,” I said shortly, “but we have to help Kendall sneak inside. She’s got a mis—” I had almost said that she had a mission, but Kendall—seeing where I was going—had stepped closer to me and pinched my ribs, hard, and I cut myself off. “She wants to get the lay of the land inside.”

But Xavier wasn’t fooled. He looked between us for a moment, his eyes narrowed. “Why does she want to get inside? What’s going on? Is she going to give you another lap dance while she’s disguised as someone else?”

Kendall glared at Xavier, and I could feel her tense.

I felt my own wolf snarl, but I managed to refrain from lashing out, despite Xavier’s blatant disrespect. “Please, just do this for me. I’m asking you for some help, as my brother.”

Xavier looked at Kendall, then at me. He looked suspicious as hell, but he finally nodded. “Fine, I’ll help you. You should tell me what’s going on, but I suppose you must have your reasons. You usually do. What did you have in mind?”

It took a moment to brainstorm some ideas and come up with what resembled a plan, but only a few minutes later, Xaiver, Colton and I emerged from the trees and walked toward the palace entrance. As we walked up the wide marble steps, the door opened, and one of the Vanguard staff stood waiting to let us in.

I started in, but Xavier grabbed my shoulder and yanked me backward.

“What the hell?” I asked, turning to him.

“As Alpha of the Samara pack, *I* should enter first,” he said shortly, and started in.

I grabbed his shoulder. “Oh *hell no*.”

He shoved my hand away, and I shoved him back. Tensions were high and escalated fast—which was all part of my plan. Fake a fight with Xavier as we entered the estate. Not only would this be totally credible—considering our recent arguments—but any dustup between Xavier and me always seemed to draw a lot of attention. Usually that attention was completely unwanted, but today it would give Kendall time to slip in through a side door near one of the garage entrances, unnoticed, as the rest of the staff hurried toward the entrance to help de-escalate the situation.

Xavier had rolled his eyes when I’d suggested the plan in the woods, but considering how many Vanguard staff members were charging toward us, I’d say it was working exactly as I’d envisioned, and Kendall was in the clear.

“Come on, guys,” Colton said from the side. “Don’t fight like this.”

I managed not to roll my eyes at Colton’s poor acting. He was supposed to be interceding but wasn’t terribly convincing. Luckily, no one seemed to notice that.

“What is the meaning of this?! What is going on?!”

I looked over to see Lucian striding across the great hall toward us.

Xavier took advantage of my moment of distraction and swung, clocking me in the jaw with more power than a fake fight needed.

The blow landed like a sledgehammer, and pain exploded on my jaw. I glared at Xavier, wondering if that was strictly necessary, or if he was using the ruse of this fake fight to work out some real anger.

But I didn’t have time to ask as Lucian hurried toward us.

“Get them apart!” Lucian shouted at his staff, and two burly guys in Vanguard livery grabbed Xavier and me and pulled us apart.

As I was dragged away from my brother, I caught sight of Kendall as she slipped around a corner of a passageway.

My jaw ached, but I was glad that the ruse worked, and she had gotten inside. I kept my eye on her as she moved stealthily toward a basement door, keeping her own eyes on the commotion at the door, making sure no one turned around to see her.

“Will one of you tell me what is going on here?” Lucian asked, looking between Xavier and me.

I rubbed my jaw and glowered at my brother—which didn’t require any acting. “Nothing,” I snapped.

“Yeah, nothing at all,” Xavier said, his eyes flashing with anger.

“They just started fighting!” Colton explained to Lucian.

*He is not going to get an Emmy.*

“I didn’t start shit,” I muttered.

“Yeah right,” Xavier shot back.

“Enough!” Lucian said, putting up his hands to stop us. “This bickering *must* stop. There is too much important business to discuss today. Didn’t you read my text? Don’t you two understand what’s at stake here? Our alliance is threatened!”

I shot a glance over at Xaiver, who was looking back at me, mirroring my own confusion.

*What the fuck is he talking about?* Xavier’s expression said.

I shrugged, as if to say, *Your guess is as good as mine*. Then—to keep the ruse going, and because one of the guards in back looked like he was losing interest and I didn’t want him to turn around until Kendall was safely out of sight—I shoved Xavier.

Xavier shoved me back. “Get your fucking hands off of me!”

“Stop!” Colton said. “Come on! This isn’t how brothers act!”

“Hey!” a familiar voice yelled.

I looked over to see that Maya had walked into the palace, followed by Cali, who rushed forward, stepping between Xavier and me.

“Greyson, what’s going on?” she asked, looking up at me, her face twisted in agony. Then she hit me with her mind link: *Are you two fighting because of me?*

**Episode 5638**

**Greyson**

“We weren’t fighting.”

Xavier and I spoke at the same time, then looked at each other in surprise.

I put my hand to my bruised jaw, which I could feel was starting to swell.

Cali looked between us. “Don’t lie to me. We saw you both.”

The *we* must have sparked something in Colton, because he looked at Maya, who was standing in the doorway.

*I’ll explain when I can, love*, I mind linked back. *But this has nothing to do with you, I swear it.*

“What are you doing here?” Colton asked Maya before Cali could respond, either out loud or through the mind link. “Wait, where are the twins?”

Maya narrowed her eyes dangerously. “What are *you* doing here, Colton? You couldn’t even bother to fucking text me?”

Colton gestured at Xavier and me. “It’s been a little chaotic around here.”

“So you *were* fighting!” Cali said, rounding on me again.

Ah shit. The ruse wasn’t supposed to extend to Cali, but I figured I couldn’t back out now—Lucian was still watching us. “It was stupid. It was about nothing, but it had nothing to do with you.”

Cali looked surprised by this, but before she had a chance to say anything, Lucian clapped his hands together.

“Well, now that we are acting like civilized adults again, why don’t we proceed? We are still waiting for Mace to join us, but why don’t we go to the meeting room,” he said, gesturing into the palace. Beverages and refreshments are prepared and though we cannot discuss the events until we are all present, we can at least eat and drink.”

He was about to turn when I caught sight of Kendall. I reached out for Lucian, ready to grab him and deck him if I had to, but—luckily—Kendall opened a door and slipped behind it before Lucian could fully turn.

I breathed a sigh of relief and let my hand drop to my side. She was heading to the basement now; I had done what she’d asked. Now whatever she was doing was up to her.

Lucian led us all down a short passage toward what he called the meeting room. As we walked, I could feel Cali looking between Xavier and me. She looked nervous, which I didn’t like, and I swung an arm around her shoulders.

I told myself I was only doing this to make Cali feel better—not to illustrate to Xavier exactly where he stood with her, though I didn’t mind that I caught sight of Xavier glaring at me.

As Lucian ushered Colton and Maya into the meeting room and over to the bar, I looked down at her.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. Xavier and I just showed up at the same time. It was nothing—just a misunderstanding that got out of hand.” I felt really bad. I knew I wasn’t exactly lying to Cali, but I also wasn’t exactly being fully open either.

Cali still looked worried and unconvinced as she walked into the meeting room, and I followed her. It was yet another of Lucian’s cavernous, over-decorated rooms. This one was wood-paneled with high ceilings and a low-hanging chandelier. There was a giant wooden table in the center of the room that looked like it weighed about a ton, and at the head of the table was a large, gilded chair that I guessed Lucian sat in. It was really more like a throne than anything else, and nothing like the other wooden chairs that ringed the table.

But Lucian didn’t sit. He looked around the room, suddenly frustrated. “Where is the wine?” he demanded. “I specifically told Armin I wanted a case of the Leroy Domaine d’Auvenay Chevalier-Montrachet Grand Cru! Where is it?”  
 A uniformed staff member scurried out of the room—presumably to find out what happened to the wine—but Colton groaned.

“It’s a little early for wine, isn’t it?” he asked.

Lucian scoffed. “It’s never too early for wine, Colton Evers. Besides, that’s not the point. When I ask for something, I expect it to be there.” He shook his head. “If one wants something done right, one must do it themselves. I’ll just get the wine from the cellar myself.”

Shit. The wine cellar was in the basement of the palace. Lucian had insisted on taking me on an hour-long tour of the wine cellar months ago. If Lucian was going down there, that wasn’t good at all—Kendall was down there.

“No! You can’t!” I blurted out, before I’d had a chance to think it through.

Everyone in the room turned to look at me in surprise.

Lucian furrowed his brow. “I can’t go to my own wine cellar, Greyson? I believe you will find that I can do as I please, particularly in my own home.”

Shit. That wasn’t good. I’d just made a grave, foolish mistake. And if there was any doubt of that, Xavier was looking at me curiously, his brow raised.

I cleared my throat, thinking fast. “I was just thinking that it isn’t right that such a gracious host should have to go alone. I’ll come help you get the wine.”

Cali looked confused, but I didn’t offer any explanation as Lucian and I walked out of the room. How could I?

Lucian led the way to the basement door. “I appreciate the offer, Greyson, but this really is unnecessary. I am more than capable of getting the wine on my own.”

“That’s fine,” I said loudly as we came down the basement steps. “I’m happy to help.”

I spoke so loudly that Lucian looked at me like I had lost my mind, but I wanted Kendall—wherever she was—to be able to hear me so she could hide herself.

As we walked into the basement, I could pick up on her scent, so I knew she was nearby. I just had to hope that Lucian assumed the scent was one that lingered from the party.

Lucian stopped in front of a large oak door.

“So this wine is pretty good?” I asked, looking suspiciously around, making sure Kendall was nowhere nearby.

“The Leroy Domaine d’Auvenay Chevalier-Montrachet Grand Cru is *exceptional*,” he said. He saw me looking at the keypad next to the door and shrugged as he punched in the code. “I know that it looks like a lot, but I had to install it after a couple of my guards—who have now left the mortal realm—stole multiple cases over the course of a few months. It was most upsetting.”

I nodded as he pushed open the door.

“Are you coming?” Lucian asked, stepping inside.

“I’ll wait out here,” I said.

“Very well,” Lucian said, closing the door behind him.

Alone, I started walking, following Kendall’s scent down the corridor. I turned left when the passageway split, and just as I turned, I nearly collided with something.

“Kendall,” I breathed, taking a step back.

She looked up at me, then quickly hid something in her hand behind her back. “What are you doing here?” she hissed at me.

Too curious to stop myself, I grabbed her arm. “What is this?”

When I pulled her arm out, I saw that she was holding a small electric meter reader of some kind, and the thing was glowing.

She yanked her hand from my grasp. “It’s nothing, and I’m working.”

“Working doing what?” I demanded.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m following a signal, if you must know.”

“What signal? God, Kendall, why don’t you just tell me what you’re doing here already? If you want me to help you, telling me what the hell is going on would be a good first step so I at least know what I should be helping you with, don’t you think?”

Her eyes flashed, and in an instant, I knew she was about to argue back. There was a certain look of defiance on her beautiful face that I was coming to recognize, but before she could speak, Lucian opened the door of the wine cellar.

“Greyson!” he called into the passageway.

“Shit,” I hissed, and shoved Kendall against the wall.

“Greyson, I can’t find the Leroy Domaine d’Auvenay Chevalier-Montrachet Grand Cru. What do you think of a Chianti Classico? It’s a seventy-eight. Very good vintage.”

I put my hand over Kendall’s mouth and pressed my body against hers to eliminate any shadows.

We were deep enough into the shadow that he didn’t see us, but I held my breath as he looked down the passageway in each direction.

Finally, he rolled his eyes. “Fine,” he muttered. “I guess I’ll bring the bottles up myself.”

Staying still as a statue, I watched as Lucian propped the door open, then I heard the clink of bottles. Lucian walked into the hallway, let the door of the wine cellar close behind him, and disappeared back up the stairs.

Alone again, I looked back down at Kendall. I was about to pull my hand away from her mouth when I saw that she was looking at me, too. And there was something in her eyes that lit a flare inside my chest. Heat rushed through me. I could feel the heat of her mouth beneath my palm, and I was suddenly filled with an insatiable desire to replace my hand with my own lips.

**Episode 5639**

**Kendall**

I saw it when it happened—when the desire overtook Greyson. I could see the change in his eyes. And it pissed me off, because I was sure that the look in his eyes was only reflecting what he was seeing in mine.

Heat pooled below my belly, and the urge to pick up where we’d left off before we’d been interrupted by the Aspen Alpha was so strong, I nearly swayed on my feet. I wasn’t an idiot. I knew that should never have happened in the first place. I’d practically given Greyson Evers a lap dance. I knew it was wrong when I was doing it, but it was like an out-of-body experience. Like I couldn’t stop myself.

And I’d seen the same look in his eyes then. He’d wanted me to keep going. He’d wanted me to grind into him, to straddle and press against him. Despite what he’d said to me, I’d known then that he’d wanted it. I’d seen the same thing then that I saw now—raw, hungry desire.

His body pushed into mine, and his hand covered my mouth. I was tempted to push it away, but not to stop him—to encourage him. Maybe it was time for us to just settle things between us. Maybe it would be useful to just get it over with. Living with this tension between us was nearly unbearable, and the idea of giving in to the desire that I felt for Greyson Evers made me feel lightheaded. I could practically picture it—I could practically *feel* it.

But I had to keep it together. I had to remember what was at stake—my job, the importance of my mission, and my life.

*Take your fucking hand off of me.*

I thought I had whispered, but too late I realized that I had somehow mind linked to Greyson.

My stomach dropped as Greyson’s eyes widened with shock.

He slowly lowered his hand from my mouth. “Did you just…do what I think you did?”

The shock of it made me tense up. I hadn’t meant to do that. I didn’t even know I *could* do that. And being able to do it was just further proof that this bond Greyson kept insisting existed between us wasn’t imaginary, however fucking inconvenient it felt for me.

“Get off of me,” I hissed, making sure to speak aloud. I tried to shove him off of me, but trying to move Greyson was like trying to move a mountain, and my elbow kicked back hard into the wall.

Pain exploded, but that’s not what caught my attention. There was a click and then the whir of some kind of machinery. And suddenly the wall behind my back began to move.

“Shit,” I muttered, scrambling as the wall revolved.

Greyson and I both pivoted as the wall spun, and when it stopped, we looked around. No longer in the well-lit basement hallway, we had found ourselves in a dark, narrow corridor.

I took a deep breath as Greyson stepped back from me and looked in both directions. I needed to calm myself down, so I concentrated on steadying my breathing and my heart rate—both of which had gone into overdrive after I’d accidentally *mind linked* with Greyson. That had happened out of nowhere, and it freaked me the hell out.

I looked down at the meter in my hands and was surprised to see the reader was going crazy. Whatever was down here, the meter was definitely picking up some signals.

“Is that why you came down here?” Greyson asked, his voice a low, husky whisper.

I looked up at him, meeting his storm-gray eyes. I felt an electric current run through me, but even when I tried to focus on his question, I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to answer him.

Maybe he could see that in my face because he broke his gaze away, looking frustrated. He reached up past my shoulder and pushed on the wall, like he was trying to get us back into the passageway where we had just been, but the wall didn’t budge. Whatever had made it spin in the first place, it didn’t appear to spin the other way.

“Fuck,” he breathed, shaking his head. “We’re not getting out of here that way. Now what do we do?”

“I don’t know what you’re going to do, but I need to take more readings,” I said, and started to step away from him.

Greyson grabbed hold of my arm. “Readings for what?” he demanded.

“Greyson—”

“You need to tell me,” he said firmly.

I sighed. “Listen, I get your frustration, but what I can tell you is that I’m not sure what I’m looking for either.” I pulled my arm from his grasp. “I don’t know, okay?”

He laughed, and there was a bitterness to the sound of it. “Come on, Kendall. You have to do better than that.”

I risked looking back into his eyes and felt the electric charge shoot through me again. “If I knew, I wouldn’t tell you, but the truth is, I actually don’t know. I was sent here to get readings—that’s all. All I know is that there have been reports of disturbances beneath the palace.” I gestured to the meter in my hand. “Which this is starting to confirm.”

Greyson stared at the meter, then at me. His eyes searched my face, like he was trying to decide if he was going to believe me. They lingered on my eyes, and after a moment he nodded, once. He didn’t speak, but there was a change in his eyes that suggested that he did believe me. At least for now.

“Okay,” I breathed. “I’m going to get back to work, if that’s okay with you.”

Greyson gestured me onward, and I looked back down at my meter. I started to walk, letting the readings guide me. He walked next to me, and we walked in total silence down the narrow passageway.

We had gone a few dozen feet when I happened to glance upward. There, in front of me, was something on the wall opposite me.

I frowned as I stepped toward it, Greyson still at my side.

Etched into the wall was the figure of a strange creature. More like a beast than a creature, scratched into the stone.

I glanced over at Greyson. “Have you ever seen anything like this?”

He peered at it with a frown, then around at the narrow passageway. “I’ve seen some of these underground tunnels before. We used them during the Bitterfang battles.”

“You’ve been here before?” I asked quickly.

He shook his head. “I’ve been in the tunnels, but I don’t think I’ve been to this particular one. Maybe some of them, but I definitely don’t remember ever seeing this etching before. Or maybe I was too distracted trying not to fucking die. I wonder if Lucian knows about this.”

“You can’t say anything to Lucian. Or to Cali—you can’t tell anyone,” I corrected myself sharply with a shake of my head. “We don’t know what Lucian knows. It could very well be that he does know about this, and he’s been hiding it.”

Greyson gave me an incredulous look. “I know you don’t know the guy very well, but Lucian can’t keep a secret to save his life.”

“Or he wants you to *think* that he can’t,” I pointed out.

Greyson looked confounded by that point, but before he could answer, his phone buzzed with a message.

He looked down at it, baffled. “How do we have a signal down here?”

I shrugged. “Hell if I know. Who is it?”

He looked at the phone. “It’s Xavier. He’s wondering where I am. Says Lucian thinks I left and he’s making a big deal about it. Shit,” he said, rubbing his hand along his jaw.

I tried not to think about the sound of the rasp of his five-o’clock shadow against his palm, but I had to swallow hard.

“I have to find a way out of here before Lucian sends a search party to look for me. Help me find a way.”

I nodded, and we started to search the passageway for a door—hidden or otherwise. We were looking hard when I tripped in the dimness over something on the ground. I stumbled into the wall, which squeaked when I landed on it.

“I think there’s something here,” I muttered, struggling to get my feet under me again.

Greyson stepped close to my side, and together we ran our hands across the stone wall, searching for a knob or a lever or a button—anything that might let us into the other side again.

Greyson must have hit something because suddenly we were spun around again and landed ourselves in a powder room of some sort. The pivot was much faster and the stop much more sudden, and both Greyson and I lost our balance. He toppled over, and I fell on top of him, catching myself by straddling his hips.

I caught myself before I landed completely on top of him, but only by planting a hand on either side of his shoulders, landing us in a *very* intimate position, and I felt my body flood with heat.

“Greyson?”

The voice sounded familiar, and we both looked up to see his girlfriend, Cali, standing over us, looking shocked.

**Episode 5640**

**Artemis**

*Would you be willing to be glamoured as me?*

Aelwen stared at me, stunned. She blinked, slowly, then looked around nervously, checking to see if there was anyone close enough to hear what I’d just said to her. “What? Why? Why are you asking me this?”

I knew I had to be careful. This was a big ask, and I didn’t want to scare Aelwen off. I wanted to let her know what was going on, but I didn’t want to reveal the real reason, for fear that Celeste might find out and try to thwart my plans once again.

So I thought fast. “I’m exhausted,” I told her. “I’m just not cut out for all this pomp and circumstance. I’m a bounty hunter, not a diplomat. I just need a few days, maybe a month or two, to rest and recover, but you know Celeste won’t let me go. So I’m wondering if you could step in for me and then I’ll slip back—”

“A few *months or two*?!” Aelwen sputtered, her eyes going wide.

“More or less,” I said, trying to smile jauntily. “And I promise I’ll make it worth your while,” I added hastily.

Aelwen’s eyes narrowed. “What did you have in mind?”

I managed not to smile with satisfaction. I’d had a feeling this was going to be the part that drew her in. “I suppose that you would either like some coin, or perhaps a better position?”  
 Aelwen eyed me. “Why not both?”

I had to admit, I liked her style. She knew what she wanted and wasn’t afraid to ask for it. “I think I could arrange that. But I’d need something from you, too.”

“What?” Aelwen asked warily.

“You will need to swear not to tell anyone who you really are—no matter how difficult a position you find yourself in,” I said urgently. This part was a deal-breaker, and I needed her to understand that.

Aelwen looked anxious again. “This sounds dangerous. Am I going to get into trouble for doing this?”

“You won’t if no one finds out,” Rishika pointed out. “As long as you keep quiet about it, nobody will know anything, and you won’t be in any trouble.”

Aelwen looked skeptically at Rishika. “I don’t know…”

I sighed. “I’m not going to lie to you, Aelwen. There is some risk here. But like everything else in life, if you want something, you have to be able to take a chance for it.”

Aelwen chewed on her lip, but she didn’t look nervous—she looked like she was thinking. She was weighing her options. “And I’ll never have to bring Celeste rolls with chilled butter ever again?”

I smiled at her. “At the very least. You will never have to serve her again.”

“I’ll do it,” Aelwen said without further hesitation.

“Okay, well that’s great, but there’s still one problem,” Marius said. “I can’t glamour anyone, and nobody I know can either. Who do we know who can glamour?”

I shrugged. “I suppose we can pay someone to do it,” I suggested, but Marius shook his head.

“No way. That’s not going to work.”

“Why not?” I asked. “I can get money.”

“It’s not about the money,” he said. “If we’re going to do this, it needs to be done by someone we can trust.”

“I have someone in mind,” Adair said. “And they live here, in this town.”

We all looked over at him in surprise.

“What?” I asked.

“They’re the person who gave me the idea in the first place,” he said. “I will go find them and ask them. Tabitha?” He gestured to her, and together they walked away, presumably to find this mystery person.

“Okay, Adair could have saved us a lot of grief if he had just led with that information,” Marius grumbled.

I shot him a dark look. “Watch it. You don’t want to get on my uncle’s bad side, Marius.”

He returned my look with a grin. “Or yours, right?”

I rolled my eyes and looked after Adair, but he and Tabitha had disappeared into the teaming crowds. “I just hope they don’t take too long. We don’t have much time.” I glanced at Aelwen, who worried me as well. She’d said yes, but she looked like she was having some doubts, and—realistically—she could change her mind at any moment.

“Hey,” Rishika said quietly, stepping close to me. “It’s okay. If we can’t do this, we’ll think of something else, okay?”

I nodded and smiled at her. “Thank you.” Even though Rishika still didn’t have all her memories back, she was still willing to show so much support to me, and it meant so much.

We waited for a few tense moments. I kept my eye on Celeste while Rishika and Marius looked out for Adair. Aelwen twisted her fingers nervously and looked as though she was thoroughly regretting agreeing to talk to me.

“Artemis!”

I looked over to see Tabitha running toward us. “What’s up?”

“Adair found the Fae he was looking for,” she said breathlessly. “He’s negotiating with them right now.”

She pointed, and I looked in the direction she indicated. Sure enough, I could see Adair walking toward us, escorting an elderly woman in our direction. The two of them had their heads bent together, and as I watched, the old woman said something, making Adair laugh out loud. It was honestly kind of a strange sight to see.

“Artemis,” Adair said, as he and the woman drew close, “I’d like to introduce you to Lilith. She was one of my own mother’s ladies-in-waiting. I hadn’t realized she was on the tour as well. We’ve been catching up.”

“Once upon a time,” Lilith said in a thin, reedy voice. She looked at me with a gentle smile. “I understand you need some glamouring, young lady.”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said, smiling back. “Thank you.”

Lilith nodded. “Anything for the daughter of Kadmos.”

“It actually isn’t for me,” I explained. “I need to glamour this woman”—I pointed to Aelwen—“so she looks like me. Can you do that?”

Lilith looked between Aelwen and me for a moment. “Yes, that shouldn’t be a problem. You two favor each other already. Same age. Similar height and build. This shouldn’t be difficult at all.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. This sounded like it would be easy, but there was still a matter of payment. I cleared my throat. “And what can we offer you for your…um, services?” I felt strangely awkward asking the question, but I wanted to get this all done quickly.

Lilith shook her head. “Nothing.”

“*Nothing?*” I repeated. “Surely we should pay you something—”

“Your family has always been so kind to me,” she said, putting a wrinkled hand on my arm. “Even after your father…” Her voice trailed off, and she looked away.

I had a strange impulse to explain to her that my father wasn’t dead—that I was really doing all this so that I could find him—but I stopped myself. There was too much to explain and this wasn’t the time to explain it.

I peeked around the carriage toward Celeste, who was still engaged in conversation. It looked as though she was speaking to two additional town council members, but she could break free at any moment.

I turned back to Lilith with a rapidly beating heart. I just had to hope whatever she was going to do wouldn’t take long.

Aelwen looked nervously between Lilith and me. “When am I doing this?”

“Now,” I said firmly, trying to sound more certain than I felt.

It was a good thing, too, because at my words, Aelwen looked terrified.

I reached out and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “I will make sure you never have to set foot in a kitchen ever again. I promise.”

Aelwen still looked scared, but she took a steadying breath. “Yes. Alright. I’ll do it.”

“Yes?” Lilith asked. “Are you ready?”

“We’re ready,” I said, shooting a quick glance at Celeste, who was still speaking to the town representatives.

“Very well,” the old woman said. “You two girls, stand side by side.”

Aelwen and I moved next to each other. I could feel Aelwen shaking slightly as my shoulder brushed hers, but she wasn’t backing down. She was defiant, but she was brave too, and I respected that.

Lilith closed her eyes and seemed to draw something from deep within herself. She waved her hands, and I felt the air stir around us. I felt nothing, but Aelwen shifted and squirmed, making a quiet whimpering noise.

“Finished,” Lilith said, opening her eyes with a sigh.

“Oh my god,” Rishika gasped as she looked at Aelwen.

“Shit,” Marius breathed, looking between us.

My heart beat rapidly as I turned to look at Aelwen—only it wasn’t Aelwen who looked back at me. It was a stranger—a familiar stranger, but still a stranger.

“Holy shit, is this really what I look like?” I asked, baffled by the face in front of me.

Before anyone could answer, I heard footsteps stopping behind me, then a voice—

“Excuse me.”

I spun to see Kastian standing just behind me. He looked at me, then at the other Artemis just in front of me. He looked between the two of us, his frown growing deeper with every passing moment.

“What the fuck is going on here?” he demanded.

**Episode 5641**

I looked at Greyson and then at Kendall where she sat straddling my mate. Shock wasn’t a good enough word to describe how I felt.

Gutted might be the better descriptor, because the sight of them in such an intimate position felt like a kick to the stomach.

I didn’t know what to say. My brain was scrambling to come up with some reasonable explanation for why my mate would be in such a…compromising position with another woman.

But she wasn’t just any woman—she was the woman Rowena had recently revealed was his second mate.

So maybe no matter what kind of position Greyson was in with her, it would hurt… A lot.

*I can’t believe that Greyson has another mate. I’ve been processing it as well as I could up until now but seeing them together like this…it makes it all too real.*

So real that my brain was at a loss. No matter how hard I tried and how much I worked to keep our earlier, generally positive conversation about Kendall top of mind, all I could think was the worst.

Kicking back into gear, my brain began conjuring images of them naked, kissing, having sex, all the things that would prove Greyson had decided he wasn’t willing to resist his attraction to Kendall for my sake.

Maybe Greyson had finally given into the pull of his mate bond with Kendall and he was choosing to test his boundaries with her…or to see how guilty he would feel.

And it wasn’t like I could fault him or even pretend like him doing this was a betrayal since I was the one who’d foolishly suggested that he explore his connection with Kendall to see where things led.

…And obviously, it had led to this.

My heart felt like it was cracking in my chest. Had I really given Greyson permission to whisk Kendall away to somewhere they could be alone and take advantage of their newly found connection? I knew I had to afford him what he gave to me and Xavier because of the *due* *destini*, but it didn’t mean it wasn’t difficult. Impossibly difficult.

*At least they still have their clothes on. They must have only just begun whatever…whatever they are planning to do.*

I wondered what would have happened between them if I hadn’t interrupted them. A few minutes more in this position, and they’d probably be naked and wrapped in each other’s arms. They likely would have been so enraptured in each other that they wouldn’t have even noticed that I’d come in at all.

“What are you doing down here, Cali?” Greyson asked as he shoved Kendall off him, his eyes dark with guilt.

*So he* does *feel like he’s doing something wrong…*

Kendall wasn’t meeting my or Greyson’s eyes and was busy straightening her clothes.

Despite how hard I was trying to keep my composure, my pain and anger began to get the better of me as I ground out, “Armin brought me down here because all the bathrooms upstairs are occupied—”

Greyson looked skeptical. “Seriously? Lucian has to have at least twenty bathrooms—”

“That’s not the point!” I snapped. “I should be the one asking the questions here!”

I wasn’t playing it cool, but I didn’t care. I didn’t feel cool right now so why pretend?

Kendall and Greyson shared a look—so quick that I would have missed it if I weren’t completely focused on them.

I picked up something in Kendall’s eyes—a warning look? What would she be warning Greyson about?

*Maybe I’m reading this whole thing wrong…*

Kendall had gotten to her feet and was busy brushing herself off, looking nonplussed as always…but this time there was something a little uncharacteristically awkward about her. She had something in her hand, but she quickly moved it out of sight and slipped it into her leather crossbody bag.

Greyson cleared his throat. “I think first and foremost, we all need to—”

“I thought Lucian only called Alphas to this little meeting of his,” I said to Kendall, interrupting Greyson. “What are you doing here, Kendall?”

The hint of discomfort I’d read in her had slipped away, and she was her normal cool, casual self again. “I was in the area and stopped in to use the bathroom.”

“To use the *bathroom*?”I didn’t bother pretending like I believed her. “So you just happened to be walking by the *Vanguard palace* and stopped in to use the bathroom.Is that what you expect me to believe?”

Kendall shrugged. “I don’t *expect* you to believe anything, Cali. That’s what happened. I mean, isn’t that why *you’re* in here?” She gestured to the powder room behind her. “And it’s all yours. I’m finished.”

I was about to correct her and explain that the only reason I was here because I’d brought Maya, but I stopped myself. I didn’t owe Kendall any explanation. I wasn’t the one who’d been caught straddling someone else’s mate…though I suppose that wasn’t quite the case since Greyson was her mate as well.

*As if things between me and Greyson aren’t complicated enough. And now, not only do I have one mate who has another mate, I have two!*

The air in the room was tense, and I could tell that something was going on, even if it wasn’t what it looked like at first. Neither Greyson nor Kendall was telling me the whole story.

I gestured at Kendall. “What are you hiding from me?” I pointed to Kendall’s bag. “I saw you put something in there.”

Kendall sighed. “You mean this?” She reached into her bag and pulled out a gold compact. “We’re in the powder room after all. Stands to reason that I’d powder my nose.”

I frowned. She seemed to have an answer for everything. Recovering, I snapped, “Then you should use it, since you’re looking a little dewy.”

Kendall smiled, but it was as cold as ice. “Thank you, maybe I will.” With that, she turned to the mirror, snapped the compact open, and began applying the powder. She was trying to look like she was so involved in touching up her face, but I could see that her eyes were on my and Greyson’s reflection.

I grabbed Greyson and pulled him out into the hallway. Kendall could play coy all she wanted, but Greyson wasn’t going to keep anything from me, and I wanted to know what was really going on.

I was relieved to see that Armin was nowhere to be found. He’d likely gotten tired of waiting on me or had been called away to tend to any of the millions of tasks that Lucian had for him.

But alone with Greyson, it felt unexpectedly awkward. I could count on one hand the number of times Greyson and I had no idea what to say to each other. We were rarely so out of sync…but that was the only way to describe what was going on right now.

We were nowhere near the same page.

Could I lay into him for being alone with Kendall when she was his other mate? He rarely gave me a hard time about stealing time alone with Xavier…*my* other mate. Wouldn’t it be kind of hypocritical of me to call him to task over this?

And it wasn’t like my connection with Xavier didn’t bother him. Far from it.

He and Xavier often bickered over the time I spent with each of them alone, but neither of them ever blamed me because they understood that I was struggling to be fair to them both.

Was Greyson any different in this instance? Didn’t he owe it to himself to see whatever there was between him and Kendall through…even if it hurt me to see it?

We were both so quiet, and the awkwardness was growing by the second.

“You know that Kendall’s excuse was bullshit, right? There’s no way in hell she came here to pee or powder her nose. We both know that,” I said.

Greyson shook his head. “I won’t argue that.”

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop my voice from trembling with rage and hurt as I said, “I’m the one who told you to find out what the deal is between you and Kendall, so if that’s what that was back there, just say so.”

“Cali—”

“I’d rather know the truth than have you protect me by telling me anything that’s not genuine. It will hurt, I’m not going to lie, but at least I’ll understand, and I won’t be in the dark.”

Greyson put a hand on my cheek, and it had the overwhelming effect of getting to me, reminding me just how much I loved him and how much it hurt to think of him caring about someone else the same way he cared about me.

“It isn’t,” he said. “What you saw in there was not at all what you think it was.”

“I want to believe you, Greyson, I really do, but how can you explain you and Kendall literally falling through a wall together in the basement with her…straddling you like…like…like you two were planning—”

“Planning what, Cali? To sleep together right out in the open in Lucian’s bathroom? Really?” His gaze shifted to the powder room and then back to me. “It’s not that I don’t know how that looked in there, because I do, but—”

“Do you really? Because if you really did, you would stop beating around the bush and tell me the real reason Kendall is here right now.”

**Episode 5642**

**Greyson**

I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Every second that I avoided answering Cali’s question was only making the hurt I saw in her eyes and heard in her voice all the worse.

It would be so easy to come clean since the truth was…Kendall and I hadn’t been involved in some secretive romantic interlude. Nor had Xavier and I been scrapping over Cali or anything else—Kendall was working for the MIB, and the fight Cali had interrupted had been staged so that Xavier and I could help her sneak in.

But I didn’t want Cali involved in this MIB stuff, and Kendall had sworn me to secrecy. Cali always came before anything else—including Kendall’s need for me to keep her secrets—but in this case, telling Cali would do more harm than good.

I doubted Kendall would put Cali in harm’s way if something did happen, but I couldn’t very well speak for what other MIB agents would do if they discovered Cali knew more than she was supposed to.

I’d already taken a big enough risk telling Xavier, and I wouldn’t have if necessity hadn’t called for it. Revealing Kendall’s true identity had been the only way to get Xavier off my back about his growing suspicions…and to gain his help in keeping Kendall’s secrets under wraps.

*But this can’t go on. It’s hurting Cali…all the secrecy and keeping these things from her.*

“Kendall is looking into something,” I said finally, my voice low. I didn’t want Kendall to overhear and think that I was about to reveal too much.

Cali pulled back. “Let me remind you that Kendall is a college administrator. What could that role have to do with showing up at Lucian’s to look into something?”

I sighed. “It doesn’t, okay? Not exactly.”

Cali gave me a skeptical look. She wasn’t buying any of this, and I couldn’t blame her. None of it was adding up. Nothing made sense.

I ran a hand through my hair, wondering if I was only making things worse. It sure felt that way.

I hated the look on Cali’s face right now, and the tears sparkling in her eyes weren’t helping, either. They hadn’t fallen yet, but it was bound to happen.

“If there is something going on between you and Kendall, something more than you’ve revealed before, please just tell me. I know things are complicated now because of the mate bond and what I told you, so just…just tell me the truth and we can figure out what to do.”

“Cali, that’s not it. Please—”

“Then what is it? Because from where I’m standing, you’re hiding something. You know you don’t have to hide things from me, right, Greyson? We’ve always been honest with each other. Whatever’s going on, whatever you’re afraid to tell me…just rip the Band-Aid off and lay it on me. We’re strong enough to deal with it, and we’ll get through it, but not if you keep me in the dark.”

Cali was the only person in my life that I truly trusted, so maybe it was time that I tell her about Kendall just so she could stop torturing herself with the what-ifs.

“Okay, Cali. You’re right. There’s something—”

Before I could say another word, Kendall’s mind link invaded my brain.

It was a disorienting feeling since I wasn’t used to her being able to do that. It was a not-so-subtle reminder that this newly discovered mate bond between us was wreaking havoc on us both.

*I’m going to go*, Kendall said. *I think I’ve done enough damage, and there’s no way I’m going to be able to find what I’m looking for now.*

My wolf stirred at the thought of her leaving. Why the hell hadn’t Chloe gotten back to me with a fix for this yet? Here I was trying to protect Cali’s feelings while longing to keep another woman close. Chloe was my key to putting an end to this—no matter the price. Too bad she was dragging her ass.

*Thanks for your help getting me in. I’ll catch you later*, Kendall said.

My wolf was clamoring, champing at the bit to ask her where she was going. A part of me even longed to go with her.

I kept my eyes trained on Cali, using her to ground me as I got my wolf to calm down enough to stop pushing me to question Kendall like where she was going or what she was planning to do was any of my business.

Anyway, the less I knew about where Kendall was going, the better for all of us. My wolf wasn’t about to just walk away from Cali. The pull between us was still too strong—stronger than anything else. I wasn’t going to walk away from Cali either. My wolf was strong, and it could overrule me sometimes, but there was no question about who was in control—me.

I loved Cali too much to go running after Kendall before I’d made things right between us. If only I had any idea how to do that without giving everything away.

*Sorry this turned out so awkward for you, Greyson*, Kendall added.

*Thanks…and leaving is the best thing you can do right now*, I replied.

*Say no more, I’m out of here. And I trust you to do what’s best for everyone*, she said.

I didn’t respond to that. What was good for Kendall wasn’t necessarily good for the rest of us, after all. And it was becoming clearer that I had no idea what “best” would even look like where all of us were concerned.

In the perfect world, best would be Kendall leaving and never coming back into my life again. Even as I thought that, my wolf became restless again, obviously shaken at the idea of losing her once and for all.

Yet more proof that none of this was cut-and-dried. If I could just tell Kendall that we couldn’t see each other anymore, that would be the perfect solution.

But I couldn’t do that.

Our bond was forcing us together while trying to tear me and Cali apart.

“Greyson, did you hear what I said?” Cali said.

I pulled myself out of my own thoughts and tried to focus on Cali alone. “I’m sorry, I think I drifted off—”

“Obviously,” Cali said, frustrated. “I was saying, I wonder if Kendall should join us so you two can get your stories straight.”

“Kendall’s gone,” I blurted out.

Cali eyed me for a few beats before looking around as if expecting to catch Kendall escaping through one of the many doors in this corridor. “How do you know? I didn’t see her…”

*Shit. Now I’ve just made it worse.*

Was I ready to throw salt in Cali’s wounds by revealing that Kendall and I could communicate via mind link?

I drew in a breath and said, “I know because her scent is fading.”

*It’s not a lie…not exactly. Her scent* is *fading.*

“She probably left through the hidden panel,” I said. “She didn’t want Lucian to know she was here.”

Cali shook her head, her eyes narrowed as if she were trying to parse through what I was saying to find some inconsistency. “I don’t get it. Why all the secrecy?”

“It’s complicated,” I said. “You’re going to have to trust me. Please.”

“I trust you,” Cali said. “Of course I will always trust you until you give me reason not to…but I don’t understand what’s going on with you and her any more than when I caught you two together.”

“Cali, the only thing going on is that I love you. You’re all I think about, and you’re all that matters. I don’t want any of this to affect us because I don’t want anything to do with Kendall. I’m sorting through the mate bond stuff, but that’s it. At this point, I’m just trying to deal. I’m not trying to solidify anything with her.”

Cali sighed and nodded. “I have to believe you if that’s what you’re saying. But what do you want, Greyson? Really?”

I pulled her closer. “I only want *you*, love. Just you and me and our life together.”

Overcome with adoration and love for this woman, I ran a gentle thumb across her soft lips. “I love you so much,” I said, my voice choking up on the last word. “You know that, don’t you?”

Cali nodded, and those tears were getting even closer to falling.

“Please don’t cry, love,” I said.

I leaned forward to kiss the tears away and then, gently, pressed my lips to hers. In the back of my mind, all I could think was that I wished this was enough to solve everything. That my love and care and desire for her would blot out everything else.

But right here, right now with Cali, I decided to push everything away. I had to focus on what was right—me being here with Cali like this. It was how things should always be between us.

When we pulled apart, I looked her in the eyes, resisting the urge to simply kiss her again with hopes that would say enough. “I just need one thing from you, love.”

Cali said nothing, simply stared deep into my eyes as she waited for my request.

“I need you to be patient with me. Can you do that?”

**Episode 5643**

**Maya**

Colton and I were seated in one of the Vanguard Alpha’s huge, opulent sitting rooms. The place was breathtaking, if not a little gaudy. The craziest part was that I’d seen no less than ten rooms just like this one before we ended up here. Heavens knew what Lucian needed all these grand rooms for. I thought maybe he’d tone things down when he wasn’t having a party, but I was clearly wrong.

Colton and I were alone, and I was sitting as far away from him as possible. At this rate, his brothers and any one of their revolving doors of mates could all sit between us with some space left over.

I was annoyed with him…annoyed at this entire situation, really. I’d certainly dealt with much worse. I’d gone up against crazy cults and motherhood was nothing to play with, but this was a different brand of drama.

And I knew drama probably more than anyone else.

My awful, murderous grandfather had given me a crash course in how acutely family could betray you. And then there was the matter of my sister, who had disappeared without a word or a trace.

Not that I was sure I would’ve chosen differently.

The truth was, I was glad to be rid of my sister, and I was happy to narrow my focus to Colton and our babies…but Colton wasn’t making that easy.

I jumped at the sensation of his warm thigh pressing up against mine followed by his rough, tight embrace. A second later, his hot lips were up against my ear making a warm shiver go down all the way to my toes even as I shoved him away.

“What part of ‘I need space’ do you not understand?!” I hissed at him.

“I don’t understand any of it.” Colton slid close again, this time anchoring himself so that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t push him away. “Just…don’t be mad at me, okay?’

I turned to look at him, and the mere sight of him staring at me all googly eyed made me go all soft and warm inside—even if I was glaring at him on the outside.

*Damn this man to hell. He gets on my last nerve and still manages to get a reaction out of me.*

He was annoying as hell, but damn it if he wasn’t the best-looking man I’d ever laid eyes on. In fact, I’d often thought that Colton was just a little too handsome for his own good. It was why he thought he could get away with everything…because he was attractive and could make me laugh when he wasn’t being a complete idiot, and sometimes even then.

After I’d gotten a good eyeful of him, I turned away and said, “Nope. I’m mad at you. Nothing you can say will change that.”

Colton nuzzled my neck, and that flush buzzing under my skin expanded until my entire body was on fire.

“Come on, Maya. You know you can’t stay mad at me.”

He traced a finger along my thigh, and I watched him lick his lips like I was edible.

“Though I admit you’re so damn sexy when you’re mad,” he said. “Which is lucky for me since you’re always mad.”

“Fuck off,” I said, smacking his hand away and pressing up against the armrest. “Why did you have to run your big mouth and tell everyone that we’re moving back?”

Colton sighed. “I don’t know, maybe because we are? What’s the big deal? And look, you came down to see me anyway…though that’s not the only coming you’ve done today.”

“Keep on bringing up the things we do in private out in the open where anyone can hear, and you’ll never get”—I lowered my voice—“shower phone sex ever again.”

“Don’t say things you don’t mean,” Colton quipped. “Anyway, I don’t get why you’re so mad about something that doesn’t matter. I told my own brother that we’re moving back, so what’s the problem? It’s not like news this big could stay secret for very long.”

“Certainly not when you’re the one holding the secret. You have the biggest mouth in the world,” I snapped.

“Another thing you only complain about when we’re outside of bed.”

I gritted my teeth. “*Stop* with the sexual innuendos! I’m serious! I didn’t want anyone to know our plans just yet.”

“Well, now they do,” Colton said. Now he was getting a little miffed. “What were you going to do? Never talk to my brother? Never see Cali?”

I gave him a fake sweet smile. “Now we’re talking.”

Colton squeezed my arm. “Come on, Maya, don’t be like that. You know you love Cali, somewhere deep, deep down. And besides, wasn’t that the whole point? To be closer to family? I mean…the type of family that’s not trying to kill or sacrifice you or your mate.”

I rolled my eyes. “Your family isn’t exactly winning any awards for normalcy either, you know.”

“I know,” Colton said quickly. “Believe me, I know we have our own brand of crazy going on, too. All I’m saying is that we moved back so that our babies have a support system and so we have a community to rely on.”

I hated to admit it to myself, and I wasn’t about to admit it to Colton…but he was exactly right. I leaned against him, despite myself.

Being closer to Colton’s family *was* the point. We’d both thought long and hard about this decision, and it felt right.

We had people here—annoying, frustrating, ridiculous people—but our people all the same. They were werewolves we could trust, and no matter how much they all had their own special way of getting on my nerves, that part couldn’t be ignored.

When we needed a break or had things to do, it would be easy as pie to leave Orion and Lyra with their uncles, or with Big Mac and Mrs. Smith…I could trust them to take care of my babies as if they were their own.

And even though we’d been working to rebuild the Grimcrest pack and were making some headway, things were still shaky. The members who’d decided to stay on once my grandfather and his people were out of power were still skeptical of having me as their Alpha. They weren’t in any position to be a support system for us.

It didn’t help that I was a woman and young on top of that. Werewolf packs weren’t winning any awards for innovation or keeping up with the times, so gaining all their respect and maintaining their loyalty had been an exhausting feat.

It was also hard to live someplace where all the dark memories of my childhood were so close by. No matter where I went in the Grimcrest pack lands, I could find something that sparked an awful memory.

That was why it felt good to be back here where I had to admit I felt more comfortable than I had anywhere else. This was more my home than the Grimcrest territory ever had been or ever would be.

I’d been driven out of the Grimcrest pack as a runt so many years ago only to have the Samara pack—imperfect in its own right—take me in. Life had gained meaning after that, and so now, Oregon was my home.

Maybe it was easier to blame him for “dragging” me here than it was to admit that I’d decided to come here just as much as he had.

It felt good that some of the Grimcrests had chosen to follow me as their new Alpha and would be joining us here soon.

I was meant to go back home to pack and get our things ready for the move now that I’d brought the twins here, but I couldn’t help but wonder how many of the Grimcrests would be there when I returned.

Would there be a pack left to lead? Was any of this the right move?

I sighed again, spiraling deeper into worries and anxieties about this newest transitional period.

Colton reached out and tipped my face up so that I was looking him in the eye. “Don’t worry, Maya. Everything’s going to be okay, babe. I promise.”

He leaned in to kiss me, and he’d worn me down enough that I didn’t pull away. Quite the opposite. I gave myself over to the kiss, opening up to him.

He hummed his appreciation and deepened the kiss, nipping at my lip and enclosing me in his arms.

“I missed you this morning. Sex over video just isn’t the same. There’s nothing like feeling you.” He slid a hand up to gently squeeze my breast through my shirt. “Nothing like hearing you.”

Almost as if on cue, I moaned.

There was absolutely nothing as good as Colton’s touch. It was funny that a man who was so unserious all the time was so skilled when it came to turning me on and transforming me into putty in the palm of his hand.

When his hand dipped lower to cup my sex, I glanced at the door.

“No one’s going to come in,” Colton said, following my gaze. “And even if they do, who cares? You’re my fiancée.”

He kissed my neck, and I wrapped my arms around him, too, thinking, *Fuck it, I deserve a little reprieve.*

I slid one leg across his lap and pulled myself over until I was straddling him, and then I took control.

**Episode 5644**

**Maya**

There was nothing like feeling Colton’s broad, hard body beneath me, and I knew how much he loved seeing me this way.

“God, you should be illegal,” he breathed, pivoting his hips up so that I could feel his erection. “See what you do to me?”

He squeezed my thighs almost to the point of pain, just like I liked it, and I stuck my tongue down his throat. That sparked something in him, and he growled while making a rough grab for the collar of my shirt as if he were about to rip it right off.

I nipped his lip in admonishment, and he relaxed, letting out a deep breath and dropping his hands to his sides as I began pivoting my hips against him.

I really had missed him. Having him here with me right now while fielding all the uncertainty about my ability to lead a pack was so grounding. I never thought I’d feel this way about anyone—especially Colton of all people.

But here I was, riding him as he moved his hips, propelling us into a rough, wild dry-humping session that was close to making me cry out in pleasure…but I didn’t want to alert anyone to what was going on in here…not that I really cared.

“God you’re so hot. Have I ever told you that?” I said between kisses.

“All the time…probably more times than you’ve lobbed some insult at me. But I know it’s all foreplay,” he said.

That wasn’t entirely true…but I did like that Colton could give the heat right back to me when he wanted. I ran my hands up and down his chest, loving how strong he felt under my fingertips.

I didn’t care what anyone else said, I’d gotten the best Evers brother. He was funny, smart—in his own way—brave, loyal, and amazing in bed.

If he wasn’t, I doubted that I’d be so completely in love with him, so attracted to him that even now, I was ready and willing to rip his pants off and ride him right here right now in this stranger’s fancy house.

“I want you,” I gasped. “I want you inside of me.”

Colton leaned forward, leaning me backwards as he kissed me deeply. He tore his lips away only to cover my neck in kisses before dropping lower to pepper kisses along my cleavage.

While he did that, I unzipped his pants and dug his cock out of his pants. “You’re so hard,” I said, stroking my hand up and down his length while he maneuvered me out of my pants without an ounce of grace.

He had that look in his eyes that I knew well. He had a one-track mind, a need to be inside of me as strong as my desire to take him into my body and fuck him until we were both shuddering, hot, and limp with satisfaction.

Once my pants were off, Colton dragged me onto his lap, pushed my panties to the side, and entered me almost clumsily.

“Fuck,” I panted.

Colton placed a hand over my mouth and pistoned his hips up, driving in deep and taking my breath away.

From there I lost all sense of what was happening—including where we were or the discretion I should have been using.

Colton had his hands around my waist and set the pace, alternating between sliding me up and down on his shaft and holding me flush against him and rocking me back and forth.

We were both flailing and straining against each other, holding tight like we couldn’t get close enough.

With his jaw set, Colton got up, commanded that I stand on my own two feet, bent me over, and entered me from behind.

I held onto the back of the couch; my knees planted in the expensive, plush cushion as Colton rammed me from behind, vibrating my entire body with the force of it and pulling little moans of pleasure from my lips.

He gave my ass a hard slap, and the sting of the contact paired with the sensation of being filled up completely by him sent me over the edge. I slammed back against him hard as I came and stayed that way while my orgasm raged.

When he came, he grabbed my ass and held me in place while his hips spasmed against me. He flipped me over and lay on top of me while he nailed me to the couch with hard yet languid strokes.

Satisfied and happy, I kissed his shoulders, his ears, and finally his lips. Then we both glanced through the doorway at the hallway beyond.

“Wow, I forgot we were even here,” I said. “We didn’t even close the door.”

“That makes two of us. Were you worried that someone was going to come in and catch us?”

“Not nearly as worried as I maybe should have been,” I said.

As we came down from our mutual high, Colton kissed me again and said, “Want to make another baby?”

I shoved him. “Shut up. No. That’s why I’m on the pill… No more babies for now.”

I was never even supposed to have had any children, but Orion and Lyra had come along so quickly that precautions seemed to be needed.

Colton waggled his eyebrows at me. “The baby making practice sure is fun though, right?”

“So much fun,” I said, rolling my eyes.

I shook my head to clear it as I slipped my clothes back on. Colton zipped up his fly and gave me a wink.

“Now I get to walk around for the rest of the day with you all over me,” he said. “My fucking hot fiancée.”

I was about to reply when a member of Lucian’s staff walked in. He looked us up and down with disdain before announcing, “You’ve been summoned to the alliance talks in conference room A.”

“Wonderful,” I said.

While Colton struggled to look presentable—I’d somehow torn the collar of his shirt, and there were nail marks down his neck—the staffer showed us to another empty yet grand room.

I frowned. “Does anyone need this many study-boardroom hybrids or…?”

The staffer gave me a blank look. “Lucian likes to be prepared,” he said cryptically.

“Hey,” Greyson said as he and Cali came walking in.

Cali looked a little…harrowed. But honestly, what else was new? I was sure it had something to do with her juggling two of the Evers brothers. One was quite enough for me. Who knew how she was putting up with two at once?

*Should I ask her what’s going on or leave it? Always so much drama with her.*

Then Lucian came walking in, followed by Porter. We shared a nod and a meaningful glance. Porter and Rowena had been through a lot with me and Colton, and we’d be linked by that forever, I figured.

“Alphas!” Lucian said a little too loudly. “Thank you all for being here today. Oh, and for those of you who aren’t Alphas, would you mind leaving us to our business? There are Alpha-only matters to discuss.”

I resisted rolling my eyes—we’d just banged in the guy’s house, so I was willing to offer him a shred of grace—and kissed Colton goodbye.

When he and Cali were gone, Lucian got down to business.

“I bet you’re all wondering why I called you here,” Lucian said.

“Uh…yeah, so if you could get on with it, that would be great,” Xavier said.

“Some of us have things to do,” Greyson grumbled. Mace and Porter nodded their agreement.

“Then if you’ll stop interrupting, I’ll get to it,” Lucian said.

I almost laughed out loud as Greyson and Xavier scowled.

Lucian turned to me. “I’ve heard that the Grimcrest pack is looking to settle in this area.”

*Ugh. Am I going to need this pompous asshole’s permission to relocate?*

“As such, we’re going to set the matter to a vote to decide whether to accept the Grimcrests and their…unusual Alpha…into our alliance.”

I’d only just met the guy, and already he’d rubbed me the wrong way.

“What do you mean? What is there to discuss?” Greyson said.

“Colton is our brother, and Maya is his mate, so as far as we’re concerned, it’s a done deal. She’s welcome to find her place in our region,” Xavier said.

“I’m sorry,” I said, cutting them off as they descended into a heated discussion. “Is this all because of me? Because if it is—”

Lucian cut me off almost as if I weren’t even there. “Any discussion about opening our region to other werewolf packs is a big deal and has ramifications that can’t be ignored. Their enemies become our enemies.”

I sat back in my seat, bristling at being talked over, wondering if this guy was *trying* to get on my bad side, because if so, he was doing a bang-up job of it.

“You’re making up excuses!” I snarled loud enough that he simply couldn’t ignore me. “What this is really about is whether the five of you deem me worthy enough to join your alliance when you’ve forgotten one thing.”

“What’s that?” Lucian said.

“You forgot to ask if I even *want* to join your alliance.”

Lucian looked offended. “What? Of course you want to join! My family’s prestigious heritage and the power of the Vanguard pack is unmatched. You’d be lucky to have us in your corner!”

As Lucian droned on about how amazing he was, my anger reached a fever pitch, and I shot up from my seat.

“Forget this, and fuck you all very much. The Grimcrest pack wouldn’t join this alliance if it came with free gold for life. Enjoy your little boy’s club.”

With that, I stormed out, slamming the door so hard on my way out that the entire palace rumbled.

**Episode 5645**

Colton and I found ourselves in the courtyard after taking a wrong turn not long after leaving the Alphas.

“Is the meeting room that way?” Colton asked, taking a few steps in the direction we’d come before faltering. “Shit. I have no idea. Who would want a house this big anyway? It’s overkill.”

I just nodded, still lost in my thoughts and rehashing my conversation with Greyson that hadn’t quite gone the way I wanted.

Our discussion hadn’t been a fight, at least not in a normal sense, but it was obvious that we were having a little trouble navigating this new normal involving Kendall, and I hated the way we’d left things.

I couldn’t stop seeing Kendall straddling Greyson, and I truly didn’t think it would be all that awful if Greyson hadn’t looked—to me—like he was enjoying it.

Greyson could tell me all day that he loved me and cared about me and only wanted to be with me, but when it came down to it, their connection was a fact, not a possibility.

They were mates…and until he found a way to break their bond, things between us would remain strained.

*Unless he has no plans to break the bond. Maybe he wants to keep it. What if he doesn’t want to be without Kendall?*

I wished we could just resolve all this and move on with our lives, but I had no idea how we were supposed to do that when Greyson was keeping something from me.

That bothered me more than anything.

It was now a question of how much Greyson trusted me. I knew Greyson well, so there was no question that my gut feeling was correct—he was willfully leaving me in the dark.

I wished I could figure out what he was so hell-bent on hiding from me.

Colton broke me out of my thoughts with a loud, “Thinking hard over there, huh?”

“Wh-what?” I sputtered.

“You’ve got something on your mind. I can tell.”

I smirked. “It’s that obvious, huh?”

“Hell yeah. Women think they’re a lot more mysterious than they really are. Most of you carry your feelings on your sleeve and can’t hide shit.”

“And you’re the authority on women?”

“No, I’m an authority on the most complex woman of all, which means the rest of you are child’s play.”

All I knew was that I was in no mood to discuss this with Colton. Greyson and Colton had, in the past and maybe even now, had their own share of differences, so he wouldn’t be unbiased. Colton didn’t always have the softest touch when it came to dealing with conflict, either.

And…I was still working through how I really felt about everything and wasn’t ready to discuss it. At this point, I was angry because of an assumed secret…otherwise was there anything to even be upset at Greyson about?

The whole Kendall thing was another reason to keep my feelings to myself. I didn’t want to talk about her anymore or explain the whole second-mate thing to yet another person.

“I’ll be okay,” I said after a long pause that probably suggested the opposite. “So…what’s with you and Maya moving back here? Not that I’m upset about it or anything.”

*In fact, having them around will be kind of…nice. Like old times. And the twins are just so fricking cute!*

Colton shrugged. “I see what you did there.”

“What did I do there?”

“Changing the subject. But don’t worry, I’ll allow it. I guess we’re heading back here because it’s the right time. We’re engaged now, and we were away for quite a bit and tried the whole Washington thing, but I think now we’re feeling like it would be good to be back here around you guys.”

“That’s as good a reason as any,” I said.

“Right. And it’ll be nice, right? We can all hang out again like we used to—you, me, Xavier, Maya—”

“And Greyson?” I interrupted.

Colton’s smile dimmed, and it was instantly awkward.

“Yeah—yeah, of course. Greyson, too. I mean, I guess he’s not the dangerous Rogue he used to be…but you know how families are. I’m not going to lie, Xavier and I are twins, so we tend to have a closer connection. He’ll probably always take priority—”

“So you’re playing favorites with your siblings?” I said.

“Doesn’t everyone?” Colton quipped.

“No…or yes. I don’t know. I guess I just want to make sure that you at least try when it comes to Greyson,” I said.

“Have you told him to do the same? It takes two to tango.”

“Come on, Colton. Will you promise me you’ll try with him?”

Colton’s smile went wide again as he said, “Do I have to?”

I smiled, keenly aware of just how good this was going to be for Xavier—for everyone—even if Colton still hadn’t learned to knock in all this time.

Colton sighed. “Fine, fine, yes, my older brother can hang out, too. The whole Redwood pack is welcome to chill whenever.”

“Yeah…this does sound really nice.”

“It will be.” Colton looked around. “So…how do we get out of here?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “And you’d think I’d have some idea about how to navigate this place since I’ve been here so many times.”

I pointed ahead of us.

“Maybe you had the right idea about going back the way we came in? I mean, that’s a start, at least. Right?”

We were about to head that way when I heard a familiar voice calling my name.

“Cali!” It was Elle. She was heading straight for me with Aysel trailing behind.

“Elle! Good to see you as always,” I said as we embraced.

Aysel walked past me like I wasn’t even there, her hungry gaze riveted to Colton. “And who are you, again?” she purred, holding out a hand to Colton.

“I’m Maya’s mate,” Colton said.

Aysel’s smile took a slight hit—so slight that I likely only noticed because I knew Aysel better than I ever could have wanted to.

“Maya’s the Alpha of the Grimcrest pack,” Colton continued. “Maybe you’ve met her?”

Aysel shrugged and checked her nails—talon-like things painted bright red. “I don’t know…maybe it rings a bell?”

Elle brightened. “So, you’re the ones with the twin pups! I have to meet them! I just know that they’re the most adorable babies ever!”

Elle’s excitement was palpable, and I realized just how much I missed her energy now that she lived at the Vanguard palace.

“Are you and Lucian talking about having children?” I asked Elle.

I wouldn’t be surprised at all if that was the next thing on Lucian’s mind. Despite all his wild parties and erratic behavior, he seemed to gravitate toward the more traditional parts of life.

I only hoped that if they were considering it, Elle didn’t feel pressured. She was still young, so she had plenty of time to have kids, and she wasn’t officially Lucian’s Luna yet…just like I wasn’t officially Greyson’s.

I felt a stab of bitterness as I remembered that the only official Luna in the Evers brothers’ circle outside of Colton was Ava. That was the one thing that Ava could hold over my head and I hated it.

*But it’s not like you can pressure Greyson into making you his Luna. What would Xavier think?*

“I’m curious…it must be so weird for you, Colton,” Aysel said.

Colton frowned at her. “What must be weird?”

“Well…both of your brothers are Alphas like my brother, yet you’re a Luna,” Aysel explained.

Colton’s frown deepened. “Yes…and your point is?”

I could tell that Colton was getting annoyed, so I jumped in to change the subject.

“So, how are wedding preparations going?” I asked. “I’m sure Aysel is a wonderful resource at a time like this.”

“Oh, she is, and it’s going amazingly,” Elle gushed, oblivious to the tension between Colton and Aysel. “Aysel has such a good eye for color and detail. I would be lost without her.”

“She’s not lying,” Aysel said in a bored voice. “She would be lost without me. Luckily, Lucian found a timeless beauty who can wear almost anything and still look ethereal. I was worried about his taste in women for a while there, but he’s redeemed himself.”

I gave Aysel a long look, wondering if there was a dig about me in there somewhere, but then I decided I didn’t care. If Aysel was speaking, she was making digs. There was no use getting worked up.

“Thank you, Aysel,” Elle said. “Cali, it’s going to be so much fun. And you have to come to the bachelorette party!”

“It’s going to be quite *epic*,” Aysel added.

Colton backed away. “Excuse me, ladies, I’m going to go find something—anything—to drink.”

Aysel followed him with her eyes as he left. “He’s kind of grumpy, isn’t he?”

“I can’t imagine why,” I quipped.

“What? I was just asking a question!” Aysel said, on the defense. “I mean it has to be awkward for someone so…strong…to find himself as a Luna.”

It wasn’t long before Colton came walking back over, looking lost and annoyed.

Aysel pointed. “You want to go that way.”

“Thanks,” Colton grunted before heading off again.

“Colton is fine with his position. He loves Maya. They’re engaged and have two children together, so he’s happy to be with her no matter what,” I said.

“I suppose he has to be,” Aysel said. “Since Maya seems kind of…tough.”

“Oh, so you *have* met her?” I said.

Aysel shrugged.

I didn’t understand why she was playing so coy when Maya and Colton had definitely been to the Vanguard before, but whatever.

“Maya is tough, but she has a heart of gold underneath her gruff exterior,” I said, internally wondering if that was quite the right way to put it.

“When can I see the pups?” Elle said.

The ground suddenly lurched under our feet with a rumbling sound so loud that we all covered our ears.

I looked around, confused as I tried not to fall over. “What the hell is happening?!”

**Episode 5646**

**Xavier**

After Maya stormed off, slamming the door so hard all our teeth rattled, Greyson and I exchanged a *fuck, that didn’t go so well* look.

I was worried that Colton was going to lay into us both once he found out how badly we’d angered Maya…and I wasn’t looking forward to that, either. Especially when Lucian was really the one to blame.

Greyson and I were both getting up to go after her when the room started to rumble.

“Are those aftershocks from Maya’s tantrum?” Porter said just as the glasses on the table began to shake and things began jolting off the shelves.

“Nah, Maya’s a force to be reckoned with, but she’s not capable of doing this,” I said. I looked around, holding onto the table to keep my footing. “Is this an earthquake?”

Suddenly, I was seized by a high-pitched, ear-splitting sound. I couldn’t tell whether it was coming from inside my head or outside of it.

When every other Alpha in the room covered their ears with their hands, I realized that it was definitely coming from somewhere in the house…or maybe outside? I had no clue, and the sound had me so disoriented that I couldn’t figure it out.

I collapsed back down into my chair before it could slide away from me, figuring that was probably the better choice compared to standing since I’d already stumbled and nearly fallen multiple times.

The sound was maybe the worst thing my ears had ever been subjected to, so bad that I felt it from my ears all the way down my spine to the soles of my feet.

*This feels the same as it did at the party. What the hell is going on here?*

“What the fuck is going on?!” Mace shouted at Lucian.

Lucian was in no state to answer. He was covering his ears like the rest of us, his face screwed up in pain.

I groaned when the pain got to be too much. It was like my head was being split apart by the shrill sound, and my hands weren’t enough to protect my eardrums.

*What the fuck* is *this? Is Lucian under the influence of some curse he didn’t tell us about? Some curse that shakes the very foundation of his house while trying to destroy everyone’s hearing?*

And then, almost as quickly as it started, the rumbling stopped, and the sound died down.

I let my hands fall away from my ears, but only after I was sure that the sound was finished. I leaned over the table, gasping, shaking my head to clear the residual ringing that the loud sound had left behind. I knew for a fact that *this* ringing was coming from inside my head.

Once the whistling in my ears had died down to a dull roar, I looked around at everyone else. Greyson was leaning against a table with one hand pressed against his temple and was as shocked as I was.

Every single person in the room looked pale…like we’d all been sickened by the rumbling and the loud noise.

Lucian groaned. “The damn DJ must have left his mic on!”

He started to stomp out of the room, but I grabbed him before he could clear the threshold.

“Cut the crap, Lucian. What the hell was that really?”

Lucian bit his lip as all of us—Porter, Mace, Greyson, and I—cornered the Vanguard Alpha, demanding answers.

Lucian didn’t answer right away. He was pensive. He looked like he was searching for a lie but wasn’t coming up with anything good enough to satisfy us. His normally smug look turned despondent. “Okay, okay…I think it’s the foundation.”

“The foundation?” Greyson said.

“Yes…there’s a big chance that my beautiful palace is…sinking!”

He dissolved into a dramatic, pained wail that made all the rest of us exchange a confused look.

“Wait a minute. Did you just say that your palace is *sinking*?” I couldn’t bring myself to call this gaudy fever dream of a house beautiful—it was nothing more than an overstuffed reflection of Lucian’s oversized ego.

I did find myself smiling at the thought of Lucian’s precious pride and joy sinking into the mud. It was almost too good to be true.

Mace looked just as skeptical as everyone else. “Wait a minute, are you sure about that? This area isn’t known for sinkholes.”

Lucian sighed. “It’s not that. It’s because of all the tunnels.”

Greyson shot Lucian a confused look. “Tunnels? Just how many tunnels are under this place?”

“I don’t really know,” Lucian admitted.

I was more curious about why Greyson seemed so intrigued about the idea of tunnels all of a sudden. We’d spent way more time than we ever wanted to in Lucian’s estate, and that meant we were all aware of all the tunnels this place had—especially after our fight with the Bitterfangs.

“How far do the tunnels extend?” Greyson asked.

“You sure are asking a lot of questions,” I interrupted.

*Is my brother doing everything he can to avoid any mention of Kendall secretly crashing the party, or is something else at play?*

I wanted to ask him about it, but there was no way I was going to bring it up in front of Lucian, one of the worst gossips in the werewolf world.

“They extend beyond the palace, of course,” Lucian said. “But that isn’t the point. The point is, I may lose my glorious home. I’ve only just restored it beyond its former glory after the fire!”

“That might be for the best,” I quipped.

Lucian hit me with a heated stare. “What? How can you say that? Do you dislike me so much that you would *wish* this on me? I know we’ve had our disagreements, but I thought you respected me enough not to wish this kind of ill on me!”

Lucian looked to the others for support, obviously hoping they were going to pile on about how much of an asshole I was being, but he only got silence in return.

*It’s not that I hate the guy…but he’s just a lot. That and the fact that the Vanguard palace is an eyesore…it deserves to be sent back to hell where it came from.*

Pouting, Lucian started pointing out the wonders of his precious abode as if he were a realtor highlighting the features and benefits.

“Do you all not see the floor-to-ceiling windows with stained glass renderings of the Vanguards’ victories? Or are you not into glorious fountains inlaid with gold and diamonds? Or perhaps you’re not into having not one, not two, but *three* indoor pools, all Olympic sized, all equipped with grottos where I’ve seen plenty of you have a great time!”

Porter and Mace ducked their heads, but not in shame—they were trying to hide laughter.

Lucian was ridiculous, and I supposed that wouldn’t change even as his palace was apparently sinking all around him.

As he droned on, I stared at the door, wondering how we could escape being held hostage by Lucian’s latest drama.

*We should check on Cali, Maya, and Colton*, I mind linked to Greyson. *But how are we going to get out of here?*

I’d no sooner asked the question than Greyson was heading for the door. “Xavier and I need to use the bathroom,” he said gruffly.

“Yes. Both of us,” I said.

Lucian wasn’t paying us any attention. He’d grabbed both Mace and Porter and was showing them the stitching on his drapes.

Once we were out of the room and away from the others, I asked Greyson, “So, what was that all about?”

“You mean that ear-splitting noise? Or are you talking about the ground quaking under our feet?” Greyson said.

“Neither. I’m talking about all your questions about the tunnels. Why do you care so much? It would be a blessing if Lucian and this over-the-top homage to himself sunk into oblivion never to be seen again.”

Greyson looked away, and I moved into his line of sight. I wasn’t about to let him off the hook just yet.

“Is this about Kendall?” I asked, deciding to not beat around the bush.

I saw a reaction, as subtle as it was, in Greyson’s eyes.

“She snuck in and went straight to the basement,” I said, keeping my voice low. “So I don’t think I need much to connect the dots from you and all your questions straight to her.”

“So what?” Greyson said. “What’s your point? What is it that you think you’ve figured out?”

“What’s she looking for down there?” I asked.

Greyson’s eyes went dark. “You know I can’t answer that.”

I laughed. “No, you certainly can. You’re just choosing not to. There’s a big difference. I already know who she really works for, so—”

“Drop it!” Greyson snarled.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? You never like anyone to ask you any questions, especially about this, so you can just go on pretending that there’s nothing going on between you two.”

“And I told you that there isn’t anything going on. But the same can’t be said for you and Cali, can it?”

I paused. “What?”

Greyson stepped closer. “You must really think I’m stupid, don’t you? I know all about you and Cali.”

**Episode 5647**

I looked around wildly as Aysel and Elle slowly removed their hands from their ears. Colton came running back in a second later, his eyes wide with confusion and fear.

“Has anyone seen Maya?” he said. “I’m worried about her after…whatever that was.”

“What the hell was that?” Maya said as she came walking into the courtyard. “I barely escaped that with my hearing intact! Is everyone good?”

“More or less,” Elle said.

We all turned to Aysel, who quickly threw her hands up. “Don’t look at me, I don’t know what the hell that was! I’m as confused as the rest of you!”

“Wait, you said you nearly lost your hearing?” I asked Maya before turning to the others. “And why did you two cover your ears like that?”

They all stared at me with confusion before Elle asked, “Wait a minute, Cali, didn’t you hear that noise?”

“What noise?” I said. “There was a noise just now?”

“Are you serious? You didn’t hear that unbelievably loud piercing sound that nearly deafened me?!” Colton said.

“It hurt like hell, and it could not have been good for any of our hearing,” Maya said. “But apparently, Cali didn’t hear a thing. The wonders never cease with you.”

“Are you sure that all of you heard the same thing?” I asked them.

They all nodded.

“I’m certain. That isn’t something I’ll ever forget, and I can tell by the looks on everyone’s faces but yours that we all experienced the same thing,” Aysel said.

I wasn’t exactly jealous that I’d missed out. It seemed like it was extremely painful, but it troubled me that I was the only one the sound hadn’t affected.

*Why didn’t I hear what everyone else did?*

“But we all felt the rumble, right? The ground shaking?” I said.

Everyone nodded at that, and it was a relief. And then something occurred to me. I was the only non-werewolf around, so whatever sound had nearly blown their eardrums had occurred on an octave my ears were unable to pick up.

“The sound probably didn’t register with me because I’m not a werewolf,” I said. “Your sensitive hearing is likely why you heard what I didn’t.”

“That could be,” Maya said. “This is one of those rare times where it would have been a good thing to be just a Fae.”

I glared at Maya’s comment, and Colton jumped in. “She didn’t mean it like that, right, Maya?”

Maya shrugged.

I brushed it off, knowing that there was no use getting offended by what Maya said. Now that she was back, I was going to have to brush off my thick skin and put it to use.

“But what kind of thing could cause a sound like that?” I said.

“No idea,” Aysel remarked. “But let’s hope it never happens again. It was so bad I felt a little sick to my stomach!”

It was then that I realized Xavier and Greyson were nowhere to be found. Maybe they were still in the alliance talks with Lucian…but either way, I needed to find them and make sure that they were both okay.

I started toward the nearest doorway but stopped short, realizing that I was no surer about which one to take than when Colton and I initially wandered out here lost a bit ago.

Luckily, I didn’t have to figure it out, because Greyson and Xavier came strolling in through another door. As soon as they saw me, they rushed over.

“Cali, are you okay?” Xavier and Greyson both said in unison.

“We were worried about you,” Greyson added.

“Oh brother,” Maya muttered. “I guess some things never change. They’re still falling all over her like she’s some delicate bird? I thought that shit was over,” she said to Colton, though it was loud enough for all of us to hear.

“I’m fine,” I said, deciding to ignore Maya again. “But the others were really in pain from the loud sound. Did either of you hear it?”

“That’s an understatement,” Greyson said. “It was terrible.”

I was distracted by the sudden sound of Xavier’s voice in my head. *Greyson knows about us.*

Thrown, I plastered on a smile so that Greyson wouldn’t realize I was having a secret conversation with Xavier right in front of his face.

*Of course he knows*, I replied.

*Wait, you told him?* Xavier said.

I was getting uncomfortable with this conversation. I didn’t want to talk about this right now…especially right in front of the man in question. Greyson wasn’t stupid. It wouldn’t take him long to pick up on what was happening.

I kept my smile even as I glared at Xavier. *I have no plans to keep anything from him, and I’m not going to lie. We’ve done enough of that. It’s time to keep things above board at all times. Did you tell Ava?*

*I didn’t have to*, Xavier said.

Colton walked over, cutting the silent tension building between the three of us. He had his arm around Maya, and his eyes were on Greyson.

“We need to talk to you, big brother,” Colton said.

I wasn’t sure whether I was happy about the interruption or not. There was so much that still needed to be said, lots of questions, but I didn’t want to talk it out here.

“Can we get the hell out of here instead?” Maya groaned. “This place sucks, and I want to leave before that sound pops up again. I don’t think I can handle it a second time.”

“We’ll leave soon,” Colton said. “I just need to chat with Greyson for a sec.”

“I’m with Maya. I want to get out of here, too. What is it?” Greyson said to Colton.

“How about letting me, Maya, and the twins crash at the lake house…?”

Greyson slung his arm around me as he muttered, “Sure, whatever.”

I clung to Greyson as we walked to the door. I was so ready to leave. Today had been trying and weird and exhausting all in one.

“No, I mean…like, until we get a permanent place,” Colton added. “Not just for tonight.”

Greyson turned to look at him. “And how long do you think that will take?”

I sensed the wariness in his voice.

“Well…Grimcrest isn’t much right now, but either way, we’re going to need somewhere for the pack to live while we figure out where we want to put down roots,” Colton said.

“And we thought…between the Redwoods and the Samaras, we could carve out some space in between for our territory,” Maya said.

“What?” Xavier interrupted.

“Let me get this straight—you want to carve up our territory?” Greyson said.

I was thrown by where this conversation was going. “But you three are brothers,” I said.

“And our wolves need to be able to run,” Greyson replied.

“I get that, but Maya’s right. There’s enough land for everybody. And what do you need two pack houses for anyway, Greyson? The lake house is just sitting there empty most of the time. Might as well put it to good use. And Colton’s your brother—”

“Ava will never go for it,” Xavier snorted.

Colton shot Xavier a look. “And why should she have to ‘go for it’? You’re the Alpha, right?”

“That’s right,” Xavier fired back. “And what about it?”

*Great. Colton’s back less than two whole days and the Evers brothers are already at each other’s throats.*

With a heavy heart, I suspected that Greyson and Xavier’s prickly behavior had nothing to do with Colton and Maya and everything to do with the trouble simmering between the three of us.

“Okay everyone, let’s take a second to think this through,” I said, trying to mediate. “Maybe Colton and Maya can use the lake house temporarily, just while they get their footing.”

“Enough!” Maya snarled. “I didn’t mean for this to get so blown out of proportion. We’ll take the lake house for now on Greyson’s *generous* terms until we find our own place. We’re not begging for scraps from you two!”

I wanted to protest, because this didn’t quite seem like the way things should go. There’d been all this talk about family so we should have been able to figure all of this out without all the attitude and hurt feelings getting in the way, but I held my tongue.

There was no use thrusting myself any further into the middle of this disagreement, especially when it wasn’t really my place to solve this problem.

After all, as I was constantly reminded—even today when I failed to hear a sound that nearly blew everyone else’s eardrums out—that I was not a werewolf. Far from it. I’d immersed myself in this life, but I still would never be able to truly understand the ins and outs of their existence.

I sighed as Colton and Maya began talking amongst themselves, obviously pissed and taking out a little of their frustrations out on each other.

*Wow. If this is any indication, maybe Maya and Colton should consider staying in Washington…*

**Episode 5648**

**Artemis**

Frozen, I stared at Kastian, who was shocked, naturally, as he kept looking between the two Artemises standing before him.

*Shit. This isn’t good.*

Kastian of all people wasn’t supposed to get wind of this. Leave it to him to walk in at the worst possible moment.

He couldn’t decide which one of me he should focus on, so he spoke to both of us as he said, “Artemis, when you said you wanted to leave the tour, I didn’t imagine—”

I took a step forward to give him a little clarity before I answered. “You’re not going to say anything to anyone about this, are you?”

Kastian belted out an earnest laugh. “Say something? Why would I? But what…are you telling me that your plan for blowing off the tour is leaving an imposter in your wake? With no plans to let me in on the secret? That hurts, Artemis.”

I mulled that over, thinking through the rest of my plan further than I’d had a chance to before now. Kastian hadn’t factored into my decision to do this at all, but maybe I would have told him. I just hadn’t gotten that far yet. First, we’d needed to make sure that Aelwen was even willing to do it, and that the glamor would function and hold up to scrutiny.

“I think that I would have told you…why not? I think we trust each other now…in a way, right?” I said.

Kastian wasn’t laughing anymore and had a skeptical look as he stepped close to the Aelwen version of me. “Who even are you?”

He reached out as if to touch Aelwen’s face, but she slapped his hand away before he could. “My name is Aelwen, and you’ll keep your hands off me, thank you very much!”

“Oh…this could actually work,” Kastian remarked. “She seems to have just as much resentment for me as you do.”

“You bet your ass I do! I know what you did to all those women. Everyone else may have forgotten, but I didn’t!” Aelwen spat.

Kastian looked shaken for a moment, his eyes wide and his mouth open. He straightened the collar of his perfectly pressed shirt and seemed like he was about to either lay into Aelwen or defend himself before I cut in.

“Kastian, can we have a little chat? Alone?”

He looked at me, snapping his mouth closed as he nodded. “Yes. I think that’s for the best.”

I looked at Adair, who immediately cleared his throat and said, “Patsy, would you mind removing the glamour magic until we get this sorted? I think we need a second to…reassess.”

With a nod, Patsy waved her hand and, in an instant, Aelwen was back to being herself. Kastian gave her a look that suggested he recognized her before Adair ushered everyone out so that only Kastian and I remained.

Kastian whistled. “You’re really something else.”

“Look, you must understand why I’m doing it this way, right? I have no choice. My back is up against the wall because Celeste—”

“Because Celeste would hunt you down the moment you’re not present and accounted for?” Kastian finished for me. “Absolutely, I understand that more than most. But do you really expect me to keep up this charade for however long you’re gone? You think that other Fae will be able to keep up with Celeste’s requests and the grueling schedule? You barely could. Hell, I barely can!”

“I haven’t thought that far—”

“Well, you need to think about it, Artemis. What if you’re gone for months? For years? You do realize that we’re married, right? That we’re expected to do certain things? Fulfill certain promises both spoken and assumed?”

I gulped at that. “What, do you mean—”

“Children, yes.”

“Don’t you have enough of those already?” I said.

The thought of having a child with Kastian made me want to vomit.

“Don’t insult me right now,” Kastian snapped, not unpleasantly but in a way that showed he meant business. “Now isn’t the time. You’re asking me to cooperate in what could turn into an epic fail with this half-cocked plan of yours.”

“Fine, fine. All I’m saying is that this is the fix for now. It has to be good enough.”

“It’s not,” Kastian said. “How long is whatever you’re racing off to do going to take? Let’s start there. At least that way I’ll know whether this whole scheme is even mildly doable.”

“I have a lead, okay? I have no idea how long it will take me to follow it, though.”

“A lead, huh?” Kastian said. He gave me a look. “And you trust this lead?”

“I do. But I understand what you mean about all the other circumstances and things that could go wrong with this. I hate that I agree with you, but I do…so I think we should make a deal.”

Kastian perked up at that. “A deal? Now you’re speaking my language. What kind of deal?”

“One that should take care of all the concerns you have about my ability to pull this off,” I said.

“I’m listening.”

“The deal is, if I don’t come back by the six-month mark, you have full permission to relinquish Aelwen and claim that I’ve run away—that I’m a horrible wife who left you. Whatever paints you as the sympathetic victim, do it with my full support.”

Kastian was nodding and muttering “Interesting,” every so often.

“I’ll be the villain in your story, and the courts will eat it up. You won’t lose your power, and you won’t be seen as weak. And women love a wounded man, so I’m sure you’ll bounce back quickly.”

Kastian’s eyes brightened at that. “I don’t need any help attracting the ladies, but no, that backstory couldn’t hurt.”

“Exactly. This is a win-win for the both of us. I get to follow this lead, which there’s no way in hell I can ignore, and you’ll get to finish the tour. If I don’t make good on our deal, you’ll finish the tour and be rid of me forever. I’ll take the blame for this…sham.”

Kastian went quiet as he considered my plan. I’d only just come up with it, but it worked for me if it worked for him. Either way, I would get the freedom I needed to pursue this newest thread. And if things fell apart and it took me longer than planned…well, would it be so bad to be free of this fake marriage with a man I did not and would never love?

I knew that Kastian had worked hard for this position…well…hard-*ish*, but even if he was privileged and most things had been handed to him on a platter, he valued his newfound role as a symbol of Dark Fae, Light Fae unity.

If the marriage were outed as a sham, it would be way worse than people thinking that I’d just up and left him. At least with me as the villain, the marriage would retain its legitimacy. And it wasn’t lost on me that claiming I’d left Kastian opposed to the truth would keep the Light and Dark Fae from sliding back into war.

If they found out the marriage was not real to begin with, what was to keep them from backsliding into the fighting that had nearly torn the Fae world apart?

I thought briefly of Hera, of Cali and Orla. I knew that painting me as the villain would look bad for the Wrenthorn family, and while I didn’t have the best relationship with Hera, I loved my mother and Cali, and I didn’t want them caught in the crossfire of my mistakes.

They had their own relationship with the Fae world, and I didn’t want to be the one to muddy their reputations here, but I couldn’t think of any better deal to make with him. Kastian would bask in his newfound fame as the poor, abandoned, Dark Fae husband. There was no doubt in my mind that he would easily use it to his advantage.

It was the perfect role for someone like Kastian, and if it came down to it, I expected him to milk it for all it was worth.

“So, are you in agreement with that deal?” I asked. “If I’m gone for more than six months, you can spin my disappearance any way you want.”

“And I have your word?” Kastian said. “Your promise? And I mean I will have total control—I can do whatever I please with your name, your likeness, our marriage?”

A shiver went down my spine at the thought of Kastian having all that control, but it was the only bargaining chip I had. And if I returned before six months, I wouldn’t have to worry about it.

“Yes, you have my word. I promise,” I said.

Kastian grinned, and it was chilling to say the least. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him this excited since meeting him…and Kastian was kind of an excitable guy.

“Perfect,” Kastian said, grinning wolfishly. “We have a deal.”

**Episode 5649**

**Greyson**

Cali yanked me away from the others and led me out of the courtyard, down a hallway, and into the first vacant room we saw.

I grimaced, doing all I could to ignore the bronze, larger-than-life sculpture fountain of Lucian slaying a two-headed lion-like creature. It was the stupidest thing I’d ever seen, and Lucian had made sure, by placing it smack dab in the center of the room, that no one could miss it.

“You know you’re in the wrong, right?” Cali said.

I sighed. That last person I wanted to upset any further was Cali. “Yes, but the timing was bad. I could have handled things a lot better if I wasn’t still dealing with what happened with you and Xavier.”

Cali arched an eyebrow. “Oh, you think? When was the last time you even thought about the lake house? Like I said back there, we already have a perfectly good pack house. Why do we need another?”

“Listen, you’re right,” I said. “Like you always are.”

Cali blushed at that, and it was so cute that I had to hold back from kissing her. Now wasn’t the time for that. We needed to figure out how to smooth things over with Colton and Maya.

“Maybe if I did lend the house to Colton and Maya, it would go a long way in mending our relationship.”

“Exactly. And wouldn’t it be nice to have your family all together again? Especially after how hard you’ve fought to protect them in the past?”

I was quiet for a moment, thinking about all the risks I’d taken over the years to protect Xavier and Colton. We weren’t the closest, but our brotherhood was important to us all…even if we didn’t always show it.

“I know I took my anger out on Colton and Maya. I just couldn’t help myself,” I admitted.

Cali looked up at me with worry in her eyes. “Are you angry with me? Because of what happened with Xavier?”

I paused, weighing her question against all the feelings that were swirling around inside of me. “I have no right to be,” I said finally. “It’s not like you lied or pretended like it never happened.”

“But you *are* angry?”

I sighed. This wasn’t easy. I was hoping that talking alone with Cali would help me calm down a little, but now that we were talking about the source of my bad mood, I realized that wasn’t going to happen.

“Yes, I’m angry. How could I not be? But I’m not angry with you. Hell, I’m not angry with Xavier, either. Once again, I’m just angry at the entire fucked-up situation. It’s exhausting.”

Cali nodded. “You’re right. It’s exhausting, and it’s fucked up. Majorly.”

She looked like she was going to say something more, but then she dropped her head and glanced back the way we’d come from. “I think you need to take a breath and talk to Colton and Maya. Make sure they know that you don’t think they’re trying to mooch or anything.”

“It’s not that—”

“I know, but make sure they know that. They care about you, and you care about them. I know that things between you and Colton are complicated, but I think that giving them a little help when they need it will go a long way.”

I smiled and leaned in to kiss her, and then I took her hand in mine. “You really are something, you know that, right?”

“So I’ve heard,” Cali said happily as we walked back to find Colton and Maya missing from the courtyard.

“Everyone left,” Aysel said when she saw us looking around.

“Shit,” I said. “Which way did they go? Maybe if we hurry, we can catch them.”

Aysel pointed to one of the many hallways that led off from the courtyard, and we ran in that direction. We narrowly missed colliding with Lucian, who was leading Porter and Mace through the hallways while discussing the types of cheese kept in his cheese cellar.

“Cheese cellar?” Cali said once we were a safe distance away and not in any danger of being roped into that awful lesson.

“Leave it to Lucian to have something like that,” I grumbled as we continued our brisk pursuit.

We pushed through the massive front doors and walked outside to see Colton and Maya just about to climb into Xavier’s car.

I hurried over to them. “Listen, I gave it some thought, and you can use the house for as long as you want.”

I looked over at Xavier who was watching me closely, probably trying to figure out if I had an angle.

“You and I can discuss carving out some territory for them,” I said to him.

Xavier nodded, but it was stiff, and I could see that the wheels were turning in his head. Likely, he didn’t like me saying this in front of everyone else where he didn’t feel comfortable voicing his misgivings but was deciding to let it slide for the time being.

After all, he and Colton were closer than he and I would ever be, and I was sure he didn’t want to look like the bad guy in front of him.

“I was just about to drive them back to the Redwood pack house,” Xavier said.

“Really? Why?” I said.

Maya shot me a scornful look. Obviously, my more generous offer hadn’t done much to impress her, and she was still pissed at me.

“Do you think we’re going to just up and leave the twins with the Redwoods because you’ve given us use of your precious lake house? Just what kind of parents do you think we are?” she snapped.

“Good idea,” Cali said, jumping in with an obvious mission to defuse things and keep the peace. “Why don’t you two spend the night at the Redwood pack house and then go to the lake house in the morning?”

Maya shrugged, though Colton looked a little more amenable to the idea.

“Sounds good if it’s good with all of you,” he said.

“It is,” Greyson said to Colton, looking him right in the eye as if to confirm it.

“Then let’s go,” Xavier said. “I don’t want to stay any longer in Lucian and his sinking palace’s vicinity for any longer than I have to.”

“Sinking palace?” Cali said.

I gave her a look. “Long story better discussed at a later time.”

“Actually, I don’t need a ride,” Maya said. “I’d rather run back. It will help me blow off some steam.”

Colton shut the car door and sighed. “Guess we’ll see you there,” he said before running to catch up with Maya.

Xavier watched them go for a few seconds before saying, “Whatever,” and sliding into the driver’s seat.

As I watched Xavier drive off, I felt good. Kind of like I’d just given everyone a Christmas present that they really wanted. I was glad that Cali had helped me see reason, and giving Maya and Colton the lake house was what I should have agreed to from the start.

Cali yawned and sagged against me. “Can we go now? I’m so tired, and it’s been the longest day ever.”

“Let’s go,” I said, leading her to my motorcycle, which was still hidden in the woods.

When I saw it, it reminded me of Kendall, and I felt a little pang in my chest that she was gone.

*Where is she? I hope she’s being careful. Damn, why am I thinking about her right now?*

“Why is your bike out here?” Cali asked. “Why didn’t you just park in the driveway with everyone else? It’s not like there’s not enough room,” she said, motioning to the expansive circular driveway in front of Lucian’s.

I paused, realizing that I wasn’t going to be able to explain it without stretching the truth. There wasn’t much I hated more than lying—especially to Cali. It was the easiest way to eat away at someone’s trust.

“It’s out here because I came here with Kendall,” I said.

I read the subtle pain on Cali’s face before a puzzled expression replaced it. “Together?” Her voice was barely audible and tentative as she asked, “Why?”

I took a breath, trying to figure out how the hell I was going to answer her.

Sure, Kendall had warned me that I couldn’t tell anyone about her being an MIB agent and that it would jeopardize her and Cali both. She’d even made a threat against the Redwoods if I told anyone. But I’d told Xavier…because I trusted him to keep it to himself.

*Even when we’re at odds, I know that Xavier wouldn’t do anything to hurt me or the Redwoods…even if only to protect Cali.*

If I could trust Xavier with this information despite our constant conflict, then why couldn’t I give the same amount of trust to the woman I loved more than anything in the world?

Cali was too important to me to mess things up by lying to her time and time again. Whatever the consequences were, she was worth it.

*If anything goes wrong, I’ll protect her just like I always have.*

I lifted her chin and gazed into her sparkling eyes. “Cali, I need to tell you who Kendall really is.”

**Episode 5650**

**Ava**

I was on my way to Eugene with Marissa, and I was enjoying the drive more than I thought I would. There was good music on the radio, and the sight of the scenery passing by and the long stretch of road unwinding in front of us was relaxing.

Or as relaxing as it could be when in the back of my mind, I felt a shred of urgency. I tapped my hands impatiently on the steering wheel. “I just want to *be* there already.”

“I know, me too,” Marissa said without looking up from her phone.

We’d chosen to drive rather than simply run there in wolf form—which would have been quicker—because we didn’t want to deal with the extra preparations it would require.

Traveling by car eliminated the whole “ending up naked and having to change into clothing” thing, and I wasn’t in the headspace to exercise all the caution required of a werewolf in wolf form.

We would have had to avoid hiker’s trails and highways, when we could just forget all that and drive with minimal stress about being discovered.

Plus, driving was a good distraction and helped take my mind off everything else. Typically, I always preferred running to driving, but these days, running in wolf form only reminded me of how I’d gotten used to doing that with Xavier.

*I just need a change of pace. That’ll fix my head. That and one less reminder of just how fucked up things are between me and X right now.*

Marissa had her feet propped up on the dashboard, and she blew a huge bubble with her gum before sucking it back into her mouth and laughing about something she was looking at on her phone.

A second later, loud voices spilled out of her phone’s tinny speakers. The voices in the video were familiar—I recognized Torin and Ravi…and then Charlie, Lilac, and finally, Xavier.

I tensed as Marissa quickly turned the video off and sat up straight in her seat as if she’d been caught doing something she shouldn’t have.

“Sorry,” Marissa said quietly.

I shrugged. “What? It’s fine. What was that video, anyway?”

“It was from Lucian’s bachelor party last night. Ravi sent it. It’s everyone dancing and drinking and having fun. And there was a DJ, I guess? It looked ridiculous and over the top as usual.”

“Lucian’s parties are always way too much,” I grumbled. “So, no surprise there.”

“Ravi is so cute!” Marissa said. “He was texting me all night.”

“Hm. Nice.”

Marissa winced. “Shit. Sorry. I wasn’t even thinking—”

I waved that off. “Marissa, you don’t have to worry about telling me about a guy you’re into. I know things aren’t great with Xavier right now, but that doesn’t mean you can’t talk about your boyfriend.”

Marissa smiled. “Thanks, but still.”

I shrugged again, and then Marissa sat up and said, “How far are we from this witch, anyway?”

“Just a few more minutes, I think. We’re close.”

It wasn’t long before I was snapping on my blinker and pulling off the highway. We were close to Tanya’s warehouse now, and I was relieved to be that much closer to a solution.

Marissa was sitting up straight and looking out of the window. “Did the GPS take us to the right place?” she asked. “This area looks kind of sketchy.”

I parked and was about to get out before Marissa grabbed my arm. “Are you sure about this?”

“What do you mean?”

Marissa gave me a look. “You know exactly what I mean. A witch? Really? You and I both know that witches can’t be trusted nine times out of ten. I know we talked about it, but…I guess I’m worried about what could go wrong.”

She gestured to the warehouse. “And this place isn’t exactly giving me a great first impression. In fact, it’s giving me the chills.”

I was starting to get annoyed. “I’ve been here before, okay. It’ll be fine.”

Almost immediately, I felt bad. Why was I snapping at Marissa? She meant well. This was a risk; I’d be silly to think otherwise.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m just a little on edge, I guess.”

I pulled Marissa into a hug. “I’m just looking out for you,” Marissa said.

“I know you are, and I appreciate that. But just know that I wouldn’t be resorting to this if I thought there was a better way. I hope you understand.”

“I understand,” Marissa said.

*She says that, but I can hear the skepticism in her voice.*

I took a breath, trying to hold onto the hopeful feeling that was lurking behind my anxiety about going through with this. “Okay, let’s go see what Tanya can do.”

There was no one around when we entered the warehouse. If not for the empty whiskey bottle sitting on a table by the door, I’d think that it had been deserted long ago.

“Tanya!” I called out. When no one answered, I called out again. “Tanya! It’s Ava. You here?”

This time there was a bit of rustling, and then Tanya appeared. “We’re on a lunch break!” she said. “Oh, it’s you again,” she said once she realized who it was.

“Hey,” I said.

Tanya squinted at me. “Didn’t think I’d see you back here for a while. Who’s this one?” She gestured at Marissa.

“This is my friend. I brought her along for moral support.”

“Why would you need moral support?” Tanya asked as she pulled a fresh bottle of whiskey from a cabinet and poured herself a glass.

“Because I need to ask you something,” I said.

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“Have you heard of something called the *due destini*?” I said, deciding not to beat around the bush. I didn’t know much about this witch, but I figured it was probably best to cut to the chase.

Tanya hovered her drink just in front of her lips before saying, “Yes, I’ve heard of it. Or…I’m familiar with the concept. One person with two bonds that are more powerful than anything…and an equal opportunity for destruction?”

“That’s one way to put it,” Marissa muttered.

“Yes, that’s it,” I said. “My mate is involved in a *due destini*, and I would like to get him out of it.”

It would be such a relief to pull Xavier out of Cali’s cyclone of drama once and for all. He belonged with me and the Samaras, and the only way I was ever going to have him all to myself was if this stupid *due destini* thing ended.

Tanya’s snort broke through my thoughts. “Well, I’m sorry you came all this way, but you can’t do that. It’s not possible.”

Tanya was slurring her words and looked almost possessed as she drank her whiskey.

“Come on, there has to be a way,” I said, annoyed that this was obviously going to be a little more difficult than I wanted it to be.

*Maybe if she’d stop drinking for a second, she’d be able to help me.*

“Nope!” Tanya said, smacking her lips before pouring another cup of whiskey and swallowing it down.

“You’re a witch! You’re telling me you can’t take care of some annoying little curse or whatever the fuck it is?” I said.

Tanya smiled at me. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me. You want me to go against fate, against nature!” She snickered. “No. It can’t be done. The *due destini* cannot be broken. It can’t be created or destroyed.”

Marissa jumped in. “But couldn’t it be…redirected?”

Tanya waved a hand at her. “No! It cannot be tampered with in any way. It’s all impossible.”

Determined, I stepped closer to the witch. “No. I know what I’m asking you to do is a lot. And I know that this is dangerous, not easy, no laughing matter, all of that. But you don’t understand what this is doing to me and my mate. I can’t lose him.”

Tanya narrowed her gaze at me as she swished a swallow of whiskey around in her mouth.

“And it’s not just about me and what I want. Breaking this *due destini* curse will make him happier, too. I see how it affects him. It’s hurting him. It needs to stop, and that bitch won’t do it, so I will.”

Tanya gulped down her whiskey and let out a sigh. She stared down into her glass, and I wondered if she was moved by my appeal, even a little.

Her eyes gleamed as she threw the now empty whiskey bottle into the overflowing recycling bin. “Interesting. Let’s just say it’s possible…but that it comes at a high price. What are you willing to give up, beautiful?”

“*Anything!*” I said without hesitation. “I’d give up anything to break the curse. I want my mate fair and square, and that will never happen while this curse has him in a chokehold.”

Tanya smiled and it sent a chill down my spine. “So, you’re willing to give up anything, huh? Even your wolf?”

**Episode 5651**

A cold breeze blew around me, skimming my cheeks as I looked upward. I stared into Greyson’s eyes, my mind spinning, trying to imagine what it was that Greyson knew about Kendall, and what he was going to tell me.

There was a part of me that was truly terrified—the part that magnified my greatest fears—because I knew that Kendall was Greyson’s mate. Was there something else that had developed between the two of them that he wanted to tell me about?

I swallowed hard, feeling nervous. Greyson still hadn’t spoken, and I almost blurted something out, just to get it over with, but I clamped my mouth shut and just waited it out.

Greyson looked around, glancing into the darkness of the woods. The lights from the Vanguard place were still visible, twinkling in the distance.

“Come on,” I said, trying to make my voice light, “all this distance is scaring me, Greyson.”

He shook his head. “Sorry, love. I don’t mean to scare you. I’m just up in my head, I guess.”

“What are you thinking about?” I wondered.

He hesitated for another moment. “I just need to make it clear that what I’m about to tell you has to be kept between us.”

My eyes widened. “This must be pretty serious.”

“It is,” he admitted. “But I’m telling you because I know that I can trust you. But I also need to be sure that you understand how serious this is. And you can’t tell anyone about what I’m going to tell you. Not even Lola.”

I shook my head. “I won’t. You know I won’t. But now you’re really scaring me. What’s going on? Just tell me—I don’t think I can handle much more suspense.”

Greyson’s face was grave. He looked around again, as though checking to see if we were alone in the quiet woods, then leaned close to me.

I could smell him—his signature smell of peppermint and a kind of dark vanilla—and I took a breath. Usually having Greyson so close to me would calm my nerves, but this time it didn’t do much to take the edge off.

“Kendall doesn’t really work for CCU,” he said, his voice hushed, but firm.

“She doesn’t?” I asked, baffled. “Are you sure? I’ve seen her there—she’s got an office.”

“Well, yeah, she does, but that’s just a cover,” he amended.

My frown deepened. “A cover. How can it be a cover? A cover for what?”

“She actually works for the Mysterious Incidents Bureau. She’s an MIB agent.”

I gasped. “*What?!*”

Greyson nodded. “I know. She’s been undercover since the day we met her.”

I thought back to when we’d first met Kendall. It had been when all that crazy stuff was happening with Chessa. Kendall had been involved with that—*overly* involved, for a school administrator, I’d thought at the time. I’d wondered why, so it made sense if what was Greyson telling me was true. And I obviously had no reason not to believe him.

“Cali, say something,” Greyson said.

I took a shaking breath. “I guess I’m not as shocked as I probably should be.”

“You’re…not?”

“No, now that you say it, I guess it makes sense,” I admitted.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about this sooner,” he said. “The truth is that I hoped it wouldn’t be necessary to tell you at all. It’s dangerous, and when I found out about it, Kendall warned me that telling anyone anything about it could jeopardize—not only Kendall’s safety—but anyone I told.”

I took that in, thinking through the statement Greyson had just made. “How long have you known, then?” I asked quietly.

“Not that long…” he said, though I could tell that he was hedging.

My heart ached. “Just tell me,” I murmured.

Greyson looked pensive. “I found out when Hans revealed it at Lucian’s New Year’s Eve party. He let it slip just before he was killed.”

New Year’s Eve. I let that sink in. Greyson had been keeping a secret from me since New Year’s—for *Kendall*. I hated that he’d kept this from me, but at the same time, I understood why. MIB was dangerous, unpredictable—especially for the supernatural. He’d likely wanted to keep me safe.

He must have guessed some of what I was thinking, because reached for me. “Cali, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to keep this from you—”

“You don’t need to apologize,” I said, cutting him off. “You really don’t. I understand.”

He gave me a curious look. “Do you really?”

I nodded. “Yes.” I smiled. “I trust you, Greyson.”

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“When did you find out she was your mate?” I asked. “That wasn’t at New Year’s Eve too, was it?”

The question hung in cold night air between us for a suspended moment, then Greyson cleared his throat, his eyes darting away from mine. It broke my heart, but I’d asked the question, and I wanted to hear the answer.

“I found out the same time you did—after I got it confirmed from Rowena, I told you. You do believe me, don’t you?”

The wind blew up again, sharper now. The night had grown bitter cold, and I shivered. I leaned toward Greyson and pressed a kiss to his lips.

“I told you—I trust you. Just like you trust me not to say anything about Kendall. And before you ask—I won’t give anything away to Kendall that I know this secret. I’ll keep pretending that she’s a college coordinator. She seems pretty good at that job, too. I wonder if she’s getting paid to do both.”

Greyson smiled at me. “Thank you, love. I don’t ever want to keep secrets from you—I hope you know that. But there was so much at stake. But then I realized that it was better for you to know than to keep you in the dark, guessing, and maybe discovering the truth on your own.” He shook his head. “That would have been far riskier.”  
 I thought about how harshly Greyson had reacted when Lola had tried to pry into Kendall’s past. Lola had been annoying, but his reactions to her attempts had been disproportionate to Lola’s crime—which made a lot more sense now. If he was worried that discovering the truth would get us both killed, he was probably right to freak out. He had been trying to protect us—like he always did.

When I shivered again, Greyson put his arm around me, pulling me close. “You look cold, love.”

“I’m freezing,” I admitted as my teeth started to chatter.

He smiled. “Let’s get back.”

I nodded, eager to agree. He slung a leg over the motorcycle, and I climbed on behind him. He handed me a helmet, and when I’d put it on, I slid close to him, pressing tight against him and wrapping my arms around his waist. He had just revealed that he’d been keeping a secret from me, but somehow, I’d never felt closer to him than I did in that moment.

Greyson started the bike and the roar of it filled my ears. The rumble of the engine resonated through me, and I clung tightly to him, reinforcing my trust in him. Even with everything happening between us—the mate bond with Kendall, the due destini with Xaiver, the secrets—Greyson and I remained so close.

He flipped the motorcycle into gear, and I held tightly as we surged forward. I pressed my face into his back. It was exhilarating to fly so fast, and behind him, I was protected from the icy wind. The night was cold, but the heat of his body kept me warm and the ride along the dark, quiet roads on the way home seemed almost too short.

When we got back to the pack house, he drove up the long driveway and, bypassing the cars parked in front of the house, drove into the garage. He cut the engine, and for a moment, all I could hear was the sound of his breathing and the pops of the cooling engine.

As much as I wanted to stay cuddled close to him, we were home and should probably get inside, so I let go of him and slid off the bike onto the hard cement floor.

He swung his leg over the bike and rolled it onto the treads, which held it in place. He took off his helmet, then mine, and stored them on the shelf next to the bike. He pushed his hand through his light hair, then he leaned against it and crossed his arms, looking at me.

I smiled at him.

“What?” he asked.

I shrugged. “You just look really sexy on a bike.”

He raised an eyebrow. “*Just* on a bike?”

I smiled but felt the muscles in my stomach tighten as he kept looking at me with those smoldering grey eyes. “Okay, you look sexy everywhere.”

There was a beat of stillness, then a flurry of movement. I wasn’t sure who moved first, but suddenly I was in his arms, and my lips were pressed against his.

**Episode 5652**

**Greyson**

I wanted Cali. My whole body ached for her, and I could feel heat surging through me. My pulse raced, and my wolf howled within me. She and I had been through hell over the past few days, but through it all, the connection between us remained as strong and as powerful as ever. I could feel it snapping like electricity in the quiet garage as we pawed at each other like horny teenagers.

And I knew Cali felt the same way. I could feel it in the heat from her lips and the way her hands clutched at me, yanking at my jacket and fumbling with the buckle of my belt—like she couldn’t decide where to start.

In the back of my head, the most rational part of my brain was yelling for me to get my shit together and take Cali inside the house. To take her up to our room and make love to her in our bed, like adults. But we were here, now, and the house suddenly felt very, very far away.

Besides, I knew it wouldn’t be as simple as walking inside and heading up the stairs to the bedroom. It was the pack house, and it was always full of distractions. The moment we stepped inside, we were bound to be bombarded by a million questions from every side—people wondering what was going on with Lucian or someone wondering if they could switch patrol shifts or Lilac asking if he could borrow a car to take Perrie out. It was literally always something, and I did not want to break this moment between Cali and me.

It felt so good to be here with her, kissing her, holding her, touching her. I felt so close to her and so connected, like a massive weight had been lifted off my shoulders. It wasn’t so much that I had held Kendall’s secret, but that I had withheld it from Cali that had caused all that distress.

Cali bit down on my bottom lip and moaned softly. She shivered slightly, and when I looked down at her, I realized that I could see her breath in the cold winter air.

Shit. What the hell was I thinking? The cold didn’t bother me—hell I could barely feel it—but Cali had to be freezing. She’d been shivering since we’d talked out in the woods, and she had to be ice cold after the ride back on the bike. I was being a bastard keeping her outside like this, just because I was too selfish to share.

I pulled away so I could look down at her properly. “I’m sorry, love, are you too cold? We should go inside so you can warm up properly. I can draw you a bath or get you some tea or—”

The rest of my suggestions were cut short when she grabbed my jacket and pulled me close, kissing me hard. Then she wrapped an arm around my neck and whispered, “Greyson, I don’t feel the least bit cold.”

Her hot breath tickled, and when her tongue slid along the edge of my ear, I made a low growling sound. Hot, fiery lust crashed over me. My hands slid downward to her waist and tightened around her hips. I lifted her and turned, setting her on the seat of the bike.

She half-laughed, half-moaned, and opened her legs, pulling me close as she kissed me again. I cradled her cheek, then slid my hand into her hair, gripping it hard as my wolf fought me, pressing me to go faster and harder. He wanted Cali and wasn’t interested in foreplay right now.

I plunged my tongue into her mouth, and she opened up to me. This gave me a lot of ideas, and I—like my wolf—wanted more.

I pulled off her jacket, then reached down and grabbed the hem of her shirt, pulling it off. She broke away from the kiss long enough to let me pull it over her head. She unhooked her own bra and tossed it aside, and when I cupped her breasts in both hands, she moaned with pleasure.

“*Greyson*,” she panted.

“God, Cali,” I said, moving down to kiss her breasts. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

I pulled off her jeans, leaving her only in her panties, and she got my jacket off. I took off my own shirt while she unbuckled my belt. My cock was aching and gave a painful, erotic pulse every time her hand brushed against it.

I grunted, and she smiled, realizing what she was doing to me.

“You like that?” she purred.

“Don’t,” I warned.

That only made her smile grow. “Don’t *what*?” she asked, feigning innocence. “What am I doing?”

She was stroking me through my jeans, putting more and more pressure on me as I grew harder and harder against her hand.

“Cali,” I growled, shaking my head.

There was a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “What am I doing, Greyson? If it’s bothering you, I’ll stop.”

If she kept going, I was going to explode in my jeans like a teenager, so I pushed her hand away with a snarl. I flipped open the button of my jeans and released my cock, then shoved her legs apart, pushed her panties aside, hovering my cock over her wet entrance.

“Is this what you want, love?” I asked, dragging myself through her.

“Greyson,” she moaned, her hips searching for me. “Please.”

That was all it took. I drove into her.

“*Greyson!*” she cried.

“*Fuck*,” I grunted as pleasure shuddered through me.

Cali threw her arms around me as she leaned back on the seat of the motorcycle, letting my cock fill her completely. Eyes closed, she tossed back her head, rocking hard against me as she rode me. “Oh god, you feel so good inside of me,” she moaned.

I gritted my teeth. I was so turned on I knew I wasn’t going to last long, so I concentrated on Cali. She was close, I could feel it. She was already trembling, and when I changed the angle slightly, so I was hitting her g-spot, she hissed.

“God, Greyson. Please,” she practically begged. “Don’t stop.”

She tightened around me, and the feeling of her pulsing pushed me over the edge. “Oh *fuck*, Cali!”

I saw stars as my climax crashed over me like a wave. I’d made love to Cali so many times, but every single time felt like the best time, and this was no exception.

As my body wound down, I drew a deep breath, exhausted, but happy.

When I could see straight again, I looked down at Cali, who smiled up at me.

“That was *amazing*,” she whispered.

“We are pretty good at that, aren’t we?” I said, giving her a kiss.

She giggled and hopped off the bike. She darted around, picking up her clothes and pulling them on. “I’m going to head in,” she said when she’d gotten her coat on.

“I’ll be right there,” I said.

She stepped close, kissing me one more time. Before I could suggest round two, she broke away, kissed my cheek, and headed out.

When I’d dressed and covered my bike, I shut the garage and headed toward the house. But something in the woods to the left caught my eye, and I looked quickly over.

Kendall was standing in the trees.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes, and when I looked back at the same spot, she was gone. No one was there at all.

I gritted my teeth. *Fucking mate bond. I’m going crazy.*

I stormed toward the house. When I stepped inside, it was chaos, as I’d suspected it would be. It was loud, and everyone seemed to be running around for some reason. My phone buzzed, and when I pulled it from my pocket, I realized the buzz was a notification—I’d missed a call from Chloe. Shit.

Cali was hanging her coat up in the closet and she looked over at me. “What’s with that face?”

“Cali!” Lola screamed before I had a chance to answer.

Cali and I both looked over to see Lola hurrying toward us. Her hair was mussed, her eyes were wide and frantic, and she had a twin in each arm.

“Thank god you’re back—I need some help!”

Cali smiled and took one of the babies. “I’ll take one.”

I didn’t appear to be needed, so I stepped back outside and dialed Chloe’s number. I was glad Cali and Lola had the babies to occupy them. I didn’t want the others to overhear the conversation, and I could fill Cali in later.

“Greyson Evers,” Chloe said without bothering with a hello. “I often wonder how you manage to get yourself into these predicaments.”

I rolled my eyes. “I haven’t even told you what I want.”

Chloe chuckled. “Clearly you need my help, which means you are in a desperate situation.”

I sighed. “I need to sever a mate bond.”

There was a long pause before Chloe responded. “I’m sorry, I thought you said you needed to sever a mate bond. Have you spoken to Cali about this?”

“Not *that* mate bond,” I snapped.

“Oh? Are there more?” Chloe asked, clearly amused. “What *do* you werewolves get up to?”

“Can you help me or not?” I growled.

She sighed. “Well, a mate bond is different than a sire bond, though we did help you with that. That was risky, but not nearly as risky as what you’re asking for. And of course, we don’t owe you any more favors, so it’s going to cost you.”

“Money isn’t an issue,” I said dismissively.

“Who said anything about money?”

I shook my head. This is why I hated haggling with witches—all the back-and-forth Why didn’t they just come out and say what they wanted? “Okay, what do you want? I’m willing to give you just about anything. I know there are going to be risks involved, but I can’t stay mated to some other woman like this. It’s fucking everything up. So whatever you want, just tell me.”

Chloe was quiet for a moment. “If you want our help, then the price is your firstborn child.”

**Episode 5653**

**Maya**

The woods were cold and dark and quiet as Colton and I ran back toward the Redwood pack house. I had always loved the Redwood lands, and after being trapped in the car with two screaming babies for the endless drive, I was glad to be out and running. I dropped my head and ran faster, sprinting fast enough Colton had to struggle to keep up.

Maybe I should have slowed down, but I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t just the drive—I was angry and frustrated, and I had energy to burn. After all that bullshit with Lucian, it felt so good to be in my wolf form again, and I let my body stretch long as I leapt over a fallen log stretched across the pathway.

*So how was the meeting?* Colton asked through the mind link.

I didn’t answer for a moment. I was happy not thinking about it, and the last thing I wanted to do was rehash it. But Colton had asked me a question and I felt like an ass just ignoring him.

*Annoying.*

*That figures. What happened?*

I shook my head as we took a turn in the path, starting to head east. *Lucian wanted all of the Alphas to vote on whether I could join their stupid little Alpha alliance. I don’t even know where the hell he got the idea that’s what I wanted. No one asked me what I wanted—or what the Grimcrest pack wants.*

*So you got pissed*, Colton surmised.

*Yeah, I got pissed*, I snapped. *Of course* *I got pissed. How could I not, Colton? It’s always the same old bullshit, no matter where I am.*

*What do you mean?*

*What do you mean, what do I mean? You think Lucian would be freaking out if* you *were the Grimcrest Alpha? Of course not. He’s only shitting his pants and insisting on a vote because I’m a woman. If it was you—or any of those other guys in their precious little alliance—who was new here, no one would have batted an eye.*

Colton hopped easily over a frozen stream. *You’re not wrong. I know you’re not. I don’t know Lucian all that well, but he seems like a traditionalist in a lot of weird…and pretty fucked-up ways. I know him well enough to know that he’s a deeply disturbed man, Maya.*

I rolled my eyes. *Yeah, well, I refused.*

*To join the alliance?* Colton asked, surprised.

*Yeah. I don’t want to join anything*.

Colton put on a burst of speed so he could get in front of me, then he cut in front of me and slowed down.

This made it so I had to slow as well. *What are you doing?* I demanded.

Colton looked at me for a moment, then nuzzled into my neck. *Come with me.*

*Where?* I asked skeptically.

He made a low growling sound. *Just trust me for once, okay? Follow me.*

It was hard to shrug as a wolf, but I did my best, and followed him as he led me to the south, slightly away from the direction of the Redwood pack house. We walked through the woods for a few moments, and when we emerged into a clearing, I saw the sparkle of water.

*Oh!* I breathed.

There, in front of me, was the lake, and a house stood at the shore.

Colton was watching me take it all in. *This is the lake house, Maya. This is where we could bring the pack.*

Looking around, I took everything in as we walked toward the house. The whole clearing was beautiful. This part of Oregon had some incredible views, and just below the lake was a small valley. The house was perfect, and though everything was brown and dead now, I could see that there would be grass in the spring, and I could practically see the twins rolling around in it when the weather turned warm again. I could imagine myself sitting on the porch, watching them, looking out at the lake…

I shook my head. I never used to be so sappy, but I had nearly brought myself to tears, imagining living in the house with my family.

*What do you think?* Colton asked.

*It’s nice, but it’s not ours*, I said quickly.

*But it’s temporary*, he reminded me. *It’s a start. Just come check it out. For science*, he added with a chuckle.

He shifted back to his human form and held out a hand. I sighed and shifted as well. I took his hand and as we walked closer to the house, I could see Xavier’s car in the back driveway.

When Colton tried the front door, it was open, and inside we heard voices. We followed them into the kitchen, where we found Xavier standing with Gabriel and Mikah, who greeted us warmly.

“Good to see you, man,” Gabriel said, slapping Colton on the back. He grinned at me. “And you, Maya.”

“I thought you were heading to the Redwood house to get the twins,” Xavier said, frowning at us.

“We are,” Colton said with a shrug. “This is just a little pit stop so Maya can really visualize bringing the Grimcrests here.”

I grimaced at his words.

Colton gave me a wry smile, then looked at Xavier, Gabriel, and Mikah. “Not that we’re kicking any of you out. We would never.”

“That’s good,” Xavier said with a glare. “Because I’m your fucking twin brother.”

I ignored their sparring as I looked around. The kitchen was large and airy, with a great view of the lake through the large picture window. I could see everyone from the pack sitting around the huge table. Colton was right—this would be a good place for a new start, but it felt surreal. Good things just didn’t seem to happen to me, and having this place for my pack felt almost too good to be true.

But maybe that was just me being too negative. Maybe I should just take this for what it was—a step in the right direction.

I sighed. “Fine, we’ll bring the pack here. But let’s get the twins settled first, yeah?”

Colton grinned, then nodded. “Don’t you worry, I’ll take care of everything with them, Maya.”

I gave him an incredulous look. “Is that right?”

“Of course.” He looked around. The guys will all help, won’t you?”

Xavier glowered at Colton and looked like wanted to say no, or hell no, but Gabriel looked surprised, and before Xavier could say anything, Mikah smiled and answered:

“Sure, Colton, we’ll help.”

Colton grinned. “Thanks, Mikah. I knew I could count on you. I’ll babyproof the place, and get those little sheets they like, and those plugs you put into outlets, so they don’t stick their fingers inside—I’ll do everything.”

“You will?” I asked.

He nodded. “Sure. By the time you bring the pack back here, it’s going to feel like a real pack house.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I felt warmed by his words, despite the skepticism I still felt. “That sounds pretty great.”

Colton looked at me for a moment, then took my hand. “Come with me.” He led me back through the house and outside. We stood on the porch in the darkness, looking out at the moonlight reflecting off the lake. The air was cold and crisp, and the moon was so bright the trees cast long shadows on the land.

“We can do this, Maya,” Colton said, his voice uncharacteristically serious. He kept his eyes out on the lake as he spoke. “All of this is within our grasp. We can be happy here. The pack can be happy here. The twins will be happy here. We’ll be near family and friends. You’ll be the Alpha of a pack that has a beautiful place to call its own. And even if we lose some pack members in the move, this will all be worth it.” He took my hand and squeezed it tight. “I swear to you.”

My throat grew tight as I listened to him, but I shook my head, annoyed with myself. I didn’t know why I was letting everything get to me like this. I didn’t used to be like this.

Colton drew me into his arms. “You got this, babe,” he said quietly. “You really do. Go. Go bring the Grimcrests here. Bring them home. This is their home. *Our* home.”

I closed my eyes and let myself be pulled into him. I hugged him tight, breathing him in, letting his words wash over me. I wanted to believe him, I wanted everything he said to be true. I wanted this to work.

“Okay,” I finally said. “Okay, I’ll do it.” I pulled back so I could look up at him. “Fresh start?”

He grinned. “Fresh start.”

“Yeah,” I said, blinking quickly as my eyes stung.

He winked. “Go get ’em, Alpha.”

**Episode 5654**

**Xavier**

I looked around the kitchen of the lake house. The place was beautiful—high ceilings, dark wood floors, giant windows overlooking the lake—and I hated it.

Okay, I didn’t hate it, but I didn’t like it. The place made me uncomfortable. It just felt off to be here, like I was wearing ill-fitting clothes. It felt like I didn’t belong here—probably because I didn’t. I should be at the Samara pack house—or at the Redwoods’.

It probably had something to do with the lake house belonging to Greyson. I’d never felt at home there. The lake house belonged to Greyson, and the Redwood pack house belonged to me, which was kind of a laugh, considering that I was an outcast there.

I pushed a hand through my hair with a frustrated sigh, wondering if I shouldn’t just go back to the Samaras and try to talk things out with Ava—try to reconcile with her. But I wasn’t sure if I was up for that. I really wasn’t in the mood for a heated argument at the moment. And I wasn’t sure if there was ever any other kind of argument when I was with Ava.

Colton—who had just come back inside—gave me a sideways glance. “You okay, man? You look like shit.”

I snorted. “Thanks a lot.”

Mikah and Gabe chuckled.

“He does look worse than normal, doesn’t he?” Gabe noted, leaning on the counter and giving me a critical look.

I shook my head and glared at him, then turned on my brother. “Don’t you have somewhere you need to be?”

“Yeah, actually I do. Maya took off, so I need to head over to the Redwood house to pick up the twins.” He tipped his head toward the door. “You should come with us. Whenever I’m feeling down about something, seeing those babies always cheers me up.”

Considering how often I saw Colton without those kids, I had to wonder how true that actually was, but just as I was about to tell him to forget it, I stopped myself when I thought about who else could be found at the Redwood house—Cali.

I knew that seeing her had the potential to go one of two ways—it could just be a reminder of where things stood with us and make me feel worse, or it could be a reminder of where things could be going between us, and cheer me up.

I considered my options. It was a risk, but the lake house was cold and empty, and I figured anything was better than spending the rest of the night here, brooding like an asshole.

“Okay, fine,” I said with a nod. “Are we driving?”

“*You’re* driving,” Colton corrected me. “I’m sitting back.”

I rolled my eyes, but when we headed out to the car, Colton did exactly as he said. He slid into the passenger seat and leaned his head back. His eyes were closed by the time I’d slid behind the wheel.

I started the car and pulled out of the driveway onto the dark, quiet road. We drove in silence for a moment, then I looked over at Colton, feeling a stab of envy at the sight of my brother. “Don’t you miss her?”

Colton smiled, his eyes still closed. “Of course I do.” He looked over at me. “I’m not going to lie, man, whenever Maya’s not around, I always think it’s going to be really great, you know? Like I’m going to get to do whatever I want. But the truth is, I always miss her as soon as she’s gone. And what I really want…” He gave me a sharp look. “Don’t make fun of me, but all I really want is to be with her.”

I frowned at him. “Why would I make fun of that?”

Colton shrugged. “You know how it is. Despite my party attitude and overwhelming charm and obvious sex appeal—I really kind of a homebody at heart. My reputation is often at odds with reality.”

I chuckled. “I guess your reputation is kind of infamous, but I’m glad you’re happy with Maya, man. I’m glad you two are engaged.”

Colton leaned back again, but he didn’t close his eyes. “What about you? You don’t seem happy.”

I sighed. “I guess things are kind of fucked up at the moment. I mean—I’m sleeping in my brother’s house.”

“You could go back to the Samara house,” Colton pointed out.

“And what about Ava?” I asked. “She’s not ready to greet me with open arms.”

“But that’s where you belong. No matter what happens with Ava, or with Cali—you are still the Samara Alpha. I don’t know what the right thing to do is, but hiding out in the lake house probably isn’t going to solve anything.”

I looked quickly over at my brother, a little stunned by his insight. Then I grinned. “Are you just telling me to go back to the Samaras so you and Maya can have the lake house all to yourselves?”

Colton laughed. “If you don’t help me babyproof the place by the time Maya gets back—then fuck it. *I’m* going to the Samaras. *You* can stay at the lake house.”

I smiled and shook my head, but as we arrived at the Redwood pack house and I pulled into the long driveway, I felt my smile fade. When I looked up at the house, I immediately thought of Cali and wondered if I had made a huge mistake coming here. Being back here felt like rubbing salt into a fresh wound.

Maybe I should have asked Mikah or Gabe to drive Colton.

Colton climbed out of the car. “Come on, Xavier. You can’t just hide in the car. Let’s go,” he said briskly.

He was right, of course. I was being an ass. So I climbed out and followed him up the porch steps. Stepping inside the house, I felt a twinge of something that might have been homesickness. Something smelled buttery and sweet, like something was baking. It was probably Torin.

I heard Cali’s laughter and looked over to see her in the living room. She was sitting in front of the fireplace on a blanket spread out on the floor. Lola was with her, and Violet and Jay. They were all playing with the twins in front of a cheery fire.

My heart ached as I looked at the scene laid before me. It looked so warm and inviting. Everything looked so cozy, and Cali looked so beautiful. The light from the fire lit her face as she smiled down at the babies, who cooed and laughed.

“Xavier!” Violet saw me first and jumped to her feet. She rushed toward me and hugged me.

“Hi, Vi,” I said, hugging her back.

When she pulled away, I looked over at Cali, who smiled at me and waved.

“Hi, there,” she said.

Colton strode into the living room. “How are my little twin demons?”

“Right now, they’re angels,” Lola said with a laugh. “But if you had come by before Cali jumped in to help, they were definitely being more demonic than angelic.”

“Xavier.”

I turned to see Greyson walking toward me.

He held out a set of keys. “Give these to our brother, will you? They’re for the lake house.”

I nodded, and Greyson and I both looked over at Colton, who was down on the floor, playing with Orion and Lyra, who were laughing and hiccupping as he tickled them.

Greyson smiled and shook his head. “Who would have thought, huh?”

“Yeah,” I muttered, but I realized that I wasn’t looking at Colton. My eyes had drifted back to Cali.

Fuck.

I balled my hands into fists. There was a part of me that wished I could just walk into the living room and take Cali in my arms. There was a part of me that wished she had just run toward me the moment I walked into the house.

But neither of those things were going to happen.

“Colton, we should get going,” I said shortly, then turned and walked past Greyson, back out to the porch. I couldn’t bear to be in the house anymore, looking at Cali, but keeping her at arm’s length. It was driving me crazy.

I stood in the cold darkness and waited for Colton, and as I waited, I thought about what he had just said to me. I thought about what he’d said about the Samara house and how that was where I belonged.

“Ready,” Colton said a moment later, walking out with a baby in each arm.

I headed down the steps, and Colton and I headed back to the car. I put the baby bag into the trunk as Colton secured the twins into the car seats in the back.

I waited until he’d finished and had shut the door of the back seat before I spoke.

“You’re not always right, Colton, but you are this time.”

Colton frowned. “I am? About what?”

I shook my head. “Before I can help with anything, I need to go talk to Ava.”

**Episode 5655**

**Ava**

When I pulled up to the Samara pack house, my mind was still racing. Maybe I hadn’t been paying attention, so when my headlights swept across Xavier’s car, I pulled in a sharp breath.

Fuck. He was back.

*Why* was he back?

Marissa looked at the car, then over at me, reading my expression in a heartbeat. “I take it from the shocked look on your face that this is a surprise visit?”

I nodded, gritting my teeth as my instincts went to war with themselves. There was a big part of me that wanted to jump out of the car and run inside to him. To act like nothing had happened and throw my arms around him. But I was afraid. *Why* was he back?

And when I thought about it, I realized that the root of my fear was Cali, and what she had to do with Xavier’s sudden reappearance.

Which was why I was seriously considering Tanya’s offer, despite how insane it was.

I sat staring at the house for so long that Marissa leaned over and switched off the engine.

“Are we going to stay in the car all night?” she asked.

“No,” I said quickly, defensively. “I’m going in.”

Marissa gave me a sympathetic smile. “I know you miss him, Ava.”

“I’m not… I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m thinking about something else,” I lied.

Marissa rolled her eyes. “I’m sure you are. Go inside. Go see what he wants.”

I bit my lip, then heaved a sigh and pushed the car door open. My stomach tightened with unexpected nerves as I walked toward the house. I knew I was being absurd. This was Xavier—my mate. There was no reason for me to feel nervous about seeing him.

But as I walked toward the door, my heart fluttered fast in my chest, like I was a girl about to ask a boy to dance at a middle school prom, and there was a simmering fear that he might reject me.

There were long, narrow windows on either side of the front door, and I saw Xavier through the glass, moving toward the door. I stopped when I saw him, my breath catching in my throat.

Marissa stopped next to me and gave me a sideways glance. “Look, I know what I said, but you don’t have to, you know.”

“What?” I said, barely hearing her.

She shook her head. “You don’t *have* to go in. We could just get back in the car. Go for a drive. Get some dinner. You could just…not be here.”

I thought about that for a moment, and the possibilities in that option. But this was my home, and this was my pack. No amount of fear was going to drive me away.

I swallowed hard. “I’m fine.”

Marissa looked at me for a moment, then gave me a hug. “Okay. It’s a beautiful night,” she said, more loudly than necessary, like she was speaking for someone else’s benefit. “I might go for a long run. Or maybe I’ll text Ravi.” She winked at me. “Good luck, babe.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, and Marissa leapt off the porch behind me.

That left me alone, and I turned to face Xavier as he opened the door. We stared at each other for a moment, the silence thick between us.

“You’re back,” I finally said.

He stepped aside so I could walk in. “Yeah. I hope you don’t mind.”

Did I mind? I wasn’t sure. I walked inside, and as I did, my shoulder brushed against his chest. Feeling the heat of him and even the brief pressure of his muscles sent an electric shock through me, and my heart started to race. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed him.

And even though I was still crushed by what had happened between him and Cali, I only wanted him more.

Maybe Cali was the one with the *due destini* curse, but I had a curse of my own—and he was standing right beside me.

But I wasn’t about to give into my desire, and I walked past him, trying to keep my face from flushing.

‘Did you forget something?” I asked coolly.

He grasped my shoulder, which sent another powerful jolt through me, and turned me around so I faced him. “I didn’t forget anything, Ava. I came to talk to you.”

I steadied my breathing and raised an eyebrow. “About?”

His blue eyes darkened. “You already know. Stop playing games. Please.”

I looked at him for a moment more, letting my eyes scan over his face. Xavier didn’t like silence, so I let him hear it for a little longer. Then I turned and walked into the living room, moving to the couch. The living room was empty. The whole downstairs appeared to be empty, which was slightly odd. I supposed I should be glad the other pack members were either conveniently busy doing something else at the moment, or shrewd enough to know that they were better off somewhere else.

When I turned, I found that Xavier had followed me and was standing close, right behind me. He towered over me, but I didn’t step back. I looked up at him and thought about how much I would like to slip my hands around the back of his neck, slide them upward, run them into his hair, to knot it in my fingers and pull—how much I would like to kiss him.

“Do you think we can talk, Ava?” Xavier asked quietly.

I sat down on the couch. “Why don’t you start talking while I listen.”

He didn’t look particularly pleased with this suggestion, but clearly didn’t feel like he was in any position to argue.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t like the way things are.”

I didn’t like the way things were either, but Xavier’s long eyelashes had just caught my eye, and I noticed how dark they looked against the blue of his eyes, and I got distracted by that train of thought. Then I started watching the way his throat moved when she spoke, and the line of his jaw, and how the muscles stretched and feathered.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that he was still speaking, and I had completely stopped listening, so I tried to tune back in.

“—and I was sitting there in the lake house, and I realized how wrong it felt. The truth is that you can’t stop me from being the Alpha of the Samara pack.”

Anger flared up in my chest, hot as fire. “Of course I can’t. No more than you can stop me from being the Luna of the Samara pack. *Your* Luna, for the record. This is *my* pack, Xavier, and nothing is ever going to change that.”

He gave me a long look, then nodded, his expression solemn. He knelt down, so we were eye to eye. “I’m not going to lie, Ava. We have our problems. But we’ve almost never not had problems. And we’ve always managed to push through them.”

He was so close, and all I could think about was how there was only one thing I wanted him to be pushing at the moment.

*Fuck! Focus! Get it together!*

The only problem was that I could tell that to my human brain, but my wolf was going crazy. We had both been missing Xavier for what felt like way too long. There was a part of me that didn’t give a shit about what Xavier was talking about. I knew my wolf wasn’t acting in the dark here—Xavier and I were mates, which meant that we fed off each other. If my wolf wanted Xavier, then that meant his wolf wanted me just as much.

But there were other issues at hand, and I tried to clear my head and tried to figure out what it was that Xavier was saying. I thought back, trying to piece it all together. It sounded like he was saying that he was open to…something. But what exactly that might be certainly remained to be seen. He definitely hadn’t been specific.

At least it had sounded somewhat hopeful. That was something to think about. It sounded like he was interested in making some moves to fix things between us. And he was right about one thing—we did always manage to work things out.

“—Ava?”

Shit. I snapped my attention back to him when I realized he had asked me a question.

He eyed me. “Have you been listening to me at all?”

“Yeah, I’m listening,” I said dismissively, though that was a lie.

He narrowed his eyes. “What did I just say?”

Fuck. I was caught.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I wasn’t really listening. I guess I was distracted.”

His eyes dropped down to my lips. “Why?” he asked quietly. Then leaned in slightly closer. “What were you thinking about?”

My heart beat hard as I leaned forward, moving until our lips were almost touching. “You.”

**Episode 5656**

**Artemis**

Celeste’s press tour had finished packing up, and we’d started out. We’d traveled for a few hours before stopping for the night, and now Kastian sat before the fire Celeste’s servants had built when they’d pitched camp. He was providing a charismatic distraction as I moved quietly about, packing up a few provisions for my own, separate journey ahead.

Inside the tent, as I went through my trunks, I made sure to secret away plenty of coins, too. The last thing we needed was to find ourselves struggling to get more money if we needed it while we journeyed. That would be challenging, and one just never knew what kind of information a bribe here or there would end up yielding.

I tucked some money into the pockets of my dress, into the bottom of my bag, and some more into the small wrist purse I carried. If life as a bounty hunter had taught me anything, it was not to store all your resources in one location.

I sighed and looked around, casting a glance out the tent flap at Kastian again. Now that I was actually making plans and leaving was truly coming to fruition, it felt so strange. I knew it was what I needed to do, of course, but it still felt surreal.

But finding my father had been something I’d felt like I needed to do for so long. And now I actually had some leads about where to find him. And I had my friends behind me to help find him. It was kind of incredible, actually. I was in a position and in a place in my life I never would have thought possible. It was always particularly striking to think about how far I’d come—from being the Kollector’s bounty hunter, then going into the human world, finding my sister, my mother, and then my uncle. Family I’d never even know that I had.

Now there was only one piece of the puzzle left to find.

I shook my head as I shoved a few of my warmest, sturdiest clothes inside my pack. I never could have imagined this life, but now here I was, and I wasn’t going to waste the chance I had now.

“Artemis?”

I looked up when I heard someone say my name quietly outside the tent flap. I was so keyed up that for a moment my heart hammered in my chest, but then I realized it was Adair’s voice I was hearing.

“Come on in,” I called back.

Adair stepped inside and looked around, making sure we were alone. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m nervous, but excited,” I told him.

He nodded, his expression stoic. He didn’t speak.

“I get that you still have reservations about me doing this, but I appreciate you coming all the same,” I told him.

“Of course,” he said quickly. “There’s no way I’d let you go alone. I wouldn’t think of it.”

I smiled up at him. “Thank you.”

For a moment, the stern look on his face cracked, and he smiled back. “You’re welcome, Artemis.”

I had that feeling again—that kind of floating sense of astonishment that I couldn’t believe I had found myself in a position where people cared for me so much that they looked out for me. They put their own safety in jeopardy to make sure *I* was safe. My whole life, I had been on my own, so I was still getting used to this.

Adair cleared his throat, ending our sweet moment. “Aelwen is all set up. She’s got your glamour on—we just need to do the final switch.” He eyed me. “You trust her?”

I shrugged. She seemed like a good person, and Marius trusted her. But smetiems you never knew until you found out. “I have to, don’t I?”

“I suppose you do now,” he said wryly.

“Marius trusts her, so that means something too,” I noted. “But even if this goes sideways on me, what’s the worst that can happen? If we find Kadmos—if we can bring him back—that will be the focus. Not me.”

“That’s true,” Adair admitted. “The Fae love a spectacle and a scandal, and it’ll be something I’ve never seen before if we manage to find my brother.”

I smiled at him. “We’re going to. I have a good feeling.”

“At least one of us does,” Adair muttered. He looked over his shoulder, out the tent flap at where Kastian sat at the fireside. “I hope we aren’t making a mistake, trusting that pompous Dark Fae.” He shook his head. “One way or the other, it’s too late now. We should go. The others are waiting. Celeste is occupied with Kastian, so now’s the time.”

“How is this going to go?” I asked, shouldering my pack.

“You’ll leave with me, and Aelwen will come into the tent as you,” Adair said.

I nodded, but I felt a little giddy. “Let’s go.”

He held out his hand. “Give me your pack. You can’t be seen with it. Go out the back of the tent.”

I handed my pack over, and he slipped out. I took a deep breath. This was happening. This was really happening.

Taking one last peek out of the front of the tent, I saw that almost everyone from the royal party was gathered around the fire. Kastian was doing everything he could to keep their attention focused on him. Adair was right—this *was* the moment.

Turning away, I strode to the back of the tent and, pulling out my knife, cut a slit in the canvas. I slipped out and walked through the darkness into the trees, without looking behind me.

Once I was in the trees, I heard the sound of an owl and moved toward it. It wasn’t an owl—it was Marius. And, sure enough, as I walked toward the sound, the others came into view. With them was Aelwen, who looked enough like me that I took a startled step back.

“Ready?” I asked, recovering enough to walk toward them.

Marius, Rishika, Adair, and Tabitha nodded. I looked over at Aelwen, who pressed her lips together.

“I guess that means I head in now,” she said. She was speaking in her own voice, but coming from my mouth, it sounded like me, even to my own ears. It was so strange. She cleared her throat. “Good luck with everything.”

She started to move past us, but I put my hand on her arm to stop her. She stopped and looked back at me.

I looked up into my own face. “Thank you, Aelwen. You don’t know how much this means to me. And it’s not a favor I’ll forget.”

Aelwen smiled. “Good. You shouldn’t.”

I laughed, and Aelwen squared her shoulders—my shoulders, really—and walked out of the trees, toward the camp.

I turned back to the others. “Well? What are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

“I think we should start toward the mountains,” Adair said. “If that’s where Kadmos and Orla had a place, there might be locals around there who live deep in the mountains who know how to get to the Cerulean Sea.”

“Yeah, that makes sense to me,” I said.

We started walking through the woods, and Rishika fell into step beside me.

“How are you doing?” she asked me.

“I’m good. Excited. Nervous,” I told her.

She smiled and took my hand. “Good. I’m excited for you.”

I looked down at our clasped hands and felt a surge of emotion in my chest. Perhaps it was the night air, or the freedom of walking away from camp and Celeste’s press tour, or perhaps it was the excitement of what we were heading off to find, but I just loved this woman so much. She was why I was walking through these woods now. Her support, her encouragement, her love.

“I love you, Rishika,” I blurted out, my emotions making me feel hot. “I know this might not be the right time to say this—and I know your memories aren’t fully back, and so much as happened, but I just feel like—”

“Artemis, stop,” Rishika said. “Stop talking. I love you too.”

I stared at her for a moment, then my face broke into a grin. I felt incredible. Blissful, and on a total high. “*Really?!*”

Rishika nodded. “Yeah, really.” She slowed her pace and leaned toward me, like she was about to kiss me, but then her face contorted, and she hissed. She grabbed her head and doubled over, crying out in pain.

“Rishika, what’s wrong?” I gasped. “Adair! Tabitha! Marius! *Help!*”

The rest of the party, who were slightly ahead of us, hurried back.

“What’s going on?” Marius asked quickly.

“Rishika!” Tabitha said, putting her hand on Rishika’s back. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I don’t know! She just cried out,” I said frantically.

Rishika was grasping onto my arm with one hand, holding her head with the other. She was whimpering and rocking slightly.

“Rishika!” I tried again. “Please, say something. What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“My memories…” she finally managed to say, her voice guttural and rough. “They’re back!”

**Episode 5657**

**Greyson**

I stood on the porch, a little away from the others. I kept thinking about Colton and the twins, and how much having the babies had changed my wild, reckless younger brother. I knew that Xavier saw it too.

And while I was glad for everything having Maya and the babies had brought into Colton’s life, seeing it filled me with a kind of icy dread, too. Because it reminded me of Chloe’s price tag.

When she’d first said it, I’d thought she was taunting me. Or at least I had hoped that. How could she not be? What kind of medieval price could that actually be? Surely it had to be some kind of a scare tactic, or just the witch’s idea of a joke.

But she had made it very clear that she was being very serious, and that was indeed the price set for my request—my firstborn child.

I rubbed my head, which was aching. It was too high a price. Of course it was. It was too absurd to even consider.

But if that was true, then why was I still thinking about it?

I swallowed hard as I looked out at the dark night. What would that be like if it were Colton—if Orion or Lyra might be torn from him, and from Maya. One of their twins taken from his family and his people, raised by Chloe and her sisters—or whoever—a mere pawn in a deal. No longer a beloved child, nothing more than a payment.

It was too selfish to even think about.

And then there was the doubt still remaining in my heart about Fenrir—Maren’s son. I knew that the DNA test had revealed that I wasn’t the boy’s father. And Maren had seemed okay with that, but I knew as well as anyone that those tests weren’t always completely accurate, and that mistakes could be made. Especially given that the Dark Fae mafia had drawn all of us into their wild machinations, who knew what had transpired to alter that test.

What if Fenrir *was* my son—my firstborn child? What would that mean? Say I agreed to Chloe’s insane terms. Would that mean Chloe would show up to cruelly rip the young boy from Maren, the only parent the little boy had ever known?

Even if it meant that the bond between me and Kendall was destroyed, and there was no more forced longing for her, I doubted I would ever be able to live with myself again if that happened.

I shook my head. I was making myself crazy, but I didn’t have to. I didn’t have to decide right away. Chloe had said that the offer stood, so there was no hurry to make a hard and fast choice. Maybe in the meantime, I would come up with something else—another form of payment Chloe would be willing to accept instead.

But the one thing that I did need to deal with was the very thing that I was trying to cut off—I needed to tell Kendall. There were far too many risks involved—and while I assumed she would be all too happy to have our mate bond severed, she still needed to have a say in it. The bond affected both of us, and though I didn’t for a moment think this was the case, I couldn’t even imagine what I would do if I was wrong and it turned out Kendall didn’t want to sever the bond.

Maybe there was something I wasn’t considering. It was in my nature to try to deal with matters like this all on my own. I was an Alpha, and before that, I’d been a Rogue. It was my instinct to do things alone. But maybe Kendall had access to options I hadn’t considered. Maybe through her connections at the MIB, she had some other way—through technology or magic, or some combination of both—to sever the mate bond between us in a way that didn’t cost so high a price.

It had never even occurred to me to ask, but she did have connections, and she had helped me out, more than once. This was a big ask—a one in a million shot, really—but it had to be worth a try. It didn’t hurt to bring it up.

Though, I had to ask myself, if such a power was available to her, wouldn’t Kendall already have sought it out?

My stomach tightened, as it always did when I thought of Kendall. This mate bond was an absolute headache. I already had a mate I loved, but—more than that—I didn’t understand Kendall, and I couldn’t predict her, and that drove me crazy. Trying to figure her out made me feel like I was speeding down a curving road in a blindfold. In a way it was exhilarating, but it was fucking exhausting.

I turned and looked through the window into the living room. Cali was sitting on the couch with Lola. She must have seen my movement and she looked over. She smiled and waved, gesturing for me to come inside.

She looked so happy, and my heart swelled when I looked at her smile. That was a smile that didn’t frustrate and confuse me. That was a smile I loved and could trust.

I held up a finger, gesturing that I’d be one more minute. Whatever I decided was going to affect her too. Not to mention that the only person I would have a child with was her, and neither of us would ever consent to giving up a child.

I blew out a breath. This whole thing was so messed up. She would never agree to this, but I had to tell her anyway. I wasn’t going to hide anything from her.

Turning back to the window, I knocked once.

Lola nudged Cali and she looked over at me.

*Come out here for a minute*, I said through the mind link.

She looked a little confused, but she stood up, and a moment later the door opened, and she stepped out onto the porch. “Greyson?” she asked, wrapping a fuzzy white blanket from the couch more tightly around her as she stepped into the cold. “What’s up?”

“Hey,” I said, stepping toward her. I drew her close, holding her tight to keep her warm. The blanket was soft, and I took a deep breath, drawing in her scent. That was something I felt like I could never get enough of.

She looked up at me. “What’s going on?” she asked.

There was no good way to start, so I just had to start. “I spoke to Chloe.”

Her brown eyes went wide. “You did? *And?*”

I sighed. “And she told me she could do it—”

“Greyson—”

“But her asking price was too high.”

Cali pulled back to look up into my face. “How high was it?”

There was absolutely no way to say this. “She wants our firstborn child.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized I’d said *our* firstborn instead of *my* firstborn.

Cali must have heard it too, because her mouth dropped open and her face flushed. “*What?*”

“I know. She’s crazy, right?”

“What did you tell her?” Cali asked.

“I told her to forget it,” I said quickly. “But when she insisted that was the price, I figured I could stall her by telling her that I’d think about it.”

“That was probably the best idea,” Cali said thoughtfully. “But why does Chloe want a child?”

“I have no idea.” I shook my head. “It’s almost cliché, isn’t it? A witch wanting to steal a firstborn child?”

Cali shuddered. “I always thought Jay’s eye was too high a price. The highest price anyone could ever ask for. But a *child*? That’s outrageous.” She looked up at me. “So what are you going to do?”

I pulled her close again and hugged her tightly to me. “I don’t know.” That wasn’t true, so I corrected myself. “I thought I would go and ask Kendall.”

Cali stiffened in my arms, then she pulled away from me. “For *her* firstborn?!” she asked, shocked.

“No,” I said quickly. “No, I thought I would just explain to her what I’m doing and see if she has any ideas. I went to the witches because I couldn’t think of any other options for breaking the bond, but I thought that Kendall might have access to resources that I might not. Or she might know some other ways this kind of thing can be done, because of her job. Her real job,” I clarified.

Cali took that in for a moment. “Do you really think she could?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I said. “She doesn’t seem super pleased about the mate bond either, so if she could break it, she probably would have mentioned it before now, but I figured it was worth a try to ask, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Cali said, nodding. “It’s got to be worth a try. But I’m coming with you.”

**Episode 5658**

**Xavier**

I looked into Ava’s blue eyes, and I felt my stomach tighten. I couldn’t help it—I felt heat flood through me.

She was watching me, and her breath felt warm and inviting on my lips. I knew I’d made a mistake. I hadn’t come here for this. I’d come here to talk to her. I loved Ava, and I hated that I’d hurt her—*that* was why I’d come here. I didn’t like how we’d left things, and I wanted to make things better.

So would kissing her right now make things better, or would that only make everything worse?

I knew the answer to that. Kissing her would feel fucking amazing…until it didn’t. Until we came back down to earth and opened our eyes again and realized that we’d only complicated an already complicated situation.

My body was a mass of heat and tension. I was at war with myself—I wanted her, and my wolf was going crazy—but I knew I needed to think clearly. I had just started to pull back when she spoke.

“And what’s distracting you?” she asked me in a low, husky whisper.

I hesitated for just a moment, then answered honestly. “You.”

Her cobalt eyes bore into me. “What about me?”

I clenched my jaw and started to pull slightly away, but she tipped her head.

“I thought you wanted to talk,” she said, her voice still low.

Shit. That voice, and the way she was looking at me—it did dangerous things to my wolf, who was stirring within me, howling and pacing.

I had started this. I had made the first move. I had knelt down, then moved closer to her, so I needed to be the one to stop this. I leaned back, pulling my hands away from where I’d braced them on the couch on either side of her. “Ava, I didn’t come here to…” My voice trailed off as she looked at me, a question in her eyes. “I came here to apologize. To see if we could figure this out.”

Her eyes flashed. “You came here to apologize?”

“Yes.”

“Then why don’t you start with the apology, and we’ll go from there,” she said, her voice impossible to read.

I let my eyes scan over her face, trying to parse her meaning. The thing was, I didn’t want things to go anywhere—not until we were able to talk things out.

She narrowed her eyes, looking suddenly impatient with me. “I’m waiting.” She raised an eyebrow. “If you’re going to apologize for hurting me, X, you might start with, ‘*I’m sorry for hurting you, Ava*.’”

“Of course I’m sorry for hurting you,” I snapped.

Her eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. “That doesn’t sound particularly sincere, Xavier.”

Good god. I had a feeling Ava was really going to make me pay. I guess I couldn’t blame her for that—maybe I deserved it.

I cleared my throat. “I *am* sorry. And I’m not just saying that because you’re asking me to. I’m saying it because I know I hurt you, and I wish I could take it back. But I can’t, so…”

“So you came back here. To your home,” she said.

“Yes…”

She eyed me. “You don’t sound sure about that.”

This was harder than I thought it was going to be. I took a deep breath, and I was suddenly flooded by Ava’s scent, which was completely intoxicating. My wolf reacted immediately, before I could even brace myself against him.

“Maybe I should go back to the lake house,” I said hoarsely, trying to control myself so I didn’t leap onto her. “We can try to talk again when things cool down.”

A slow smile spread across Ava’s face, lifting her perfect lips. “Is it hot in here? I didn’t notice.”

“Now I know you’re lying,” I shot back.

She narrowed her eyes. “You came here to apologize by calling me a liar? Not off to such a smooth start, are we?”

My body was a wildfire threatening to burn out of control. I braced my hands on the couch on either side of her and leaned into her. I couldn’t pretend what was happening wasn’t happening. It wouldn’t do either of us any good to deny the wild electricity in the air between us, and I could tell that—despite everything—we were still completely hot for each other. Hell—if I got any hotter, I was going to burst into flames.

“I need to go,” I murmured. *Now*, before I acted on what I was feeling.

“Not so fast,” Ava said, slipping her hand around the back of my neck. “You owe me another apology.”

The feel of her hand on my skin was driving me so crazy I could barely string my words together. “For what?” I managed to ask.

She reached her finger up to stroke my cheek, the soft feeling of her fingertip purely erotic. “For calling me a liar.”

“Aren’t you?” I breathed.

Her eyes were on my lips as I spoke. “Does it count if we’re both lying?” she asked quietly.

Damn.

We stared at each other for a long moment. I took everything in—her intoxicating scent, her heat, the feel of her skin, the warmth of her breath on my face—everything about her was pushing me and my wolf to the absolute limit of our discipline.

Later I wouldn’t be able to say who moved first, but suddenly, my lips were on hers, and I had the sudden urge to let out an echoing howl.

Ava, on the other hand, let out a soft moan. The sound was quiet, but it seemed to reverberate in the air around me. I felt it in the base of my stomach. I’d heard the sound before, and I knew exactly what it meant. The sound was basically a starter’s pistol, and I knew it meant that there was no turning back. If I was going to have any chance at all of stopping things, it was going to be now. Right now.

But I didn’t want to stop anything.

Ava pulled away from me, her eyes flashing, her lips already kiss-swollen. “Don’t tell me how sorry you are, X—*show me*.” Then she pulled me back into a kiss.

I kissed her back, biting down on her bottom lip hard enough that she gasped. If she wanted me to show her, then I was going to show her.

I dropped my kisses down, moving down to her jaw, then down her neck. She dropped her head back with a hiss of pleasure as I reached the base of her throat. I lingered there, running my tongue along the structure of her collarbone as I unbuttoned her shirt, then I moved downward, taking her breast into my mouth.

“Oh god,” she moaned.

I bit down, then pulled back, letting my tongue flick over her nipple. Ava liked a little pain with her pleasure, and I threaded my hand into her hair and pulled as I moved my mouth to her other breast.

“*Xavier*,” she panted.

I loved hearing her moan my name. Ava was always so strong and so controlled, so it always got me off getting to make her putty in my hands. My cock was aching, but I ignored it, keeping my focus solely on her as I moved downward, kissing my way down her flat stomach.

She arched against me, but I took my time, rubbing her through her jeans until she began to tremble. She was grabbing at the couch cushions and breathing hard, barely able to hold on when I finally unbuttoned her jeans.

She pushed herself up as I slid them off, then her panties, which were soaking wet.

“Spread your legs,” I growled at her. “Let me see you.”

She opened her eyes and, locking her gaze on mine, did as she was told. And still kneeling before her, I dove into her.

“Oh *fuck*,” she moaned. “Oh god. *Xavier*.”

Her thighs were trembling, but I held them open as I flattened my tongue against her sex, pushing into her fast, then slow, then fast again. Then I moved my ministrations back to her clit, sucking on it, grazing it ever so slightly with my teeth. I loved the way she started to go wild for me, her hands threading into my hair to keep me in place.

“You taste so good,” I told her, easing up for a moment and nipping at her inner thigh.

Hungry for more, I pushed a finger into her, then a second, which drove her wild. Her whole body was shaking, and she pulled hard on my hair as her hips ground into my face.

“Fuck, Xavier, *yes*!”

She cried out when she came, and I could feel her tightening around my fingers.

“*Oh god*,” she kept whispering. “Oh my *god*.”

She had closed her eyes as she came, and when she opened them again, I looked up at her from between her legs. When our eyes met, we both smiled, almost laughing in relief. It was as if some great tension between us had been broken.

“That was fucking *amazing*,” she breathed.

I grinned at her. “So does that mean I can stay here tonight?”

**Episode 5659**

*I’m coming with you.*

I didn’t even think about the words as they came out of my mouth. They were just…instinctive. But the second I said them, it hit me like a bolt of lightning that I couldn’t go with him.

“Oh…right. I guess you’re asking her MIB stuff. I guess I can’t go, can I?” I said softly.

“It’s probably not the best idea,” Greyson said with a sigh. “For the record, I would *love* you to come with me. It would make things so much easier. And it would give us all a chance to get things out into the open.” He shook his head, looking out into the dark night beyond the house. “Everything with Kendall is always so…volatile.”

I flinched. I didn’t like the way that sounded. Because the way he’d said it, it didn’t sound like a bad thing. Yeah, I knew volatile could mean violent and unpredictable, but it could also mean wild and exciting—and it could also mean sexy—and sex. And what I’d learned when it came to werewolves was that they weren’t always opposed to a little wildness thrown in.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed all thoughts of Greyson with Kendall as far from my mind as possible. “Yeah, maybe it would be best if you talked to her first,” I said. “See what she says about all of this.”

Greyson must have heard some of the struggle I was feeling in my voice, because he looked down at me. “There’s got to be a way to fix this.”

“You told her that you weren’t going to tell anyone about her being in MIB,” I reminded him. “And it’s not going to help this conversation if you reveal to her that you told me.”

Greyson pushed a hand through his hair, looking frustrated. “You’re right. I know you’re right.”

I was quiet for a moment. “You never told me why she was there.”

He looked down at me, confused. “Why she was where?”

“The real reason Kendall was at Lucian’s,” I clarified. “I thought her excuse was pretty dubious—and that wasn’t a real makeup powder case she had in her hand.” I raised an eyebrow. “She wasn’t there to powder her nose.”

Greyson blew out a breath. “Love—”

“Greyson, now that you’ve told me about Kendall’s connection to MIB, you should be able to tell me why she was snooping around the Vanguard palace, right?”

He thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not exactly sure what she was after. Only that it had something to do with that weird noise we heard.”

“You don’t know why she was there?” I asked dubiously. I wasn’t sure if I believed him.

“No, not really. She wouldn’t tell me,” Greyson admitted. “I was going to ask her if she found anything out when I talked to her.”

I took this in, and I had to admit I found it all pretty fascinating. “So Kendall is investigating whatever that noise was?”

“I think so,” Greyson confirmed. “That’s why she was there the night of the party, and that’s why she was there today.”

“But why?” I wondered.

“No clue. MIB clearly knows something happened, but she’s not saying what that something is. Not to me at least,” he added, and I could see that it bothered him that Kendall wasn’t telling him.

“But what was it?” I wondered. “Whatever it was, it didn’t affect me.”

“I don’t know,” he said, looking more tense than ever. “But I’d really like to. That’s something I’d like to ask her about too. If it doesn’t affect Fae, maybe whatever it is only affects specific supernaturals? I’ve never heard of anything like that, but I suppose anything’s possible.”

“Could whatever it is be something from within the Vanguard house?” I wondered. “Is that what the MIB think? I mean, I’m just thinking of that place, and all of Lucian’s collections. He’s got all those relics. And all those really problematic pieces of art,” I said, rolling my eyes. “How could I ever forget Seluna and the statue he had made of her.”

“Oh god,” Greyson muttered, rubbing a hand across his jaw. “I’d forgotten about that.”

“I’m just saying, Lucian has not always had the best judgment,” I said. “I wouldn’t be shocked if he had something he was holding onto that he shouldn’t be. Which could spell trouble for everyone in the area, right?”

“Yeah,” Greyson agreed. “Very easily.” He shook his head. “I used to think we had trouble around here before that clown moved in. Now I’m trying to remember what the hell we ever worried about.”

“Maybe Lola and I can check in with the Vanguards. Talk to Aysel, get a list of the stuff they have in their collection and start to investigate. Maybe there’s something in one of their collections that has magical properties that might have caused those weird noises we heard.”

Greyson thought about that idea for a moment. “I think that sounds pretty good. As long as you don’t connect anything that’s happening to Kendall. You know how Lola gets,” he warned.

“I do know, and I’ll make sure Lola doesn’t get anywhere near Kendall or the MIB,” I promised.

He nodded, then he gave me a squeeze before stepping back. “I’m going to head over to Kendall’s now.”

A lump formed in my throat, but I just nodded. “Okay. Yeah, no time like the present. Let me know when you get there.”

He smiled. “Thanks, love. I will.” He bent and kissed me, then headed down the porch steps.

I pulled my blanket more tightly around me as Greyson disappeared around the side of the house. He was gone for a few moments, then I heard the distant sound of his motorcycle starting. I couldn’t help but notice that he’d been riding it more frequently since he’d discovered this mate bond with Kendall.

Kendall also had a motorcycle. And I’m sure she certainly wasn’t as afraid as I was to ride on it…

The winter cold stung my cheeks, but I stood watching as Greyson pulled out of the garage, then waited until he drove down the driveway and turned onto the road.

I was glad that he was speaking honestly to me about Kendall and everything about their bond. And I was glad he was riding his motorcycle over. Even though I found the motorcycle a little unsettling, it was better than shifting and showing up at Kendall’s place naked. Of course I knew he could take clothes with him, but it was the principle of the thing.

When Greyson’s motorcycle had disappeared and I couldn’t even see the taillight anymore, I turned and headed back into the house. It felt warm after the cold of the porch, and I tossed the blanket onto the couch in the living room, then I headed off in search of Lola.

I found her in the kitchen with Jay. They were standing together at the counter, Jay was chopping an onion, and Lola was grating a block of cheese.

I stared at them in surprise. “What is going on? Are you two making dinner for everyone? Where’s Torin.”  
 Lola rolled her eyes. “You don’t need to look so shocked, Cali. I *have* cooked before.”

“Torin had a hot date,” Jay explained.

“And I wanted lasagna,” Lola said. “So we’re making it.”

“Okay,” I laughed. “Listen, did either of you feel anything earlier?”

“Feel what?” Lola asked, confused.

“Like an earthquake or anything like that? Or did you hear a ringing in your ears?”

Lola still looked baffled. “What are you talking about?”

“At the Alpha meeting at the Vanguard estate earlier today, there was this…rumbling, and everyone there put their hands over their ears like they were in pain,” I explained.

Jay’s eye went wide. “Wait, that happened again?”

Lola and I both stared at him.

“*Again?*” I asked. “It happened *before*?”

“Yeah, the night of the bachelor party. We thought it was feedback from the speakers at the DJ booth, but all the guys there felt it.” He looked over as Ravi walked in from outside. “Ravi, remember the weird sound that made everyone’s ears ring at the bachelor party?”

Ravi grimaced. “Oh yeah. It was like my head was splitting open. It was quick, but it sucked.” He grabbed a handful of cheese from the pile Lola had just grated and popped it into his mouth.

I narrowed my eyes as pieces of the puzzle fell into place. This was all starting to make a strange kind of sense. I hadn’t listened to hours and hours of true crime podcasts for nothing, and I could spot a pattern in a series of clues as well as anyone. “Jay, I think you’re going to need to make that lasagna on your own.”

“What?” Jay asked, looking up as he cranked open a can of tinned tomatoes with a can opener. “Why?”

“Because I need Lola to come with me to the Vanguard palace,” I said. “Now.”

**Episode 5660**

**Greyson**

When I pulled my bike in front of Kendall’s apartment building and shut off the engine, it suddenly occurred to me that I probably should have at least texted her to let her know I was coming over. At least to find out if she was home before I came all the way over.

I pulled off my helmet and looked up at her windows. The lights were on, which was a good sign. At least that meant she was in.

I stashed my helmet and pulled out my phone. *I’m coming over.*

She responded right away:

*No.*

I sighed. Did everything with Kendall have to be so fucking difficult?

*Too late. I’m outside*.

She sent a middle finger emoji, which surprised me into a chuckle.

After texting Cali that I was here, I slipped my phone back into my pocket and headed toward her building. She was home, and I just had to hope that she was alone. I really hoped I wasn’t about to walk in on her hooking up with someone—especially not the guy she was with when I’d called from London.

Not that I was jealous. Obviously. It would just be awkward, and I would have to throw the guy out, which would probably piss her off.

When I got to the door, I hesitated for a moment, then knocked.

The door flew open, and Kendall stood in the doorway, glaring at me. My wolf reacted first, howling his approval and excitement. I quickly registered that she looked…cute. Dressed more relaxed than I’d ever seen her. She was wearing black leggings and an oversized sweatshirt that slid off one shoulder, exposing her smooth, creamy skin. Her long hair was pulled up into a messy bun on the top of her head, and these long pieces in the front were swept back, though pieces had come untucked from behind her ear and were falling back into her face.

The whole effect was…distracting.

She brushed her hair impatiently from her eyes and tucked it behind her ears. “This better be important, Greyson,” she snapped.

I tried not to think about how much I liked hearing her say my name and stepped past her, ignoring the fact that she hadn’t invited me inside. “I wouldn’t have come if it wasn’t important.”

“Come on in,” she muttered, rolling her eyes as she shut and bolted the door behind me.

I couldn’t help but notice that her door had three very serious deadbolts on it.

She stepped into the apartment and dropped into a chair, pulling her legs up to her chest. “Okay, so you’re here, and you shouldered your way into my apartment. Care to tell me why?”

I sat down in the chair across from her and looked directly at her. “I never got a chance to ask you—did you find anything at Lucian’s?”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, Grey, you know I can’t reveal that to you.”

“Seriously?”

She leveled a look at me. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

She did not.

“Yeah, you’re a regular stand-up, Kendall. I’ll bet you have a great routine. I’m sure you really get the guys rolling—”

“Whether or not you think I could handle an open mic is really not all that interesting to me, Greyson,” she said shortly, cutting me off. “Making them laugh isn’t a huge concern for me, not when I can make them do so many other things, if you know what I mean. And I’m not going to tell you anything that’s going to compromise your safety, or my job. What I can tell you is that the only thing I know is that the source of the sound seems to be coming from somewhere within the Vanguard palace.”

I fought to not think about what else she was capable of making men do, and I tried to focus, thinking about what she’d meant. “I guess I’m not all that surprised to hear that. I guessed as much. But did you find anything?”

She shook her head and got to her feet. “I’m not fucking doing this, Grey. I’ve already told you too much. You should leave. I don’t know why you’re here at all.”

She stood up and looked pointedly toward the door.

I didn’t stand. Kendall was right—I had shouldered my way in, and I didn’t think she was going to let me do that a second time. She wasn’t an easy touch. I’d gotten lucky this time, and I didn’t want to throw away my shot here.

I thought for a moment, trying to figure out how I was going to change the subject to get us talking about the mate bond situation.

She must have seen the look of concentration on my face as I thought about this, because she shook her head, looking annoyed. “Okay, out with it. What’s the real reason you’re here?”

I cleared my throat. “I’ve been looking into options to deal with our mate bond situation.”

“Deal? Options?” she asked, her eyes narrowing.

“I think you’ve made it clear that you—and I feel the same way—don’t want this bond between us,” I said.

Kendall looked at me but said nothing.

Her silence was strange and a little unsettling, but I pressed on. “So I thought I would see what could be done about it.”

A muscle in her jaw twitched, like she was clenching it. “Do you want a drink?”

“What?”

“A drink. Do you want one?” she repeated.

“No—thanks,” I said, a little baffled.

She turned her back on me and stepped into her small kitchen. There was a center island, and I watched as she moved around, grabbing a glass and pouring a generous shot of rum into it. She pulled open the fridge and grabbed a can of Coke and cracked it open, pouring a much stingier shot of that into the glass.

She took a drink of what was basically straight rum. “And what did you discover? About what could be done?” she asked, fixing me with a hard look.

“That it won’t be easy to break it,” I said, thinking of the conversation with Chloe.

Kendall didn’t say anything for a moment. Then she laughed. “Are you kidding me? You came all the way here—barged into my apartment uninvited—to tell me *that*? *I* could have told you that. We both know the mate bond isn’t something you can make disappear with a snap of your fingers. You really could have told me this over the phone. Or—better yet—in a fucking text message.”

The frustration I often felt when I was with Kendall surged up in me. It was a kind of confused, irritated attraction, like I didn’t know if I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her, or if I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and kiss her.

“I found out that it would be difficult, but not impossible,” I ground out.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” she asked.

I shook my head. I really wished this was going to be easier to say, but I just had to say it. Kendall liked things right to the point, so it wouldn’t do me any good to beat around the bush. “You’re MIB.”

She eyed me warily. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Does MIB have a way to do it?”

She gave me an incredulous look. “*MIB*?”

I ignored this reaction. “I’m asking because I don’t know, but it seems like they have access to so much secret shit, I thought they might have a way to break the bond that doesn’t involve witches.”

She drained the last of her drink and put the glass onto the counter with a hard thunk. “Don’t you think that if I had access to some secret bond breaker that would actually work, I would have already used it?”

I felt a little disappointed, and as that emotion floated around in my mind for a moment, I realized it wasn’t just because she claimed that MIB didn’t have that kind of technology, but also because she would have broken the bond behind my back.

But that was ridiculous. Neither of us wanted to be bonded to each other. “Okay, there’s not one that you know about. But what if there’s one that you don’t know about? Maybe it’s so secret that they haven’t told you about it. Can’t you ask around—”

“I’m not going to ask around,” she snapped.

“Why not?”

“Because it would raise suspicion about why I wanted it, and in my line of work, I can’t afford that,” she said. “Besides, we both know there’s absolutely no way to break a werewolf mate bond. It sucks, but that’s the way that it is.”

I thought about Chloe’s offer, but I kept the details of that to myself for the moment.

“I guess you’re right,” I said with a frustrated sigh. “I guess it’s just going to stay impossible until we find a way to break it.”

Kendall glared at me for a moment, then she stepped out of her kitchen and toward me. She stopped right in front of me. “Let me save you the trouble.”

“What?” I asked.

“You want to stop this connection, then I’ll do it for you. We don’t need some top-secret magical device. It’s far simpler than that.”

I frowned at her. “What are you talking about?”

She smiled, but the expression didn’t come close to meeting her flashing purple eyes. “Greyson Evers, I’m rejecting you as my mate.”

**Episode 5661**

**Artemis**

I held onto Rishika as her whole body trembled. She was clearly in pain, and I was trying to focus on that, but my head was spinning as I tried to process what she’d just blurted out—

She’d just gotten her memories back?! It felt too good to be true. We’d been trying everything and at some point…sort of given up. It had seemed they’d come back in their own time—if at all.

Total and complete relief washed through me.

“Artemis? What’s going on? Is she okay?” Marius asked, extending his hand toward Rishika.

When I looked up at him, I saw that his expression was concerned, and looking past him, I saw that Adair looked worried and Tabitha was stepping toward us.

“What can I do?” she asked.

But Rishika just grimaced and shook her head, though it looked as though it pained her to move. “No, it’s fine. The pain’s starting to go away.” She took a deep breath and when she looked up at me, she managed a smile. “I remember.”

“*What* do you remember?” I asked, shocked.

Rishika straightened, and when she did, she looked better. There was more color in her face, and she didn’t look as though she was about to pass out. “Everything,” she said simply. “You. Me. All of it.”

“All of it?” Marius repeated, looking surprised.

Rishika nodded.

My throat tightened, and I felt as though I was about to cry, which startled me. I knew I had missed Rishika and the closeness we had shared before she’d lost her memories. But I’d also wondered if it was better this way, because I would be freer as I looked for my father. Stronger, without anyone or anything holding me back, and able to face the truth about what I would find when I found him.

But hearing that Rishika’s memories had returned was *such* a relief; it made me realize just how much I really loved her.

Stepping closer to her, I cupped Rishika’s chin. “I…I just…” I found that I couldn’t put the tumult of emotions I was feeling into words, I simply kissed her.

Pressing my lips against hers felt so warm, so right, so perfect. If nothing else, this journey to the Ceruvela Mountains helped bring Rishika back to me. I felt almost whole again. I had my mom, Cali, my uncle, and now I had Rishika back. The only missing piece now was my father.

Rishika pulled away and looked up at me with joy and excitement sparkling in her dark eyes. “I remember when we met for the first time. How we played games at the pack barbeque. I remember training with you, and our first kiss. I remember that it took my breath away.”

I laughed and leaned my forehead against hers. “I remember too,” I said quietly.

“Why did it look like you were in so much pain?” Tabitha asked, still looking worried.

Rishika stood straight and shook her head. “I have no idea. Maybe it was just overwhelming to be hit with so much so fast. It did sort of hurt in a way, I guess… All these important pieces of my life all at once.”

I bit my lip, choked up to hear that I was an important piece of this smart, powerful woman’s life. I reached for her and kissed Rishika again, almost like I was trying to prove to myself that I wasn’t dreaming this. I didn’t think I was, but weird things did happen in the Fae world.

But when I kissed her, she was solid and sure. This was *real*. This wasn’t a mirage, and I wasn’t dreaming this.

“I want to hear more memories,” I said, feeling giddy.

Rishika laughed. “I remember when we became a couple—a *real* couple. Do you remember that?”

I nodded, then shot a quick glance over at Marius. I thought about how he and I had once been a couple, before I had decided that I couldn’t allow myself to be attached to anyone. I’d believed that too—until Rishika. Everything had changed when I met her.

When I looked back at Rishika, her smile had faltered. “And I remember when we broke up so that you could come here.”

A wave of guilt and sadness washed over me as I remembered this as well. We’d only done what we’d thought was right at the time, but seeing the look on Rishika’s face now reminded me of how it had felt to do it at the time, and I shook my head. “I’m so sorry—”

“No, stop,” Rishika says, holding up her hand. “You don’t have to apologize. I also remember why we did it. You needed to be free to come here, Artemis. You couldn’t hold back anything.”

I nodded.

Rishika gave me a keen look. “Still… Selfishly, I hope that you don’t feel like you want to be apart anymore.”

The question hung in the still air of the woods for a long moment.

I shook my head. “I want you back,” I said, my voice breaking as I spoke. “I need you. I never wanted to leave you.”

Marius cleared his throat, and when I looked over at him, he was smiling.

“Well, congratulations, Rishika. Welcome back,” he said.

But there was something in his voice—a strange, almost imperceptible edge—that gave me pause. It made me wonder if he actually meant what he said.

“Well, in any case,” Adair said, breaking off the moment, “I’m glad that you all are having this happy reunion of sorts, but our mission remains the same—as does the danger—and we should really keep moving.”

“Yeah, of course,” I said, nodding. I knew Adair was right—there was still danger to be aware of—and as much as I wished Rishika and I could keep catching up, I also knew that it would have to wait.

Adair stepped ahead of the group to lead and began to walk. Tabitha walked with him. Marius lingered for a beat before joining them, and I stared after him as he strode through the woods.

“Are you okay?” Rishika asked, watching me watching Marius.

“Hmm?” I asked, looking over at her.

“Are you okay? About me? And about us?” she asked.

“Of course I am,” I said quickly—and honestly. “I’m overjoyed that you got your memories back. I’m just thinking about…” I trailed off and looked toward Marius again.

Rishika followed my gaze and nodded. “Yeah.”

“I just hope *he* is. But it was hard to tell.” I looked at Rishika. “Are you okay about him? And me?”

Rishika smiled at me. “I know that he makes you happy. Even if you don’t fully recognize it yet, or want to admit it yourself, I can see it.” She thought about the question for a moment. “Maybe I didn’t like him at first…Okay, I know I didn’t. I think I was just jealous of your connection, and your past. But I’ve seen how much he really cares about you. And I don’t blame him for falling in love with you.” She shrugged. “It’s kind of impossible not to. And the truth is, I’ve grown to like him, despite his faults.”

“Really?” I asked incredulously.

She nodded. “And it’s not just because he cares about you, and because he loves you.” She glanced ahead, where Marius was walking. “He’s a good man.”

I followed her gaze to Marius’s strong back and sure, steady walk. My heart swelled as I looked at him and thought about Rishika’s words. There was no way I could predict what any of this could mean—only that I was here with the two people who I loved.

Reaching out, I took Rishika’s hand as we walked through the dense woods.

We traveled on for another few miles. The woods were thick, and the path was overgrown, making walking slow and difficult. I was just starting to get tired when the trees began to thin, and I looked around. We were coming out of the woods, and in the clearing I spied a building. As we got closer, I realized that it was a rustic inn, with a steeply sloped roof and wooden shutters on its many-paned windows.

Adair stopped and looked up at the inn. “I don’t know…”

“Well, I’m tired,” Marius said. “And hungry.”

“We can eat and sleep anywhere,” Adair said, still eyeing the inn warily.

Marius rolled his eyes. “I’d prefer the comfort of a bed.”

“I don’t think comfort should be our priority,” Adair said tightly. “I think our priority should be Artemis avoiding being recognized until we’re further out.”

I looked around. “We are in the middle of nowhere,” I pointed out. “There’s no one around here who’s even seen my face as a member of the Fae court, right?”

Adair still looked hesitant. “I don’t know.” He glanced at Tabitha. “What do you think?”

Tabitha had just opened her mouth to answer when the thick wooden door of the inn flew open and a burly man wearing a barman’s apron lunged out. He was red in the face and pointing a stubby finger at Marius.

“You!” he spat. “*You!*”

“*Oh shit*,” Rishika breathed.

The man advanced on Marious. “You *slept* with my *wife*!”

**Episode 5662**

**Xavier**

I stared up at Ava. I was uncertain, but I maintained my position. Everything about this felt strange. I was on my knees, practically begging Ava to say in the pack house…but I also knew that I had power in this situation. Because of the mate bond Ava and I shared, I always had power over her, just like she always had power over me.

But I also knew she was angry, and I wasn’t sure what was going to happen next. Ava’s anger was a lot like her passion—intense and unpredictable. It could be explosive. She could want me to leave, but I was Alpha of the Samara pack, and while this was technically her house, it was also the Samara pack house. If I wanted to put my foot down, I could. But I didn’t want to. That wasn’t who I was, and that wasn’t who I wanted to be with Ava. Separate from the fact that I knew she would fight back just as hard, I didn’t want to cultivate that kind of animosity between us. I didn’t want her to feel as though she didn’t have control over who was welcome in her own house.

But I also didn’t want to be a pushover.

Shit—there was a lot going on here. The balance between Ava and me was delicate, to say the least. I didn’t want to become an Alpha who couldn’t hold his own against his Luna. But the thing was that I really respected Ava, and everything she had given to her pack, and I loved her, so I waited for her to answer, knowing that it would sting like hell if she told me to leave.

Despite all the ways I felt about this situation, Ava was the first girl I had ever loved, and I loved her still. She was my mate and my Luna, and I didn’t want to hurt her anymore than I already had. And…I was *so fucking turned on*.

I was so attracted to Ava. How could I not be? Her dark hair, her sleek, perfect body. Those bright blue eyes that usually seemed to see everything, but now were half-closed, heavy with lust. Her perfect little mouth was open, her lips dark from where she’d bitten them as I’d made her come. She was this strong, powerful werewolf, and as much as I loved her power, I loved to see it melt away as I stripped off her clothes and brought her to climax again and again, making her tremble under my hands.

I nuzzled into her thigh, my aching erection straining against my pants. *Fuck*—I wanted her. How could I not? She was my mate.

“So,” I breathed, letting her feel my exhale on her sex. “Can I stay?”

She reached down and grabbed a handful of my hair. I let her force my head up until I was looking at her.

Her eyes were no longer half-closed. Now they sparked bright and alive. “Do you mean stay between my legs all night?”

I laughed and watched as her face flushed with amusement and excitement.

“Is that a yes?” I asked and ran my teeth along the inside of her other thigh. I kept my eyes on her as I bit down lightly on the soft flesh and smiled to myself as she drew in a sharp breath.

She caught the smile, and her eyes narrowed into a glare. “You do know I’m still pissed at you, right?”

“Of course,” I said easily. “It’s hard to miss.”

Her breath caught as I slid both hands up each of her thighs, making my way back toward her sex. “Oh god,” she moaned, closing her eyes again. “You can stay,” she breathed, “the night.”

I felt a weight lift off my chest. I knew this last fight had been a tough one, and this concession meant a lot to Ava, and it wasn’t lost on me.

I slid my hands upward, under her arms, and stood up, easily picking her up with me. I loved the way she wrapped herself around me, her legs encircling my waist, and my cock gave a throb.

Leaning into her, I kissed her, then spoke so my mouth was against hers. “We better take this upstairs to our bed, then, huh?”

“*Yes*,” Ava breathed back, pushing her hips against me.

I didn’t need to be told twice. I carried her up the stairs and down the hall and into our room.

Ava spent the time kissing my neck and my ears, using her tongue to drive me out of my fucking mind.

I kicked the door shut behind us with my foot and tossed her onto the bed, collapsing on top of her as our mouths found each other. I plunged my tongue into her, and her kiss felt as sharp as her nails as her hands slipped under my shirt.

I broke away long enough for her to pull my shirt off, then kissed her again as she dragged her nails down my chest. She wasn’t being playful now, she was looking to hurt, and I could feel the scratches were deep enough that they were going to leave marks. She wanted me to feel her anger.

*Good*, I thought savagely as I tore off the rest of her clothes. *Fucking good.* I wanted to feel it.

She unbuckled my belt and yanked my jeans off, releasing my cock. Grabbing hold of it, she switched positions, so she was on top of me, straddling my hips.

Her hand wrapped around me made it hard to breathe, but I smiled up at her. “Okay, you said I could stay, so you must want something.” I smacked her ass hard enough the sound echoed through the room. “Why don’t you show me how badly you want it.”

Ava’s eyes had widened when I’d spanked her, but then narrowed again at my words. “Bastard,” she hissed. She took my cock in her hand and began to stroke it slowly. “I’m going to make you *beg* me.”

I would have laughed, but my head was nearly exploding, so I just gritted my teeth.

She picked up the pace, stroking me faster, jerking me off just the way she knew I liked it. This was the problem—it was hard to play games with someone who knew me as well as Ava did. She adjusted her body so she was hovering over me, then slowly lowered herself down, guiding my cock into her, but only just.

“Fucking hell,” I groaned.

She lifted herself up. “Tell me how much you want me.”

“I want you,” I said, staring into her eyes, meaning it.

She lowered herself down. “Tell me how much you need me.”

“I need you,” I growled.

She lowered herself even more. My cock twitched, aching to be surrounded by her. I could practically feel her—close, but not quite.

“Tell me that you love me—”

“I fucking love you,” I snarled, grabbing her hips and yanking her down, driving my cock into her all at once.

“*Xavier!*” she cried.

“I might be a bastard, but you’re a fucking beautiful manipulator,” I snapped, thrusting into her over and over. “You look at me with those eyes, and you come at me with that fucking body, and you know what you do to me.”

“You bet your ass I do,” she panted, her eyes not straying from me as she clamped hard around my cock, making me groan.

We were building a rhythm that matched our heavy breathing. I could feel myself building toward a fucking Everest of a climax, but I fought it back, determined to make Ava come first.

I slipped my hand between us, smirking when she moaned. “Look at you. I just made you come five minutes ago, and you’re dripping wet again. You’re never going to make me beg for a fuck I know you want just as much as I do.”

“I could stop right now,” she panted.

“You’re a fucking liar,” I snarled, smacking her ass again before grabbing it, massaging it hard.

“And you’re a controlling prick,” she said, tangling her hand into my hair and pulling hard enough I growled.

I brought my hand out from between us, and when I pressed my fingers against her lips, she opened to them. She sucked on them eagerly. Then I pulled them out, swirling them over her clit as she began to moan. “Maybe you hate how much you love me and how much you want me, but that doesn’t change who we are to each other.”

Ava was trembling now. “I’m your mate,” she said quietly.

“Say that again,” I commanded.

Her eyes had started to close, but she opened them wide and looked at me. “You first.”

I flipped her over on the bed and drove into her hard enough the headboard slammed into the wall. “I’m your fucking mate.”

“Say it again!” she demanded.

“I’m your mate!”

She grasped the sheets as she came apart completely. “Oh god! Yes! *Xavier*! *Yes!*”

Pleasure had been crawling up my spine, and now black spots filled my vision before the stars burst, sparking to life behind my eyes. My body shook as my climax rushed through me.

“Oh *fuck*!” I breathed. “God, *Ava*.”

Ava didn’t stop moving until I was completely spent, and then I collapsed on top of her, breathless. My head dropped against her shoulder as the adrenaline began to ebb.

For a moment there was no sound but the deep rasps of our breaths. Ava ran her hand up and down my spine, then I rolled off of her.

She looked over at me, her smile wry. “I guess it’s a good thing you stayed.”

“Yeah,” I said with a tired laugh.

She got up and slipped out of bed, padding to the bathroom. I watched her, my eyes on the smooth sway of her hips as she moved.

It had been incredible sex, but it had hardly cleared the air. If anything, things between us felt more muddled than ever. The mate bond between me and Ava—and Cali—was so difficult to navigate. My wolf was so hungry for connection to both of them. I loved Cali—I wanted to be with Cali. But I loved Ava, and I was with Ava. She was my Luna.

It all felt like an impossible puzzle that was missing pieces.

I dropped my head back and looked up at the ceiling. Was it even possible to make this work? I had two mates. But did I even *want* that?

**Episode 5663**

**Greyson**

I stared at Kendall for a long moment, trying to comprehend what the hell she was saying to me. “What exactly do you mean—you’re *rejecting* me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Good god, Greyson. Has this really never happened to you? Do I actually have to spell it out for you? *I don’t want you*. Which works out, because you don’t want me. So I’m making it really easy on both of us. I reject you as a mate. There’s no need for any of this bond-breaking bullshit.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think it’s going to be that easy. I remember Colton trying to do something like that when he was trying to stop things happening with Maya, and look how that turned out for those two. They’re about as mated as can be,” I said.

Kendall ground her teeth.

“Listen, if it were really as easy as just wishing it away, you and I probably wouldn’t even need to be talking about it right now,” I reasoned.

She narrowed her eyes to dangerous slits. “I want to make one thing very clear, Greyson—I have no interest whatsoever in being mated to you. Or to anyone else. I think the whole mate concept is just leftover from the days of patriarchal bullshit, when it was all about the Alpha, and the Luna was expected to do whatever he said, but mostly just to shut up and bear children. *Fuck that*,” she said, articulating every syllable clearly. “I’m not giving up my freedom for that shit.”

I took that in. I supposed I should be relieved to hear her speech. It was the idea of being a mate at all that Kendall rejected, not just because it was me.

Some of what I was thinking must have shown on my face, because she glared at me.

“It’s nothing personal, man, but I don’t care who it is. So I’m rejecting you, and any other mate who comes my way. That is not going to be my life. Not now—not ever.”

We stood for a moment, staring at each other, until the silence between us was broken by the apartment buzzer.

Kendall’s eyes darted to the door, then over to the clock on the wall. She grimaced, then stepped over and pressed the buzzer, letting whoever was into the building.

Then she grabbed my shoulder and shoved me toward the door. “Thanks for dropping by unannounced and uninvited, but it’s time for you to leave.”

Turning around, I gave her a suspicious look. “Why are you in such a hurry to get rid of me?”

“That would fall distinctly into the category of *none of your damn business*,” she said tartly.

She shoved me into the door, which just…did something to me. It was the rough way she handled me combined with her sudden closeness—suddenly my senses were completely flooded with her intoxicating scent. My wolf began to stir.

I tried to ignore it as much as I could, but Kendall wasn’t making it any easier on me. She had me pushed against the door and was reaching past me to open it. It was an ineffective way of getting me out, but an incredibly good way to push her body up against mine. Her sweatshirt had slid off her shoulder a little more, revealing more skin, and I could see that she wasn’t wearing a bra. My head started to spin when I thought about what it would look like if I just grabbed the hem of that sweatshirt and just pulled it up over her head.

My wolf threw back his head and howled.

There was a loud knock on the door behind me.

“*Fuck*,” Kendall breathed. She looked up at me, her purple eyes accusing and angry and impossible to look away from. “Hold on a sec,” she called to the person at the door as she kept her eyes fixed on me.

“Come on, baby,” a man’s deep voice growled. “Making me wait only makes me want you more. Don’t make me wait too long.”

The sound of the guy’s voice made a shot of something hot and angry and uncomfortable arc across my chest. Was that…*jealousy*?

I covered my own feeling of terror with a smirk. “A booty call? Really?”

Her eyes nearly shot sparks. “Yeah? So what? I’m an adult, the fact of which I believe you’re fully aware.”

“*Kendall*,” the guy called in an annoying, singsong voice.

I ground my teeth, fighting to keep my wolf from shifting to attack the guy behind the door. “I can’t leave. We haven’t finished discussing this.”

“Oh, we *really* have,” she assured me.

“Hey, babe, is someone in there with you?” the guy asked, sounding more concerned.

Whoever this clown was, he didn’t need to be worried about Kendall. That was *my* job—or even if it wasn’t, it certainly wasn’t this guy’s job.

I turned and swung the door open, glowering at the man standing in the doorway.

He was a tall guy, almost as tall as I was. He had a dark beard and tattoos all over his arms and up his neck. I’d figured it would be that guy I’d seen her with before, but this guy was new.

The guy was holding a vape, which he took a puff on as he looked me over. “Who the hell are you?”

I did *not* like this question. “I’m the last guy you’re ever going to see if you don’t get the fuck out of here. *Now*.”

The guy looked thrown, then looked past me to Kendall, who was standing just behind me. “Kendall, babe—who is this guy?”

Before Kendall had a chance to answer, I stepped toward the guy. “I’m her boyfriend, that’s who I am. Now get the *fuck* out of here.”

The guy looked shocked. He stammered for a moment but didn’t put up a fight when I slammed the door in his face.

I felt pretty good about that, but when I turned around, it was to face a *very* angry Kendall.

“What the actual hell, Grey!” she snarled.

I shook my head and pushed past her. “Trust me, I was doing you a favor. That guy was an asshole.”

She spun around, glaring. “The only asshole I can see is *you*.”

I turned to face her wrath, feeling a strange twinge of uncertainty. Why *had* I reacted that way? It had been so instinctive; I hadn’t even thought, really. It was just so automatic.

No, I was being stupid. It was like I’d said to Kendall—it was because she and I hadn’t finished our conversation about the mate thing, and we couldn’t exactly talk about that in front of a stranger. That was obviously it.

Obviously.

But Kendall’s purple eyes seemed to glow with pent-up rage. “You threw him out because you were jealous.”

“*Jealous?*” I repeated, as though that was the most outrageous thing I’d ever heard. “Of the guy who just showed up at your door puffing on a green apple–flavored vape pen? Get real. I thought you had standards.”

This pissed her off even more. “I told you before, Greyson—what I do, who I fuck—none of that is any of your fucking business. You got that?”

Tattoo guy *was* there to hook up with her. I *knew* it. My head felt like it was going to explode. My wolf was pushing me to shift, and I felt this muddled mix of emotions playing out in my chest—anger, confusion, and jealousy. It actually reminded me of how wild my wolf had felt during the Lupo Finale all that time ago, when I had seen Xavier with Cali for the first time.

I had held it back then…but this was similar and different all at once.

It also reminded me how fucking serious the mate bond was. And however much Kendall wanted to blow it—and me—off, that wasn’t how any of this worked. She could say that she rejected me, but that wasn’t going to do shit.

Kendall gave a low growl of frustration and turned away from me. She strode into the kitchen and grabbed her phone from where it lay on the kitchen island and started texting. Angrily.

I walked over toward her and put my hand on her phone, lowering it so she looked up at me. Her eyes were practically shooting angry sparks, but at least she was looking at me.

“So how is this rejection thing supposed to work, anyway?” I asked her.

“I don’t know why this is so hard for you to understand, man,” she said, her voice icy cold. “You stay away from me, and I stay away from you.”

I gave a cold laugh. “And when you need me to sneak into the Vanguard palace to snoop around or whatever the hell your secret mission is, will we still be avoiding each other then, or will you be making an exception?”

She froze, and her eyes narrowed. “As I’ve made perfectly clear, you are *never* to talk about my work. You are not MIB, Grey, so you need to learn to stay the fuck out of my way. And let me be crystal clear with you.” She put her phone down and looked me square in the eyes. “If you come back here again, I’ll make sure it’s the last thing you ever do as an Alpha.”

**Episode 5664**

I parked the car and looked up at the Vanguard palace. I glanced at Lola, and she nodded.

“Let’s go,” she said, pushing her door open.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed my own door open and stepped out. The nerves set in as we walked toward the door, and my stomach twisted into a tight knot. No one here knew we were coming. We’d thought about calling before we’d driven over, but Lola had advised against it.

*It’s better to just show up*, she’d insisted*. If we call, they might tell us not to come.*

*But if we just show up, they might turn us away. Or just ignore us at the door*, I’d pointed out.

Lola had waved this off. *That won’t happen.*

But I wasn’t so sure. I had been inside the Vanguard palace enough times to know that Lucian had plenty of items in his possession that he probably shouldn’t. He was a collector, and the place was practically a museum of the weird.

“Okay,” Lola said as we stepped up to the door. She shot a glance at me, finally looking nervous herself. “So how do you want to approach this?”

I took a steadying breath. “We keep it simple. We ask to check out everything they have that might be magically linked, or some kind of werewolf artifact. We make a list of everything we see, or we get one from Aysel.”

Lola frowned. “Do you really think there’s a list? And do you think Aysel has it? Recordkeeping doesn’t exactly seem like her jam, does it? If there is one, Armin probably has it, don’t you think?”

“Regardless, I think looking around and asking for a list is the first step,” I said, shaking my head. “There is something here that caused everyone’s head to ring so much that it was painful. Everyone except me. That’s weird, and it has to be werewolf related, right? And it was something here.”

“Yeah, that’s weird,” Lola agreed. “But really, what’s the concern? I mean, yeah, it was weird, but there’s a ton of weird shit that goes on around here, and you’re acting like this one thing in particular is really serious.” She gave me a searching look. “Is there something more that I don’t know?”

*Yeah, there absolutely is. Like the fact that Kendall is from MIB and she’s looking into what happened here that caused everyone’s heads to ring*, I thought to myself. That alone was enough to signal to me that there was something very, *very* wrong happening here. If it was strange enough that MIB was looking into it, then it was strange enough for us to look into as well.

I just didn’t happen to know *what* exactly we were looking for.

“Cali?” Lola pressed.

I cleared my throat. “I just think it’s really odd, and after everything that happened with Lucian and Seluna, I don’t want to assume that nothing’s going on over here. It doesn’t feel like something Lucian is capable of.”

“Being normal? Remotely tolerable?”

“Exactly,” I said. “And I’m the pseudo-Luna of the Redwood pack, after all. Kira’s fake Luna mark never left, so I should try to live up to it, right? Plus, I have to take care of all of you, don’t I?”

Lola snorted a laugh. “My wittle bestie, Calie-Walie,” she said in a baby voice. “Always looking out for others at the detriment to herself.”

I glared at her, then reached out and used the giant brass knocker to announce our presence.

We heard the thunderous sound of the knock echoing inside, but for a long moment nothing happened.

I started to sweat. This was exactly what I was afraid was going to happen—we would be ignored completely. My mind started to spin, wondering if there would be any use to trying to sneak inside. Lucian was a bit of a wild card, but one thing I knew he took seriously was the security of the Vanguard palace, and I was pretty sure we wouldn’t last long if we tried to sneak in through a window or something like that.

I was just starting to lose hope and was feeling around for my keys in my pocket when I heard footsteps coming toward the door. My heart beat hard, and a moment later, the door swung open to reveal Armin.

It was a fight, but I managed not to make a disappointed sound, though I wasn’t pleased to see him. He wasn’t the person I was hoping would come to the door.

“Hey,” I said, forcing a smile.

“Yes?” he asked coolly.

I cleared my throat. “We were hoping to catch Aysel or Lucian, if they’re around.”

Armin didn’t answer. He only raised an eyebrow at me, which I supposed was answer enough. He wasn’t going to tell me shit unless I explained myself, but I wasn’t going to do that either.

“I guess if they’re not around, and you can, I was hoping you could talk to Lola and me about some of the…uh…special items that are kept here at the Vanguard house,” I stammered.

Armin blinked slowly, and Lola grabbed my arm in a grip so tight it felt like she was trying to cut off my circulation.

“We weren’t *hoping* to do anything,” she amended. “We *are* doing it. Excuse us,” she said, pushing past Armin and stepping inside the manor.

“It’s already quite late,” Armin protested. “Perhaps another day would be better. Aysel is engaged elsewhere. She’s in her mud bath currently.”

“Welp, squeegee her down, rinse her off, and get her out here,” Lola said bluntly. “We need to talk.”

“Cali! Lola!” a voice called out.

Lola and I turned to see Elle at the top of a flight of stairs. She looked excited to see us and flew down toward us.

“What are you two doing here?” she asked breathlessly.

“We wanted to talk to Aysel or Lucian—preferably Aysel—about some of the items here…” I started.

Elle’s face brightened. “Well, Lucian is doing something he called a sound bath, but I just saw Aysel in the kitchen.”

Lola glared at Armin. “The kitchen, huh? So much for that mud bath, I guess.”

Armin didn’t respond.

“I can take you there, if you’d like,” Elle offered.

“That would be great. Thanks, Elle,” I said gratefully.

“Follow me,” she said brightly and led Lola and me out of the foyer and into a short passageway that led to a huge kitchen. The place was massive with high ceilings and wide, white marble countertops.

For a moment I looked around, distracted, thinking about how much Torin would love the place. Then I focused on Aysel, who stood at the gigantic kitchen island, putting together an elaborate charcuterie board. She was just adjusting the prosciutto into what looked like a rose when Elle spoke:

“Look who just arrived!”

Aysel looked up, and her eyes registered surprise when she saw Lola and me standing in front of her. Then she sighed. “You came at a very bad time. I’m in the midst of finalizing the details of the Bachelorette party charcuterie board, and I simply do *not* have the time to socialize at the moment. You can’t trust anyone to do this kind of thing right, can you?”

“No, you really can’t,” Lola said soberly. She gave the meat rose a skeptical look. “You do realize the guests are going to be werewolves, right?”

I cleared my throat. “Listen, Aysel, this is pretty important, and we really don’t need much of your time.”

Aysel looked up at me with an irritated huff. “What is it then?”

“We just need to know if we can look at all the magical items around this place. All the treasures and whatnot that Lucian’s been collecting,” I said.

“Or if there’s a log of everything that he has, that would be even better,” Lola said quickly.

Aysel paused, a wedge of brie in her hand. She stared at us, puzzled. “Magical items? Here? We don’t have any magical items.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Come on, Aysel. You don’t really expect me to believe that, do you? I mean, come on, that whole Seluna thing? With the statues and the shrine and everything? That was a mess. You can’t tell me that Lucian doesn’t have some other weird things hanging around here somewhere.”

Ayse put the brie down and cut it into slices. She ate one thoughtfully before she answered. “The incident with Seluna was…regrettable, yes, but my brother learned his lesson from that experience.”

“Yeah, okay, and if you buy that story, I’ve got a bridge in Brooklyn I’m looking to sell,” Lola said, rolling her eyes. “Sorry, Aysel, but we don’t believe that. Come on, is there a list or not?”

But before Aysel could answer the question, the kitchen door pushed open. We looked over to see Lucian stride into the kitchen, wearing an elaborate robe in crimson silk.

He eyed us both with shining eyes. “*List?!*” he boomed. “Who needs a list when I can give you the grand tour!”

**Episode 5665**

Lola groaned as Lucian stepped over to the marble center island and plucked up one of the prosciutto roses. He popped it into his mouth, ignored Aysel’s reprimanding slap on his hand, and winked at us.

I cleared my throat. “When’s the bachelorette party, Aysel?” I asked.

Lola shoved her elbow into my ribs. “Cali,” she said in a low tone, “that is *not* why we’re here.” She looked up. “Anyway, Lucian, you shouldn’t worry about a tour. You should go back to your sound party—”

“Sound *bath*,” Lucian corrected her.

“Whatever,” Lola said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “We really don’t need you. We already asked Aysel for help.”

Lucian looked annoyed by this, and I felt my defenses rise. I was reminded exactly how touchy Lucian could be, and I shot a glance at Lola, hoping to communicate a warning to her through my eyes, but she wasn’t looking over at me.

“May I remind you that *I* am the *Vanguard Alpha*,” Lucian said imperiously. “Therefore *I* should be the one who shows you around the manor, not my sister.”

Aysel sighed, sounding annoyed, and looked back down at her charcuterie board. “Look what you’ve done. You’ve thrown off the balance, Lucian,” she said sharply, pushing the meat and cheese from the board so she could start again. “Anyway, Cali and her very annoying companion think that we have a bunch of magical artifacts lying around. That’s what they want to see.”

Lucian gasped and his face lit up as he looked at Lola and me. “Is that right?! Well, you must know that everything I collect is magical in its own way!”

Lola scowled. “Is that how you would describe your love affair with that demon, Seluna? Was that *magical* for you? Because it sure as hell wasn’t magical for the rest of us—you almost killed Cali. Remember that part—”

“That kind of magic isn’t quite what we meant,” I said quickly, interrupting Lola’s tirade nervously. “Maybe we could just…um…start with the artifacts you collect. No magic needed.”

I smiled, hesitating to say more of what we were after. I didn’t want to raise any questions that Lucan might ask that I wouldn’t be able to answer.

“Hmm.” Lucian thought this over for a moment, looking pensive. “Well, that might be possible. Where should the tour begin?”

I thought fast, remembering the last time I was here, and what I had seen. Everyone was being evasive as hell, but I knew there must have been a reason why Kendall had been snooping around in the basement, whether anyone wanted to admit it to me or not.

“Well, why don’t we start at the bottom and work our way up?” I said, trying to sound casual, like I’d just thought of it. “Starting in the basement.”

“Dammit!” Aysel swore angrily.

I looked quickly over at her as she threw a piece of prosciutto across the kitchen. The thin slice of cured meat stuck to the far wall.

“I hate doing this,” she snapped. “Maybe I should just hire a caterer and breathe down their neck until it’s done right.”

“Why don’t you take a break and come with us,” Lucian said, taking another prosciutto rose. “You look as though you need to take a breath, and I have much to show you, too.”

“Like what?” Aysel asked, looking up at him.

The history of the Vanguard pack is important for all of us to know,” he said seriously.

Aysel rolled her eyes, but when she looked down at the disarray of meat and cheese and mangled fruit on the cutting board in front of her, she shrugged. “Fine,” she said in a defeated tone. “I’ll come.”

Elle, who’d been quiet through this whole conversation, stepped forward and put a hand on Lucian’s arm. “I want to come too. I’d like to learn about the pack.”

“Of course, my sweet,” Lucan said, smiling down at her.

I couldn’t help but smile when I looked at them. As completely outrageous and annoying as Lucian could be, Elle really did seem happy with him.

Lola, however, blew out a frustrated breath. “At this rate, we’re going to need a freaking bus for this tour.”

But either Lucian didn’t hear her, or he chose to ignore her, because he slipped his arm through Elle’s and clapped his hands. “This way!”

Lola looked annoyed, but she and I followed Lucian out of the kitchen, down a short passageway, and through a closed door. The door led to a flight of stairs which led to a clean, well-lit, finished basement. It was more like another floor than a basement, and Lucian spoke the whole time.

He was going on and on about the history of the Vanguard pack—something about his great-great grandparents and how they’d come over from the “old country,” though he was vague on where that might have been. I wasn’t really listening. I was looking around, looking for anything suspicious—but also looking for the powder room where Greyson and Kendall had burst through when I’d last been down here.

Try as I might, I couldn’t stop remembering the whole scene, and how Kendall had been straddling Greyson, almost like they were…

*Stop*, I told myself firmly.

That was *not* why I was here.

I pushed those thoughts aside and began to look around again. There had to be a good reason why Kendall had been snooping around down here, and I needed to figure out what that was.

As it happened, without really knowing, Lola’s next question helped me out considerably.

“Lucian,” she said, interrupting his monologue about the honor of being a member of the Vanguard pack, “can you tell me a little more about the layout down here?” She looked around. “It seems a little strange for a basement.”

“Of course,” Lucian said, looking pleased. “I designed this all myself, you know.”

“You don’t say,” Lola countered.

She was making fun of him, but Lucian—in typical fashion—didn’t notice.

He pointed to a wall. “That is not a wall, though it obviously looks like one, but is a swinging door panel that leads to a powder room—”

My stomach clenched. “*Oh?* Interesting,” I said, as though this information meant nothing to me.

He nodded and pointed down the passageway. “And the wine cellar is just down this corridor here.” He looked around thoughtfully. “I think it would make the most sense to start in the old wing of the basement. That was actually in existence before we bought the property. We built everything on top of it.”

Lola nodded, but my eyes lingered on the panel that Lucian had pointed out. I couldn’t help but wonder if Kendall had some other agenda. If she *was* in MIB—as Greyson had explained to me—who knew the real reason she had been here that night?

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Kendall—not exactly—it was just that I didn’t trust MIB agents to reveal everything about their motives.

I thought of all of that as Lucian led us along until we reached a narrow corridor with dim light. There were pieces of art on the wall, and when I looked at them, I saw that they looked quite old.

Lucian saw me noticing them and nodded approvingly. “Yes, some of these works go back hundreds of years.”

I nodded. This was all interesting, but I recalled that Lucian liked to exaggerate, and I had to take everything he said with a grain of salt.

Lola had her phone out and was taking frantic notes, cataloging everything we were seeing. She stepped closer to the wall and peered at it, then looked back at Lucian.

“There are drawings on this wall,” she said quietly to me.

I peered at the spot on the wall, remembering that I had seen drawings like this one in Lucian’s wine cellar during the alliance’s party celebrating the victory against the Bitterfangs. I hadn’t known what they were then, and I still had no idea what they were now.

But Lucian offered no explanation. He was already moving on and stepped in front of a glass case holding a pendant on a velvet covered shelf. The pendant had a fierce looking face, and it was ringed by richly colored gems.

Next to him, Elle leaned toward the pendant. “What’s that for?”

“That is believed to possess the power to protect,” Lucian said quietly.

I shot Lola a look and found her looking back at me.

“Protect from what?” she asked.

Lucian shrugged. “Who knows? I just thought it was such a magnificent piece it simply had to be preserved.”

As we walked past it, I shuddered, thinking that such a piece might have come in handy when Seluna had been around.

We continued on, moving past a gaudy painting of a dragon and were just about to turn a corner when Lola stopped suddenly and pointed to an elaborate key that hung on the wall.

She tipped her head, staring at it curiously, then looked at Lucian. “What does this key open?”

**Episode 5666**

Stepping next to Lola, I looked at the key that had caught her attention. It looked old and was so ornate that it was almost hard to identify as a key. But it was—I could see the teeth of it that would fit into the lock.

“Is it some kind of artifact?” I asked, peering closely. “A relic or something like that?”

Aysel let out an annoyed-sounding huff. “It smells musty down here. Are we almost done with this tour?”

“It is *not* musty,” Lucian said, sounding deeply offended. He took a breath, deep and slow, as though he was savoring one of his expensive wines. “*That* is the smell of history.”

Aysel remained deeply unimpressed. “Well, history stinks then.”

Lucian rolled his eyes and stepped past her to look at the key that so fascinated Lola and me. “We found this when we were clearing rubble after the tunnel collapse. Like the pendant, I thought it had a certain visual appeal. Much like myself,” he added with a smirk back at Elle.

When he was looking away, Lola made a gagging face at me behind his back. I shoved an elbow into her ribs to make her stop.

Lucian turned back and took the key from where it hung on the wall and held it for Elle to see. “Perhaps we could make this into a charm for my precious forest rose,” he said. “That sounds ilke a wonderful idea.”

Elle looked at the key for a moment, then crinkled her nose. “It’s rusty.”

“You’re completely right, my forest rose,” Lucian said immediately. “This is not remotely worthy of you.”

“Can I hold it?” I asked.

Lucian put it into my hand. It was a lot heavier than I thought it would be, and I had to use my other hand to support it. I looked at it closely. Elle was right—it was rusty, but not so much that I couldn’t see its elaborate carvings. I looked at the symbols then looked up at Lucian.

“What do the symbols mean?” I asked. I had some trepidation asking the question. I kept thinking of Seluna, and nearly dropped the key when I gave an involuntary shudder at the memory.

Lola reached over and grabbed a lit candle from one of the many wall sconces. She held it over the key so we could see it better.

Lucian looked closely at the key. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But perhaps we could invite the renowned werewolf historian, Noemi V. Collinsworth to examine it.”

Aysel groaned. “Or you could just leave it on the wall, dear brother.”

“Where it won’t summon any demons,” Lola added.

“Does it actually open anything?” I wondered.

“It’s too late for that,” Lucian said with a sickly-sweet smile at Elle. “My sweet forest rose has already opened the door to my heart.”

This elicited another round of gagging from Lola.

I thought Lucian was obviously over the top, but his love for Elle seemed genuine, and it just made me smile.

“Well, it is a key, it must open something,” I reasoned.

Lucian took the key from my hands and hung it back on the wall. “Perhaps it did once, but who knows now. Let’s move on, shall we?”

He led the way around the corner and further down the hall, but Lola and I lingered for a moment longer.

Lola typed furiously on her phone, adding the key to her “Suspicious” list. “Do you think he’s telling the truth?” she whispered when she was done.

We both peeped around the corner, spying on Lucian as he headed down the hall. He had his arm around Elle, with Aysel following after.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. How can you ever tell with Lucian?”

“Yeah, good point,” Lola muttered. “He’s a natural-born liar.”

“He *exaggerates*,” I corrected. “That’s not exactly the same as lying.”

“Whatever,” Lola said, not looking convinced by my sense of nuance.

“Come on,” I urged, and she and I hurried after the rest of the group.

Lucian was standing before a plinth, gesturing toward a piece of stone. “—and this is what remains of an ancient sculpture of a distant relative from one of the first packs that roamed the earth,” he said.

Lola and I looked at the sculpture, which looked a lot more like a piece of broken rock.

“Do you see the claw there?” Lucian said, pointing.

I squinted. Maybe it was a claw. Or maybe a spoon?

“How do you know this…*thing* is a relative of anything other than the rock it once belonged to?” Lola asked dubiously.

Lucian’s eyes went wide with indignation. “Because it was authenticated by none other than Professor Collingsworth herself!”

“Ah, I see,” Lola grunted. “I’m sure it was.”

I gritted my teeth. I knew Lola wasn’t Lucian’s biggest fan, but I wished she would take it easier on him. We needed him to show us everything, and that he was actually letting us walk around was kind of amazing. If we pissed him off, Lucian could very easily choose to throw us out. He was very fickle that way.

I tried to communicate that to her through a very pointed look, but Lola wasn’t really paying attention, and I didn’t know if it did the trick.

We kept walking down the corridor until we came to a point where the corridor intersected with another passageway. But this one looked different. It wasn’t nicely finished—this one had roughly hewn stone walls that curved off into total darkness.

I peered into the gloom. “Where does that go?” I wondered.

“Well…” Lucian looked uncharacteristically unsure. “I can’t say for certain.”

“What?” I asked in surprise. “You don’t *know*?”

“This is one of the original tunnels from before the palace was built—”

“And you’ve never looked into it?” Lola demanded.

“Ever since the collapse, it’s become far too unstable,” Lucian said, shaking his head. “It’s not safe to send anyone in. I thought it best that we don’t try.”

Lola stepped next to me as we looked into the darkness of the tunnel. My mind began to wander, and I felt a chill shiver up my spine. I could smell the air that wafted out of it—it was cold and dank, and I couldn’t pierce the darkness of the depths with my eyes.

“Can you see anything in there?” I muttered to Lola. I figured if anyone could see anything, it would be her, given that she had the benefit of werewolf vision, which was heightened.

Lola narrowed her eyes. “I can just see stone walls.”

The others had stepped away, so when Lola stepped into the passageway, I was the only one there to grab her arm and yank her backward.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. “Didn’t you hear Lucian? It’s not safe.”

“I know that,” Lola said. “I’m not going all the way, I’m just going to take a few steps, check things out.”

She shook off my arm and stepped into the tunnel.

I looked over at Lucian, Elle, and Aysel, who were walking down the passageway, then back toward Lola, who was stepping into the darkness. My fear kept ratcheting upward as I watched her walk into the shadows.

“Caliana?”

My heart gave a leap as Lucian called out to me. I turned to look at him.

He raised his eyebrows. “Are you coming? I have so much more to show you.”

“Yep, coming,” I said, forcing a smile. “Be right there!” I turned back to Lola. “*Come on!*” I hissed at her.

But then I stopped. Because now I couldn’t see Lola at all. She had disappeared into the darkness.

*Shit.*

“Lola!” I hissed, peering into the blackness. “Where are you?”

Heart thundering in my chest, I took a step into the tunnel.

“I found something.”

The sound of Lola’s voice nearly sent me into cardiac arrest. “Where are you?” I demanded, looking around.

A hand grabbed hold of my arm and towed me forward. Closer, I could see Lola in the gloom, and she was standing beside what looked like a closed door. She spoke before I could ask:

“It won’t open,” she said. “It’s either rusted shut or it’s locked.”  
 The door was wooden, and there was a curious little window in the middle of it, covered with thick iron bars. I tried to peer through it, but it was too dark to see anything.

Looking down at the keyhole, I saw the lock was quite rusted, but it did get me thinking, and I looked up at Lola.

“Do you think that key from the wall would open this?”

Lola grinned at me. “I don’t know, but there’s only one way to find out.”

She started back toward the corridor—presumably to get the key—but I grabbed hold of her arm to stop her.

“No, wait,” I whispered. “We shouldn’t go in there without Kendall.”

Lola turned back to me, her brows drawn down in confusion. “Kendall? What are you talking about, Cali? What the hell does Kendall have to do with any of this?”

**Episode 5667**

**Artemis**

*You slept with my wife!*

I turned to look at Marius but found that he looked just as shocked as the rest of us.

“Is that true?” I asked, as the innkeeper’s words continued to echo through the silence of the clearing.

Marius darted a glance at the stout man, his own hand moving to the knife tucked into the belt at his waist. “I don’t know…*is* that true?” he asked the man.

Gods, this man.

The innkeeper looked thoroughly exercised, and I felt an odd pang arcing through my chest. I was almost sure it was jealousy, which surprised me. It wasn’t as though this kind of behavior from Marious came as a surprise—not at all. I knew—probably better than anyone else in this group—about Marius’s past. He was usually a lover for a night, and not much longer. I knew from my own experience that being a bounty hunter kept you on the move and it made it hard to develop connections. Beyond that, Marius was just…Marius.

I had certainly fallen for his charms in the past. Even after I had grown wise to his game and known better, I still fell for it every now and then back when we were both hunters. In fact, I’d developed feelings for him and run away from him as quickly as I could. It felt like that had been eons ago.

But things felt different now… *He* was different now. Ever since I had returned this time to seek out my father. He seemed more mature. He had been supportive and understanding and willing to accept my boundaries. Somewhere along the way, it felt as though Marius had grown up. Maybe I had too, because for the first time, I didn’t want to run from what I felt for him.

But even knowing all this about him, it still didn’t feel great to be reminded of Marius’s past like this—right in front of my face.

I glanced at Rishika, wondering if this is what my relationship with her made Marius feel.

“Does it matter? Really?” Adair asked, his voice snapping me from my thoughts. “We’re all just looking to pay you for a hot meal and a warm bed. Surely all of our coins are worth more than anything that happened, or didn’t happen, between this man and your wife,” he finished, shooting a dirty look at Marius.

Tabitha’s eyes went wide, and she elbowed Adair in the ribs. “No offense,” she added quickly to the innkeeper, who was going red in the face.

“*Does it matter*?” the innkeeper repeated, looking intense. “*Does it matter*?! Of course it matters! It was the best thing that you ever did!” he shouted at Marius.

“Sorry, what?” I asked, shocked.

Marius stared at the man. “It…*was*?”

“*Yes!*” the innkeeper exclaimed. “Without you, I would never have learned how to please my wife in bed.” He shook his head with a wide smile. “Thanks to you, I’ve learned all the little tricks of Marius Raistlin, and now I’m unstoppable in the sheets!”

I pressed my lips together, trying valiantly not to burst out laughing.

“Oh, um…*good*,” Marius said, nodding. “I’m so glad that our pleasure could bring…the two of you together.”

“And it’s so passionate,” the man went on, nodding emphatically. “Better than when we were newlyweds. I’d like to see *you* do better!”

Marius held up his hands. “I’m not interested in your wife, sir. Just those rooms my friend mentioned.”

“Of course!” the innkeeper said with a chuckle. “The famous bounty hunter can stay here anytime.” The smile slid off his face, replaced with a watchful, somber look. “Just watch out who you chat up in the tavern. Not everyone here will be as happy to see you as I am.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s true,” I said, with a sideways glance at Marius. “Anyway, those rooms?”

“Yes, come in, come in,” the man said, waving us into the inn.

We followed him into the lobby, which was low-ceilinged and dim. Wall candles lit the space, and beyond the lobby I could see the bar. There was the smell of old stew and stale beer—a smell I remembered well from my bounty hunter days.

“How many rooms would you like?” the innkeeper asked, walking behind the counter and pulling out a leatherbound guest book.

“Two,” I said, without thinking.

The innkeeper nodded and handed over two sets of keys. Adair stepped forward to pay, and as I looked over at Rishika and Marius, I felt my face heat with a blush.

“Sorry,” I said quietly. “I wasn’t thinking. We can get a third room.”

Marius shook his head. “No, it’s fine. I can sleep on the floor,” he said, and stepped away.

Finished paying, Adair turned to me and held his hand out. “My key? Tabitha and I are going to our room. Maybe we’ll meet you later for a meal, but we should rest now.” And before I could say anything in response, he turned away and began escorting Tabitha toward the stairs.

I looked over at Rishika. “Should we eat first?”

She nodded. “I’m starving.”

I was too, so we headed toward the tavern. It was busy, but there was a table free near the fireplace, and we walked toward it.

“Keep your head down,” I said quietly to Marius. “You caught a lucky break with the innkeeper, but we don’t need anyone else recognizing you.”

Marius nodded and dropped his head, and when we sat down, I pushed him into the chair in the farthest corner, as far away from the firelight as possible, so he would be obscured from view. It wasn’t perfect, but it was the best I could do.

As we settled in, Rishika nodded toward the stairs.

“Adair and Tabitha really rushed off. Do you think we should bring them some food? We were traveling for a long time. They’re probably hungry.”

Marius raised his arm, flagging down the barmaid, who was passing by. He carefully covered the bottom of his face with the other hand as he did so and shook his head. “No, come on. They’re fine. They probably just wanted to have sex. It’s not like Celeste was giving them any breathing room.”

“Can we stop talking about sex?” I said quickly. “Especially when it concerns my uncle?”

Marius and Rishika exchanged a look.

“Yeah, sure. Sorry,” Marius said, glancing up at the barmaid, who had just stepped over to our table and had clearly heard what I’d just said.

She blushed. “Sorry, do you need…another moment?”

Marius dropped his hand and smiled at her, turning on the full blast of his handsome charm. “Not at all, love. We’ll each have the special and three ales. Thank you, sweetheart.”

The waitress blushed even pinker and nodded, then hurried away.

I glared at Marius, annoyed with his obvious flirting.

“What’s your problem now?” he asked.

“Problem? What problem?” I asked hotly. “I don’t have a problem with anything.”

He stared back at me. “You clearly have a problem with me right now.”

“I really don’t,” I snapped. I shifted my shoulders, feeling uncomfortable and frustrated. “Let’s just eat and try to focus. I want to talk about the Ceruvela Mountains.”

“What do you want to talk about?” Rishika asked.

I glanced around the tavern. It was fairly full, and I looked into the faces of the people sitting at the tables nearby. “We should talk to a few people here. See if anyone here knows the area or could point us in the right direction.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Rishika said slowly. “But we need to be careful.”

“Careful about what?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Careful about asking too many questions to strangers if we don’t know too much about them, right?”

Marius considered this. “Maybe,” he said. “But we have to consider that we also won’t get anywhere if we don’t ask around.”

“Exactly,” I agreed.

“I think we ask now and deal with the consequences later,” Marius said.

“Agreed,” I said. I glanced around again, trying to decide who nearby looked like a local, or perhaps a well-traveled merchant who might know something about the Ceruvela Mountains. Marius was right—we didn’t know exactly where we were going, and we weren’t going to get anywhere at all if we didn’t start taking some risks and asking around.

But as I looked around, I spied a group of men walking through the tavern. For a moment I had nearly convinced myself that they had nothing to do with us, but when they stared straight at our table as they walked toward us, I knew we had trouble.

*Shit.*

My stomach clenched, and I looked over at Marius, thinking he had been recognized, but he looked as confused as I felt.

The men were closing in, and they drew weapons—a staff, a bow, a knife, and several swords. They surrounded our table in an instant, glaring at Rishika.

“Hey!” the biggest man, with a crop of bright red curls, grunted. “Werewolves aren’t welcome here.”

**Episode 5668**

**Greyson**

*What the hell does Kendall have to do with any of this?*

My heart seemed to sputter to a stop, and I ducked my head to avoid smacking it on the low ceiling as I broke away from Armin and hurried toward the sound of Cali’s voice. I had just heard Lola’s question and I knew there wasn’t a lot of time to spare—I could *not* have Cali answering anything about Kendall.

But I was too late, and I heard Cali’s voice—

“Oh…it’s just that Kendall really loves spelunking,” she said awkwardly.

There was a pause, then—

“That figures,” Lola muttered. “That bitch is fit as hell. But this is a tunnel, not a cave.”

I moved even faster and managed to smack my head on some low-hanging rock. “*Dammit*,” I hissed.

Both girls went quiet.

“Greyson?” Cali called out. “Is that you?”

Holding my hand to my stinging head, I pushed on and found Cali and Lola standing by a door, looking at me, shocked. Cali was holding a rusted key in her hand.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

Behind me, I could hear Armin’s heavy breathing as he caught up with me.

“He brought me down here,” I said, gesturing toward the Vanguard attendant.

Cali looked at Armin, then back at me. “Okay, but why are you here? I thought you were going to talk to—”

*Don’t talk about her!* I mind linked to Cali desperately. I could not have her bringing up Kendall.

Cali clamped her mouth shut and looked nervously over at Lola, who had started eyeing me suspiciously.

“Jay is making lasagna, and he…told me that you two were here,” I said quickly, making the story up as I went. “He said you’d want to know.”

Somehow—miraculously—I’d managed to find a reasonable explanation, because Lola sighed.

“My Jay does make a mean lasagna,” she admitted. “I hope Ravi doesn’t eat it all.”

I looked over at Cali. *Why are you here?* I asked her through the mind link. *With Lola? Talking about Kendall?*

*We just found this key, and then Lola found this old door, and then I thought it had something to do with what Kendall was researching.* She paused. *Sorry. I think I just got carried away.*

I smiled. *It’s fine*. I never could get mad at Cali.

“Okay, so are we going to check out this door or what?” Lola asked, interrupting the silent conversation she didn’t know was going on.

“No, we probably shouldn’t,” I said, trying to sound casual, though I felt anything but. There was no way I wanted Cali getting involved in any of…whatever the hell this was. That was why I had rushed over here as soon as I’d gotten back to the pack house and Jay had told me what Cali and Lola were up to. He *was* making a lasagna, but that wasn’t why I was here.

Cali glanced at the door. “It looks a little strange, but if this has anything to do with the sounds you all heard, you don’t need to worry about me, because—whatever they are—they don’t affect me.”

“Can I see that?” I asked, reaching out and pulling the key from Cali. I did want to look at the thing, but I was also thinking that if Cali was onto something, and if this key had anything to do with Kendall’s investigation, then that meant it involved MIB. Which meant that it could not involve Cali on *any* level. Not to mention Lola or—for the love of god—Lucian.

I thought about Kendall’s last threat before she’d kicked me out of her apartment. I wasn’t exactly sure how credible that threat was, but given that she was MIB, and not prone to fucking around, I knew I had to at least entertain the possibility that she was serious.

At least Cali hadn’t said anything to expose the truth about Kendall to Lola. I’d been freaked out when I’d heard them talking about it, but I knew I shouldn’t have worried. I trusted Cali, and I knew she would have ultimately realized what she was saying and stopped herself before giving anything away.

Still, though, I was glad that I’d brushed off Armin’s dismissal upstairs and made it down here myself.

Lola made an annoyed huffing sound. “So what? Are we just going to put the key back and walk away from this *very* promising looking door in an unexplored cave wall without even *trying* to see what’s behind it?”

“Yeah,” I said shortly. “That’s exactly what we’re going to do.’

“*Why?*” Lola demanded. She looked surprised and frustrated. “Why are we doing that? I thought we were going to try to find out the cause of that sound. And”—she gestured toward the door—“aren’t you at least a little bit curious about what we’d find behind that door?”

I shook my head. “Whatever’s behind that door really isn’t our business. This is the Vanguard palace, and they have a right to explore their tunnels as they see fit.”

“That’s correct,” Armin sniffed.

I glanced over my shoulder at Armin, then looked at Cali. “You told me you were coming here to ask Aysel for a list of Vanguard items, not go exploring the palace all on your own, late at night, in unstable tunnel systems.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “She’s not on her own—she’s with me.”

I wasn’t sure that was the selling point Lola clearly thought it was, but I kept that to myself.

“Where did you get this anyway?” I asked, turning the key over in my hand.

But before Cali had a chance to say, we all turned when we heard another voice shout—

“Greyson Evers! Redwood Alpha! Whatever brings you here?”

Cali, Lola, Armin, and I all turned to see Lucian, Elle, and Aysel walking toward us.

Shit. This night just kept getting better and better. Running into Lucian was not on my list of preferred ways to spend my evening, yet here I was, and I tried to keep the scowl off my face.

“Lucian,” I said with a nod.

Lucian looked between Cali and me as his mouth stretched into a grin. “Just can’t keep away from your mate, can you?” He shook his head as he reached for Elle’s hand and kissed it. “I know just how that is. Any moment away from my beloved forest rose feels like an eternity.”

“*Oh my god*,” Lola muttered under her breath, sounding disgusted.

I ignored her. “Yeah, I guess so,” I said vaguely. “I just came looking for Cali and Lola.”

Aysel sighed, but when her eyes scanned over to Armin, her bored expression brightened considerably. “Armin! There you are! Let’s go upstairs, I need you to show me how to do a proper prosciutto roll.”

Armin stepped forward and offered Aysel his arm. “I would be honored.”

Aysel accepted his arm, and the two of them stepped out of the gloomy tunnel.

Lola watched them disappear around the corner. “I don’t think the prosciutto is the only thing that’s going to be rolled tonight,” she said, shaking her head.

Cali elbowed her, but she just shrugged.

Lucian’s eyes drifted to the rusted key in my hand. “Is that my key?” His brows furrowed. “My word—why is everyone so fascinated by that key all of a sudden?”

I opened my mouth to assure Lucian that I wasn’t when Lola spoke first—

“We think it might open this door,” she said quickly.

“Door?” Lucan asked.

“Yeah, this one,” she said, pointing to the roughly hewn door with the rusted lock and strange, barred window at the center. “Doesn’t this keyhole look like that key might fit?”

Lucian took a step closer. “That is strange…” he said, transfixed by the door.

“You didn’t know this was here?” I asked.

“We haven’t had a chance to explore these tunnels,” he murmured.

Cali glanced upward. “Yeah, you mentioned that. Didn’t you say it was because this part of the basement was unstable?”

Lucian ignored this question. He pulled the key from my hand and stepped toward the door, shoving the key hurriedly into the lock. Both the lock and the key were rusted with disuse, but Lucian was strong, and he pushed and turned them hard.

The lock gave a loud, grating, protesting squeak, but eventually we all heard a resounding click.

“It worked!” he exclaimed triumphantly. There was a door handle—also rusted—but nothing happened when he turned it, so he threw his shoulder against the wooden door. It finally gave with a groan, but when it swung in, there was a loud, piercing sound that cut through the darkness like a knife.

It entered my ears and sliced through my body like a burning hot sword, lighting my nerves on fire. I was only vaguely aware of it beyond the sudden, screaming knowledge of my own blinding pain, but everyone around me put their hands to their ears and dropped, shaking, to the ground.

Everyone but Cali.

**Episode 5669**

**Xavier**

When she returned from the bathroom and got back into bed, Ava rolled to look at me.

“What was it like, when you lost your wolf?” she asked.

I was lying on my back, looking up at the ceiling, but at her question, I looked over at her, surprised. That whole mess in London had been such a shit show, I was surprised she’d even brought it up. “Why do you ask?” I wondered. “When I had Greyson’s wolf? You saw it—it was a fucking nightmare—”

“No, not that. That’s not what I’m talking about,” she said, shaking her head. She looked at me for a moment, her blue eyes wide and searching. “I mean when…” She swallowed hard, and looked almost scared, which was such a strange expression to see on her face it scared me. Almost nothing scared Ava. “I mean when I was in the spirit world.”

My stomach twisted as her meaning sank in. She meant when she was in the spirit world—after I’d sent her there. But she hadn’t said that, so I didn’t say it either. It didn’t matter, though. Spoken or not, it was there, hanging in the air between us.

I thought about the question, trying to understand the meaning behind it. It was so strange that she’d brought it up. That time was such a dark part of the past for both of us. The pack wars, the death of my mother—by her hand. Her death—by my hand. *Dark* was a fucking understatement. And yes, I’d lost my wolf because of that, but I’d gotten it back because of Cali—that’s how Cali had come into my life. Ava knew that, so it made it even stranger that she’d brought it up—but I kept that to myself too. She’d asked a question, so I just tried to answer what she’d asked.

“I felt…” I sighed, trying to think back to a time I tried never, ever to think about. “Incomplete. Lost. Angry. Depressed.” I shook my head. “Why are you bringing this up?”

She reached out and stroked my hair, her eyes searching mine. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

I frowned. “That’s not an answer to my question. What made you suddenly think of me and my missing wolf?”

She dropped her hand. She didn’t answer but turned so her back was to me. Our bodies curved together, almost instinctively. She felt warm and soft, and my body hummed to feel her, but something in my brain buzzed.

“Ava?”

Still she didn’t answer.

I run my fingers softly up her thigh.

Her breath hitched. “X?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it you or your wolf who loves me?”

I froze, thrown by the question. “What?”

She flipped around to face me. “If you lost your wolf again, would you still love me?”

“I’m not going to lose my wolf again, Ava,” I said firmly. “I have no intention of ever setting foot in the Fae world again.”

“That isn’t what I asked you.”

I sighed. “I don’t think it would make a difference. I love you. Isn’t that all that really matters?”

Her eyes searched my face. “I hope you’re right.”

“What is this really about?” I asked, pulling slightly back from her.

She didn’t answer for a long moment. Then she leaned toward me and brushed a kiss across my lips. “I’m just thinking about the pack. Our pack.”

I frowned. “I’m not seeing the connection.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you the Alpha?”

My brain was scrambling to keep up with what felt like a seemingly random assortment of conversational topics. “Of course I am.”

She nodded. “I don’t want them to see us in a bad place, but at the same time…”

I nodded. “We need to be united. The good of the pack is more important. Not that what we’re going through *isn’t* important, but—”

“I agree,” she said, cutting me off. “I don’t want anything we’re going through to affect the pack. No more than it already has. And I know it already has.”

“We’ll handle it. *I’ll* handle it. *I’m* the Alpha of the Samaras,” I said firmly.

“Good. Glad to hear you say it,” she said, raising her brows. “But I’m still pissed at you.” She gave me a shove. “So don’t think you’re staying in this bed tonight.”

This was *not* what I wanted to hear, but I kept my mouth shut. I got out of bed, feeling frustrated. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“And then you can leave,” Ava said, turning her back on me again.

Fucking hell.

I headed into the bathroom and flipped on the water, thoughts of Ava running through my head. Having her intoxicating scent on me only made my mind more difficult to clear.

As I waited for the water to heat up, I let my mind wander, wondering why Ava had been asking about my wolf—if it was me or my wolf who loved her.

I was sure it had to do with the insecurity she was feeling now that she knew how I felt about Cali.

Shit. I wasn’t sure how I was going to fix this situation, and I wasn’t anywhere near an answer or what I was going to do—or even if this was what I wanted.

The reality was that I wanted both of them. That was my entire problem. No—my real problem was that I wasn’t built for this. I had only ever wanted one woman. My mate. And now I had two.

The bathroom was filled with steam, and I stepped into the shower with a groan. The water was burning hot, and I stood beneath it, trying to let it work out some of the tension in my shoulders as the water rolled down my back.

But as my mind wandered, it wandered to Cali. What would she think of all of this? Would she be ashamed of me for falling into bed with Ava again? I’d just had phone sex with her the other day—and hearing that daring side of her had been such a turn-on for me.

I shook my head with a smile, wondering where that had come from, and before I knew it, the memory of that had aroused me again.

*Fuck.*

I could feel my wolf reacting to the thoughts of Cali. He hadn’t gotten nearly enough of her lately. She’d brought him back in London, and I just felt insatiable in general, but there was something about Cali that just really got me going.

I leaned against the cold tile of the shower wall, trying to stop thinking about her, but it was impossible. It was like I could picture her, walking into the bathroom and closing the door behind her. Dropping her clothes into a quiet pile on the floor and opening the glass door of the shower to join me under the water. I could practically feel her hands reaching out to me, running up my chest, and down…

“Fuck…” I hissed, reaching down to wrap my hand around my cock. I didn’t want to, but it was like I wasn’t able to stop the need I felt for her that just kept urging me onward.

I thought of her, standing with me in the shower. I thought of turning her around and taking her from behind, so her breasts would be pressed against the glass of the shower door. The thought of how she’d scream and curl her toes as she came pushed me over the edge, and I braced my hand against the shower wall as I came, hard, gasping and swallowing back Cali’s name.

*Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.*

I shook my head, furious with myself.

I stayed that way as I finished my shower quickly and stepped out, toweling off more roughly than strictly necessary.

When I stepped back into the room, I saw that Ava was gone, which made my stomach clench with guilt. I looked at the bed, which was still mussed, and her perfect, intoxicating scent lingered.

She’d told me I couldn’t, but it probably wouldn’t have been the best idea to sleep here tonight anyway. It would be too…complicated. Too confusing. Too…too everything.

Stepping over to the dresser, I pulled open a drawer and grabbed a pair of black joggers and a black T-shirt. I pulled them on, then pushed my hand through my wet hair. Only when I’d gotten dressed did I notice my phone was buzzing. I picked it up and was startled to see that I had five missed calls. I scrolled quickly through the notifications and saw they were all from Colton.

An alarm began to ring in my head. That couldn’t be good.

As I held my phone, it began to buzz again. I was getting another call—from Colton.

“Colton, what the fuck?” I asked, answering right away. “Is everything okay?”

“Xavier,” Colton’s voice was filled with urgency, “I need you here! *Now*.”

**Episode 5670**

My heart thundered in my chest as everyone around me suddenly dropped to their knees. Greyson put his hands to his head, Lola was gasping, Lucian was rocking back and forth, and Elle’s eyes were screwed tightly shut as she curled in on herself. All of them were in obvious pain from a source I could only guess at.

I dropped down to Greyson’s side in a heartbeat and grasped onto his arm. “What is it?” I asked him desperately. “Is it the sound again?”

But he didn’t answer. I wasn’t even sure if he heard me.

I looked frantically at the door Lucian had just pushed open. Maybe it had been armed with some kind of an alarm—but that didn’t make any sense. Why didn’t I hear anything? No, I just knew my instinct was right—it had to be that sound that Kendall had been sent here to investigate.

I jumped to my feet, thinking that if I could just pull the door shut, maybe I could make the sound—and the pain—stop for all of them. It was agony to see Greyson and Lola and Elle—and even Lucian—in so much obvious pain. I grasped the handle of the door and tried to pull it shut, but it was so heavy. It didn’t move an inch. How the hell had Lucian been able to shoulder this thing open so easily? I knew he was strong, but this door seemed immovable.

I was straining, using all my strength, and was just starting to wonder if my magic could be of some help when the door began to move. It was slow, but inch by inch, it started to give.

“Thank god,” I breathed.

But then the ground beneath me gave a sudden jolt, sending me painfully to my knees. I looked down at the stone beneath me as cracks began to appear, splitting the rock. They spread all around me, cobwebbing out and up the walls, into the ceiling. Suddenly, rocks from overhead began to tumble downward.

Panic was starting to set in as I scrambled to my feet, gritted my teeth, and grabbed hold of the door handle again. I pulled with all my might and finally managed to pull the door shut. And as suddenly as it had started, the rumbling stopped.

It was eerily quiet, and for a moment no one moved, then Greyson stood up and pulled me into his arms. I could feel his heart beating hard in his chest as he held me close.

“Are you okay?” he murmured.

“Am *I* okay?” I asked, pushing back so I could look up into his face, which looked pale in the dimness. “You’re the one who was hurt. Are *you* okay?”

Greyson shook his head, as though to clear it, and next to him, Lucian, Elle, and Lola got slowly to their feet.

Lucian brushed debris from his silk robe and looked around. “Is everyone okay? My dear one, are you alright?” he asked, turning to Elle.

“If getting blasted by some deafening noise is no big deal, then yeah, I’m great,” Lola snorted.

One by one, they all turned to look at the door.

Lucian stepped toward it and pulled the key from the lock. “I suppose we won’t be opening that again anytime soon,” he said stiffly.

I opened my mouth to ask him what he thought might have caused the noise, but stopped when Greyson gave me a swift command through the mind link—

*Not now.*

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The car ride back to the pack house was tense and quiet. For me at least. I was dying to talk to Greyson about what had just happened and what the hell was going on with Kendall, but it was impossible with Lola in the car. Besides, she was asking her own questions.

“What even was that?” she’d exploded when we’d first climbed in. “It was like the sound was coming from somewhere inside my brain! And you didn’t hear it, Cali! That’s nuts!”

And she just hadn’t stopped.

“There just has to be something behind all of this,” she just kept saying. Then, finally, when we were almost home, “I mean, is it possible it’s all just a big coincidence?”

She was sitting in the back and leaned forward, looking between Greyson and me expectantly. I felt a little guilty, keeping her in the dark about what I knew, but what could I say? I wasn’t going to betray Greyson’s trust in me.

Greyson pulled the car into the driveway and stopped in front of the house.

Lola kicked the door open. “I’m starving. If Jay didn’t save me a big hunk of lasagna, he’s sleeping in the shed tonight—*after* he makes me my own personal lasagna.”

Greyson and I followed Lola into the house, but we headed up the stairs while she went into the kitchen. When we were finally alone in our room, I shut the door.

“How did it go with Kendall?” I asked before Greyson could even sit down.

“Pretty chilly,” Greyson said with a shrug. “She was less than thrilled to see me.”

“What did she say?” I wondered.

“Said she rejected me, and the bond, and had no interest in being mated,” he said, looking tense.

I frowned at him, feeling frustrated. “I don’t get it. If she doesn’t want the bond either, why wouldn’t she try to help get rid of it? MIB is so freaking mysterious, we have no idea what tools they could have at their disposal—”

“I agree,” Greyson interrupted, “but she was not interested in looking into it herself, and there wasn’t much more I could do,” he said, pulling off his jacket and tossing it on the bed. “She’s not saying anything, I can’t force it out of her, and she made it pretty clear that if I came back there asking more questions, she was going to make me pay.”

“*What?*” I gasped. “Are you *serious*?” I felt my hackles rise. The idea of someone—anyone—threatening Greyson sent my protective instinct into overdrive. “She can’t do that—”

“Love, it’s fine,” Greyson said, stepping toward me.

“No, it’s *not* fine,” I countered. “You don’t want to be in this any more than she does, so where does she get off being so unhelpful?” I demanded.

“I agree,” he said with a shrug. “I’m choosing you, love. I want you. But I don’t think this works like the *due destini*… Otherwise, my choice is you.”

I dragged my hand through my hair, feeling so frustrated I could scream. The *due destini* just created so much pressure in my life and the lives of my mates. To be chosen by Greyson and to be in the horrible push and pull situation—guilt sat in my stomach like a stone.

A sick feeling swept over me, and I turned away from Greyson, unable to look at him.

“Love, no—” he said, reaching for me. He grabbed hold of my wrist and pulled gently, turning me so I looked at him again. “I didn’t say that to make you feel bad. I just said it to show you that it doesn’t seem to work that way. It’s just another piece of a very complicated puzzle.”

Swallowing hard, I nodded, but still couldn’t bring myself to look at him.

Seeing this, Greyson stepped closer still and put his finger beneath my chin. He tipped my head gently upward until I looked him in the eyes. “Cali, look at me.”

I looked at him.

His grey eyes blazed. “I love you, Caliana Hart. You’re my whole world. Please don’t forget that, even with all the craziness happening around us.”

“But…” I took a deep breath. This was hard to say, and I had to force the words out. “Greyson, you owe it to yourself to at least see…what this could be with Kendall. You are mated, after all.”

Greyson looked into my eyes. “I appreciate your openness, I really do. It’s something I haven’t always afforded you with the *due destini*, so I know that this is hard for you to do it now. Let’s just…” He hesitated for a moment. “Let’s just keep taking this one step at a time, okay? If there’s a way to end this with Kendall, I’ll find it. I promise,” he assured me.

I nodded. “Okay,” I breathed, feeling my anxiety beginning to lessen. I had felt so worried and so anxious, and all of that had gotten worse after what happened at the Vanguard mansion. But it felt good to talk it out with Greyson. It wasn’t that we had resolved anything tonight, but it just felt good to have talked it out. It made things feel less scary somehow.

“Yeah,” I said, taking another breath. “We’ll just take it one step at a time.”

Greyson moved his hand so he was cradling my cheek, and then—without needing to say anything at all—he leaned down, pressing his lips against mine. The kiss began slow, but heated quickly, and I felt my body respond to him. It was as though the kiss was a promise of something more to come…Something neither of us wanted to stop.

**Episode 5671**

It was so easy to open myself up to Greyson like I had so many times before. Our lovemaking was easy and comfortable yet exciting, and Greyson always knew just what to do to meet my needs.

I loved the feel of him. He was so passionate, and a little possessive—which was different, coming from him—but I welcomed it given everything that was going on. I couldn’t blame him for how he felt, and it wasn’t like he ever treated me poorly when those types of emotions were churning inside of him.

We’d been through so much but moments like this…both of us seeking pleasure in each other’s bodies almost always felt like the reset we needed, a way to confirm that we were still connected and would always be in sync.

Today, he was fierce, hungry, and insistent. I met his passion with my own, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my body against his as he kissed me deeply. Things began to escalate quickly; he tore his lips from mine and brought them lower so that his mouth could capture my breasts as soon as he’d worked me out of my shirt.

He brushed his teeth gently across my nipples and he followed that up with a gentle, furtive flick of his tongue, then he took each one into his mouth and sucked until his name was a breath on my lips.

He paused to wriggle out of his pants, and I watched him, giggling as he pulled off my pants and my panties and then slotted his heavy, broad body between my legs. I could feel his erection pressing against my center, and I raised my hips to grind against it.

The feeling of his desire and need for me was the most powerful aphrodisiac, and when he spread my legs and took himself in his hand, preparing to enter me, I smiled, overcome with excitement and anticipation.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered in my ear as he slid inside of me, pumping his hips to drive himself deeper. “And you feel so fucking good.”

I wrapped my legs around his torso to draw him in and it was like a dam broke, his body moving quickly against mine, sliding up and down, pressing me into the mattress as he drove in again and again.

“I love you,” I said, trying to catch my breath but gasping as Greyson increased his speed, spurred on by my words. “I love you, and nothing will ever change that.”

Greyson kissed me in response, grunting softly as he rolled over onto his back. He dragged me on top of him, and I kissed him while pinning his hands to the bed.

“What are you doing?” he asked with a smile.

“Just taking control.”

I let go of him just long enough to grab his shaft and position it against my sex, then I slowly lowered down, taking him in inch by inch while he pivoted his hips up to drive himself in deeper.

Once he was inside of me completely, I rocked my hips, enjoying the sensation of him sweeping around inside of me. I leaned forward to kiss him and pinned his hands down again, then I dropped my hips as fast as I could while my breasts dragged and bounced against his chest.

Greyson arched against me, closed his eyes and bit his lips. “Cali, you don’t know what you’re doing to me.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” I said. I went faster then, our bodies bouncing and slamming together on the bed, our breath coming in hard, loud gasps.

“I don’t want to come yet,” Greyson said, and then he was getting up and positioning me on my hands and knees. He swept my hair up into his fists and pulled it gently. “This is how I want to come, but you first,” he said.

He penetrated me again, and I cried out, driving my hips back against him because I wanted to feel all of him inside of me again and I didn’t want to wait.

“God, you’re so hot. So fucking sexy, Cali. I can’t get enough of you.” He let go of my hair, and it fell in a curtain around my face. Then he grabbed my behind, squeezed it with both hands, and used it as an anchor to pull me back and forth against his hips, sliding me up and down his shaft.

“Greyson, oh my—I think—I think I’m going to—”

I couldn’t finish the sentence, all thoughts and words melting away as a blissful feeling built and spilled over between my legs.

Greyson went faster, not stopping even when I collapsed onto my stomach after the pleasure of it overwhelmed me. He laid his body flat on top of mine, lifting his hips up high only to slam down against me, nailing me to the bed.

My orgasm hit as a warm, mind-blowing rush. I grasped the bed sheets and arched my ass up against Greyson as he assailed me harder, faster, tipping my climax into overdrive.

A second later he tensed, rose to his knees, and thrusted fast. “*Fuck.* I’m coming, love, stay with me.”

Still reeling from my own orgasm, I stayed right where I was until Greyson’s movements began to grow slow and languid.

When he was finished, he dropped down on the bed beside me, but I was already getting up.

“Wait, where are you going?” he asked, reaching for me.

“I’m suddenly in the mood for tea,” I said, slipping into my robe and heading for the door.

“Tea sounds wonderful.”

“Earl grey?”

“Earl grey. I’ll be down in a sec, love,” he said.

I went downstairs, my legs still wobbly from the lovemaking, and put the kettle on. Greyson appeared a little later and kissed me on the cheek before he took a seat at the kitchen island.

“Are you okay after everything?” I asked him.

“I feel fantastic. I always do after spending quality time with you.”

I blushed. “That’s not what I mean. I’m talking about what happened at the Vanguard estate.”

I put two mugs on the counter between us and poured us tea, then dropped the diffusers into each.

Greyson sighed as he peered down into his cup. “I’m concerned about what’s going on over there, yes. It’s just…strange. I don’t get it. But what’s weird is that Lucian doesn’t seem the least bit concerned.”

“Well, it *is* Lucian. He’s a strange one.”

“Yes, but with the you-know-who looking into it, I think it’s best that all of us stay cautious about everything. We don’t want to get on *their* bad side. They can make things very difficult for us.”

I frowned at that. Now that I knew Kendall was in the MIB, it was strange to think about the organization and what they were capable of—and now that meant what Kendall was capable of.

I supposed I was still kind of jealous of Kendall, and I hated that.

“I guess it’s going to be hard to avoid the Vanguards right now. I know we try to steer clear of Lucian and his antics, but I don’t think we can ignore this.”

“No, we can’t,” Greyson said.

He sipped his tea.

“There’s so much going on in the Vanguard world right now. The bachelorette party is coming up, the wedding. I want to be there for Elle, but it’s hard to focus on that when whatever this is going on,” I said.

Greyson looked tense. “I don’t think any of that is a good idea right now.”

I was shocked to hear him say that. “Wait, what do you mean? Are you really thinking that they need to postpone all the wedding festivities?”

“Yes. If there’s something dangerous lurking in the Vanguard cellar, we need to take it seriously. It’s obvious that Lucian has no plans to take care of it, and I’m not about to have a repeat of the Seluna thing.”

“You really think it could be something at a Seluna level?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to risk it. I don’t want to put anyone I love in danger if there’s something down there that could hurt them.”

I chewed my lip in worry, but I nodded. “I get it. I agree. Whatever it is only seems to affect werewolves for now since I can’t hear that painful sound.”

“Thank god. I don’t want you to suffer like that. It felt like my head was being ripped apart.”

“I know, I could tell it was excruciating. I don’t want Greyson or Lola or anyone else to get hurt…but if you really think we should tell them they have to postpone the wedding…how do we even broach that with them?”

I could see it now, Lucian freaking out and flying into a rage that would make things worse. And I didn’t want to upset Elle, either. She loved Lucian…for whatever reason…and was excited to get married to him.

“I’ll talk to Lucian about canceling the wedding,” Greyson said.

“No,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

**Episode 5672**

**Xavier**

I was racing to the lake house, going faster than I should have as my mind raced to all the reasons Colton could have made that frantic plea. I was trying to call him back to get more details, but he wasn’t answering.

*Classic fucking Colton. Always out of reach after getting me all worried and worked up.*

And I wasreally worried. Whatever was going on with him sounded urgent. I banged my hand on the steering wheel in frustration. I wasn’t getting there fast enough. I nearly pulled the car over to shift and run the rest of the way since it would probably be faster, but if I was going to do that, I should have already done it.

Now I was close, and it wouldn’t be much longer now.

The lake house loomed into view, and I made a sharp turn into the driveway. I expected to see something that alerted me to whatever was going on—flashing lights, cop cars, some kind of chaos happening out on the lawn, but there was nothing.

*That’s a good sign, right? Maybe it’s not so bad. Maybe I’m not too late.*

I burst into the house to see Colton standing amongst so many crates that I couldn’t even navigate my way through the foyer.

“Oh, hey, bro,” Colton said with an easy smile.

“What? ‘Oh, hey, bro?’ Did you really just fucking say that to me?” I shouted.

Colton scowled. “What’s eating you? I just said hi. Sheesh.”

I almost screamed, but I stopped and took a deep breath. “What the fuck, Colton? What is going on? Where’s the emergency?!” Despite my attempts to remain calm, my voice was rising with every word.

“I totally fucked up!” Colton replied. “I wanted to make the perfect place for Maya and the twins. You know, get the lake house all ready so that she would feel better about coming here to live. I feel so guilty about her moving her whole pack here, so I wanted to show her how much better this would be than our house back home.”

“Okay…I’m still not seeing what made you call me like you were being strangled to death and needed help.”

Maybe he *would* need that kind of help soon.

“I ordered too much furniture!” he said, throwing his hands up like this was the worst thing ever. “And now look. It all arrived at the same time and now I have no idea what to do. I’m drowning in boxes. So in a way…it *is* an emergency.”

I was so fucking pissed I could barely think straight, and I could tell by the look on Colton’s face that he could tell that he’d fucked up. What I didn’t see there was any remorse. He likely didn’t think it was a big deal.

“Why weren’t you answering your phone?” I asked wearily.

Colton pointed to one of the tall stacks of boxes. “How the hell was I supposed to get to it? I’m trapped over here in this corner, and I don’t know exactly where it is.”

“You are a fucking idiot.”

Colton’s eyes flashed. “Don’t call me that.”

“Well, you are! I thought something was really wrong! I thought that something had happened to you, to Maya, or to the twins or something! And then you wouldn’t answer your fucking phone, so that made me worry even more.”

“Sorry, man—”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it. You can’t do that shit, Colton. For real.”

“Listen, it may not be the emergency you expected, but it is a fucking emergency. Do you have any idea how hard Maya’s going to kill me if she gets here and sees that I’ve turned our new place into what looks like a storage unit?”

I thought about that, picturing Maya walking in with a twin in each arm and not even being able to get past the foyer because of all the shit Colton ordered.

“Yeah, I mean, if she sees this, she’s going to kick your ass.”

Colton threw his head back. “Exactly! When the delivery guys were bringing it in, I kind of freaked out. I called you as soon as they left.”

“But why did you order so much?”

“Because I wasn’t sure what Maya would want. I just went on a shopping spree and ordered almost everything I found and now there’s too fucking much.”

“You’re right about that. I literally can’t even move into any other part of the house,” I said.

“And that’s why Maya’s going to kill me when she gets home. You’d think she wouldn’t be able to attack me seeing as she’ll be carrying our kids, but you don’t know what Maya’s capable of.”

I laughed despite myself. “I mean, Maya is one of the scariest people I know, so I get it.”

Colton moaned and covered his face in his hands. “There’s no way I’m going to be able to fix this before she gets home. It’s impossible. I’ve made a fucking mess of this place, and we haven’t even been here a week!”

“That is a new record,” I teased.

“Please, Xavier. You’re not helping.”

I could see that my brother was really freaking out. He was right. It wasn’t a true emergency, but in his case, it was close enough.

“Come on, let’s go out onto the porch and get some air. Think you can do that?” I asked, motioning at the boxes towering between us.

“Fuck. I guess I’ll try.”

I had to keep from laughing as Colton navigated his way through the boxes, nearly knocking over multiple packages and almost falling more than once before he finally stepped into the foyer with me.

The fresh air felt good as we walked outside and sat down on the porch stairs. “So…is there something else going on? Maybe something you haven’t mentioned?” I asked him.

“I guess so. I’m just really hoping this all works out, but there’s no way for me to know if it will. I’m worried she’s going to decide she doesn’t like it here and change her mind. I want to make this our real home. I never felt at home in the Grimcrest packlands.”

“From what I’ve heard about that place, I don’t know how anyone would.”

“It was bad, bro. It was creepy and weird, and I could tell that Maya was haunted by all her bad memories of that place the entire time we were there. But that doesn’t mean she’s jumping with joy to come here.”

“But why?”

“She has her reasons. Maya’s complicated. I think she doesn’t want to do anything that seems like she’s taking anyone’s charity.”

“But she’s not. Greyson was happy to offer the lake house.”

“I don’t know about happy to, but I know deep down he doesn’t mind. And Maya is easily irritated. I think she’s worried about being so close to the Redwood pack…when that’s all I want. I missed being near my pain in the ass brother.”

I rolled my eyes and gave him an affectionate punch on the shoulder. My anger had finally dulled, and I was starting to see my brother’s side of things.

“I missed my very annoying brother, too,” I said.

I glanced over my shoulder at the house, the boxes looming even the doorway. “I’ll help you move the boxes around so we can figure out what goes where.”

An hour later, half the boxes were moved to the back porch, and the other half were stacked neatly in the main living room for Maya to see when she got home.

We stood back and admired our handiwork.

“Thanks, man,” Colton said.

“You’re welcome. I think she’ll be excited about the new stuff, honestly. Now it’ll be easier for her to pick out what she likes, and you can return the rest.”

Colton headed to the kitchen. “Can I get you a beer? That’s the least I can do after you saved my life.”

“Yeah, but let’s make it a whiskey instead.”

We were just clinking glasses when my phone rang. I was surprised to see Greyson’s name on the screen.

“It’s Greyson. Wonder what he wants?”

Colton shrugged. “Only one way to find out, my guy.”

I glared at him as I answered.

“Hey, I need to see you right now,” Greyson said. “It’s important.”

*What now? Is this because of what happened between me and Cali? I do not feel like rehashing that with Greyson right now. It’s not like we will ever reach middle ground on something like this.*

I glanced at Colton who was watching me closely, probably wondering at my expression.

“Sorry, Greyson, not in the mood to talk right now,” I said.

“Like I said, it’s important, Xavier. It’s about Lucian.”

I was surprised at that. “Lucian? That’s who you want to talk about? What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Something’s happening as we speak.”

“That’s ominous,” I said.

“Lucian’s hiding something at the Vanguard palace.”

“So what? It’s his house. I have more on my plate than worrying about what hijinks Lucian is getting into in the privacy of his palace of crazy.”

“Normally I would agree, but there’s something big happening over there, and I’m worried that if we don’t take matters into our own hands, we could have another Seluna situation on our hands.”

**Episode 5673**

**Artemis**

I gave each of the brutes the most cutting look I could, trying to get them to back off. I wasn’t in the mood for a fight, but there was no way I was going to let them treat Rishika that way.

“It’s fine, I can deal with them,” Rishika said. “Piece of cake.”

“That’s what you think,” one of the Fae said. A second later, he and his friends had weapons aimed right at us—a mixture of crossbows, clubs, and blackjacks. They weren’t bluffing, either. They looked more than ready to use them.

I tensed, readying myself to blast them or use my own weapons.

Rishika seemed to be a lot calmer and more collected than I was. “You have three seconds to get out of my face,” she said in an even voice.

“Why don’t you take your own advice and get the hell out of here? You werewolf mongrels aren’t wanted here,” the Fae said.

Marius scooted back in his chair and got up. “Why don’t we deal with this like real Fae warriors?”

Everyone looked at him as he lifted his ale. “With a good old-fashioned drinking contest. Winner gets to stay.”

It was so quiet it was unsettling, and everyone was just staring at Marius for a few beats before the Fae finally lowered their weapons.

“You lot are on,” said the biggest one, to my surprise.

He stashed his crossbow as he stalked over to the bar to order ale. Marius joined him. I watched the bartender slide so many mugs across the counter that I lost count, and I started to get worried.

“I think this is a bad idea,” I said to Rishika. “We aren’t really going to drink all that, are we?”

“You’d know better than me. Where I’m from, we don’t settle disputes by drinking ourselves silly.”

“Relax,” Marius said as he brought an armful of mugs back to the table. Ale splashed all over the tables as he sat them down. “It’s going to be fine. This is much better than a fight to the death, don’t you think?”

Rishika and I shrugged.

“There’s no way in hell I’m winning this,” I whispered to Marius as the others came to join us at our table.

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Marius said.

“Alright, so everyone has their portion. First to finish every mug in front of them stays. The other group goes,” the big Fae explained.

The bartender got in on the action by starting the countdown, and as soon as the word “one” left his mouth, we began.

I topped out at one mug, and once I was finished with that, I could barely even look at the next one. Marius was holding his own, downing mug after mug in a way that looked like he wasn’t even swallowing it, just pouring it down his throat.

But when I checked out Rishika’s progress, I was shocked. She was almost done!

The Fae were falling off one by one, and soon, it was only Rishika and the biggest, loudest Fae left, going drink for drink.

“Rishika, you don’t have to push yourself this hard. We can just leave!” I said.

Rishika shook her head and downed the final mug, her last one. A few people in the bar cheered for her victory—and Marius and I shouted the loudest.

“Damn!” the big Fae said. He turned to his friends, most of whom we sprawled out on the floor passed out. “Guess she won fair and square.”

“She did, so if you’d kindly get the hell out of here, it would be greatly appreciated,” Marius said with a bow.

They filed out, and Marius and I turned shocked looks on Rishika.

“How the hell did you do that?” I said. “I’ve never seen you drink like that before!”

She threw up her hands like it was nothing. “Probably because I’ve never had to. I don’t make a habit of plying myself with ale.” She hiccupped. “I think I need some water.”

She tried to get up but nearly fell straight through the table. Marius and I rushed up from our seats to help. We each wedged ourselves under her arms to keep her upright since she could barely stand on her own two feet.

“Why are you two hopping around like that?! I’m fine. I’m not drunk. I’m a werewolf, remember?”

She was about to say more, but then a loud heave wracked her body.

“Hey, don’t let her puke all over my floor!” the bartender said. “You’ll be the ones cleaning it up!”

“We’re going!” I said. “Though this is kind of your fault, too!” I admonished him. He was the one who served them the drinks, after all. What did he expect?

“Just get her out of here, will you? No harm, no foul, okay?” the bartender replied.

“Let’s get her into bed, try to sober her up a bit,” I said to Marius.

With one arm slung over my shoulder and the other draped over Marius’s, we all but dragged Rishika up to my room. I helped her down onto the bed and she rolled over onto her back with a loud groan.

“How am I this drunk? I’m a werewolf! We don’t get drunk…at least not *this* drunk,” she said. “The whole room is spinning.”

“It’s Fae ale. It packs a wallop even for a werewolf. I’m surprised you can even speak right now,” I explained.

I got her a glass of water and sat next to her while she drank it down.

“I’ll sleep on the floor, as promised,” Marius said, already in the closet searching for extra blankets and pillows.

“That’s silly,” Rishika slurred. “The bed is huge.”

She drew out the last word for way longer than she should have, and Marius and I exchanged a look.

“We can all three fit.” She waved to Marius. “Come on. The more the merrier.”

I was shocked. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Rishika.”

“Come on, quit making it a big deal. It’s just three people sharing a bed.”

Marius just stood there awkwardly, not saying a word.

“Marius, get in this bed or risk the biggest cold shoulder in the world tomorrow.”

He winced. “We’re just making inroads, I don’t want to piss her off,” he said to me.

“Then go ahead. Let’s not get her all worked up,” I said.

Marius sighed and climbed into bed and stayed so far to the other edge that with one false move he could easily go falling off.

I slid between them and tried to get comfortable. No one said a thing, and the mood was beyond awkward as we all just lay there—me staring at the ceiling, Rishika with her eyes closed, and Marius staring at the hotel room door.

Rishika suddenly shivered and I rolled over to cuddle her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’m feeling a little better after having a little water and lying down. I’ll be good as new in no time.”

Marius bumped my foot, followed by a quick, “My bad.”

I sighed, realizing that this was going to be a cramped, awkward mess if we really tried to sleep this way.

“Listen, I can just sleep on the floor. Really. I don’t mind,” Marius said.

“I’m the one who invited you to the bed, so you should stay,” Rishika said.

“And I appreciate the olive branch or whatever we should call it, but this is ridiculous. We can’t all really fit and it just…it’s awkward,” Marius said.

“He’s right,” I said.

“I don’t see why it has to be awkward,” Rishika said. “We’re all *friends*, aren’t we?”

Rishika put an obvious amount of emphasis on the word “friends.”

“None of us have amnesia. We know exactly what we all did together, but we have yet to talk about it. Why? Artemis, you clearly care about Marius, and we’ve all already had sex, so what is the problem?”

“I guess I…just…don’t know how to navigate this. And I don’t want to make you uncomfortable—”

“It’s more uncomfortable acting like there isn’t some tension between us. If we can all have sex, we can lie in a bed, can’t we?” Rishika said.

*I’m shocked she’s being so open to this. I never would have expected it.*

“W-well, since you got your memory back…well…I was worried that it might be weird for you. The threesome happened before you remembered everything.”

Rishika sighed. “I mean, you’re not wrong. It was a lot getting my memories back from before and putting all the pieces together. But I remember everything that’s happened since then, and I don’t regret what happened between us.”

I was shaking my head, still trying to process this.

“Oh stop, Artemis. Why are you so surprised? I’m not a prude. Never have been. I’m a werewolf for crying out loud.”

I pulled Rishika close. “I love you. I’m so happy you’re back.” I kissed her neck, and Marius cleared his throat.

He was still balanced on the edge of the bed, trying not to crowd us. “So…where do I fit in? Are we all just friends with a past?”

With my arms still around Rishika, I turned to look at him. “I don’t know. And I don’t want to pretend that I’m not attracted to you. And you know I care about you.”

“So, what are you saying?” Marius asked.

I sighed, not sure what to say. I’d always had a hard time expressing myself. I would have run away from a conversation like this in the past, but that wasn’t how I was feeling right now. I didn’t want to run away.

“I like you both,” I said. “I have strong feelings for you both.” I took a deep breath, my cheeks on fire. “So…could we do this together? Somehow?”

**Episode 5674**

**Greyson**

Xavier goes silent as if he’s processing what I just said.

“So? Don’t you have anything to say about it?” I said when the silence went on for a little too long.

“I just…didn’t expect you to say that you wanted to talk about *that*,” Xavier replied.

I paused, confused. “Wait, what did you think I wanted to talk about?”

Xavier cleared his throat, a clear indication that I’d hit a nerve of some kind. And then I knew exactly why he was acting this way. It was about Cali.

*So, he thinks I want to call to question him about spending time with Cali…*

I’d heard Colton in the background, so I knew that my brothers were together after the party at Lucian’s last night.

“I don’t want to have this talk on the phone. I think it’s worth talking in person,” I said. “Where are you? I’ll come to you.”

“I’m at the lake house.”

“*My* lake house?”

“Wait, are there multiple lake houses?” Xavier snapped sarcastically. “Because I’m only aware of one.”

“Don’t be a smart-ass. I’m just trying to figure out what you guys are doing there,” I said.

I had questions, but whatever. There were far more pressing issues than figuring out what was going on in Xavier or Colton’s heads.

“I’ll be there soon,” I said, hanging up.

I sighed as I got ready to go. I had no idea where things had gotten this messy, but a mess it all was. And there was no telling when things would get better.

Xavier and I had been at odds about Cali since the moment we laid eyes on her, and that wasn’t going away any time soon.

I was used to fighting with my brother about Cali, but it just seemed like another conflict on top of the heaping pile of problems in my life. There was the Ava stuff and the Kendall stuff that Xavier didn’t even fully know about…unless Cali had filled him in.

*She wouldn’t have gone behind my back to tell Xavier something that was supposed to stay between us, would she?*

I didn’t want to blame Cali if she shared it—she probably had her reasons—but I also felt a little bitter as I imagined their pillow talk, them sharing private time and secrets.

At the last minute, I decided to shift and run rather than drive, so I gathered my things in a satchel, strapped it on, shifted, and took off into the woods.

The run was exactly what I needed. It always felt like I forgot to connect to this part of myself when problems started popping up. Almost as if my human form was a lot less stressful to maintain and shifting would only complicate things.

But it was actually the other way around.

When I was in wolf form, my thoughts and worries dulled to the background. I relied more on instinct and the here and now, and I needed that after the past few days.

By the time I reached the lake house, I truly felt better. Lighter. The heaviness returned, though, as soon as I stepped into the lake house.

It felt awkward as I stepped into the house. There was no way in hell I should ever feel like I was intruding on something on my own property, but that was exactly the feeling I got, even though I hadn’t even laid eyes on Xavier yet.

I was surprised when I ran into Gabriel and Mikah in the kitchen.

“Hey, didn’t know you two were still here,” I said.

“We were going to head out last night,” Gabriel said, “but things have gotten so interesting here that we decided to stick around for a bit.”

“They always do, don’t they?” I said under my breath.

I was just about to go looking for Xavier when Colton walked in. He gave me a stiff wave and a half smile. Even though it wasn’t much, it was still miles away from how we used to be back in the day. Simply being in the same room used to have us at each other’s throats.

“Hey, good to see you. Thanks again…and sorry about all the boxes everywhere,” Colton said. “Just prepping the house for Maya and the twins to come stay permanently.”

“Good, so you’re settling in okay?”

“Yup. Thanks again.”

Colton seemed happy-ish to see me, and my uneasy feeling dissipated a bit. If Colton could give me a halfway pleasant greeting, maybe I could count on the same from Xavier, despite whatever was going on under the surface with us right now.

*I’d written things off thinking that Colton and I would never get along, but it looks like things are slowly getting better, and I’m genuinely happy about that.*

“Where’s Xavier?” I asked him. “We need to discuss a few things.”

“Alpha shit?” Colton asked. He whistled through his teeth. “Always something with you top-of-the-chain folks. Way too much drama and stress for my taste. Glad I’m just engaged to an Alpha and not one myself.”

“Thanks for that,” I said. “But yeah, it’s Alpha shit.”

Colton pointed toward the lake. “He’s out by the lake. Just got back from a run.”

I thanked Colton and then headed out of the house and into the back yard. After the low-stress conversation with Colton, I was wishing for a smooth conversation with Xavier without any confidence that would actually happen.

I was reluctant to speak with him because all too often, our discussions turned into fights.

“Hey, what’s up?” Xavier said as I approached. He kept his eyes on the water and didn’t bother looking up at me. “What is it that you wanted to talk about? Something about Lucian having a Seluna-sized problem in his house.”

That was certainly the most pressing issue, but there were just so many damn things that Xavier and I had to discuss—Cali, Alpha shit, the pack houses. But in the end, I stuck to what I’d come for.

“I didn’t say that it was comparable to Seluna for certain, only that something was going on and I don’t want it to get any worse.”

“And by ‘something,’ you mean…?”

“You know that something’s going on with Lucian’s place, right? Remember we were there when that crazy thing happened again. Made me feel like the world was ending—the weird earsplitting whistling sound and the ground shaking. That can’t be nothing.”

Xavier shook his head and sighed, his brow creased in deepening annoyance. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen my brother and he didn’t look annoyed with something I’d said or done.

“So what? His place is shaking or sinking or whatever. What do you want me to do about it? Lucian is Lucian, and he always has some shit going on.”

“Well, maybe we should figure out the brand of shit this time before he has a wedding there and it all comes to a head while we’re watching them take their vows,” I answered.

Xavier went quiet as if he were only now really considering it. “Knowing Lucian, it’s going to be a weeklong event. So, who wants to do the honors of talking to him about it?”

We stared at each other as we realized that this was something that we aligned on completely—neither of us wanted to deal with Lucian, but both of us knew what the consequences could be if we didn’t.

“Fine, I’ll do it!” I shouted. “I’m the oldest anyway. I should probably take the lead.”

“I never thought you being the older brother would come in handy one day,” Xavier said. “I’m pleasantly surprised.”

“Cali said she’ll talk with Elle to break the news, and we’re going to have to figure out the right way to approach this since it’s not going to go well no matter how we spin it,” I said.

Xavier was nodding. “Okay…so is that it?”

I glared at him. “Yes. For now.”

Not quite shoulder to shoulder, we headed back to the house.

“What are you doing?” Xavier asked. “We talked, now aren’t you leaving?”

“I’d like to talk to Mikah. Is that okay with you? I mean not that it’s any of your business. Have you forgotten that this is my house?”

Xavier snorted. “What’s that they say about families? What’s yours is mine?”

“Ha,” I said, unamused. “Funny.”

We went into the house to see Gabriel and Colton flexing their biceps at each other for some ridiculous reason while Mikah stood by and watched.

“Can I talk to you for a minute, or are you afraid to miss this?” I joked.

“Please get me out of here,” Mikah said. “What do you want to talk about?” he asked once we were out of earshot of the others.

“You’re familiar with MIB, right?”

The vampire looked surprised. “Yes…and where is this going, Greyson?”

I glanced back at my brothers and Gabriel, who were now punching each other in the arms to see who would cry mercy first.

“I want to know what kind of items they have. Magical items.”

It was obvious that Kendall was as much at a loss about breaking the mate bond as I was, but maybe Mikah knew something she didn’t.

“So do you think they have them?”

“Have what?” Mikah said, his eyes on Gabriel who appeared to be winning the punch fest.

“Magical items!” I said impatiently.

“I’m not sure,” Mikah finally replied. “They probably do, but what do you care?”

“It’s a long story,” I said. “I know I’m being push about this, but I have to know and it’s all I can really say right now, okay?”

“Have to know, huh? Well, if it’s important to you, Greyson, I know just the way to get the information you need.”

**Episode 5675**

I was in the living room and on the phone with Elle. Greyson hadn’t yet returned from talking to Xavier. I knew that we would need his support as Alpha for this and that Lucian respected the alliance, so hopefully Greyson was getting Xavier on the same page.

“What you need to know first and foremost is that we’re all still so happy about your engagement and we support your marriage to Lucian fully.”

*No matter how strange and insufferable he is.*

“But…we’re worried about what’s going on over there. It’s strange, Elle. The ground rumbling and shaking underneath us, that loud sound that nearly burst all the werewolves’ eardrums.”

Elle sighed. “I know. I don’t understand what’s happening with that…it’s so strange.”

“Exactly,” I said, hoping that this meant she would understand what I was going to say next. “What we want is to make sure that it’s not a bigger threat than any of us expect. It was definitely…odd.”

“I agree with all that, Cali, but Lucian says it’s nothing. The Vanguard palace is super old, and there are a lot of strange things roaming around here. You know the other day, I thought I saw a ghost!”

I winced. “That’s…not helping,” I said. “It’s just proof that there are too many weird things in that place that we don’t know about.”

“Yeah…and? You don’t have to live here, so what does it matter to you?” Elle said innocently.

And honestly when she said it so matter-of-factly like that, it made me wonder if Greyson was overreacting a little. But as quickly as I thought that, reason pushed that possibility away. MIB was interested in the Vanguard palace for a reason, and an entire palace’s very foundations shouldn’t shake like that.

But what if Elle got angry and became another barrier to us getting to the bottom of things?

Greyson’s concerns about this being another Seluna situation had me thoroughly spooked. Seluna had nearly destroyed every single pack, had thrown our lives into chaos.

“Elle, you have to get Lucian to cooperate with Greyson and the other Alphas on fixing whatever this is. They’re going to talk to him more seriously about our concerns, and hopefully we’ll find a solution that works for all of us. The faster we figure out what’s going on, the faster you can have the wedding and ensure everyone’s safety.”

“So that’s the real reason you’re calling. To get me to delay my wedding?”

Elle didn’t sound angry, but of course she didn’t sound happy about it, either.

“Elle, of course we don’t want to interfere with such a big event in your life, but we want to make sure everyone’s safe. That’s all.”

Elle let out a huge sigh. “Fine. I’ll try to get Lucian to agree…but it’s not going to be easy.”

“I know, but thank you for trying.”

I stared at the phone for a while after we ended the call, lost in thought. I was worried that this could be bigger than any of us ever realized, but I was doing a lot of self-soothing, convincing myself that there was no reason to freak out until we had more information.

I only hoped that we were ahead of things and not about to be crushed by something we weren’t prepared for.

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The next morning, I was up early rushing to crew practice. I wasn’t in the mood for college or practice—I had *way* too much on my mind, but I couldn’t keep ignoring my responsibilities outside of the pack. I didn’t want to lose this part of my life, even if it was stressful juggling both sometimes.

It had felt almost physically painful to leave Greyson in bed this morning, especially when we hadn’t had a chance last night to fully debrief. But it sounded like Xavier was on board from the little we discussed.

Still, no matter what, convincing Lucian that he needed to delay his wedding plans for the greater good of the area packs was going to be…a lot.

I arrived at practice and said my hellos, then tried to get my head in the game. I refocused on calling out strokes for the team, almost fumbling a few times when my mind began to drift back to our problems.

*Get it together, Cali. Performing well at this regatta is your last chance. You want to stay in school, so you need to do what you have to in order to make that happen.*

On the upside, at least I wasn’t failing anymore. As long as I participated in the regatta, I would keep my scholarship and stay in school.

After practice, Codsworth announced there was a party at one of the frat houses.

“It’s our brunch fest,” Codsworth explained.

“A party in the middle of the day?” I said.

Codsworth gave me a look that said, “And?”

“But it’s a Monday!” I said.

“Oh sweet, naïve Cali,” Bear said as all the guys laughed. “So pure and unaware of the chaos of college life.”

“Frats don’t follow normal rules about when and where to throw a party—surprised you don’t realize that yet. Plus, everyone knows girls love brunch. It’s a win-win.”

“Well, as fun as all that sounds, guys, I don’t think I can make it. I have a lot of stuff to do at home and—”

Codsworth threw up a hand to interrupt me. “Did you think we were asking? We’re telling, dear Cali. You never hang out with us anymore.”

I looked around at all the pouting faces and genuinely felt bad.

I sighed, reminding myself that if I wanted to keep this part of my life going and really enjoy it, I was going to have to spend quality time with my college friends. What was the point if I didn’t indulge in all this lifestyle had to offer?

Going to a Monday brunch rager was about the most normal thing I could do, and I didn’t want to lose that, so even though I was aching to get back home to Greyson, I agreed to go to the party.

“Yes!” They all shouted.

“Good to have you back, Hart,” Gael said.

“We were starting to think you didn’t like us,” Rodrigo said with a fake pout.

The party was in full swing when we arrived.

“I’m just going to send my boyfriend a text to let him know where I am,” I said. But I also wanted to see if there’d been any progress with Lucian.

“Just invite him,” Codsworth said.

“I…don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Come on!” Rodrigo and the others pressed. “We like Greyson. He should hang out more, too.”

I was happy that they liked him, but Greyson was no more in the headspace for this than I was.

“He’s busy or I totally would have him come.”

*Hopefully he’s out postponing a wedding.*

Greyson texted back.

***Have fun, and I’m working on it.***

I was surprised by a sudden rush of insecurity.

*Was that text cold, or am I just overthinking it?*

Then I heard Gael shout, “Mimosa flight! Get in on this, Hart.”

I went over to see way too many mimosas lined up on a counter. There were also mini waffles and pancakes and bacon. They’d gone all out, and the frat guys weren’t wrong.

Who didn’t like brunch?

“I don’t know about this,” I said. “I don’t really day drink, and I have class later.”

“Flight! Flight! Hart do the flight!” they began to chant.

I was trying to get out of it, but they shouted over my protests by chanting louder.

“Fine!” I said, smiling despite myself as I decided to dig in, eating and drinking until they were satisfied.

Honestly, it wasn’t so bad. I hadn’t done a normal silly college thing for so long, and I missed how lighthearted and fun it was. I didn’t want to miss out on these sorts of things anymore.

A game of mimosa pong brought out my competitive side. I was having a good time with the guys and was happy I’d given in.

“Cali! Why aren’t you answering your phone?” someone shouted in my ear.

I turned to see Lola standing behind me. “What are you doing here?” I said. “Or…how did you know I was here?”

Lola rolled her eyes. “I track your phone, duh. Are you drunk?”

“No!” I said quickly. “I had a few mimosas, but that’s all.”

Lola gave me a skeptical look. Clearly, I didn’t seem as sober as I wanted to think I was.

“Wait, why are you tracking my phone?” I asked her.

“That’s not the point.” Lola leaned closer to shout a whisper into my ear. “I found something.”

“Found what?” I asked, my attention slowly being pulled back to mimosa pong.

“About the key!” Lola said. She snapped her fingers. “Focus, Cali!”

I was sobered a bit to hear that. “Really? I thought Greyson said not to bother with that.”

“He did but you know me, I do what I want. I contacted Steinar at the library.”

“Okay, and?”

“The key has some old spell written on it,” Lola explained.

“A *spell?* So does that mean we should contact Big Mac?”

**Episode 5676**

I started to hurry off, so affected by the mimosas that I almost tripped and fell through the pong table.

“Party foul!” someone yelled at me before gently guiding me away from the game.

I stumbled toward Lola, realizing that I was maybe getting drunker by the second. Apparently the mimosa flight caused a slow burn of inebriation.

*I knew I should have stuck to having fun here without drinking!*

I wasn’t used to drinking so early in the day, and it showed. I looked around at everyone else. No one seemed as sauced as I was. How did they do it? Was I this out of touch with college life that I couldn’t even survive a mimosa flight?

Lola grabbed me to steady me and led me away from the mimosa pong table. “I don’t think you can go anywhere right now, Cali. Are you good?” she said.

“Am I good? Of course! Can’t you see that I’m totally fine?” I was hoping that if I said it, it would come true. The truth was, I didn’t feel like myself at all…but I didn’t want Lola to know that.

I shook off Lola’s hold and attempted to walk on my own, but a second later I was crashing into Codsworth. We banged heads and both went down hard. I sprawled out on the ground with Codsworth moaning in pain beside me.

“Come on, Hart. Rookie mistake!” he said. “Always stumble away from your friends to avoid party injuries.”

“Ouch!” I shouted so loudly that people gave me strange looks. “That hurt!”

I rolled over onto my stomach, starting to feel a little woozy. This was not looking good.

*This is why I don’t day drink. I feel like it always turns out this way—me sloppy drunk and passing out, the rest of my day totally shot.*

Lola picked me up from the floor, her vampire slash werewolf strength making it super easy for her to lift me up like it was nothing. We stumbled into the bathroom, and she locked the door while I leaned against the wall and pressed my face against the cool tile.

“Cali, ugh. I wouldn’t touch anything in here if I were you. This *is* a frat house,” Lola warned. “You have no idea what might be on those walls.”

“I know, but the wall feels so good against my hot skin.”

“Okay, you’re really drunk,” Lola deadpanned. “Noted.”

A wave of nausea crept into my stomach, and I launched myself at the toilet. “I feel like I’m going to throw up! I’ll never do a midday mimosa flight again!”

“We all have to learn our lessons somehow.” Lola was laughing. “You really overdid it!”

I eyed my friend. “Don’t laugh at me! You’re just mad that I had fun at a big college party without worrying about monsters or mates or problems!”

“Maybe I am!” Lola replied. “Speaking of, why didn’t you call me to join you?”

“I don’t know, it was a spur-of-the-moment thing. And really fun if I’m being honest. I resisted it at first because I just kept thinking about Lucian and my scholarship and all of that, but then I decided to throw all my worries to the wind and have fun.”

“Well, I’m glad that you got to blow off a little steam,” Lola said.

“Me too. It was fun, but I’m going to have a horrible headache later,” I said. “Note to self, never do a mimosa flight again. Hangovers are usually for the next morning, but I’m already feeling mine coming on.”

“Yeah, well, that’s all part of it. I wonder if there’s something to, ‘the worse the hangover, the better the party.’ It’s like you know how you’re going to end up, but you don’t care. You’re having too much fun to stop.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I just hate that I miss out on so many ‘normal’ human things like getting wasted at parties and dancing with friends and just hanging out. We’re always in the middle of some huge pack catastrophe, and I’ve had to throw this part of my life to the side to deal with it all.”

“Maybe, but it’s not like we don’t party and have fun with the pack,” Lola said. “They know how to party, too.”

I smiled. “That’s true.”

Still, my feeling of being disconnected from normalcy lingered. It wasn’t that I regretted anything about my life, but I did feel like I was neglecting other parts.

“Do you feel like your life would be better without all the supernatural stuff?” Lola asked. She was trying to sound light, but I could hear a hint of sadness in her voice, and I knew why. She was lumping herself in with the supernatural stuff. “I know that it’s not always easy being my friend—”

I stopped Lola and took her hands in mine. “Don’t you dare down yourself like that, not to me. I wouldn’t change a thing about you. And anyway, I’m half Fae, remember? I’m the supernatural stuff, too! I was never going to escape the supernatural element to my life…but that doesn’t mean I don’t sometimes picture my life without it.”

“Well, that sounds like you do regret it.”

“I really don’t!” I said. “I think that everyone pictures what their life could have been if they’d made one different choice or taken another path. It’s inevitable to think about from time to time. But what you must know is that overall, I’m happy. I’m so honored to be going through this crazy life with you by my side.”

“You mean that?” Lola said, smiling.

“I mean it. There’s no one else I’d want to do battle with.”

Lola hugged me, and I hugged her back, though I was also hanging on her a little since my legs were a bit wobbly still.

We both jumped when someone banged on the door.

“Alert! Alert! Campus security is here to shut us down!” someone shouted.

“Damn! I knew I saw a bunch of freshmen here!” Lola said. “Underage drinking. Shit!”

“I can’t be caught at an illegal party!” I said, panicking. It was funny how non-supernatural problems could feel just as big as the supernatural ones. I’d almost felt just as panicked while facing down Seluna and Letifer and Adéluce.

“I’ll be ruined,” I wailed. “I’m underage too—and the crew team…my probation! It’s all bad, Lola!”

“Calm down, don’t worry,” Lola said. She looked around and then hurried to the window. She pushed it open then looked down. “Let’s climb out.”

“But we’re on the second floor!” I wailed.

“We don’t have much of a choice, Cali.”

We started to climb out, but it was high up, and I was still pretty drunk. I almost fell right off the drainpipe we were scaling but Lola caught me at the last second and we went tumbling to the ground.

“Hey, you!” a security guard shouted, pointing at us. “Hey, boys, some of them are trying to get away!”

Lola and I were on our feet in a flash, and we took off running.

“Shit, they’re chasing us!” Lola said. “I could smoke them in a second, but I don’t want to leave you behind.”

“Thanks for not using your vampire powers to abandon me!” I said. “I really appreciate it.”

We ran into a random building, both of us laughing hysterically despite the danger.

“Why don’t you just blast them?” Lola said.

I glared at my friend. “Oh gee, why don’t I just show everyone on campus that I’m not a normal human? I’m sure that would go over well.”

Still laughing, we raced through the building’s mostly empty hallways with the security guard shouting after us, close on our tails.

“This way!” Lola shouted, pulling me into a darkened lecture hall. We raced up the stairs to another exit and then blasted through that door into a second-floor hallway.

“How about in here?” I said, pointing to a slightly ajar door. We ducked inside and huddled under a desk.

Breathing hard, I said, “I think we lost them.”

“Let’s hope,” Lola said.

While I was struggling to catch my breath and sweating bullets, Lola might as well have been out on a calm afternoon stroll. She wasn’t panting, wasn’t sweating, and every hair was in place.

It was at times like these that I wished I was a werewolf or vampire because their stamina was unmatched.

Someone cleared their throat, and we looked up to see Kendall standing over us.

*Oh my god. We accidentally hid in her office!!*

An awkward beat passed where we all just looked at each other. The silence was broken by a knock on the door.

“Campus security!”

I clasped my hands, looked up at Kendall and whispered, “You have to help us!”

Kendall arched an eyebrow, looking like she was over me and over whatever I was trying to drag her into. “What? Why?”

I glanced at the door and then back at Kendall while imagining getting thrown into some campus drunk tank, or worse yet, getting expelled. “Please,” I said. “Hide us!”

**Episode 5677**

**Kendall**

I just stared at Cali and Lola. Why was it that Cali always seemed to show up, asking for something, needing something, wanting to discuss something? No matter what I did, I always seemed to get dragged into her drama.

This time, she’d obviously gotten herself into some fresh new mess if campus security was after them.

“Open up, campus security!” they shouted again with a harder knock.

“Shit,” I said. “Just be quiet, and I’ll get rid of them.”

“Thank you,” Cali mouthed.

I rolled my eyes and went to the door.

*Why the hell am I helping her? This isn’t my problem.*

“May I help you?” I asked the panting security guard as soon as I opened the door. I put on my most pleasant voice, even managing to smile despite my annoyance.

“Did two students run in here?” the guard asked.

“Not in here, no, but I did see them running that way.” I pointed down the hallway. I even opened the door a little wider as a good faith gesture, hoping that Cali and the other one were smart enough to stay put and not make a sound.

The security guard’s eyes swept my office, and then he stepped back, looking confused. “I could have sworn they ducked in here, but thanks. Call the office if you see them, okay?” he said. “Sorry for bothering you.”

“Will do,” I replied. “And it’s no problem at all. Hope you catch those delinquents.”

Once he was gone, I shut the door and whispered, “Coast is clear.”

Cali and Lola poked their heads out from behind the desk.

“Clear, clear?” Lola said.

“Yup,” I said. “As clear as it can get. His scent is getting fainter as we speak.”

They both stood up, and I noticed that Cali was wavering a bit on her feet.

*Drunk. I can smell it on her.*

“Thank you *so* much, Kendall. You’re a lifesaver, and we really appreciate it,” Cali said a little too loudly.

Lola shushed her.

I shrugged. “It’s whatever.”

Things had been weird between us with all the Greyson stuff, and I was completely fine with keeping Cali with arm’s length…even though she always seemed to weasel her way into my life one way or another.

“So…are you two okay? What was that all about?” I eyed Cali. “Do you need water? Should I call someone?”

I immediately thought of Greyson, of course, and my wolf grew restless, but I quieted that quickly.

“We’re okay,” Lola said. “But can we just hide out here for a bit? Just to make sure the coast is clear?”

I sighed, not bothering to hide my annoyance. “Yeah, sure.”

I sat down at my desk and pretended to work, but all I was really doing was looking out of the side of my eye at Cali and Lola. It was hard to concentrate with them yammering on.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Lola asked Cali. She was looking at her phone and seemed to be texting someone. “Okay, just talked to Jay, and he’s coming to get us. He’ll be here in ten minutes.”

Cali nodded, but her eyes were closed, and she was slumped in her chair.

“Do you think I should text Big Mac to meet us at the pack house?” Lola asked.

Cali opened one eye and then the other, and then she was looking at me.

I was busy pretending to work again.

“Um…I don’t know,” Cali said.

“You don’t know? What do you mean?” Lola said. “Steinar told me that key from Lucian’s basement is made of some kind of ancient stone. Doesn’t that sound shady?”

I gave up the farce of working, perking up at the mention of Lucian’s cellar. “So, you found something in Lucian’s basement?” I said.

I didn’t feel the least bit bad about commenting on their conversation. They were in my office interrupting me, and I’d saved their butts. It was my right to ask.

Especially since whatever they were talking about was MIB business.

Cali gave Lola a look but didn’t answer right away.

*What the hell were they doing in the cellar? Did Greyson say something to her about this? He better not have. He’s not supposed to, and Cali and her friend have big mouths, that much is obvious.*

“Oh yeah,” Lola said. “You did mention that you wanted to talk to Kendall about all this, but you didn’t tell me why.” Lola trained her intense stare on me. “Something about you liking spelunking?”

“Huh?” I said, confused.

“Oh, ha-ha, that’s right. I mentioned Kendall because she knows a lot about werewolf stuff,” Cali said. “I thought she’d be a good resource.” Cali was nodding like I was supposed to jump in and agree.

I said nothing. I was trying to figure out if Greyson had really gone back on his word and told Cali something he shouldn’t have. I was getting more suspicious by the second, and Lola didn’t look like she believed Cali one bit.

Lola’s phone dinged, breaking the bit of tension that was blooming in the room. “Jay’s close.”

Cali jumped up. “Okay, let’s go.” She tugged on Lola’s arm to pull her out of her chair, obviously eager to leave.

*Yup. Something is up. Cali can’t get out of here fast enough all of a sudden.*

Just before they walked through the door, I said, “Cali, I need to talk to you. Alone.”

Cali looked surprised, and I sensed that her friend had already gone into protective mode.

“Yeah, sure,” Cali replied, trying to sound nonchalant.

“You sure, Cali?” Lola said.

“Is she your bodyguard?” I joked.

“What if I am?” Lola said, not unpleasantly.

“Then that would be weird,” I deadpanned. “Cali’s a big girl. I’m sure she can take care of herself.”

Lola was about to say something else, but Cali stopped her.

“Lola, it’s all good. I’ll meet you downstairs, okay?”

Lola eyed me as she left, and I stared right back.

Once she was gone, I wasted no time getting to the point.

“Let’s get it all out there. What did Greyson tell you?” I asked.

“About what?” Cali stammered.

*Okay, now I know for sure that Greyson blabbed.*

“What did he tell you about me?” I pressed.

Cali hesitated, and I could see the wheels turning in her head. “He just told me that you were looking for something in the Vanguard cellar. Something that may be behind all the weird sounds and the quaking.”

“Uh-huh,” I said slowly, taking that in. “Did he tell you why *I* was looking?”

“Like I told Lola, because you know about werewolves.”

“Well, Cali, that makes sense since I *am* a werewolf. Lola knows that, doesn’t she?”

“Yes…but just because you are something doesn’t mean you know much about whatever you…um…are.”

*Okay, this is clearly bullshit.*

“You heard that loud sound too, right? Since you’re a werewolf and all? I mean, why else would you have been there?” Cali finished.

*She’s maybe the worst liar I’ve ever met.*

“Your friend mentioned a key. What’s up with that?”

“Oh yeah, the key. Lucian said they found it when they were clearing out rubble from the tunnel collapse. It’s covered in all these strange symbols. We used it on a strange door down there, and when we opened it, the sound was unbearable for all the werewolves.”

I was intrigued. “Okay, so where’s the key now?”

“Lucian took it.”

It sounded like I was going to have to pay Lucian a visit or sneak back into the Vanguard palace, get the key somehow, and see where it led. It had to be connected.

“I have to go,” Cali said. “Lola and Jay are waiting for me.”

Cali started for the door, but I stopped her again.

“Is there anything else?”

Cali faltered for a second but recovered with a smile. “Nothing else, just…thanks for helping Lola and me.”

When Cali was gone, I leaned back against my desk. There was no question Cali was hiding something, and if it was that she knew I was MIB, Greyson was going to have hell to pay.

My phone vibrated in my purse, and I picked up to see a text from the tattoo guy.

***Free to hang?***

I smiled, knowing that what he really wanted was to hook up. Greyson tried to make the guy think he was my boyfriend, but that hadn’t stopped him from pursuing me. He was like a moth to a flame.

I thought back to how Greyson had pushed him out of my place in a fit of jealousy. So annoying. But then my wolf was responding, thinking about how mad Greyson had been that I was with someone else.

I was furious at Greyson right now because I suspected he’d run his mouth to Cali about my MIB ties, but I couldn’t deny how hot it had been to see Greyson go all Alpha on that guy. I was sure that mate bond was at fault for his behavior, but ugh, that was so stupid.

I hadn’t lied to Greyson. I wasn’t into the mate stuff *at all*. It was archaic and bullshit, but my wolf didn’t seem to realize that.

Another text came in, probably from the tattoo guy.

I was gearing up to text him that I would come to his place—a good way to scratch the itch that had been bothering me since Greyson ruined everything.

*Greyson would be so pissed if he knew I was still going to see my little fuck buddy tonight.*

But the text was from Agent Imamu, not my booty call.

***Agent King, get back to the Vanguard pack house. We’ve learned that some of our own have gone missing, and I need you to check it out.***

**Episode 5678**

I was so angry at Kendall, but I was doing my best to push it down. It was as if Kendall suspected something but wouldn’t come right out and say it.

Maybe that was what made her a good MIB agent. She didn’t show her cards easily.

Lola was chattering to Jay about our crazy afternoon, and I was doing my best to chime in so that Lola wouldn’t realize that I was sulking.

But in true Lola fashion, she wasn’t ready to leave the Kendall stuff alone.

“So, what did she want to talk to you about?” she asked.

“About Greyson, and it’s complicated,” I answered. “And she asked about the key. You probably shouldn’t have mentioned that in front of her.”

Lola shrugged. “Too late. Is Kendall going after Greyson or something?”

The car swerved as Jay reacted. “Going after Greyson? What do you mean?”

I glared at Lola. “What’s up with you today? You’re acting like the drunk one.”

“What? Jay already knows all about it. I don’t keep secrets from him. Unlike some people I know.”

I felt a twinge of guilt, but it passed quickly. I couldn’t tell Lola everything…and I especially wasn’t going to tell her everything if she was going to broadcast it to her mate and in front of people like Kendall—who she barely knew—whenever she got the chance.

“But wait, Jay, if you already know about the Kendall and Greyson stuff, why did you act so surprised?” I said.

“Honestly I’d forgotten about it until Lola brought it up again,” Jay said. “Dudes don’t hold the gossip top of mind like girls do.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “As for Kendall, I have no idea if she’s going after Greyson. Doesn’t seem like it.”

“I thought that was what she really wanted to talk about,” Lola said.

“Well, that wouldn’t have been surprising. We do share a mate bond with the same guy.”

Lola shook her head. “Oh, but your life is full of drama, Cali.”

“Don’t I know it. It’s as exhausting for me to live it as it is for you to hear about it.”

“It doesn’t exhaust me, it excites me. Life would be dull without hearing about your tangled relationships. And anyway, fuck that shit. You and G had the mate connection first!”

“Yeah, that may be, but I can’t blame Greyson for needing to work through this in his own way. How can I judge after everything I’ve put him through with Xavier?”

Lola nodded. “You’ve got a point. It would be hypocritical of you.”

“Hey!” I said.

“What? I’m just agreeing with you.”

I sighed and sat back in my seat, tired of talking about all of this. It was all too complicated and draining. Why couldn’t I have just one mate? Why couldn’t Greyson? Why couldn’t Xavier? Every other wolf I knew had straightforward connections with their one true mate, but Xavier, Greyson, and I couldn’t enjoy that luxury.

We got back home, and Lola kissed and thanked Jay. “You’re the best, you know that? You’re always here for us whenever we need you.”

Jay chuckled and kissed Lola back. “I can’t help but think that I wouldn’t have to be if you two weren’t always getting into trouble.”

“But that’s why you like me, right? Never a dull moment?” Lola said with a pout.

“That’s not the only reason I like you,” Jay replied.

He and Lola exchanged glances so heated that I took a step back. “Okay guys, I’m standing right here.”

“Oh please, Cali. Do you know how many times we’ve had to watch tender moments between you and your mates playing out for everyone to see? Don’t be a hypocrite!”

“Quit calling me that, Lola!”

She giggled. “I’m sorry, you know I don’t think of you that way.”

“Funny way of showing it,” I said. “And Jay, thanks again. You really are a lifesaver.” I hugged him.

Seeing his eye patch reminded me that Greyson was going to potentially make a deal with the witch Chloe to remove his mate bond with Kendall.

*I really don’t want Greyson getting tangled up with any other witch but Big Mac. She’s the only one who won’t take a part of his body in exchange for her help…even though she probably wishes she could sometimes.*

I was hoping that there would be some other way for Greyson to fix this other than witchcraft.

“Okay, see you two later,” Jay said. “I’m going to go get some sparring in with Ravi.”

“Tell me more about what Steinar said about the key?” I asked Lola once Jay was gone. I wanted to discuss this, but also wanted to avoid talking about my Kendall problem any more today.

Lola got that excited look on her face that I knew only led to trouble. “Steinar told me that it looks older than anything he’s ever seen.”

“That’s crazy coming from Steinar since he’s as old as time itself,” I said.

“I know, exciting, right? The key is super ancient. A true relic. The symbols aren’t a language but a spell or incantation of some kind.”

I shuddered at that. I’d dealt with my share of spells, and that meant I was intimately acquainted with how bad things could go depending on what type of spell it was.

“I don’t like that it’s a spell. If we’re not careful, we could open Pandora’s box.”

Lola squealed. “I know, wouldn’t that be awesome?”

“Lola, what? No. That wouldn’t be awesome. You do know that nothing good comes out of Pandora’s boxes, right?”

“Is that true?”

“Come on, Lola. Yes. It’s almost always bad. And that means we have to be careful with this key!”

Maybe it was a good thing that Lucian had stopped us from exploring further. He wasn’t often right, but maybe his instincts had protected us from ruin this time around.

“Does Steinar have any idea what the spell is for?” I asked. “Or who might have carved it onto the key?”

“No. Steinar couldn’t read the spell himself, but he told me he would investigate. Now all we have to do is wait for the mystery to unfold!”

Lola was having way too much fun with this. She didn’t seem worried in the least that there was something dark simmering underneath Lucian’s palace.

Lola and I yelped when Big Mac blipped into the room.

“Wow. You two are jumpy today,” she said.

“We just didn’t expect you to blip in,” Lola said. “But thank you for coming.”

“Yeah, yeah, what do you want?” Big Mac said.

“It’s about an ancient key,” I said.

“Of course it is.” Big Mac rolled her eyes and plopped down into a chair.

“We asked Steinar about it. He said there’s a spell or incantation carved into it, and we wanted to see if you could read the spell and tell us what it’s all about.”

“What am I? A Rosetta stone?”

Lola and I exchanged a look.

“No?” Lola replied.

“No is right. I’m not some helpline you can just call anytime you want. I have a life you know.”

Big Mac was obviously annoyed with us, as usual, but she didn’t leave…as usual. She just wanted to give us a hard time.

I smiled at her. “So…are you going to help us or…?”

“Yes, fine. Show me the stupid key.”

“We don’t have it—”

I paused at the mischievous look on Lola’s face.

“Wait, Lola, tell me you didn’t—”

Lola hurried toward the door. “Just a second, I’ll be right back.”

Big Mac and I watched her scamper upstairs rubbing her hands together like she was the villain in a movie.

Big Mac looked around. “This place hasn’t changed much.”

“No, it hasn’t. And how are you and Mrs. Smith?” I asked.

Big Mac smiled, a rare thing. “She keeps me on my toes, let’s just say that.”

Lola came scampering back holding the key.

“How did you get that?” I said.

“I lifted it from Lucian. I mean, would you trust a guy who brought a demon back to life with a key like this? I sure wouldn’t…so I snatched it when he wasn’t looking.”

“You do have a point,” I said.

“I don’t feel bad for lying to Kendall at all. I did what I had to do. And how else do you think I was able to show the key to Steinar if I didn’t have it?”

“I don’t know…I guess I thought you took a picture of it or something?” I said.

“Nope. I showed him the real thing.”

“Let me see the thing so I can get on with my day,” Big Mac said, lifting the key from Lola’s palm. The moment she touched it, her eyes rolled back in her head, and she fainted.

“What the hell!” Lola and I shrieked.

We dropped down beside her and started shaking her, trying to rouse her.

“Big Mac? Big Mac!? Are you okay?”

After a few excruciating seconds where I contemplated making a call to Mrs. Smith to tell her that we’d knocked the love of her life out with an ancient key, Big Mac moaned and sat up.

She spotted the key on the ground next to her and scrambled away from it as quickly as she could. “Get that the *fuck* away from me!”

**Episode 5679**

I was shocked. It was rare to see Big Mac so shaken up. “Big Mac…what gives? What’s going on?”

Big Mac didn’t answer. She was too busy jumping up and racing to the other side of the room, getting as far away from the key as possible without leaving the room altogether.

“Big Mac, are you okay?” Lola asked.

“I’ll be fine, as long as you keep that thing away from me. Don’t let it touch me!”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it’s infused with ancient, volatile magic. It overloaded my magic just now.”

“I don’t get it—”

“You don’t have to get it, Lola. What I’m telling you is that if you try to use it, it could have dire consequences. Put it back wherever you got it from. Now!”

Lola and I looked at each other, the fear on Lola’s face mirroring exactly how I felt inside.

“You have to tell us more than that,” I said.

“I don’t want anything to do with that key!” Big Mac said, her voice shaking. “It’s connected to something dark. That’s all you need to know. I won’t touch it again. I won’t even look at it!”

“It’s okay,” I said, stepping between Big Mac and the key. “We’ll keep it away from you. It seems like Lola and I can touch it with no issues.”

Though neither of us seemed to be in a rush to do so.

“Where did that come from?” Big Mac asked.

I hesitated before saying, “We got it from the Vanguard cellar. We found it in one of the tunnels Lucian has down there.”

Big Mac scowled, mumbling something while she shook her head.

“Well, you should have left it there,” Big Mac said. “You’re messing with something you don’t understand. As usual.”

“You think we should have left it with Lucian? Something as powerful as this?” I remarked.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Okay, maybe not, but what was he doing with it? Any idea if he’s used the magic in the key?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “He was trying to make it into a necklace charm for Elle.”

Big Mac’s eyes went wide in shock. “Trying to what?”

“You know Lucian. He thought it looked pretty, so he wanted to give it to Elle. But then we also used it to open this strange, locked door in the catacombs under his house and, well…it didn’t go well for the werewolves. As soon as he opened the door, it unleashed a sound so loud that every werewolf dropped to their knees in pain.”

Big Mac was still shaking her head and taking pains not to look at the key. “That’s bad. He probably did use the magic when he opened the door, and that will have a cost.” She looked from me to Lola. “There’s always a cost with dark magic like that.”

She glared in the general direction of the key but kept her eyes from landing right on it as if she could sense exactly where it was.

“You need to put it back right away. Wherever it was before, it can be safely contained there, the magic kept at bay. You can’t just carry that thing around. You both are playing with fire.”

I glared at Lola. We were supposed to be trying to fix whatever was going on at Lucian’s, not making it worse.

“Have any of you checked on Lucian to make sure nothing’s happened to him?” Big Mac asked.

Big Mac picked up on the look Lola and I shared, even though we quickly averted our gazes so that we didn’t give anything away.

“Wait a minute,” Big Mac said. “What aren’t you telling me? Lucian knows you have the key, right?”

“Um…maybe?” Lola said.

“Maybe? Does he or doesn’t he?” Big Mac asked.

“He…may not know. I don’t think he’d mind that we borrowed it…er…took it.”

“Don’t say *we*,” I hissed at her. “I wasn’t part of your little pickpocketing adventure.”

“So what you’re saying is that you stole the key?”

“A little,” Lola admitted.

“A little?! There’s no such thing as stealing something a little. You either stole it or you took it with his knowledge. Which one is it?”

Lola rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. “Okay. I stole it. What’s the big deal? We all agree that Lucian shouldn’t have something like this in his possession. I took it for safekeeping. I’m the hero in this scenario.”

Big Mac and I just looked at Lola.

“Look, it doesn’t matter, just put it back where you got it from,” Big Mac said. “Don’t mess around with magic.” Big Mac turned her glare on me. “I thought you of all people would have learned that by now, but obviously you enjoy magic blowing up in your face over and over again.”

Now, all I could think about was the danger and the party. We needed to fix this, but I had no idea how.

I pulled out my phone and called Lucian. He didn’t answer. I called Elle next and sighed with relief when her soft voice came over the line.

“Hey, Cali, can’t really talk now. We’re super busy with preparations.”

I frowned. “Preparations? For what?”

“Oh, well I talked to Lucian, and he said we didn’t need to cancel anything. This palace has stood for millennia, and he said it’ll stand for much longer than that. It’s super safe!”

“Elle, wait. We talked about this. We knew that Lucian wouldn’t agree to it, but you were supposed to convince—”

I heard a loud crashing sound on Elle’s end. “Darn it, I told you not to put that there!” Elle shouted, and then the line went dead.

I slowly pulled the phone down from my ear as the gravity of how wrong this was about to go hit me.

“The party is still happening,” I said.

“Well, that cuts it. I was invited, but there’s no way in hell I’m going near that place.” She got up and dusted herself off. “You always tear me away from my life to ask for my advice, and now for the millionth time, I’m going to give it. Put that fucking key back where you got it.”

And then without another word, Big Mac blipped away.

I rushed off to go find Greyson. I found him upstairs in his room relaxing in bed. I knew that neither of us—or hell, anyone in our circle—had much time to relax, and I was sorry I had to bother him, but this was something he needed to know about.

“Greyson, something bad has happened!”

Greyson shot up, his eyes wide. “What? Are you okay, love?”

“I am for now, but the key…Lola stole it from Lucian’s so that we could figure out what the spell written on it was. Big Mac came to take a look and she fainted when she touched it! She said it’s enchanted with dark magic, and we have to get it back to the Vanguard palace.”

Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose. “Lola stole the key? What the hell was she thinking? This can’t be good…”

“That’s not the worst part, or maybe it is, I don’t know—but I called Elle and they’re still preparing for the bachelorette party. They don’t sound like they have any plans to postpone it. She says Lucian told her it would be fine.”

Greyson cursed under his breath and was already getting up and heading downstairs.

“What should we do?”

“We need to go and talk to Lucian right now. He has to know more than he’s telling us…but he’s not answering his phone.”

“I know. I tried him, too,” I said. “Remember, he didn’t even have a phone when we met him. For all we know he doesn’t even keep it close by.”

“Fuck!” Greyson said, his wolf flaring in his eyes. “Why is everything with this guy harder than it has to be?”

“Come on, let’s just go to the Vanguard estate and talk to him face-to-face,” I said.

I was thinking about the key and wondering if this was our chance to follow Big Mac’s advice and just return the key without Lucian knowing.

“Big Mac says we need to place the key back wherever we got it. She thinks that wherever it was before may have kept its dark magic contained. Should I try to sneak in and put it back?”

Greyson was shaking his head before I even finished. “No. I don’t like the idea of you going anywhere near that place if something dangerous is about to happen.”

“Wait, I thought we were past this,” I said.

Greyson looked confused. “Past what?”

“Past you forbidding me from going where I want.”

“That’s not what I’m doing, Cali.”

“Good, then we’re going. Together.”

Not long after, we were climbing into the car with Lola.

“Where’s the key?” Greyson asked.

Lola patted the zipper pocket on her shirt. “I’ve got it right here, tucked away.”

“Good. Don’t lose it,” Greyson said.

We drove to the Vanguard estate in a tense silence, broken only when Elle answered the door with obvious excitement.

“So glad to see you all! Come in!” she said.

“Where’s Lucian?” Greyson grunted. “I need to talk to him.”

“I’ll get him. Oh, and you all know one of my last-minute guests, right?” Elle said, pointing to a woman dressed to the nines. She had her back to us as she plucked a flute of champagne off a waiter’s tray.

I gasped when she turned around to face us. “Kendall?!”

**Episode 5680**

“Kendall? What the hell are you doing here?” Greyson said. He was as shocked as I was, and I did take some pleasure in the fact that he didn’t look happy to see her.

“How rude,” Kendall said easily. “I’m obviously a guest of the Vanguard pack.” She looked around. “I mean, this *is* the Vanguard palace, right? You don’t get to dictate who comes and goes, do you?”

Greyson snapped his mouth shut, struggling to find a comeback.

“Anyway, I got an invitation from Aysel weeks ago. I called to check in with Elle to see if it was still okay that I join, and she was more than happy to have me.”

She sipped her champagne and smiled pleasantly. “Besides, I’m new to the area and having a little trouble making friends…with people I want to associate with.” She gave me a pointed look. “And I’ve heard so much about the prestigious Vanguards, so here I am. Not that it’s any of your business.”

I scowled, wondering what Kendall’s game was here. That was pure bullshit, and I wondered if Elle could tell.

“Thank you again, Elle, for bringing me into the fold.” She clinked her glass against Elle’s. “I’m so excited for tonight’s festivities.”

Elle smiled. “The more the merrier.”

“We should talk,” Greyson said to Kendall.

She waved him off. “Maybe later. Right now, I’m ready to mingle. It’s a party after all.” She looked all of us up and down. “Even though none of you seem dressed for the occasion.”

I was getting more heated by the second and trying to hide it. I didn’t want to let Kendall know she was getting under my skin. She was so effortlessly dismissive. Even Lola, who typically had a comeback for everything, seemed thrown off.

Kendall turned and melted into the party, not looking back even once.

“What’s she up to?” I said to Greyson.

“Probably spying,” he whispered.

Lola leaned in. “Spying? For who?”

“Oh…who knows?” I said with a laugh. “Everything I know about Kendall so far leads me to believe that she’s always up to something.”

Lola nodded. “Yeah, she’s so shady. And kind of bitchy…but that’s not a crime.” Lola sounded like she appreciated Kendall’s terseness. She looped her arm through mine. “Well, since we’re here, let’s get a drink.”

I groaned. “A drink? I don’t think so. I’m still kind of out of it from all that champagne earlier. Remind me to never drink a mimosa again.”

Lola gasped. “I will do no such thing.” She pulled me toward the bar. “Ginger ale for you.” She leaned close to whisper in my ear. “And I’ll try to slip the key back into Lucian’s pocket if I get the chance.”

“Okay, but this is a bachelorette party, remember? Lucian may not even be here.”

Lola smiled. “This is Lucian we’re talking about. I’m sure he’ll show up at some point. And if he doesn’t…well…I’ll figure something else out.”

With ginger ale in hand, I tried to enjoy the party for what it was, even if I was worried that the entire place could implode in a rush of black magic at any moment.

Elle had really outdone herself with the décor. There were flowers *everywhere*. I didn’t think I’d ever seen so many in one place. So many different varieties and colors. I felt like I was in a dream…or a beautiful nightmare depending on how I looked at it.

Lola and I passed by tables draped in crisp linens with full tea service. White-gloved waitstaff walked around with trays of champagne. They were also wearing fancy hats that looked like something straight out of the gilded age.

There were so many desserts stacked high on so many tables that I couldn’t even choose what to eat next. I was going to have a stomachache later, but the cupcakes, donuts, and brownies tasted good, and I wasn’t against indulging myself.

Lola and I stopped to admire a champagne fountain set up in front of a massive ice sculpture of Elle with angel wings—and this was surrounded by beautiful white orchids.

“This is a beautiful party,” Lola said as the three-piece string quartet seated themselves and started playing classical music. “And wait, did they hang *extra* chandeliers?”

I looked up and saw what Lola was talking about. There were definitely more chandeliers than normal. “Why does Lucian have to go so hard with all his parties?”

“Don’t be a hater, Cali,” Lola teased. “If he wants his mate to have extra chandeliers, he should make it happen. There’s a lot of things to down Lucian for, but this isn’t one of them.”

I shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

Lola and I mingled and talked and laughed, enjoying ourselves despite the circumstances. My mood only took a dip when we ran into Ava standing with a bunch of other Samaras at the bar.

Ava looked like a million bucks, of course. Her long hair was styled in a bun, and her slinky red dress bared a lot but still managed to look classy.

She looked me up and down as I approached. “Wow, Cali. You look awful!”

I scowled. “Thanks.” I wanted to say she did, too, but it would have been a lie.

“I mean, you look fine, enough, but I’m saying you look all pale and washed out and kind of clammy, like you threw up or something,” she said.

“You’re not far off,” I admitted. I took a sip of my ginger ale, which was helping my stomach upset along with the desserts.

I left Ava as soon as I could, opting to make small talk with Perrie and Cresta. I liked them well enough, but it was easy to sense that none of the Samaras cared for me very much. Didn’t take a genius to know why that was.

“Vanguard parties are always so extra,” Perrie said. “But Elle’s glowing.”

I turned to watch Elle working the crowd. She looked beautiful in her flowing white slip dress and seemed to be having a good time.

I excused myself as politely as I could and pulled Lola to the side. “Any ideas about how to get rid of the key?” I said. “I haven’t seen Lucian yet.”

“I think we can put it back where we found it, but how are we going to get access to the cellar?” Lola said.

“We’ll wait for an opening and slip out.”

I spotted Greyson weaving through the crowd heading toward us. He looked very out of place, being that he was one of the few men in attendance.

“Did you find Lucian?” I asked him.

“No, and I’m starting to worry. For all we know, more is happening downstairs as we speak.”

“We need to find him and warn him and put the key back,” I said.

“Let’s get it over with,” Greyson said.

We started to sneak off when Perrie appeared.

“Where are you three going? And why do you look all secretive?”

“We were looking for you! Let’s get another drink!” Lola said. “Let’s go! I want to know all the dirt on Lilac as a boyfriend.” She linked her arm through Perrie’s and at the same time, slipped me the key.

“Good luck,” she whispered.

Greyson and I wasted no time heading for the cellar. Greyson had a good sense of direction and easily navigated down to the place where we’d found the key.

What I didn’t expect was to find Kendall already there.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Kendall rolled her eyes before exchanging a look with Greyson that made me jealous. I wished I could tell Kendall to cut the crap—that I already knew her secret. That would wipe that smug look off her face. But that would be throwing Greyson under the MIB bus, and I didn’t want to do that.

“I could ask you both the same thing,” Kendall said.

Greyson was about to respond when Lucian appeared. “Wait, what are you all doing down here? The party is upstairs.” His eyes fell on Greyson. “And you’re not supposed to be here at all. It’s a bachelorette party! We’ve already had our fun.” He winked at Greyson, who rolled his eyes.

“That’s such an archaic thing to say,” Kendall said. “Why can’t men go to bachelorette parties?”

“Because Elle didn’t want them there. It’s her party, not yours,” Lucian said pleasantly. “With all due respect.”

Kendall and Lucian stared each other down, and for once I liked that Lucian was putting someone in their place in his own special way.

I eyed his jacket pocket, wondering if there was a way for me to drop the key into it.

“I really need to talk to you, Lucian,” Greyson was saying.

“Ah, you’re hungry for some man bonding time?” Lucian said.

Greyson winced. “Please never say that again.”

Lucian slapped him on the back. “Whatever you say, friend. Come on!”

To my dismay, Lucian and his jacket pocket started heading off with my mate. But he didn’t get far before his steps faltered.

“You okay?” Greyson asked him.

Lucian didn’t answer.

Kendall and I screamed when Lucian dropped to the ground, and we screamed louder when he started convulsing and vomiting blood.

**Episode 5681**

I stared in horror as Lucian writhed on the ground at my feet, gasping and choking. My heart began to race as blood spewed from his mouth, staining his face and clothes.

“What the hell is happening?” I gasped, looking up at Greyson in horror. “Is he okay?”

But Greyson didn’t answer me.

“Lucian!” Elle dropped down by Lucian’s side, her face white and terrified. She grabbed hold of his hand, trying to stop him from shaking, but nothing she did seemed to help him. She cried out in fear, looking around at all of us.

Kendall knelt by his other side. She looked tense, but there wasn’t any fear in her expression as she looked down at the prince, carefully avoiding the blood spurting from his mouth. She rolled him to his side so he stopped choking and tried to talk to him. “Lucian!” she shouted, as though trying to speak to him across a large room. “Lucian! Can you hear me?! What happened?!”

Suddenly, Lucian stopped vomiting. He stopped trembling and lay quietly for a moment. It was as though Kendall yelling at him had pulled him back from wherever he had been.

His eyes blinked open, and he pushed himself up onto his forearms, looking around, confused, like he didn’t know where he was.

Stepping forward, I put my hand to his forehead. He felt hot and sweaty, like he had a fever.

“You collapsed,” I explained to him.

“What?” he breathed, wiping a hand across his chin, smearing blood.

Greyson looked around, then stepped forward and put his hand beneath Lucian’s arm. “Let’s get you back upstairs,” he said.

Elle helped Lucian get unsteadily to his feet. He was clearly disoriented and seemed weak. He swayed on his feet.

As we all headed toward the stairs, I shot a look at Greyson—

*Do you think it’s food poisoning or something?*

Greyson glanced over at me. *I have no idea. The vomiting could suggest it, but who knows?*

When we got upstairs, Aysel was waiting for us.

She huffed an irritated sigh when she saw her brother. “Lucian, you’re always being so dramatic…” She trailed off when she got a better look at him, and how heavily he was leaning on Greyson. “What’s wrong? Is he really sick?”

“It appears so,” Greyson muttered.

Aysel looked past us, into the basement. “Why were you all down there again?”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to dig into the real reason—the key, the door, the strange sound. Aysel had been skeptical enough the other day, so I just shrugged. “Oh, the four of us were checking out the wine cellar.”

Aysel frowned. “The *four* of you?”

“Yeah.” I glanced over my shoulder. “Greyson, Lucian, me, and Kendall.”

Aysel looked past me, her frown deepening. “And where *is* Kendall?”

My stomach clenched as I turned, following Aysel’s questioning gaze. Kendall was *not* with us. She had been with us in the basement—I had seen her next to Lucian—but she had not come up the stairs with us. So where the hell was she now? Where had she gone?

I gritted my teeth, thinking about why Kendall was here at the Vanguard palace in the first place. But when I looked back at Aysel, I knew I wasn’t going to dare explain that to her.

Aysel was looking at me, waiting for an answer to her—admittedly reasonable—question, but I didn’t have one.

So I improvised. “Maybe she stopped by to use the bathroom,” I said with a shrug. “To clean up. Lucian did throw up.”

“*Ew*,” Aysel said, stepping back, looking disgusted.

Lucian moaned and leaned more heavily on Greyson.

Elle gave Aysel a dark look. “Come. We must get him to his bed. Lucian must rest.”

“Yeah, good idea,” Greyson agreed. “Elle, you lead the way.”

Elle nodded and pointed down a passageway. We walked for a while, turning a bunch of times until we came to a long hallway lined with portraits.

“In there,” Elle said, nodding toward a heavily carved wooden door. She pushed open the door and led us inside.

It was a huge room, with a massive bed in the center of it. It was an imposing four-poster, with heavy crimson curtains pushed back to reveal a silk bedspread in the same crimson color. I managed to not roll my eyes when I saw it, though I wanted to.

Greyson helped Lucian over and laid him down on the bed. Elle tried to make him comfortable, but Lucian’s face was tight, and he shook his head. Then Elle excused herself, needing to take care of the party downstairs.

“I don’t want to stay here,” he murmured as soon as Elle left, though his eyes were closed and he looked exhausted.

I looked between Greyson and Aysel—who had followed us to Lucian’s room—but they both looked as confused as I felt.

So I turned to Lucian instead. “You don’t want to be here?” I asked him. “Why don’t you want to be in your bed?”

Lucian shook his head. His brows were drawn down and he looked tense and agitated. “I can’t stay here.”

“Where?” I asked him.

“*Here!*” he insisted, opening his eyes a crack to see me. “Here! In the Vanguard palace!”

Aysel rolled her eyes. “Are you serious? After you spent all that time and money to rebuild it? That was such a huge pain in the ass for everyone, and now you don’t even want to live here? Come on—”

“No, no,” Lucian murmured. “C’est mauvais! Nous sommes tous en danger!”

“What is he saying?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Greyson said. “He’s not making any sense.”

“I think he started speaking French,” I said, growing more anxious by the moment.

Then—without warning—Lucian jumped to his feet and ran toward the bank of windows directly across from his bed. He was sprinting, and was fast, but Greyson was faster, and reached out and pulled him back, holding him tightly.

“Let me go!” Lucian cried out, fighting back, reaching desperately for the windows. “I’m going to fly! I can do it! Let me show you!”

“Pull it together!” Greyson shouted. He pulled Lucian back, away from the windows, though Lucan was putting up one hell of a fight. “You’re a werewolf, and the last I checked, werewolves don’t fly.”

“I can do it!” Lucian cried out. “Je peux voler!”

Greyson began to pull him back to the bed, but Lucian wasn’t making it easy. He was fighting Greyson, and then he began to point wildly to the bedroom door.

“He’s coming for me!”

We all spun around to look at the door, but there was no one there.

“*Please*,” Lucian said desperately, pleading with Greyson, and then me. “You have to save me!”

Aysel stepped forward and took her brother firmly by the shoulders. “Lucian! Stop! You are acting crazy. Even for you.”

Her voice was harsh, but I could tell that she was scared by his strange behavior.

She looked around. “Where is Armin when I need him?” she groaned.

I narrowed my eyes. “Aysel, Lucian is your brother. You *need* to do something.”

“But what?” she demanded.

“Oh my god,” I muttered, stepping past her to Lucian, who was swaying on his feet. All I knew was that if it was Artemis that was sick, I wouldn’t hesitate to help her.

Greyson must have understood what I was thinking, because he stepped next to me. Aysel faded back, and together, Greyson and I got Lucian back onto the bed and got him undressed.

Greyson pulled off his shirt, and I got his shoes and socks off. As we worked, I could feel heat pouring off of him. Werewolves always ran hot, but Lucian felt feverish, and he had started to sweat.

I looked over at Greyson. “He seems really sick. Do you think we should call a doctor or take him to a hospital or something?”

Greyson gave Lucian a tense look. “He’s an Alpha. The chances are that whatever is making him react like this, his immune system is already going after it and is starting to take care of it,” he assured me.

I looked at Lucian’s face, which already had a sheen of sweat on it. “I hope you’re right,” I said nervously.

When we’d gotten him undressed, I helped Greyson ease Lucian under the covers of the bed. We pulled them up, but only a second later Lucian kicked them off.

“It’s too hot,” he gasped, throwing his arms out on either side of him. He tossed his head to the side, then looked over at the door. “It’s not safe,” he said again. “We’re all in danger. He knows you’re here. Don’t leave me! Please! Please don’t leave me! Take me with you!” He whispered these last statements, tossing and turning fitfully. He rolled onto his chest, and for the first time I got a look at his back.

I took an involuntary step back, gasping in shock. Because for the first time I saw that spread across his pale skin was a bright red, angry-looking rash.

**Episode 5682**

**Xavier**

I sat in my car and stared up at the Samara pack house. I just couldn’t stop thinking about how Colton had explained that he didn’t feel like he belonged at the Grimcrest pack house. It was stuck in my head because—despite everything—I just couldn’t shake the feeling that I didn’t seem to belong *anywhere*.

I was the Samara Alpha—and this was the Samara pack house. But my Luna and my mate—or, *one* of my mates—didn’t want me to stay here with her. How fucked up was that? I was the Alpha, but it was her house, and I just didn’t feel like I was welcome in it.

And to make matters even worse—and weirder—I *owned* the Redwood pack house, but my brother was living there as the Redwood Alpha. He was living and sleeping there with Cali—who was also my mate.

And my other brother was moving into the lake house. So where did *I* belong?

I leaned my head back on the headrest and blew out a gusty sigh. This was all so fucking convoluted. I didn’t have all the answers—I didn’t even know if I had *any* of the answers—but I did know that Ava was right about one thing: If we didn’t work out some kind of middle ground, my own pack was going to start to wonder what kind of Alpha they had. Whatever was going on between Ava and me, I couldn’t keep being a no-show Alpha—I couldn’t do that to my pack. They were counting on me.

So I opened the door and stepped out of the car. But as I started toward the house, I knew I didn’t have any real answers, even though I’d told Ava that I would figure it out.

Maybe if I could try—*really* try—to explain to her what I was going through and feeling, maybe she might at least *try* to be a little more forgiving. She was always telling me that she wanted me to open up more, so maybe she would like that.

But I wasn’t positive that was going to work. It wasn’t that Ava was heartless or anything, but she could be pretty stubborn. Especially when it came to anything having to do with the *due destini.* And anything to do with Cali.

As I headed inside, I nodded to Knox, who was sitting in the living room. He nodded back, looking pleased to see me. That was something—at least Knox had gotten his shit together and stopped being such a little pissant about everything.

Though I figured that had an expiration date too. I had no doubt that if these problems with Ava continued, Knox would try to use it to somehow question my role as Alpha of the pack.

“Ava’s not back yet,” Knox said, getting to his feet.

I paused.

“She and Marissa are still at Elle’s bachelorette party,” he added, like I didn’t know where Ava was.

I shrugged. “Hope they’re having fun,” I said vaguely, wondering why the hell Knox felt compelled to bring that up. As if the only reason I would be at my own fucking pack house would be to see Ava. I rolled my eyes but didn’t say anything else. I wasn’t in the mood to get into a pissing contest with the shrimp, so I had started to head upstairs when I heard the front door open and shut.

“—it was disgusting!” Marissa laughed as she walked in.

“I know, I know,” Ava agreed, laughing too.

I realized with a pang that it had been a while since I’d heard her laugh.

“I feel like I need to take a shower just to rid myself of that memory,” Marissa went on.

I turned around to see Ava chuckle as she pulled off her jacket. She stopped when she saw me, with one arm in, one arm out.

My breath caught as I looked at her. She’d gotten dressed up for the party, and she looked beautiful. She was wearing some kind of smoky eye makeup, and it made her blue eyes look brighter than ever, and her short red dress clung to her body in ways that made my mind start to think…*thoughts*.

She recovered before I did and finished pulling her jacket off.

“What are you two doing back so early?” I asked, trying to sound casual. “Shouldn’t you be stuffing dollar bills into some stripper’s G-string and drinking some cocktail with a filthy name?”

“The party ended early,” Ava said coolly, not looking directly at me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Lucian got sick,” Marissa explained. “Elle called it all off to take care of him.”

That was news to me. “That’s too bad. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

Marissa smiled and rolled her eyes, then headed past me up the stairs.

Knox, who had come into the entryway when the women walked in, now looked between Ava and me for a moment. The air was heavy with tension, and he clearly felt it.

Finally, he cleared his throat. “Anyway, I think I’m going to go…patrol…outside.”

This snapped Ava’s attention back. “Are you on duty tonight?”

Knox shook his head. “I’m just going to do an extra round. I just…need some air.”

It was clearly an excuse to get away, but neither Ava nor I asked him any more questions.

As soon as the door shut behind Knox, I looked at Ava. “What did you tell him?”

Ava frowned. “What?”

I nodded toward the door. “The shrimp. He clearly knows about you and me…”

Ava rolled her eyes and tossed her keys onto the table near the door. “Don’t call him that. And I didn’t tell him anything, Xavier,” she snapped. “I didn’t have to. He figured it out on his own.”

I rubbed my head, which was starting to ache. “That’s why I came back.”

Ava cut her eyes sideways at me. “You’re not sleeping in my bed.”

For a moment I considered making a joke—something about her dress and not sleeping but still sharing the bed—but I decided that now was not the time for it. “I came back here because I belong here, Ava. Even if you don’t want to sleep with me. But we are going to have to at least give the appearance of being together, or Knox and the rest of the pack are going to figure even more things out.”

Ava crossed her arms. “That sounds like an excuse to crawl into my bed.”

“*Our* bed,” I corrected. “And that’s not what I’m doing. I’m just saying I can’t stay out on the couch if we don’t want to have to deal with a shit ton of questions from Knox and everyone else in this pack. That’s not the kind of thing that’s just going to go unnoticed around here.”

I could see the calculations going on behind Ava’s eyes. She knew I was right, though she didn’t say anything.

“I can just sleep on the floor until…” I paused for a moment. “Until we can figure this all out.”

She still didn’t speak, but she didn’t look as angry as before, so I took a step toward her. I breathed deeply, drawing in her scent. It washed over me, as heady as night-blooming jasmine.

“I promise you,” I said quietly, “we *will* figure this all out.”

Ava hesitated for just another moment, then nodded, though I could see some reservation in her eyes. Her scent and the sensation of just being near her made my whole body come alive, but I didn’t want to push it, so I balled my hands into fists at my sides, fighting for control.

“How was the party?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes again, but this time she smiled. “It was more fun than I expected, but every bit as over-the-top as I was anticipating.”

I returned her smile. “It sounds like you had fun.”

She thought about it for a moment. “It wasn’t unpleasant.”

I remembered what Marissa had said. “What happened to Lucian? He really did get sick?”

She frowned. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“What happened?”

Ava shook her head. “I don’t really know; it was so weird. The party was going on and then there was suddenly a big commotion as they brought Lucian up from the basement. He looked pretty bad… I’ve actually never seen an Alpha look that way,” she said, trailing off for a second. “Then we got out there after that.”

“Wait…*what*?” I asked. I shook my head, trying to make sense of what Ava had just said. “Hang on—who’s *they*? Who brought Lucian up from the basement? Who was there?”

“Greyson and Cali,” Ava said.

My eyes went wide. “*Cali* was there? Was she okay?”

It was like the temperature in the house dropped as the words escaped my lips. I could see the change in Ava immediately. Her blue eyes, so bright a moment ago, darkened and narrowed to dangerous slits and her shoulders rose, high and tense.

Whipping around, she strode to the front door and pulled it open. “Get the fuck out!”

**Episode 5683**

**Greyson**

Cali’s gasp drew my attention, and I saw in an instant what had caused it. A strange rash spread across Lucian’s back, red and angry, weepy and damp-looking.

“Oh, that’s *disgusting*,” Aysel murmured, looking horrified. “What is that? He looks like he’s got hives or something. Get the blankets up, I don’t want to look at that.” She twitched the sheet up, covering Lucian’s back so only his shoulders were showing.

I leaned toward him, trying to get a closer look at his back.

“Could it be an allergic reaction?” Cali wondered. She glanced up at Aysel. “Is Lucian allergic to anything? Anything he could have eaten recently that would have made him break out like this? And maybe that would explain the throwing up and the fever too?”

Aysel frowned, like she was thinking about the question. “I don’t think so. Nothing I know about,” she said slowly.

But I was barely listening to her. I just kept thinking about the rash. There was just something…off about it.

“Greyson, what are you doing?” Cali asked, as I reached for the sheet covering Lucian.

“I just want to check something,” I muttered, pulling the fabric back.

“Gross,” Aysel said. “Don’t do that, Greyson. Cover that back up. Why are you showing it?” she asked, reaching for the sheet to cover Lucian again.

“Stop,” I said, putting my hand out. “I want to see his back.”

“Oh my god,” Cali said quietly. She leaned forward, looking closely at Lucian. “Look—there’s a pattern.”

“Holy shit,” I said under my breath. Cali was right—and that’s what had been eating at me. There *was* a pattern. I had seen it right away, but it was like my brain just hadn’t fully processed it. I stared down at Lucian’s back in wonder and shock. I could see the pattern spreading across his back, but it was like I had stopped trusting my eyes. How could this be? What was going on here? Rashes didn’t appear in patterns.

I pulled the sheets lower so I could see the rash more completely as Lucian twitched and babbled. His eyes were half closed as he spoke, but the words he was saying weren’t any recognizable language. He’d stopped speaking English or French. He was just babbling incoherently, which was deeply unnerving to listen to. And he was sweating even more than ever, clearly feverish.

Trying to ignore his florid nonsense speech, I looked down at the rash and really tried to get a sense of the full picture of the pattern on his back.

Or *was* it a pattern? I was freaked out by Lucian’s behavior—was it possible I was seeing too much in my head and something that wasn’t even there? Like I was finding a pattern just because I was looking for one, like a Rorschach or something?

But as I looked at his back, my stomach tightened. No, there was no use trying to deny it—the rash was definitely in the shape of a crow with outspread wings.

I looked up at Aysel and Cali—it was clear from the shocked look on their faces that they saw what I saw.

“What *is* that?” Aysel asked as she leaned closer, a sharp edge of fear in her voice.

I shook my head. “Honestly, I have no idea. But I don’t think we should jump to any conclusions about what we think it might be,” I added hastily, looking up to see Cali’s worried expression. I probably shouldn’t have spoken so candidly, and I tried to quickly backtrack. “I know it looks strange, but there’s still a chance it’s just a random pattern.”

Lucian shuddered, like he was cold, and wrapped his arms around himself, so Cali pulled the sheet back up, covering him.

That made me smile. Even now, in the weirdest of moments, Cali was still looking out for others.

“I think we need to get a professional involved here,” Cali said firmly. She looked up at me. “Shouldn’t we take Lucian to a hospital?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Aysel said without hesitation. “We have a Vanguard physician on call. I’ll have Armin summon him,” she said crisply, and turned and walked out.

Lucian stirred and turned over.

Cali pressed a hand to his forehead, and her own brow furrowed with worry. “He’s burning up.” She stepped into the bathroom and returned a moment later with a damp cloth for his forehead.

“Will you keep an eye on him for a minute?” I asked her.

She looked at me warily as she placed the washcloth on Lucian’s forehead. “Where are you going?”

I hesitated for a moment. I knew Kendall was a sticky subject, but there was no getting around it. “Kendall didn’t come back upstairs with us. I thought I should go check on her.”

Cali’s mouth opened to respond, but then she closed it again. She only nodded, saying nothing.

I could see a hint of disappointment in her eyes. Or was that jealousy? Either way, I needed to clarify my motives, so I stepped closer to her.

“I’m worried about what Kendall is doing down there,” I told her quietly. I glanced over at Lucian, who seemed to be pretty out of it. But I lowered my voice anyway. “And you know why I’m worried.”

Cali took this in for a moment, then flipped the cloth over and pressed the cool side on Lucian’s forehead.

“I’ll be back,” I told her.

She nodded, and I headed out of the room with a heavy heart. And just as I walked out, Lola pushed past me, bursting into the room.

“I just heard what happened!” she announced, moving to Cali.

Cali and Lola were keeping an eye on Lucian, so I continued out into the passageway. I meant what I’d said to Cali—whatever my wolf might feel about Kendall, this was different. Kendall hadn’t come up with us from the basement. She was here to do MIB business. Which meant she might be here looking for something.

Moving carefully around the manor, I managed to avoid the remaining guests in the great hall—there weren’t many at this point—and headed through a side passage back toward the hallway with an entrance to the basement. I opened the door and headed down to the cool, subterranean level.

And as soon as I got to the basement, I was hit by Kendall’s scent. I took a deep breath, taking her in. She was still here—I could feel it.

Following the trail her scent gave me, I traced her past the wine cellar to the door where Lucian had collapsed. There she was—standing at the door, taking pictures of the wooden door with the strange little window.

She heard my approaching footsteps and turned, her purple eyes flashing with an accusation before she even opened her mouth. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Well, *I* was actually invited here,” I pointed out, “while you made up some reasonable excuse to snoop around.” I gave her an assessing look. “Did you find anything?”

She glowered at me. “You know damn well I wouldn’t tell you if I did.”

I stepped closer to her and felt my wolf begin to stir as he became aware of her scent and—most of all—her proximity.

Fuck. That wasn’t good. I couldn’t let the mate bond flare up again. Not now.

“You are *not* a part of this, Greyson. You have nothing to do with my…research.” She shook her head. “Go back to wherever you came from.”

“Maybe I don’t want to,” I challenged her.

“Maybe I don’t care,” she muttered back, flipping through the photos on her camera.

I rolled my eyes. “Are you even concerned about Lucian?” I asked.

She shrugged, looking unbothered. “He’s a werewolf. He’ll be back to his usual pompous self in no time at all.”

“So you’re not worried?” I asked.

“Not really,” she muttered.

“Not at all?”

She stopped perusing her camera and looked up at me. Her striking eyes searched my face. “What are you getting at, Greyson? If you’ve got something to ask me, why don’t you just ask it already?”

I paused. I was trying to take shallow breaths. Her scent was everywhere, and it was driving my wolf crazy, but I couldn’t get a question out of my head, so I just asked it. “Did you do something to Lucian to make him collapse the way he did?”

She stared at me for a moment, giving no sign of emotion. “Why would I do that?” she asked flatly.

I raised my eyebrows and nodded toward the door. “So that you could do exactly what you’re doing—have some time down here to do some research.”

She scoffed. “And here I was, thinking you had come down here because you were worried about me.”

She started to turn away, but I stepped toward her and grabbed her by the shoulders so I could look her straight in the eyes when I asked my final question—

“Did you use some MIB drug on Lucian?”

**Episode 5684**

Lola stood at my side as I put a fresh cold compress on Lucian’s forehead. These seemed to help, but only for a moment, and Lucian’s fever always seemed to come roaring back, no matter how many I applied.

I looked up at her. “Do you think a fever reducer would help him?”

“Like medicine?”

I nodded.

Lola shrugged. “It might,” she admitted, “but it might not. It might not have any effect at all. You just never know with werewolves.”

“That’s great,” I muttered, flipping the compress over.

Lola eyed Lucian’s sleeping face warily. “Hey, do you think it’s possible this palace is cursed?”

I looked quickly up at her. “Why would you say that?”

She stared back at me. “*Why* would I say that? Cali, you can’t be serious. I think it’s pretty obvious. Just look at all the bad shit that’s happened here. Think of all the bad shit that’s just happened to *you* here,” she added pointedly.

I grimaced. “Okay, I guess there has been some bad shit,” I conceded. “But you could say the same thing about the Redwood pack house, and I don’t think that house is cursed. I think bad shit is just kind of bound to happen when you get a lot of supernatural beings and events in one place. I think that’s just the risk you run when you live in the supernatural world.”

“I guess so,” Lola admitted. “But since Lucian’s at the heart of this latest thing, I just think it wouldn’t be a stretch to suggest that there might just be something foul in the house of Vanguard.”

I shook my head. “I think you’ve been watching too many of those gothic horror movies.”

“You shouldn’t laugh at me,” Lola chided. “My BritBox subscription is how I’m figuring out the way the world works.”

“I’m not laughing,” I said honestly. I cleared my throat, then pulled down the sheet covering Lucian’s back. “Lola, when you look at that rash, what do you see?”

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Holy shit. That’s a giant bird, right? With its wings spread.”

My stomach sank. I was really hoping she was going to tell me she saw nothing but an ordinary rash, and of course I was being crazy for seeing something else. But it was clear Lola could see the pattern. Greyson had too—I knew he had. I had seen the shock in his eyes. “That’s not good,” I said quietly.

Lola set her jaw. “See? This only confirms what I said—this whole palace is cursed. Maybe it started out that way when they built it, or maybe it’s just been getting worse over time. There was a lot of dark energy generated here with that whole Seluna thing. Lucian and Aysel said they got rid of all that stuff associated with her. Maybe they didn’t—”

“Don’t be crazy,” I said quickly. “That stuff almost destroyed them too. They wouldn’t hold onto it.”

Lola gave me a long look. “Cali, sometimes you are so naïve it freaks me out. Okay, say they did get rid of all of it. Maybe the bad mojo is just still lingering. Maybe that’s what’s going on here. Maybe it’s causing more bad things to happen.”

I shuddered. I knew that Lola was prone to exaggeration, but I had to admit that she had a point—it wasn’t a bad theory.

I bit my lip as I looked down at the rash spreading across Lucian’s back. “So I’m assuming you’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“What? Lucian’s weird stigmata?” Lola shook her head. “Come on, Cali. I bet *no one’s* ever seen anything like this before. Does anyone have any idea what it means?”

“Greyson sure didn’t seem to know,” I said, remembering that he hadn’t said anything before he’d left to find Kendall. And Aysel didn’t offer any explanation. The four of us were the only ones who had seen it. I looked the Vanguard Alpha over again. “Maybe Lucian’s royal physician will know what this weird mark means.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Lola said, though she didn’t sound particularly hopeful.

“I mean, come on, there has to be some kind of normal explanation for this…right?” I said, speaking more to convince myself than Lola. “I mean. maybe he rolled over onto something. That could happen.”

Lola considered this for a moment. “I remember this friend I had in high school—Michelle Davis—she got ringworm from walking around without her shoes on when she was on vacation, and she had these really weird patterns on her skin for a while.”

“Yeah, right. Exactly,” I said.

“Yeah,” Lola said.

We stared at each other, and from the look in Lola’s eyes, I knew we were both thinking the same thing—whatever was going on with Lucian, it wasn’t something he’d rolled over on, and it wasn’t ringworm. Whatever it was, there was no simple, non-magical explanation for what we were looking at. As much as I wanted one, it just didn’t exist.

A million different questions raced through my head as I reached for the sheet and pulled it to cover Lucian up. Just as I did, the door of the bedroom chambers burst open, and Elle came rushing into the room.

Her eyes were wide and frantic, taking everything in, and when she saw Lucian on the bed, she rushed to his side.

“My poor, poor Lucian! I’m back, can you hear me?”

She grasped hold of his hand, but he didn’t even flinch at her touch. He didn’t seem to be aware that she was near, which seemed so strange. He was obsessed with Elle.

Elle looked up at me. “I just wanted to make sure that the party was called off … He seems worse now… Did something happen? What is this red mark? Is he going to be okay?” she asked desperately.

Lola and I looked at each other, exchanging worried looks. The truth was that I had no idea if he was going to be okay, but neither of us really wanted to say that to Elle—not when she was looking at us with those big, doe eyes.

“Oh, you know…I think I heard there was a werewolf flu going around,” Lola said vaguely, clearly trying to play down the real danger of the situation.

I gave her a look. *What the hell?* I mouthed.

Lola shrugged.

Elle took the cool cloth from me and held it to Lucian’s head. “Dear heart,” she said softly. “Can you hear me? I’m right here. I’m right by your side. I’m not going anywhere ever again.”

I tipped my head and Lola nodded, understanding. She and I stepped over to the window, away from the bed, giving Elle and Lucian some privacy.

I glanced over at the door, wondering when Greyson was going to come back.

Noticing this, Lola frowned at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said automatically.

“*Cali*,” she said pointedly.

I sighed. “Greyson went down downstairs again to look for Kendall. And he’s not back yet.”

Lola’s eyes darkened. “Why did he do that?”

“Kendall was down there when Lucian collapsed.”

“Are you *sure*?” she asked quickly.

“What? Of course I’m sure,” I said, taken aback. “I mean, I was there when it happened.”

“That’s not what I mean,’ Lola said, lowering her voice. “I mean that Kendall is a grown woman and can more than take care of herself. Are you sure he didn’t go down there because of the old mate bond pulling on that invisible string between them?”

My stomach clenched uncomfortably at the suggestion. “I guess I’d thought of that,” I admitted. “But Greyson assured me that wasn’t what was going on.”

Lola still looked skeptical. “He did, did he? Then why did he go down there looking for her?”

I opened my mouth to answer, then thought better of it and closed it again. I just wasn’t sure what to say without revealing that Kendall was in the MIB business.

I shook my head. “He was just worried when she didn’t come back up with us,” I finally said.

Lola’s mouth twisted. “Well, I suppose that with any luck, whatever Lucian has, Kendall will get it. I’m just picturing Kendall puking all over the ground and covered in a rash, and the thought makes me smile.”

I sighed. “Can we please not talk about her?” I requested.

Lola raised an eyebrow. “Sure, but you’re the one who brought her up—”

“Lola, please,” I pleaded.

“Fine,” Lola huffed, putting up her hands in mock surrender. Her phone buzzed, and she pulled it out of her pocket. Reading the screen, she smiled brightly. “Oh! It’s a text from Steinar.”

“Steinar? Really?” I asked, surprised. “What does he have to say?”

Lola navigated over to the text, but as she read, I watched as her excitement turned into wide-eyed terror.

“*Oh god*,” she murmured.

“What is it?” I asked.

She looked up at me, her eyes filled with fear. “I knew it! I just *knew* it!”

“Knew what?” I demanded, my heart starting to pound.

“I told you this place was cursed!”

**Episode 5685**

**Artemis**

Marius let out a low whistle. “You mean…like a relationship between all of us? Not just sex?”

I bit my lip, wondering if it had been a mistake to bring it up in the first place. I opened my mouth to answer, but before Rishika spoke before I could say anything—

“Why not?” she asked with a shrug.

I mean, I could actually think of a million reasons why not—not the least of which because relationships were hard enough without adding a freaking third person into the mix.

I couldn’t help but think of my sister, and how hard Cali seemed to have it with two mates.

“I don’t even know how things would actually work between us all,” I admitted.

Marius looked thoughtful. “Yeah, I guess I’m not sure either.” Then he smiled. “But it was fun when we all slept together.”

“I do like you as a person,” Rishika said to Marius, then clarified, “but that doesn’t mean that I’m ready to have a relationship with you. I know you care about Artemis, and you’ve earned my respect as a friend, but I think we both know those feelings are different than being in a relationship with someone.”

“Of course,” Marius said with a nod.

It was clear there was a lot to work out here, but I was relieved that neither Rishika nor Marius appeared to be jealous of each other. That—at least—seemed like a good place to start.

But I was also aware that it was possible for that to change. Feelings could change. Easily. People could get offended; feelings could get hurt. And it wasn’t like I had a really stellar record when it came to long-term commitments. Marius and I hadn’t worked out the first time around, and Rishika and I had broken up before I’d come here to the Fae world. I’d once been so afraid of relationships, did I really think I could handle two at the same time?

I bit my lip as I considered all of this. Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea after all. Maybe this was all just doomed to fail.

But as I looked at each of them, I didn’t *feel* like this was doomed to fail. I knew that what we were suggesting might be complicated, but we did all enjoy being around each other. And that night we’d spent together had been really hot.

I couldn’t let that sway me, I reminded myself sternly.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t think we need to decide anything right now. This is new to all of this. Rishika just got her memories back, we’re all on the road, I’m looking for my father—there’s a lot going on.”

Marius laid back with a sigh. “Yeah, I’m fine with waiting on making a decision.” He looked over. “If Rishika is.”

Rishika nodded, then smiled. “Sure, but maybe by the end of this journey, we’ll all be sick of each other, and this will all be a moot point.”

Marius rolled over and blew out the candle that burned on the small table next to the bed. This cast the room into near darkness, but as my eyes adjusted and the moonlight began to filter in, I looked on either side of me. I could see both Rishika and Marius in the pale light, both of them, lying so close to me.

I felt a sudden warmth flowing through my body, heating it as though a warm fire had just been lit at my feet. I wasn’t so much the sexual tension that we all shared—though I supposed that was part of it—it was that I felt safe. Totally and completely safe. I had spent so much of my life alone and often hunted. I’d been bound to the Kollector, forced to do unthinkable things. I’d felt completely abandoned in the world for so long, and now here I was, with two people who I cared about so much, and who I knew cared about me. They were with me, beside me on this quest to find Kadmos.

“Goodnight,” Marius murmured, as he turned onto his side. He brushed a kiss on my cheek as he closed his eyes.

“Goodnight,” I whispered back.

“Goodnight, Artemis,” Rishika said quietly, kissing my other cheek.

“Goodnight,” I said again. I was suddenly glad for the darkness, as I could feel my face flushing.

I closed my eyes as I felt Rishika’s hand envelop mine. Then, a moment later, Marius did the same with my other hand.

My heart skipped a beat. It would be so easy to ignore all my concerns and to roll to one side or the other—to kiss them both, and to enjoy them as I did the other night.

But I knew I shouldn’t. I couldn’t allow myself to go there. Not when there were so many unknowns ahead.

No, whatever we decided—and it *would* be a mutual decision—it was going to have to wait.

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The next morning I opened my eyes suddenly.

My heart beat hard, and I looked around, trying to figure out what had woken me. I had sat up without realizing it, and must have woken Rishika in the process, because she sat up and looked blearily around.

“What’s going on?” she asked sleepily.

I frowned. “A thud. I heard a thud.” I looked around. “Where’s Marius?” Then I looked over the side of the bed to see him on the floor. “Oh my god—wait…is he sleeping?”

Rishika leaned over to look. She smiled. “Maybe he was right. The bed is kinda small for three people.”

“Maybe,” I said with a yawn.

I glanced out the window and saw that the sun was just starting to appear on the horizon. The sky was still grey, but I could see gold streaking the sky, so I knew dawn was coming soon.

I looked back down at Marius. “Do you think we should wake him?”

“I can’t believe he slept through a fall off the bed,” Rishika chuckled.

I smiled at the sight of Marius’s sleeping face. “He looks so peaceful. Let’s let him sleep a bit longer.”

“Fine with me,” Rishika said. “But I think I’m awake now.” She climbed out of bed and stretched, yawning.

“Sorry for waking you,” I said.

“That’s okay. I think I’ll go wash up.” She grinned at me. “Maybe I can scrub your back.”

I returned her smile. I was super tempted to take her up on the offer, but I had to shake my head no. “I think I should go downstairs and talk to the innkeeper now while it’s quiet, before it gets too busy. I want to see if we can get some supplies for the trip. “

Rishika nodded. “Okay, that’s probably a good idea. But I’ll miss you,” she said with a wink. She collected her clothes and headed into the small washroom.

Marius slept on while I quickly got dressed and slipped out the door. I headed downstairs and into the lobby, which was dim and quiet in the early morning light. The fireplaces in the tavern weren’t even lit yet.

But I could hear movement in the kitchen, so I let myself in.

“Hello?” I said tentatively, pushing the door open.

The innkeeper was inside and looked up warily as I walked in. “Breakfast isn’t served for another hour,” he said tersely. His eyes looked puffy with sleep, and it occurred to me that it had to be hard work to run an inn and stay up as late as people wanted in the tavern, but still get up to cook breakfast for departing travelers in the morning.

I shook my head. “That’s not what I’m here for,” I said, though someone seemed to be baking bread, and it smelled amazing. I tried to ignore the buttery aroma and focused on the task that had brought me downstairs. “I came down because my friends and I are planning to take a very long trip, and I was hoping you would be willing to sell me some supplies for it.”

His stormy expression cleared in an instant when I mentioned the idea of him selling us what we needed. “Oh! Of course!” he said swiftly. “I often do that for travelers who pass through. I can put something together for you.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully.

He got to work, swiftly filling a cloth bag with an assortment of bread, dried meat and fruit, and wedges of hard cheese. All food that would travel well. It was clear he had indeed had experience packing food for traveling.

“Where are you headed?” he asked in a friendly way.

I hesitated for a moment, remembering Adair’s warning to keep to ourselves at the inn. But I shrugged—the innkeeper seemed nice enough. There was probably no harm in telling him our destination, as long as I left the reason for our trip out of it.

“We’re hoping to spend some time in the Ceruvela Mountains,” I said.

The innkeeper had just picked up a large wedge of aged cheddar from a wheel on the counter, but when I spoke, he dropped it in surprise. He wheeled around to look at me, his face going ashen. “The Ceruvela Mountains? You can’t be serious. No one who goes there ever comes back.”

**Episode 5686**

**Greyson**

I watched Kendall closely as I waited for her answer. What I didn’t expect was for her to laugh in my face…though I shouldn’t have been surprised since this was Kendall after all.

She made it her job to be as difficult as possible whenever I questioned her about absolutely anything.

“Are you serious? Do you really think MIB has time to engineer something so ridiculous just so I can look around down here?” She laughed again, louder, shaking her head at me. “Wow. No. I didn’t give Lucian some magical MIB potion. Get a grip, Greyson.”

“I don’t think it’s that ridiculous. I know that you…” I hesitated, knowing that I needed to choose my words carefully. “I know that your, um, company, has all sorts of random tricks up its sleeve. Drugging someone doesn’t seem like that much of a stretch.”

“Greyson, you need to stop watching so many spy movies…or whatever.”

Kendall started to move past me, but I blocked her way.

“A simple yes or no would be helpful,” I said. “It’s a valid question considering.”

She gave me a look that could cut steel. “I didn’t drug him. I thought my response made that clear enough. But then again, you don’t ever seem to take what I say at face value. You tend to ask me things a million times before you catch my drift.”

She shoved past me, but I grabbed her shoulder to pull her back around to face me.

Her eyes flashed angrily as she shrugged out of my hold and jammed a finger in my face. “Next time you touch me like that, you’ll draw back a nub! I’m not Cali. I don’t have to answer your questions!” Kendall hissed.

I wasn’t afraid of her, but I believed that she would pounce if I wasn’t careful, and I wasn’t looking for a fight.

“All I want to know is what you’re up to. You were alone down here for a long time. What did you find?”

“None of your business, Greyson. How many times do I have to say that before you get it? This doesn’t concern you, okay?”

“I disagree. If Lucian has something down here that’s causing all these sounds, all the quaking, then it very much is my business.”

Kendall eyed the door. “What happened to the key?”

“I’m not sure. I assume Lucian still has it.”

She nodded and then started toward the stairs.

“Where are you going?”

She heaved a sigh. “To talk to Lucian,” she said without turning to look at me.

“What, so now you *are* concerned about him? Or are you more concerned about the key?”

She smiled before replying. “He seemed really sick. I mean, throwing up blood is no small matter.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“Great!” she said sarcastically before continuing up the stairs.

We were approaching Lucian’s room when Aysel appeared. “What are you two still doing here? Party’s over.”

Kendall and I exchanged a look.

“Just checking to see how he’s doing,” I said. “Kendall was concerned, too.”

Aysel looked between us with a worried expression. “Well, the doctor will be here within the hour, so I guess we’ll know more then.”

Aysel looked worried, and I felt for her. As crazy as Lucian was, I didn’t want to see him sick. After all, it was rare for Lucian to show any vulnerability at all.

“Do you mind if we take a peek to see how he’s doing?” I asked.

Aysel glanced at his door and then back at us. “Fine, but don’t get him worked up. I don’t know much about his condition, but it doesn’t take a medical doctor to know he needs his rest and to keep calm.”

“We promise we’re only going in to check on him. We’ll be in and out,” Kendall said.

Aysel narrowed her eyes at her before nodding. “Fine. Lucian would kill me if I stopped anyone from visiting him. You know he loves the attention.”

*Aysel certainly knows her brother well.*

“Shall we?” Kendall said, reaching for the knob.

Just before we stepped in, the door opened, and Cali and Lola came walking out. Both looked upset.

Aysel gasped. “What is it? Is he dead?”

“No!” Cali said quickly. “He’s just sleeping. Elle is with him.”

Aysel looked relieved and hurried into Lucian’s bedroom, shutting the door behind her.

As soon as the four of us were alone, Cali nudged Lola. “Show Greyson.”

Lola glanced at Kendall, then held up her phone so that I could see the text from Steinar.

*They who pass with the turn of the key shall unlock a curse upon their blood for all eternity.*

I looked between them, confused. “What the hell does that mean? What is this?”

“Greyson, come on, get with the program! It explains everything!” Lola said.

“Um…no. I need a little more clarification than some cryptic text from Steinar,” I said.

Kendall eyed the text and then looked at Cali. “You showed who the key?”

Lola and Cali exchanged an uneasy look, like they’d been caught. “Steinar. He’s a gargoyle librarian at the Obaltarion?” Lola said.

Kendall raised an eyebrow.

Lola huffed. “The magical library? Look, it doesn’t fucking matter.”

“No, it doesn’t. All that matters is that Steinar agreed to look into the symbols written on the key. We just needed to know what we were dealing with,” Cali said.

“And?” Kendall pressed.

“And, well, he translated for us, and that’s what it says,” Lola replied.

“I don’t like the sound of this. We’ve all dealt with our fair share of curses…but still, that doesn’t mean anything,” I said.

Kendall put her hand up as if to quiet me down. “Where’s the key now?”

Cali hesitated. “Lucian took it back after we tried to open the door.”

Kendall gave her a long look like she was trying to decide whether to believe her or not, but she didn’t push the issue.

“I’m going to go check on him,” Kendall said before slipping into Lucian’s room.

As soon as she was gone, Cali said, “So, guess you found her.”

I nodded. “Guess so.”

“I wonder what she was doing down there,” Lola said.

I shrugged. “Guess you’ll have to ask her.”

“I will,” Lola said, turning and heading for Lucian’s door. “She doesn’t scare me.”

“So, did Kendall tell you anything?” Cali asked as soon as Lola was gone.

“Not a thing,” I said. “Honestly, I’m kind of frustrated. She wouldn’t tell me a thing even after I accused her of causing Lucian’s sickness so that she could snoop around.”

“What? Do you really think she would do that?”

I leaned close. “The MIB are capable of anything. So yeah, I thought she might have done something like that.”

“And? Did she admit to it?”

“Of course not. She denied it.”

Cali glanced at the door, biting her lip. I knew the wheels were turning in her head and she was trying to determine what to do about Kendall. So was I. But I wasn’t sure that there was anything *to* do. She was on official business and used to deflection.

She wasn’t going to tell us anything she didn’t want to share. That much was clear.

“Honestly, I don’t think we should do anything,” I said. I pulled Cali into a hug. “If there’s something going on, maybe we should trust MIB to handle it. That’s what they’re here for, right?”

Cali sighed. “Yes, I guess you’re right. I mean, there must be any number of strange supernatural things going on at any given time that we know nothing about, and they obviously avert the crises when they arise.”

“Exactly. I’d like to think that if there’s something truly dangerous going on that will affect the packs in this region, they’ll tell us. Kendall’s a hard-ass, but she’s not heartless,” I said.

But I didn’t believe my own words. I was more worried than ever, and I just couldn’t trust the MIB was equipped to deal with whatever was going on.

“So, how’s Lucian doing? Any improvement?” I asked Cali.

“Not really. He was mumbling for a while, and then he passed out. Maybe we’ll get lucky and his fever will break and that will be the end of it.”

“I hope so. All of this is giving me a bad feeling.”

I hated dealing with unknowns…especially when the more clues we found, the more confused I became. I had no idea what to do next, and I hated that Kendall wasn’t being more forthcoming.

Cali and I entered Lucian’s bedroom to find Aysel sitting at her brother’s side. Elle was on the bed with Lucian, holding his hand and whispering in his ear.

Lola was silently watching Kendall.

*I hope I don’t have to warn Lola off Kendall again. She’s barking up the wrong tree if she thinks it’ll be fun to go digging around in Kendall’s past.*

Elle suddenly got up, frowning as she clutched at her stomach.

“Elle? What’s wrong?” Cali said.

Elle looked up at her. “I…I don’t know. I’m not feeling so well.” She staggered and collapsed into Aysel before vomiting up blood, just like Lucian.

Aysel screamed as Cali and I jumped out of the way of the spray. “Oh my god,” Cali said, breathless. “Is it contagious?”

**Episode 5687**

A short while later, Greyson, Lola, and I were standing outside the Vanguard palace. We were all still plenty shaken up about what happened with Elle. We’d helped Aysel get Elle into bed…while keeping our distance, and then gotten out of there as fast as we could.

“I think it’s best that you both get in the car and we get the hell out of here,” Greyson said. “There’s something going on here, and I want no part of it.”

“Too late for that,” Lola quipped. “We’re in this. For better or worse.” She winced. “And if all the projectile blood vomiting is any indication, it’s likely for the worse.”

“Don’t say that!” I snapped. I wasn’t ready to think that Lucian and Elle’s fates were in store for us, too.

Kendall came walking out of the palace and made a beeline for her motorcycle. She climbed on without a word to anyone and pulled off in a spray of gravel.

“Ugh. She’s so badass. It’s annoying,” Lola grumbled.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her as she disappeared down the road. “I wonder what she’s up to.”

“No way to know,” Greyson said, following my gaze.

“Guess not. And anyway, right now I’m more worried about whether it’s wise to leave Lucian and Elle,” I said.

“There’s no way we’re staying here,” Greyson replied. “We don’t know what the hell is going on, and after Elle fell sick like that, there’s no guarantee that this thing isn’t spreading. We all do everything together. There’s a good chance that we all ate the same food—and that could be the source of this sickness.”

I gave him a skeptical look. “It’s not the food, Greyson. You saw Steinar’s message. My guess is that whatever’s going on with Lucian and Elle is a curse from the key.”

I fully believed that the key was responsible for this, but I didn’t want to freak out unnecessarily. I was trying to be reasonable about this, which meant that there was a chance that the strange rash and the vomiting had nothing to do with the curse or the key…but I didn’t believe that in my gut.

“Anyway, if it was because of the food, wouldn’t everyone be vomiting right now?” I said.

“It’s not the food,” Lola said darkly, her eyes on the Vanguard palace, which seemed more ominous than usual right now.

“I’m happy to discuss this somewhere else,” Greyson said. He popped open the car door and motioned for us to get inside.

I considered arguing once more that Elle and Lucian might need us, but I knew there was no use. Things weren’t like they used to be where Greyson tried to control me to keep me out of danger, but there were certain battles I knew I wouldn’t win, and this was one of them.

Not to mention that not knowing what the hell was going on had me on edge. It could be the curse making Lucian and Elle sick, or it could be something else, and Greyson was right to be worried about contagion.

What I really wanted was to talk to Greyson more about Kendall. I did feel bad that I’d lied about the key, though it wasn’t technically a lie. Lucian *had* taken the key back after opening the door…I just failed to mention the part about Lola pickpocketing it from Lucian after that.

I hated that Kendall was so top of mind all the time lately. Maybe it was because she was so damn mysterious and tight-lipped. Or maybe it was because she wasn’t the type to let anyone push her around and I admired that…and was kind of jealous of her wolfy confidence.

Her association with the MIB made her even more of an enigma, and that meant that I wouldn’t put it past her to use some MIB engineered drug to cause a distraction so that she could snoop around in peace.

But what I truly felt guilty about was not telling Greyson the whole truth. It wasn’t normal for me to keep things from him.

“So, um, about that key?” I fished it out of my pocket. “Here it is.”

Greyson’s eyes went wide. “What the hell? Where’d you get that, Cali?”

“I definitely didn’t lift it from Lucian’s pocket,” Lola blurted out.

I shot Lola a look. “Really, Lola?” I turned back to Greyson. “What Lola meant to say is that we…um…borrowed it.”

“But why?” Greyson asked. “I don’t get it.”

“Well, we were curious. We wanted to know what it was. After all, you know that Lola and I were going to make a list of all the Vanguard relics. And this is one of them.”

Greyson didn’t look pleased at all. “Making an inventory and swiping an ancient key that doesn’t belong to you are two very different things, Cali.” He turned to look at Lola. “Or do you guys not understand how making a list works?”

“It was my idea, Greyson,” Lola said.

“No, Lola. I’m not going to let you take all the blame. It’s not like I made you run the key back to Lucian’s once I found out,” I said.

I looked at the key where it lay in my palm. I thought about Big Mac’s reaction, Steinar’s text. “There has to be something about this key, though, right? Steinar’s text alone is a sign that there’s so much more to it than meets the eye.”

Greyson was quiet for a moment. “We need to keep this to ourselves for now. At least until we find out what’s making Lucian and Elle so sick. And until we get to the bottom of this, no Redwoods are allowed anywhere near the Vanguard estate.”

Lola chuckled. “You don’t need to twist my arm.”

When we arrived back at the Redwood pack house, Lola stepped out of the car and belched.

“Wow, gross, Lola,” I said.

“Sorry. I got a little motion sickness thanks to Greyson taking all his turns at thirty miles per hour,” she said.

Greyson frowned. “What? I didn’t do that one time. And there are barely any turns at all between here in the Vanguard.”

“Well, something has my stomach all woozy. I’m going to make some tea.”

Lola went to head inside just as Jay was coming out. He waved at us, draped his arm around Lola and led her inside.

“So…why do you think Kendall asked about the key?” I asked Greyson.

“I wish I knew. She might have just been curious…”

“Or maybe she thinks it has some connection to the noise. She likely knows more than she’s letting on,” I said. “She’s investigating the Vanguards for a reason. It can’t all be a coincidence, right?”

“I wouldn’t rule that out,” Greyson said. “At this point, there isn’t much I wouldn’t consider. That’s how it is when you don’t know much. Anything is possible.”

I sighed, thinking back talking with Kendall and wondering if I’d missed something, some subtle clue in her demeanor or in anything she’d said that pointed at what she was up to.

“She really wouldn’t give you any details about why she was at the Vanguard palace?” I asked.

“Nope. As usual, she was less than cooperative.”

Greyson put an arm around my waist. “Maybe we should lock the key up somewhere? Until we find out more from Steinar?”

“And what about Kendall?” I said.

“You really are fixated on her, aren’t you?” Greyson said.

“No!” I responded a little too quickly. “What I mean is…not really. It’s just that I know she’s connected to this somehow in a way that could blow this whole thing wide open.”

“What if I tell Kendall that I know where the key is? See how she responds? I’m still not convinced that she didn’t have anything to do with what happened to Lucian, and now Elle.”

“There’s one more thing,” I said to Greyson, wanting to make sure we were entirely on the same page.

Greyson gave me an exasperated look. “Now what?”

“We showed the key to Big Mac, and she totally freaked out. I mean, really freaked out. Passed out and skittered away from the ring like it was poison. Refused to even look at it after that.”

“What? Way to bury the good part,” Greyson said.

“I know…there was just so much going on at Lucian’s that I didn’t get a chance to fill you in. Anyway, she says that the key contains old magic. Powerful magic. So powerful that it knocked her flat. Told us to keep it away from her, and she meant it.”

“Okay, we’re definitely locking that thing up, then. I hate that you even have it,” Greyson said. “I have a safe in the study. We’ll put it in there until we figure out what else to do.”

We were just heading inside when we heard Jay shouting. We rushed into the kitchen to see what was happening.

The teapot began to whistle on the stove, and there was a mug shattered on the floor. Lola was on the ground clutching her stomach, blood pouring out of her mouth.

**Episode 5688**

**Kendall**

Driving my motorcycle on a cool night like this was one of my favorite things. It cleared my head, or at least helped me put the day in perspective. And what a day it had been.

Short of shifting to wolf form and speeding through the woods, navigating these curvy woods on my bike was the most invigorating thing I could do.

*So much going on. So many moving parts. So many people sticking their noses where they don’t belong.*

Like Greyson. He was good at that—insinuating himself into things that had nothing to do with him. Making everything his business. And after our latest run in, I really needed time to think.

Dealing with a bunch of amateur sleuths always made my job harder than it needed to be. Without Greyson and Cali hovering around questioning me every time I saw them, I’d probably have cracked the case by now.

As it stood, I was as confused as they were. If I trusted a word they said, I would probably ask them questions so we could figure out what the hell was going on, but that wasn’t protocol, and Greyson and Cali’s allegiance rested with each other, not me.

I couldn’t get that image of Lucian spewing blood out of my mind. And now that it had happened to Elle…I knew I would have interesting dreams tonight.

*That is, if I sleep at all with everything that’s going on.*

In a normal world, Elle and Lucian’s conditions would be due to some sort of severe sickness or an internal injury. Throwing up blood was no laughing matter—ever. But all signs pointed to spontaneous blood puke. I was sure there was an official term, but I couldn’t get the phrase “blood puke” out of my mind. It had a certain ring to it, and perfectly described what afflicted them.

I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.

It still blew my mind that Greyson had accused me of having something to do with it. That he thought the MIB would drug someone, make them expel fucking blood, just so I could snoop around—which was already easy enough to do in a huge place like the Vanguard palace without having to resort to such extremes.

Even though he was wedged under my skin and showing no sign of removing himself, whenever I thought about Greyson I lost my focus. Instead of fixating my attention where it should be—on the key, the door, the sounds—I could only think about the way my wolf responded to him.

My wolf wanted him—badly—even if my heart and mind didn’t.

“Fuck!” I yelled into the wind. I hoped like hell I hadn’t let it show. No sense leading him on, because as far as I was concerned, there was nothing between us, and there never would be. I’d rejected him, and I wanted that to be the end of it.

He was with Cali, and that was where he belonged. I wasn’t interested in relationship drama, and I certainly wasn’t into love triangles. This whole thing was a pain in my ass.

*Maybe I should hit up my tattooed hottie for a little distraction. The best way to get over Greyson is to get under someone else, right?*

But I’d learned my lesson on that. Sleeping with someone else was nothing but a temporary fix. In fact, the last time that I was in bed with that guy, I’d kept imagining I was with Greyson instead, which had almost ruined the evening altogether.

*Shit. I’m doing it again. Thinking about Greyson. And my wolf is going crazy. I have to stop this. It’s not healthy, and it’s driving* me *crazy, too.*

I trained my thoughts back to the Vanguard issue. That report—if that was what you could call it—from Steinar was alarming. I’d played it cool, but alarm bells had started going off after reading that text.

That was why I had to get my hands on that key—without raising any alarms or drawing any more attention to myself.

That was a tall order with Cali and Greyson and now that Lola girl breathing down my neck.

I entered my apartment building and paused outside my unit. I could hear someone moving around inside.

I backed out of view of the peephole and slid my hand inside my jacket to grab my Taser. I’d seen far too many things in my MIB career to not go immediately to suspicion and caution.

I reached out to unlock the door and then pushed it open as quietly as I could. I was barely through the threshold before Imamu’s scent filled my nose.

*This can’t be good.*

I put the Taser away and flipped on the light. He was seated in a recliner in the corner of the room. I slammed my door behind me. Annoyed.

“You could have called. There are these nifty things called telephones. Have you heard of them?”

“Sure, I could have. But I needed to see you in person.” Imamu got up and looked me up and down as if checking to see if there were any clues to where I’d been that he could pick up from just looking at me. “How did things go with the Vanguards? I assume that’s where you’re coming from.”

“Didn’t find anything on the missing persons you wanted me to check into, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Uh-huh. And what about the door?”

I was thrown for a moment but recovered quickly. Likely, not quick enough. I could tell from the look in his eye that he’d caught my surprise.

“What about it?” I said.

“You failed to mention it.”

I didn’t even bother asking him how he knew about it. It was the MIB’s business to know.

“Still looking into it,” I said.

Imamu nodded, his expression suddenly pensive. “Were you there when it was opened?”

Now I was really puzzled. “Why are you asking me that? I said I was looking into—”

“Just answer me.”

“Yes. I was there when Lucian unlocked the door, and moments later, the Vanguard Alpha fell ill. Spewed blood from his mouth. Went white as a sheet. Fever and disorientation. Not pretty.”

“Hmm. And do you think they’re related?”

Now I was even more confused. “Why would I assume they were? For all I know, the guy ate some bad shrimp.”

“And you’ve seen people throw up blood after eating bad shrimp?” Imamu asked.

“Okay…good point. I guess I shouldn’t be so quick to jump to conclusions.”

“No. You shouldn’t. Did anyone else get sick?”

“Yes. His fiancée Elle got sick shortly after. Same symptoms. Other than that, I don’t know of anyone else falling ill.”

For a moment, I started to wonder if Greyson hadn’t been off base at all about MIB’s role in Lucian’s sickness. Could my people have something to do with this? I wouldn’t put much of anything past Imamu, but I’d been with the MIB for a while now and couldn’t see them going to those ends. Nor would they do it without informing me of it.

Unless….

“Do you not trust me anymore?” I asked him. “Did I do something wrong? Are you keeping me in the dark—”

Imamu waved that off. “If you’re thinking we had a hand in making them sick, forget it. You’re one of our top agents, and we’d tell you if we resorted to anything like that. But the symptoms that struck the Vanguard Alpha and his bride to be, well, they’ve raised certain concerns amongst MIB personnel.”

I eyed him warily, realizing that I had no idea where this was going so there was no use trying to jump on step ahead of him. It had never worked before, and it wasn’t working now.

“What kind of concerns? If there’s something on your mind, just say it.”

“There’s been talk of the Dark Fever.”

I raised my brows in shock even though I wanted to do much more than that. “What? Dark Fever?”

“There’ve been cases where the cause of someone’s illness is caused by dark magic. It’s rare but not impossible. The Dark Fever is just one of several werewolf specific diseases that we know about, its name describing a plethora of symptoms. And we’re starting to think there are way more afflictions that we haven’t discovered yet.”

“Fuck. Dark magic spawned illnesses made especially for werewolves. I’ve heard about them before. I remember one such case in Spokane not all that long ago.”

“Uh-huh. And how do you feel? Any nausea, malaise, disorientation?” Imamu asked.

“You sound almost concerned,” I said.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“I feel fine,” I said. “I don’t have a single symptom. Don’t expect to, either.”

“I’m pleased to hear that.”

He headed for the door.

“It’s all connected. It has to be. The sickness, the key, the door, whatever’s down there causing all these disturbances.” He paused. “Which means your priority is clear. Get that key, and find out what’s behind that locked door.”

**Episode 5689**

I rushed to Lola’s side, slipping on broken bits of mug on the way while doing my best to avoid the small puddle of blood that had formed next to Lola.

“What the hell is happening to her?” Jay shouted. “Is she okay?” Jay looked like he wanted to cover his eye. “Because she doesn’t look okay.”

“I don’t feel so good,” Lola groaned, rolling over onto her back as the blood continued to dribble out of her mouth. She looked at Greyson. “Told you you’re a lousy driver!” Her words were slurred, and her eyes were all hazy.

“I think there’s some sort of bug going around the Vanguard palace,” I said to Jay. “That has to be what this is.”

“A bug? What kind of bug makes people throw up blood? I’ve never heard of that before,” Jay said, scooping Lola up from the floor just as Torin came running in, eyes wide.

He stopped short and frowned. “Ugh! Is that…blood? Please tell me it’s red wine!”

“It’s not red wine, Torin,” Greyson said, already starting to pick up the bits of broken mug and toss them in the trash.

“I’ve got this,” Torin said, jumping into action. “You go tend to her,” Torin said to me and Greyson. “I’ll clean up this mess before anyone else sees.”

“Thanks, Torin,” I said, hurrying after Greyson and Jay and Lola.

*I can’t believe this is happening to my BFF. What if she’s really sick?*

I thought about the key. The curse. Big Mac’s over-the-top reaction. The ominous carvings on the key. No one had thrown up blood before this key came into the picture. There had to be a connection, right? Was I naïve to think that it could be something less sinister at play?

*Should I mention the key to Jay? What if that’s what’s wrong? How will we even be able to fix this?*

Greyson interrupted me as if reading my thoughts. “Cali, don’t panic, okay? We still don’t even know what caused this.”

“But the key! It has to be more than a coincidence, right? First it was Lucian, then it was Elle, and now…now it’s Lola! Who’s next? Is anyone safe?”

Greyson took me gently by the shoulders. “It could be anything. Food poisoning or a stomach bug or…some other sickness that we’ve just never heard about but is totally normal.”

I was shaking my head, not convinced. Jay was right. Throwing up blood? What kind of stomachache caused that? I’d seen a lot of movies, and vomiting blood was never a good thing.

“I know that you’re thinking about what Steinar said about the key, but until we know for sure what’s happening, there’s no point in causing a panic,” Greyson said.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. “But right now, I need to check on my friend.”

I raced upstairs to find Lola hunched over the toilet bowl, retching. Jay was hovering over her, holding her hair and trying to comfort her, but he looked distressed and like he was moments from losing it. I couldn’t blame him. The situation looked way past dire.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked him.

Jay turned his stressed gaze on me. “No idea. I think I’ve got it from here, but if I need anything, I’ll let you know.”

I was on my way back to my room when I saw that Greyson’s door was open. I padded over and saw him staring in the mirror.

He turned around abruptly when he saw me in the reflection. “I was just thinking that I should have shaved today,” he said.

“What?”

His forehead was beaded with sweat, and his eyes were red rimmed and glassy.

My stomach tightened. “Are you…” I was too afraid to ask, but I knew I had to. He was already trying to hide it from me so that I wouldn’t worry. “Are you feeling sick, Greyson?”

He smiled, but it was forced and unnatural. He flexed his biceps. “Sick? Do I look sick to you?”

“Um, actually you do. Like really sick. Do you feel nauseous? Feverish?”

He laughed and shook his head. “None of the above.”

The last word choked out of his lips, and I could tell that he was in some kind of distress. My worry was quickly eclipsed by a flash of anger.

“Greyson Evers, this is serious. Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m an Alpha,” he said. “Getting sick isn’t verylikely for me. I’m fine. I promise.”

“But Lucian is an Alpha, too!” I fired back. “And that didn’t stop him from getting knocked flat by this.”

I moved closer to him, and he flinched away when I reached out to touch his forehead, but he wasn’t quick enough.

“Holy fuck. You’re burning up.”

“Well, you know by now that werewolves run hot, right?”

“Not that hot, Greyson. Will you please—”

“I just need some water. Cold water. That’ll cool me down.”

He took a couple of steps toward the bathroom and then faltered. He would have hit the ground if he didn’t catch himself on the dresser at the last minute.

He took another step, and this time he did almost fall. I rushed to his side just in time, though his weight nearly sent us both crashing to the floor.

“Come on,” I grunted. “Let’s get you into bed.”

I could tell he was doing his best to hold his own weight and having a hard time doing it. He supported himself on each and every piece of furniture we passed on the way to the bed, until finally we made it and I helped him sit down.

I helped him out of his shoes and socks and then struggled to help get his massive body under the covers, a feat that demonstrated how weak he was becoming.

“You’re right,” he whispered. “I’m sick. Super sick.” He closed his eyes. “But at least I didn’t vomit blood… Or have that…rash…” And then he drifted off to sleep.

I was trying not to panic, but things were going from bad to worse. My mind immediately went to Steinar’s text. The cursed key. The one we’d brought into this house. The one Lola had stolen and carried around.

Big Mac’s reaction to it should have scared us more than it had. We should have done everything we could to put that key back to where we’d found it.

But we hadn’t, and now people were getting sick. Maybe things would have gone this way even if we hadn’t swiped the key, but it was hard not to at least partially blame myself and Lola for what was happening.

Now, I had to figure out how to fix this.

*Big Mac must know more than she’s letting on, right? Maybe if I explain that the key may have made Greyson sick, it’ll change her mind.*

Before long, I found myself standing in Big Mac’s and Mrs. Smith’s house, ready to plead my case.

Big Mac was watching me through narrowed eyes, and shaking her head as I relayed the story of everything that had happened since we last saw her.

“That sounds tamer than almost anything you’ve all gotten yourselves into before,” she deadpanned. “But I don’t like hearing that Greyson’s sick. And as annoying as the Vanguard Alpha is, he and his fiancée don’t deserve to vomit blood. Lola…well…the jury’s out on whether she got what was coming to her.”

“Big Mac!” I said.

She shrugged. “What? Just calling it like I see it.”

The sweet smell of something baking caught my attention. “Whoa, what’s that? Is Mrs. Smith baking cookies?”

Big Mac grinned. “No. I’m baking for Sabine.”

I was stunned. “You’re baking now? I didn’t know you had any interest in doing anything like that!”

In the background, I heard Mrs. Smith singing.

“Wait, is she doing karaoke right now?” I asked.

*What the hell is going on here?*

I didn’t have time to worry about what they got into during their afternoons at home. I had to get Big Mac’s help or things were going to get a lot worse.

“I don’t mean to bother you. I just need you to take another look at the key to see if it could be causing the sickness and if it is, I need your help figuring out how to neutralize its power.”

“Oh wait, just a sec!” Big Mac disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a cookie that she handed to me. “Sorry about that. Didn’t want my cookies to burn. And sure, I’d be happy to help. Now hurry up and give that a taste. I want to make sure it’s good before I give it to Sabine to try.”

I nearly fell over in shock.

*Why is Big Mac being so…unlike Big Mac?*

Big Mac sighed as she took a seat in her easy chair. “I tried to warn you, Cali. The key is what’s making the werewolves sick with something called the Dark Fever. It’s a dark magic illness created by the ancients.”

I shuddered. “The ancients? That doesn’t sound good. What can I do to stop it?”

Big Mac leaned close. “There’s a cure, but it lies deep in the caves.”

I flinched when she grabbed my hand and pulled me close.

“But you’d better get a move on searching it out, because if you don’t find it soon, all your werewolves are going to die!”

**Episode 5690**

I was back in the pack house stressed and pacing, wondering what I was going to do. Big Mac had been very clear, I had to do something, or Greyson and the others were going to die. But what could I do? And what did she mean by caves?

I shook my head as I fingered the key lying in my pocket. The cursed key. The literal key to all this madness, it was starting to seem like.

What would Big Mac have done if she knew I still had the key, and not only that, that I’d brought it into her house?

*I wish none of us ever laid eyes on this stupid key! There’s been nothing but bad luck ever since we saw it.*

But if Big Mac was right and the cure to the Dark Fever really existed somewhere beyond the door it unlocked, then I was going to have to use the key again to save the people I cared about.

“Cali?”

I jumped and turned around to see Jay standing behind me. I blinked, suddenly disoriented before I realized exactly where I was—just outside Greyson’s door.

*But wait a minute, wasn’t I just…*

“Don’t tell me you’re getting sick, too. You just had the strangest look on your face,” Jay said.

“No, I’m not sick,” I assured him. “I’m pretty sure that whatever’s going on is only affecting the wolves. Anyway…what’s going on? Is Lola okay?”

Jay’s expression was scaring me. He looked like he’d just seen a ghost. I could only hope that it wasn’t the ghost of anyone I knew.

Jay sighed and rubbed his jaw. “I…guess? She was talking gibberish for a long time, but then she fell asleep. I got worried at first that she was unconscious, but when I checked she was breathing normally and just seemed to be getting some rest—which I know she needs.”

“Good. Maybe sleep will keep the symptoms at bay.”

“Yeah…but are you sure you’re okay, Cali?” Jay asked, looking at me closely.

“Yes, I’m totally fine.”

“I know but you were murmuring, and you had the strangest look in your eye. It was almost like you weren’t here for a second.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I must have spaced out after I got back from Big Mac’s house. Maybe she blipped me back? That would explain why I feel all weird.”

Jay looked at me funny. “Big Mac’s house? Blipped? You do know that you haven’t left the house, right?”

“What? Yes, I did. You probably didn’t notice because you were tending to Lola and didn’t hear me leave.”

“No. Lola fell asleep, and then I went down to the living room to speak with Ravi. No one left the house.”

Stunned, I closed my eyes and tried to think back on the last few moments before I’d ended up outside Greyson’s door. I remembered my conversation with Big Mac pretty vividly. “But…that’s weird. I know I went to Big Mac’s.

Jay was probably confused, and who could blame him? His mate was in awful shape, and none of us had the slightest clue about what was going on. It had to be driving him crazy.

Jay left to check on Lola, and I peeked in at Greyson. He was still sleeping, which was good, but when I touched his forehead, it was still burning hot with fever.

I leaned close to whisper in his ear. “I’ll be right back. I have to go thank Torin for watching you while I was out seeing Big Mac.”

I kissed Greyson on the cheek and then went downstairs to search for Torin. I was just heading to the kitchen when Xavier came in.

“Xavier, wow, I wasn’t expecting you,” I said. I almost mentioned how happy I was to see him, but something about Greyson lying in bed sick stopped me from doing it. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what Greyson’s state had to do with it, only that it somehow didn’t feel right.

“What’s wrong?” he asked after taking only one look at me. “Ava told me about Lucian. Is it about that?”

I felt like I was going to burst into tears. Despite my misgivings about Greyson, I fell into Xavier’s arms, and he wrapped his arms around me.

“What is it? Are you really that worried about the princeling? You really are one of a kind—”

“No. It’s not about Lucian. I mean, yes. I feel for him and Elle, and it hurts me to see them like this, but Greyson’s sick, too, and it’s all I can think about.”

Xavier reacted with a start. “Wait, Greyson’s sick? My brother?” Xavier glanced up the stairs. “This is all so strange. I just saw him, and he was fine.”

“That was before he went into Lucian’s mansion,” I said. “Now he’s really sick, and so are Elle and Lola. Lola and Elle and Lucian were throwing up blood. Greyson didn’t do that, but he’s still in really bad shape.”

“Any idea what’s going on?” Xavier said.

“I have a few suspicions, but nothing concrete.” I felt hopeless as I cried silently against Xavier’s chest.

“It’ll be okay, I promise,” Xavier whispered in my ear. “My brother and the others? They’re the strongest people I know. They’ll get through this.”

I wanted to believe Xavier, but he hadn’t seen what I’d seen. He didn’t know the details.

“I want to be positive like you, but I don’t think it’ll work in the face of a curse!” I explained.

“A curse? You think everyone’s sick because they’ve been cursed?”

“Yes. Big Mac confirmed it when I went to see her tonight,” I said.

Xavier still looked majorly confused. “You went to Big Mac’s…tonight?”

“Yeah. Why does that seem weird?”

Xavier glanced at his watch. “I don’t know. I guess because it’s kind of late and—”

A knock on the door interrupted us.

“Who is that?” Xavier said.

“I’ll get it!” Torin said, rushing in from the kitchen with his crisp white apron on.

As he passed, I grabbed his arm. “Hey, thanks again for watching Greyson while I was gone.”

Torin paused. “Huh?” But then he was at the door and opening it, letting Kendall in.

“Is Greyson here?” Kendall asked, her eyes passing over me like I was barely an afterthought. It wasn’t that she was being rude, she just really wasn’t all that interested in me and something about that burned me up inside.

*What the hell is she doing here?* Xavier mind linked to me.

I hated the sting of jealousy I felt at seeing her standing there all hot and strong and nonchalant. *I have no idea*, I replied.

“Yes, Greyson’s here but he’s…” I could barely get myself to say it.

“My brother’s sick,” Xavier finished for me.

Kendall looked taken aback. She tried to hide it and it was fleeting, but concern passed across her face.

“How bad is he?” she asked.

“He doesn’t seem in nearly as bad of shape as the others. Like Lola, who’s sick, too,” I said.

Kendall cursed under her breath. “Can I go up to talk to Greyson?”

“He’s sleeping,” I told her. “And whatever it is you want to tell him, you can tell me.”

Kendall glanced at the screen door as if contemplating jumping on her bike and getting as far away from this place, and me, as she could, but she stayed put. After a few beats passed, she turned to me. “If this wasn’t important, I’d wait for Greyson to wake up, but I guess in this instance I don’t have much of a choice but to share what I know.”

*Kendall probably thinks I’m acting like Greyson’s firewall, but it’s the truth. Greyson’s in no state to discuss this right now.*

“So, after you and Lola showed me Steinar’s text, I did some research. Whatever’s going on in Lucian’s basement, it’s no threat to non-werewolves,” Kendall said. “Which is good news for you, bad news for almost everyone in your circle.”

*So she knows.*

“I know all about this,” I said. “The disease, or ailment, is called the Dark Fever.”

Kendall looked stunned. “Wait, how did you know about that?”

I felt a little insulted, but it wasn’t the time to trade barbs. “I spoke to Big Mac, and she told me what she knew.”

“And when was this?” Kendall said.

I was feeling overwhelmed with all the questions, but I supposed it was a little bit of payback for all the times I’d questioned her…or shown up at her office unannounced.

“I found out tonight when I saw her,” I said.

“Cali, like I said, you never left the house today,” Jay added as he came walking in to join us. “You’ve been here the whole time.”

“Jay’s right. You have,” Torin said. “After cleaning up the kitchen, I went to the living room to watch *10 Things I Hate About You*, and you never came downstairs. Not even once. Maybe you dreamed it, or something?”

“No. It couldn’t have been a dream,” Kendall said. “She has too much information. Knows things she shouldn’t—things she couldn’t possibly know. Like the name of the disease caused by the curse.”

I stared at everyone, my mind racing.

“I don’t get it. What’s going on here?” Xavier said.

“Kendall’s right. I don’t think I had a dream,” I said. “It must have been a vision!”

**Episode 5691**

I was doing my best not to freak out, but the idea of having visions was troubling, and it was clear that the others were thinking the same thing. Everyone knew what happened when I started seeing things that weren’t there, and it was never good.

Jay looked between us. “Are you sure you didn’t just read about the Dark Fever somewhere and then you dreamed about it?”

Kendall looked skeptical. “For real? Where would Cali just randomly read about something like that? It’s way too specific.”

Jay shrugged. “I don’t know…the library? Online? In a magazine?” Jay looked at the ceiling, still thinking. “A billboard? A pamphlet…”

“Stop. I didn’t read about it somewhere, Jay. Big Mac told me about it…or rather she explained it to me in my vision.”

I faltered, knowing that I sounded bonkers. But it was really starting to seem like the vision was real and that meant I was going to have to start dealing with what Big Mac had said in the vision…unless I could still prove that it hadn’t been a vision at all.

“Ohhh,” Jay said, ribbing me a little. “Then I’m sure it’s true, you know, since it happened in your vision.”

“Don’t be like that, Jay. I swear that the vision means something, even if I wished I hadn’t had it in the first place,” I said.

I hated admitting that I’d even had another vision. My visions weren’t the good and pleasant kind, and they’d often signaled the beginning of a lot of turmoil in all of our lives.

The last time I’d experienced one, Seluna had been working overtime to demonize me. And then there was the time Greyson had visions under the influence of strong magic. As much as I tried to shake the feeling, this newest vision felt like some kind of omen, and we’d had our fill of ominous signs and warnings.

“I wonder if it’s possible that I sawBig Mac in person. Maybe I like, sleepwalked there or something, but that—”

“Isn’t it possible that neither Torin nor Jay saw you leave, Cali?” Kendall interrupted. “I mean, I don’t know how all of you spend your time, but certainly you two had something better to do than stare at the exits all afternoon.”

Torin fidgeted as he glanced at Jay. “We were watching a really great scene.”

I felt a bit of relief, though it was hampered by the fact that it was likely that I had, indeed, had a vision. Jay and Torin may not have been paying attention the whole time, but that only meant that it was more likely that something strange was going on.

“There’s a simple solution to this,” Xavier said. “Why don’t we just ask Big Mac? If anyone would know whether Cali actually came to see her, it would be her. That way we can quit all this useless speculation and get to the bottom of this.”

I could see the worry in Xavier’s eyes, and once again I was reminded of how good it felt to have him in my life again…even if it wasn’t on the most straightforward terms.

“He’s right,” I said. “And hopefully she’ll confirm that I came there. Even if no one else thinks I ever left.”

It was funny how my worries always seemed to shift and change by the minute. There was a time when having a vision wouldn’t have incited such anxiety, but I was so worried that it meant things were going to get even more out of control than they already were. Between the Kendall stuff, whatever was going on in the bowels of Lucian’s house, and the ongoing complicated stuff between me and Xavier, I wasn’t looking forward to dealing with anything else.

I called Big Mac, and after a couple of tense rings, Big Mac picked up with her usual aggressive unpleasantness.

“Why are you pestering me?” Big Mac asked. “Actually, why am I even asking? That’s all you any of you do.”

“Sorry, Big Mac, I just have one question.”

“That’s what you all say. ‘Sorry, Big Mac, we only have one question. We won’t waste much of your time, Big Mac! One question.’ Lies! One question always leads to another question, and before long I’m being pulled into some crazy bullshit that nine times out of ten puts my life in danger. It always starts with a question. Or a request. Or a combination of both.”

I waited for her rant to end before I let out a nervous laugh and said, “So, about that question…did I come to see you a little while ago?”

There was a long pause where I looked at the phone, wondering if she’d hung up on me.

*No, she’s still on the line.*

“Cali, have you been drinking?” she finally asked.

“N-no! I mean, not in the last few hours or so,” I said, remembering how tipsy I’d gotten at that frat party. “I mean, I went to a college party, and you know how those get, but—”

“I didn’t ask for your life story,” Big Mac snapped. “So, you are drunk, is what you’re saying? I just want to be clear.”

“What? No, that’s what I’m *not* saying. I had some drinks, but I’m not drunk.”

*Anymore…*

“How do I know that you know you’re not drunk if you’re drunk?” Big Mac asked.

“Huh? No, I swear I’m not drunk.”

No response.

“Hello? Big Mac?”

“What did she say?” Kendall asked. “Were you there or not?”

“Big Mac?” Once again, I looked at the phone. The call was still active, but the silence was deafening on the other end.

“Wait, I think she hung up on me! Or…maybe she just put the phone down or something?”

“Call her back!” Xavier snarled. He was just reaching for the phone when Big Mac blipped into the room, causing Torin to shriek.

Big Mac scowled at him and then walked up to me and sniffed my breath. “You’ve been drinking. Just as I thought.”

“I never said I hadn’t been drinking. I said I wasn’t drunk!”

“That’s not important,” Xavier said.

Xavier draped an arm around my shoulders which felt so comforting and supportive that I wished I could just close my eyes and forget everything else but him.

“But you’re not the one asking the question, Xavier, I am, so believe me when I say that your opinion on the matter means absolutely nothing,” Big Mac said in a bored tone.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Big Mac, just tell us, did Cali come and see you a little while ago or not?”

Big Mac crossed her arms over her chest as she eyed me, then Xavier, then everyone else, sizing us up. I was holding my breath and hoping against hope that she was going to say yes.

“No,” Big Mac finally said. “I haven’t seen Cali since she and Lola came to see me earlier. Haven’t seen or heard from either of them since then. Thankfully.”

“Oh no,” I said under my breath.

*So, it’s true. A vision. A damn vision! Why?*

Jay and Torin nodded. “We told you. You never left,” Torin said. “We didn’t have to watch the door to know that.” Torin gave Kendall a pointed look that she shrugged off.

“So, I had a vision. I just have to come to terms with that. There’s no other way to explain it.”

Big Mac was shaking her head. “I warned you. Warned you clearly and loudly and as earnestly as I could. Don’t mess with ancient magic. It’s connected to something dark. But no one listens to me. Speaking to any of you is like screaming into the void.”

“Dramatic,” Xavier grumbled under his breath.

“Wait, are you saying that this vision could have been caused by the magic?” I said.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “What in the hell do you think, Cali? Were you having visions before you and your partner in crime meddled with something you shouldn’t have?” She sighed. “No? Then there’s probably a link. It’s common sense, Cali!” She glanced around the room. “By the way. Is anyone else having visions?”

When everyone else shook their heads, Big Mac asked me, “Who else saw the key?”

“Key? What key?” Xavier interrupted.

I avoided answering Xavier as I thought about who else had laid eyes on the key. Lucian, obviously, Elle, Greyson, and Lola. I gasped. “Wait…everyone else who saw the key got sick. Like really sick.”

“Wait a minute, what do you mean?” Big Mac said.

“I mean, throwing up blood and can hardly stand on their own two feet,” I said. “It’s pretty bad. We don’t know what’s causing it, but now…”

“Shit,” Big Mac whispered.

“Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on?” Xavier barked.

I put a calming hand on Xavier’s back. “I promise I will, Xavier. But I need to know, Big Mac. Given what you said about ancient magic, did the key or the door cause my visions?”

**Episode 5692**

**Xavier**

None of this sounded good to me. I was just standing there listening to details about something that was obviously hurting Cali without any idea what was exactly going on. “What are you two talking about? A key? A door? If there’s some dangerous magic wreaking havoc—”

“Stop getting all aggro,” Kendall interrupted. “We were all with Lucian yesterday in the cellar of his mansion when he opened a door with an ancient key. After that, a bunch of people got sick, as Cali explained. Now you’re all caught up.”

“Oh, that’s all?!” I shouted. “Why didn’t my brother tell me you were all skulking around in Lucian’s weird dungeon?”

“Cellar,” Kendall corrected.

I whirled on Cali. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

My always simmering hate for Lucian bubbled up just a bit more. Did anything good ever come from associating with the Vanguard Alpha and that wacky yet dangerous palace of his?

“And how do you figure into this?” I asked Kendall. “And why does she know more than I do?”

Kendall rolled her eyes and focused on Big Mac who gave Cali a pointed look.

“This key that Cali and Lola were prancing around with knocked me on my ass. So back to the point and at the risk of leaving Xavier even further behind the eight ball, yes, it’s the key that’s giving you the visions, Cali. Do the math.”

Cali shuddered against me, and I tightened my hold around her while struggling to make sense of this. There was a time when I would have been the first person Cali told about this. We’d never kept secrets from each other, but here I was with no knowledge at all of what was going on in her life.

I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her to face me. “Why didn’t you tell me, Cali? I could have helped. I could have—”

“Xavier don’t beat yourself up about it. I didn’t hide it on purpose. It’s just that I thought whatever brand of magic this was only affected werewolves. Wasn’t that what Steinar said? That werewolves were the ones susceptible to it?”

Kendall nodded. “Yes, that’s what your friend Lola said.”

Big Mac snorted. “Listen to all of you. I can tell none of you practice magic because you still don’t get it. Even after all the times magic has knocked most of you on your asses and disrupted your lives you still don’t see that there are no rules when it comes to magic.”

“I get it,” I said. “Even if I wish that I didn’t.”

I’d spent too much time under Adéluce’s thumb to think that magic followed any conventions I could wrap my head around.

“But why am I having visions? And why am I the only one?” Cali said.

“I’d take the visions over puking blood any day,” Kendall muttered.

“That part,” Big Mac said. “And as for the visions, Cali, that’s the beauty of ancient magic. Nobody knows just what it’s capable of.”

“That’s hardly comforting,” I said.

“If you called me here to be comforted, that was your first mistake,” Big Mac said.

“Could it be happening because I’m Fae? Maybe the magic doesn’t make me sick like it does the others, but perhaps it gives me other symptoms? The visions?”

Big Mac cocked her head to the side as she considered that. “Could be…but it could also be something else entirely.”

I was getting annoyed at Big Mac’s usual tendency to beat around the bush and offer us nothing in the way of details.

“Like what?!” I snapped. “Be more specific.”

Big Mac glared at me. “Like she’s also Greyson’s mate,” she hissed. “It could have affected the mate bond.”

Lilac came walking in, stopping short when he saw all of us standing there obviously caught up in an intense conversation.

“Uh…I just came to find Jay. Lola’s looking for you. She threw up again, too.”

Jay frowned and started up the stairs just before I rushed to clap him on the shoulder. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“Thanks, man,” Jay said before continuing up the stairs with Lilac.

“I’ll make another cold compress,” Torin said, rushing off to the kitchen.

I returned to Cali’s side and continued trying to piece things together. “I still don’t know why I was left in the dark. It’s not like you to keep this from me, Cali.”

Cali shrugged. “Xavier, don’t make it a big deal, okay? There’s enough going on without me having to worry that you’re upset about not being let in on something I don’t even understand.”

Big Mac suddenly jumped back from Cali. “Wait a minute. You still have it, don’t you?”

Cali looked confused. “Wait, what—”

“I warned you, Cali. I told you to get rid of it, and you saw with your own two eyes what it did to me. What would possess you to keep it!?”

“Big Mac, I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

Before Cali could finish her apology, Big Mac blipped out of the room.

Now I was even more confused.

Cali sighed and dropped her head. “I have the key.”

“What?” Kendall said. “You told me—”

“I told you that Lucian took the key after he opened the door…but what I didn’t tell you was that Lola and I took it back.”

“You really are something,” Kendall said, shaking her head. “Of all the stupid—”

“Cali must have had a reason,” I interrupted.

“You *would* say that,” Kendall shot back.

Cali looked at me. “I thought that we could figure out what it was for, what the markings on it meant. That’s all.”

I held out my hand. “Can I see it?”

Cali hesitated. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. It’s what Big Mac warned us about. The ancient magic inside of it. Maybe if we hadn’t kept it and we’d put it back where it belonged like Big Mac said, everyone wouldn’t be sick right now.”

I hated to see Cali blaming herself.

“Not everyone’s getting sick, though,” I said.

Cali shook her head. “Xavier, thanks for trying to make me feel better, but everyone who saw the key is sick. There must be some connection. I don’t know…maybe it’s messing with my Fae powers, and that’s what’s making the werewolves sick.”

“Too much speculation going on around here for my taste,” Kendall said. “There’s a straightforward explanation for this, and I wish I knew what it was.”

I glared at Kendall. I wished she would get the fuck out of here, but I knew that she had an interest in this as part of MIB. It bothered me that I was standing here with no clue about what was going on, which was never a good look for an Alpha. Especially when whatever it was involved my own mate.

“Whatever’s making the werewolves sick is tied to the key and to the door. I think we can say that for sure. I hate to continue the speculation, but maybe it *is* tied to your Fae magic somehow.” Kendall stepped closer to Cali. “Tell me more about the vision.”

Cali furrowed her brow as if trying to remember. “It felt so real…” She suddenly looked up. “In the vision, Big Mac said the cure for the Dark Fever lies deep in the caves. Any idea what that could mean? Could it be there?”

I didn’t like the look in Cali’s eyes. I’d seen it before, and I wasn’t about to let it blossom into more. “We don’t know,” I said sternly. “And it’s too risky for you to go rushing off to find out.”

I looked at Kendall, expecting her to support what I was saying, but she wasn’t giving anything.

“It’s only making the werewolves sick,” Cali said.

“So let the werewolves handle it. You don’t need to get involved. It’s not your problem.” Even as I said it, I knew that it wasn’t a good enough reason for Cali to keep from getting involved. Over the time I’d known Cali, so many of our problems had qualified as “werewolf” problems and that hadn’t stopped her from trying to help. But that was also Cali for you.

“But Greyson, my mate, and Lola, my best friend, are both sick. How is that not my problem?”

I ran a hand through my hair, gritting my teeth in frustration.

*I knew she wasn’t going to just take my advice and leave this to Kendall and the others.*

“And what if it doesn’t stop there? It could affect you, or Ava,” Cali said.

That hit me and made me think about this differently. Obviously, I didn’t want to puke blood, and I didn’t want Ava to get sick either.

“But nothing’s happened to me so far, and it probably won’t,” I said. “But wherever you think you need to go to fix this, I’m coming with you.”

Cali frowned and shook her head. “You don’t know what it will do to you if you get too close to it.”

My frustration had reached its limits, and I couldn’t stop it from bubbling over.

“Cali, I don’t care what you say, you’re not going there by yourself!”

Kendall stepped between us. “Xavier, she won’t have to. I’m going with her.”

**Episode 5693**

“With me? You can’t be serious, Kendall,” I said.

We weren’t friends. We were barely associates…which was funny since something stronger than both of those relationships linked us. Greyson was both of our mates, which meant we were connected in some roundabout way.

But that didn’t mean I wanted to go running off into the Vanguard caves with her. In fact, there was almost no one I would want to go into those caves with less.

… Except maybe Ava.

“I’m serious. You can’t go alone, so why not? You’re worried that Xavier or another werewolf could be affected, so I’ll go in their place,” Kendall said. “Seems like the perfect solution to me.”

Xavier arched an eyebrow, still trying to wrap his head around all this information, it seemed. “Last time I checked, you’re a werewolf, Kendall. If it’s dangerous for me, it’s dangerous for you. Not that I care if you want to throw yourself into harm’s way.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” she deadpanned before shifting her gaze to rest on me. “Cali, can we talk alone?

I was startled by the idea of Kendall, who barely ever seemed to want to give me the time of day, wanting to speak to me in private.

*What does she want? Is this some kind of plan to knock me out, steal the key, and go into the caves on her own? I wouldn’t put it past her, and that’s just the kind of thing MIB would do.*

“No. Whatever you want to say to my mate, you can say it in front of me,” Xavier said.

My heart swelled at Xavier’s words. I loved it when he claimed me as his mate. It reminded me of the connection we had and that, despite all the bullshit we’d been through, we cared for one another. But I knew it wasn’t just about me and our connection. He didn’t like Kendall much, and it showed. He didn’t trust her and that meant he didn’t trust her with me…though I’d shown up wherever Kendall was unannounced and very alone enough to know that I wasn’t in any direct danger.

*Though if Xavier knew what I knew about Kendall, he would trust her even less.*

Kendall yawned as she regarded Xavier, a brash show of how little his demands moved her. “Don’t you have a pack or something to get to? Do they even know what you look like anymore?”

Xavier snarled, and I quickly stepped between them.

Kendall took a deep breath. “Fine. If your overbearing mate wants to monitor all your conversations, far be it for me to get in the way of your…dynamic.” She smiled sweetly at us both.

“He’s not overbearing, and he doesn’t monitor my conversations!” I snapped.

“Yeah. Sure. Anyway, Cali isn’t the only one whose mate is affected by this ancient magic or disease or whatever we’re dealing with here,” Kendall said. “I am, too.”

A pit opened up in my stomach.

“If something is affecting my mate, I have the right to try to help him.” Kendall paused and smirked as if she were toying with me. “In fact, I have more than a right. I have an obligation. Stand by your man, right?”

I opened my mouth to argue but closed it just as fast. She was right. Greyson was her mate. But something about the way she’d said it made me think that she wasn’t being straightforward. From what I’d seen, Kendall wanted nothing to do with her mate bond with Greyson…so why was she suddenly acting like she had some devotion to him?

*She’s probably just using the mate bond as an excuse to cover that she’s an MIB agent and going to those caves is official business for her. It’s easier for her to lean on her bond with Greyson than reveal her true motives.*

Xavier looked between us with sympathy. “But I could say the same thing. Cali is my mate, and she’s affected. And Greyson’s my brother, so there’s that. I have two reasons.”

“I can see the logic in that,” I said.

I loved that Xavier was being so protective of me—it reminded me of old times—but I also hated it because he was throwing himself right into danger. Whatever was going on could bring powerful werewolves to their knees in more ways than one, and I was worried that he was going to get hurt.

It wasn’t that I doubted his affection and care for Greyson, but I knew Xavier, and his main drive was to be by my side because he loved me and wanted to make sure I was safe. I wanted him with me, too, but not at the risk of his life.

“I was at that party at Lucian’s, too, remember? If the ancient magic is hurting the others, I’ve likely been exposed, too, and so have a good portion of the other packs. That means the Samaras are at risk.” Xavier turned to Kendall. “And no matter your opinions on how present I am with my pack, I’m still going to do whatever I can to protect them.”

Kendall smirked. “Oh, so I hit a nerve? Being around you all has taught me that Alphas are really fucking sensitive.”

Xavier’s face twisted into a scowl. “Kendall—”

“Xavier, stop,” I said. “I get all the reasons why you want to come to the cave, but I think you need to be real about what it could mean for you, or for all of us. Bringing you to the cave could trigger whatever’s festering in there.” I turned to Kendall. “And the same thing could happen with you.”

Kendall eyed me. “Just like you, I don’t have a choice.”

*I wonder how true that is…*

“Can I talk to Kendall alone?” I said.

“Great, all that to end up back where I tried to be in the beginning. A solo conversation between two people who actually have a dog in this fight. You’d think we weren’t working on an urgent, deadly problem or something,” Kendall said.

Now it was time for both of us to scowl at her.

Kendall shrugged. “What? We are wasting time. I’m sure we can all agree on that.”

*Are you sure you want to be alone with her? I don’t trust her*, Xavier mind linked. *And her attitude is shit.*

*That may be, but I’m not afraid of her. I’ll be fine…but thank you for looking out for me.*

I met Xavier’s eyes and had to look away, the fire that ignited in my belly was so intense.

Xavier moved toward the door but hesitated before leaving as if undecided. “I’m going to go check on Greyson, I guess.” He gave me one last lingering look before dashing upstairs.

Once he was gone, I turned back to Kendall. “Greyson told me you rejected him.”

Kendall didn’t flinch. “It’s none of your business, but yes, I did.”

“Then why are you acting like the bond still means something to you?” I huffed. “If you rejected him, then you don’t have any obligation to him at all. No duty. Why do you even care?”

I could hear the emotion creeping into my voice even though I was doing my damnedest to hold it back. It was hard to stay calm when I thought about Greyson being mated to anyone else but me.

Kendall sighed and her expression softened a touch. “I rejected Greyson because he needed to hear it.”

I was taken aback. “Needed to hear it? What?”

“Neither of us want this mate bond. I thought if I rejected him, it would make it easier for all of us…but you probably know better than most that mate bonds don’t often behave the way we want them to. I can reject Greyson until I’m blue in the face, but that doesn’t change much.”

I thought about all the times I’d considered the ties of my bonds to Xavier and Greyson, the mate bonds that were too strong for even magic to break.

“Mate bonds are famously difficult to sever,” Kendall finished almost wistfully.

“Uh, yeah, I do know that, and it doesn’t comfort me in the least to think about how strong they are, even when they shouldn’t exist,” I said pointedly.

*Still, she’s not pushing to go to the caves because of her mate bond with Greyson. She wants to go for one reason and one reason only—because of the MIB.*

“You look like you don’t believe me,” Kendall said. “Remember, I was down there, too. I have an interest in this no matter what you think of me.”

*Maybe I can get her to admit the truth without exposing that I know that she’s with the MIB. But how?*

“Why were you down there in the first place? I’ve been meaning to ask,” I said.

Kendall was pensive for a moment before uttering a quiet, “Not here.”

She grabbed me by the arm and led me outside.

“What? What is it?” I said.

Kendall glanced toward the house as if checking to make sure we were really alone. “Cali, there’s something you need to know about me.”

**Episode 5694**

**Greyson**

I was drifting in and out of sleep, feeling warm, fitful, and not good at all. The last time I remembered feeling this way was maybe when I’d had werewolf rabies…or maybe when Letifer had gotten to me. But even then, it hadn’t been this bad.

It felt like my insides wanted to shift and my body was poised to do it, but it just wasn’t happening. It was like I was stuck in limbo, suspended between human and wolf, caught without the ability to push through to the other side of either.

I wanted to puke, and my entire body was taut, tense, wound up in a ball that I couldn’t break out of.

The only relief came when I felt a reassuring hand on my forehead followed by a cold compress. I opened my eyes slowly.

“Love?”

My voice was raspy, and it hurt to talk, but everything felt better just seeing Cali’s face.

“Relax, it’s going to be okay,” she said. “Just breathe and don’t worry, I’m here to take care of you.”

I closed my eyes again, feeling safe and secure having her beside me. Then all at once, all my pain slipped away, and when I opened my eyes, I was still in my room in the pack house.

A bright summer sun shined in through the window, and I rubbed my eyes just as the bathroom door creaked open. It was Cali in extremely sexy lingerie, and every nerve ending in my body came alive at the sight of her.

“Whoa,” I breathed.

Cali ducked her head, suddenly bashful. “Is it too much?” She tugged at the delicate white lace of her bustier, trying to keep it in place so that her breasts didn’t pop free. Her matching lacy white thong was simultaneously frilly and diminutive. The lingerie was elaborate for sure, but in the best way. She was like a present I’d get to unwrap ribbon by ribbon.

“It’s not too much…though I am starting to feel like I may pass out from how hot you look,” I said. “Holy fuck, you look amazing.”

Cali came to join me on the bed where I was spread out naked under the sheet. She straddled me and pinned my arms to the bed and pressed her body tightly against mine. She leaned close to whisper in my ear.

“I want you so bad, Greyson. I want your baby inside of me. I want our baby.”

I cupped her face as so many different emotions rushed through me—all of them good. I wanted this so badly that I was overwhelmed in the best way.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We’ll have our baby. Everything we want will come in time. I know it. And in the meantime, we should enjoy the road to all the things we hope for.” I rose up to meet her lips and kissed her.

“You always know how to say all the right things,” she said before snaking her tongue into my mouth to deepen the kiss. I sucked on her tongue, subtly grinding my hips against her hot center, anticipating what it would feel like to bury myself inside of her.

Cali released my wrists and smoothed both hands down my chest to where my erection was growing by the minute.

“I’m a big fan of this little getup you’re in,” I said. “As you can see.”

I trapped her bra strap between my teeth and pulled until it snapped back against her skin. Cali let out a breathy laugh.

“I thought you would be. When I put it on, I figured it was right up your alley.” She kissed me again, deeper and longer. She began moving her hips in time with mine while her soft palms grazed up and down my shaft, caressing it, enjoying it.

I reached up to palm her breasts, pressing them together so that the beautiful lace puckered, revealing more of her beautiful, full cleavage.

“You’re truly the most beautiful woman in the world, you know that?”

I let my hands travel down, and I cupped her, gently massaging her folds until she gasped and pulled away.

“What’s wrong, love?”

“I want to enjoy this, Greyson, I do…but I’m just so worried.”

I stopped and let my head drop back down onto the pillow. “Worried? About what?”

“It’s just…it was so easy when you and Maren got pregnant.”

I was totally thrown off. “What? When me and Maren…wait a minute, Cali. What are you talking about? Love, Fenrir isn’t my son. You know that.”

Cali shook her head as confusion overtook her features. “What are you talking about?”

“He’s not my son,” I said adamantly. “This whole time, have you been—”

“What are you even talking about, Greyson?” Cali said, her voice high with distress. She got off the bed and began pacing the room, hugging herself. “Maybe this was a mistake.”

I got up to take her into my arms, but she dashed into the bathroom before I could reach her, shutting the door and locking it behind her.

I knocked. “Cali…I don’t know what’s going on, but there’s nothing for you to worry about. It’s just some kind of misunderstanding. Love, please come out…”

To my surprise, the door opened, and this time it was Kendall dressed in a shiny red leather bustier with a thong in the same color, her dark brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. She put her hands on my chest and gave me a playful shove.

“I thought I told you to wait in bed, Grey.”

“Kendall?” I wanted to say more, but nothing else came out. I was even more confused now, but still aroused as my eyes drank in Kendall’s shapely form sheathed in her edgy getup that left nothing to the imagination.

Her snake tattoo was on full display, slithering from bicep to collarbone, its rattle tail stopping just above the swell of her breast.

She walked out of the bathroom and pushed me again. “You don’t follow directions. How naughty of you.”

She walked me back to the edge of the bed, and her next push laid me out flat on the mattress. But not completely flat. I looked down and saw that my erection was sticking straight up, and Kendall eyed it with obvious pleasure.

“If we’re going to be having sex at least four times a day, I’m going to keep it interesting. That’s a promise, Grey.” She landed on top of me and climbed me like a tree then pressed her mouth to mine.

The kiss started off slowly, Kendall taking control, placing rough kisses up and down my neck, her nails lightly raking my skin as she kissed my chest, my arms, and then traveled down to my abdomen.

She smoothed her hands up my abdomen as her mouth dropped lower until she was just about to take me into her mouth.

I stopped her.

“Wait, did you say four times a day?”

Kendall rolled her eyes. “What, is that not enough for you, Alpha?”

“Wait, I didn’t—”

She rolled her hips, and the vision of it struck me silent. “If we want a baby, we have to do whatever it takes, however many times it takes.”

I was even more turned on now, but uneasy, too. Something didn’t feel right.

“What about Cali?”

Kendall stopped kissing my pelvic bone and looked up at me. “What does that matter?”

“Of course it matters.”

A low chuckle drew my attention and I turned to see Chloe, Posie, and Lauren watching me.

“What the fuck?!”

I pushed Kendall off of me with a start and she crashed onto the floor in a flurry of curses. “What the hell, Greyson?!”

“Relax, Greyson. Kendall’s right. It doesn’t matter to *us* who births your firstborn.” Chloe smiled darkly. “Either way, your first child belongs to us. That *is* what you wanted, right? What you asked for?”

“No. No! I didn’t agree to any of that! None of it. Not even breaking the mate bond!”

I jumped up and was suddenly pushed back by some unseen force. I landed on the floor and when I looked up, Xavier was standing over me.

“Easy bro, relax,” he said.

I looked around wildly.

*What the hell is going on here? Kendall’s gone…the witches are gone?*

“Where are they? Where did they go?” I yanked the comforter up to look under the bed.

Xavier watched me with a raised brow. “You’re sick, man. A fever. You’re probably seeing shit.”

I stood up and fell back on the bed. “I do feel sick.” I stared at the ceiling, which seemed to be slowly revolving. “Where’s Cali? She was here when I lay down.”

“Cali’s talking to Kendall,” Xavier said darkly. “They want to go back to the Vanguard to check out that door that nobody bothered to tell me about.”

I was barely listening, struggling to get up and go for the door. “She can’t go without me.”

Xavier easily shoved me back to fall on the bed. “You’re not going anywhere, Greyson. You’re way too sick. You should see yourself.”

I grabbed Xavier’s arm. “Then you have to go. Whatever you do, don’t let her go alone.”

**Episode 5695**

I tried hard to hide my shock, my anticipation, my excitement at having cracked the code that was Kendall all on my own. I couldn’t wait to run and tell Greyson all about how Kendall had finally come clean without me even having to push her into it.

*I can’t believe it! She’s finally about to admit the truth? Am I going to be able to act “surprised” by the confession?*

Kendall looked out over the Redwood yard, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she was trying to avoid making eye contact. If so, was it because she was nervous about telling me the truth about MIB?

Kendall cleared her throat, but she still wasn’t looking at me head on. “Despite how it looks, I’m not just a college administrator,” she began. “There’s much, much more to me. Likely something you would never suspect.”

I bit my lip, so close to blurting out, *“I know! I know all about it! You’re an MIB agent!”*

Kendall took a conspiratorial look around. “I’m also working for…”

She hesitated, and I could barely stand it, could barely contain myself. I was so excited to be able to talk openly about what she was up to. And to be able to do it without revealing that Greyson hadn’t kept her secret. This day was turning out to be better than I thought.

Sure, there was still something funky going on at the Vanguard palace, but at least I was going to be able to let go of this secret I’d been holding for Greyson.

It was going to be such a relief to speak freely to Kendall about who she was. I would be able to learn so much about the MIB and how they operated.

Once she told me her biggest secret, it would mean that she finally trusted me and wasn’t going to treat me like an annoying little sister or something anymore.

Then Kendall finally turned to face me and said, “Okay, here goes. I’m not just an administrator, I’m also working tirelessly to get my doctorate degree in anthropology.”

My mouth dropped. “Huh?”

“I know it’s a shock…oh wait, you don’t know what that is? Anthropology is—”

Annoyed, I said, “I know what anthropology is, but why are you telling me this?”

“Because whatever is down in the Vanguard catacombs is ancient and could reveal so much about the past that we don’t know. Throw the use of ancient magic into the mix and we could be right on the precipice of discovering an identifiable source of a deadly plague.”

My mind was racing. This wasn’t at all what I’d expected her to say.

*Does this mean that I’ll eventually have to refer to Kendall as Dr. King?*

“But wait, humans aren’t supposed to know anything about magic and werewolves, right? How can you get a degree in it? You couldn’t share your findings even if you did discover something.”

Kendall scoffed. “Of course I’m not going to reveal anything about actual magic, Cali. And as a werewolf I certainly have no plans to reveal the reality of who and what I am. But humans already know about magic…they just don’t know it’s real. They have stories about it that have endured for centuries. They know about supernaturals, too, paranormals, all of it. They just don’t fully know, you know?”

*I know, all right. Just how I don’t fully know what’s going on in Kendall’s head at any given time.*

I was struggling not to be annoyed that she was obviously playing me for a fool…or maybe she wasn’t searching out the catacombs for MIB business and was truly working on her anthropology doctorate? I mean, it wasn’t something she could lie about. She would either graduate with the credentials or not, right?

There had to be some truth to it. Or not. This was Kendall we were talking about.

“Anyway, I’m interested in addressing where all the stories humans have about things they shouldn’t have knowledge of come from. The origins of their obsession with all they don’t understand and can’t prove exists.”

She smiled and something about it was chilly and off-putting.

“That’s part of the reason I want to get beyond that door,” she said.

“Okay…and there’s no other reason?” I said, still not believing a word of what she was saying.

Kendall leveled her sickeningly brilliant purple eyes right at me. “I already told you the reason. Were you not listening?”

The pit in my stomach widened. “So…it’s because you love anthropology and because you care about Greyson,” I deadpanned.

“Yes, exactly,” Kendall said brightly. That was likely my sign that all of this was bullshit. Kendall had never acted this cheerful while speaking to me.

“Anyway, you shouldn’t go in there alone regardless. My reasoning shouldn’t matter to you, anyway. You just need someone by your side to help protect you. And sure, Greyson or Xavier could, but Greyson’s down for the count, and you don’t want Xavier to put himself at risk, so I’m the perfect option.”

“But why are you telling me all this now?” I said.

“Because you didn’t believe my reason for wanting to go into the catacombs, so I told you…and because I think you deserve the truth, of course.”

I gritted my teeth. There was more to it than that, but it wasn’t like I could call her a liar without revealing how I knew she wasn’t being truthful. There was only so far I could push this before Kendall would narrow those purple eyes at me—like she loved to do—and wonder why I was asking so many questions.

“So, are we good?” she said.

I hesitated. Good wasn’t the way I would describe the state of things between us. Some of what Kendall said made sense, if any of it were true.

In the end, I just nodded. There was no real harm in Kendall coming along. In fact, since she was more than just a doctorate student—no matter what she wanted me to believe—maybe her MIB training would come in handy.

Kendall glanced back at the house and held out her hand. “So, how about the key?”

I blanched. “What? The key?”

“Yeah. We’ll need the key.”

“I know that, but there’s no reason to just hand it over to you. Especially given the warning that Big Mac gave about the ancient magic it could be tied to. It would likely be best if you, as a werewolf, didn’t come into direct contact with it.”

Kendall started to say something but stopped herself and flashed that chilling smile again. “But do you have it?”

I patted my pocket. “I have it.”

“Then let’s go,” Kendall said.

She started to head out, but I stayed put. “Wait. Right now?”

“Yes, right now. What’s with you Redwoods and Samaras and taking a million years to act on anything? My motorcycle’s right there. We can be at the Vanguard palace in no time.”

I looked back at the house. “But what about Xavier and Greyson?”

Kendall scowled. “Do you ask their permission to go to the bathroom, too?”

I glared at her. “Stop making digs at me about them. We have mutual respect, and that means—”

“That you all don’t make a move without having long-ass conversations about it. Got it.” She took me by the shoulders, her intense stare making me want to get far away from her. “But Greyson’s sick, right? And as for Xavier, well, he wants to protect you, but once you get in there, there’s no way to know if he’ll even be able to protect himself.”

I bit my lip, thinking about Xavier and Greyson and how worried they would be if I just up and left.

“If it *is* the magic that made poor Greyson fall sick, then who’s to say Xavier won’t, too?” Kendall said.

I hated Kendall’s logic, even though it was true.

“But I should at least tell Xavier, right?” I said.

Kendall sighed like I was being the most annoying person in the world. “Do what you want, but you and I both know that if you tell him, he won’t let you go. Or…he’ll let you go and insist on coming with you, putting himself in major danger.”

“But he’s my mate!” I said.

“And Greyson’s mine. What’s your point?”

Her throwing that back at me stung. I crossed my arms. “I won’t lie to my mate.”

“And nobody’s asking you to. Besides, you keep trying to prove that you’re not under anyone’s control…” She winced. “But it doesn’t seem that way from where I’m standing.”

“I’m not under anyone’s control!” I said.

“Prove it. Do what you want because you can. Do what you need to do.” She started toward the motorcycle. “Or don’t.”

I watched her, feeling torn and agitated. If I did tell Xavier, I knew that there was no way in hell he would let me go without him. I loved him too much to put him in danger. I couldn’t take the chance that he might end up as sick or sicker than the others.

Kendall was just about to climb onto her bike when she turned and looked at me. “So, what’s it going to be, Cali? You coming or not?”

**Episode 5696**

**Artemis**

I regarded the innkeeper without hiding my skepticism. “What do you mean people never leave?”

Marius stepped in. “Yeah. Is it because they have such a wonderful time here or because they like…die or something? Because you realize those are two very different things, right?”

The innkeeper hit Marius with a blank stare.

“I think it seems obvious based on the context,” Rishika mumbled.

“Marius is right, I am going to need you to elaborate, please. I’ve never even heard of this place before, but you have?” I said to the innkeeper. “How do you know it’s so dangerous?”

The innkeeper’s eyes widened. “B-Because I’ve heard stories!” he sputtered. “People come through here all the time looking for the rare treasures hidden deep in the Ceruvela Mountains, but none return.”

Marius cleared his throat. “Is there a possibility that after they find all the riches they don’t come back to, um”—he looked around—“a rustic yet charming establishment like this?”

“No, it’s because of the monsters there,” the innkeeper said, leaning close and keeping his voice low.

“Monsters?” I echoed.

“Yes. Monsters the likes of which most Fae have never seen before,” the innkeeper said.

I shared a loaded glance with Marius and Rishika. I wasn’t so sure I believed this man. Why would my father have wanted to take me, as a baby, and Orla, his new bride, to a place so dangerous and teeming with monsters? Plus, this was the Fae world. When wasn’t there something magical to contend with?

Still, the way Kadmos had described it to my mother made it sound so picturesque and beautiful…like a place out of anyone’s wildest dreams. A vast, green garden paradise protected by a beautiful mountain range—peaceful and remote.

*Maybe there are dangerous areas but also a safe haven inside of it?*

That was the only explanation I could come up with. I didn’t know my father at all—only what other people had told me about him and the little bit I’d “seen”—but there was no way Kadmos would have risked whisking us off to somewhere unsafe.

My father had cared deeply for my mother…and for me. So, the innkeeper was either wrong or didn’t know as much about the place as he thought.

I shook my head at the innkeeper. “It doesn’t matter what lies beyond, it’s our decision. But do you know how to get there? We’ve already wasted enough time and we need to get going. Or even better, is there a guide who could lead us there?”

The innkeeper’s face remained contorted with fear as he opened his mouth to answer, but someone interrupted.

“I know the way.”

We all turned to see a Fae standing nearby. He’d obviously been listening for a while. He had silver-tinted skin and dark blue hair in a slicked-back style. He was handsome in a scary, otherworldly way.

“And who are you?” I asked.

He smiled, revealing perfect teeth with slightly pointed canines. “I’m Zale. And who do I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

The guy’s tone grated against my nerves. He was smarmy, cocky, way too self-assured. A great combination for a Fae. I had a feeling he and Kastian would get along great if they were to meet.

“I’m Artemis,” I answered sharply, making it clear that I meant business. “Since you’re interrupting a private conversation, you’d better have some pertinent information. Do you truly know how to get to the Ceruvela Mountains, or do you just think we’re some naïve travelers you can swindle and take advantage of?”

“Right. Because we’re not,” Marius interjected.

“Don’t underestimate us. I don’t think you want to test us…if that’s your plan, that is,” I said.

Zale laughed heartily. “Wow. I guess we do live in uncertain times. You asked for help, I offered it, and I get a tongue lashing for my trouble.”

“We’re just being cautious. I’m sure a man like you understands that,” I said.

Zale shrugged. “Sure. Never a bad idea to be sure you’re not getting conned. But I can assure you that I do know my way to the mountains, and that my offer comes from a good place. Don’t get me wrong, there’s a price.” He winked. “But you won’t find anyone who knows the mountains better than me.”

“And obviously lived to tell about it,” Marius added. “Though I must admit that makes your claims harder to believe.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to see the proof to believe it.” Zale crossed his arms. “I was there a little over twenty years ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday. It’s quite the paradise if you know where to look for it, but the innkeeper isn’t wrong. Many dangers lurk there if you don’t know where to look.”

Zale picked up his mug of beer from the counter and took an easy drink, like he had all the time in the world and was discussing something light like the weather or sports scores.

“If you went there so long ago, how can you know what it’s like there now?” Rishika said.

Zale drained his beer and smiled. “So smart, even for a wolf.”

“Hey, don’t start with that anti-wolf stuff. It won’t end well for you, so back off!” I said. “We don’t need your help, and we don’t need you. Period.”

Zale shrugged and beckoned for the innkeeper to bring him another ale. “My knowledge may seem outdated, but I’m Fae, and this is my home. Nothing here really changes at its heart, and the same can be said for the Ceruvela Mountains. But suit yourself. No skin off my back.”

He turned away and didn’t say another word.

Marius, Rishika, and I lingered for only a moment more before we went outside where we saw Tabitha standing with Adair, who had his cloak hood pulled over his head to hide his identity.

“Well?” he said as we approached.

“Apparently, it’s super dangerous to go to this place, and any and everyone who has, except for some shady guy at the bar, never return. The innkeeper implied that they all died there. Killed by monsters or some such,” Marius explained. “Any questions?”

Tabitha looked stunned. “Um, yes?”

“A lot,” Adair grunted.

“That shady guy Marius mentioned offered to take us there…but he didn’t seem trustworthy. Allegedly, he’s been there and back…over twenty years ago,” I added.

Adair took that in. “So, it’s going to be a pain in the ass to get there and more of a pain in the ass when we arrive.

“Pretty much,” I said.

Adair sighed. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that we try our luck. What better group of people is suited to handle anything that comes our way? We’re not your average travelers,” I said.

Everyone went quiet to mull that over.

“Come on, think about it. We’re two bounty hunters, a werewolf, two magic-wielding badasses, and a human magic nullifying machine,” I said.

Tabitha smirked. “I like that. I’ve never been called a machine before.”

“All I’m saying is that we can do this. The monsters will be afraid of *us.*” I hadn’t given a hell of a lot of pep talks in my day, but I thought I was doing okay.

Still, Adair didn’t look impressed. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, Artemis, I do, but the Fae world has much to offer in the way of…monsters.”

Marius nodded soberly. “True, but Artemis is right. We should be able to take on anything that comes our way. I’ve gone up against my share of monsters…and while some of them have handed me my ass, I’ve certainly bested plenty.”

“I dunno, monsters sound like fun,” Tabitha said, winking at me. Adair gave her a weary look.

“I don’t know about fun, but I’m up for a challenge,” Marius said. “Think about it. We’ve all managed to grow up big and strong on our own. We’re resourceful. If something comes our way that we’re not prepared for…we can always run.”

Rishika seemed as skeptical as Adair. “I’m not going to argue that we’re strong. But take it from me, when you’re not sure what the beast growling in front of you is capable of, things can get really bad really fast. We don’t know the terrain, so we won’t have home court advantage. So many opportunities for us to take a wrong turn.”

“But that’s always a risk, isn’t it?” I said. “Let’s just go. We’ll face whatever we have to face when we get there, and I have a feeling it’ll turn out in our favor.”

“Fuck it,” Adair said. “Won’t be the first time that I’ve dove in headfirst.”

We were just about to set off when I heard someone calling my name. A second later, Zale rushed up to join us with his pack on his back.

“Just so you know, you’re already going the wrong way,” he said. His cool nonchalance would be disarming if it wasn’t so maddening.

“The wrong way?” I stopped short and looked in the direction we were going and turned to look behind us as if I had any idea how to orient myself.

Zale gave me a knowing look. “Listen, I know we didn’t get off on the best foot, but give me a chance. Let me join your little pilgrimage, and I’ll prove that you can trust me.”

**Episode 5697**

**Xavier**

My brother was freaking out worse than I’d maybe ever seen. I didn’t know if the delirium from his sickness was to blame or if he was really this worked up about Cali going into the Vanguard catacombs on her own.

Likely, it was a bit of both.

“Listen, Greyson. You’re going to have to trust that I would never let Cali poke around the caves under the Vanguard palace alone. I would be by her side to protect her even if there wasn’t some kind of ancient magic curse lurking down there or whatever.”

Greyson shook his head, his eyes glazed with fever. “Well, isn’t that peachy? Peach pie, that is.”

I frowned. “Greyson, come on, man. You’re a wolf, and I hate to fucking admit it, but you’re one of the strongest I know. Fight through this.”

“The fight is flight,” Greyson mumbled before his body began quaking.

*The fuck is he even saying?* I held his hand until the tremors passed. For maybe the first time since Greyson had given up his Rogue life and come back into the pack, I was worried about my brother. Whatever was behind my brother’s illness, he seemed to be getting worse. I was glad that Cali wasn’t here to see him like this.

*If anything were to happen to Greyson, Cali would be devastated. I’m not going to let that happen.*

“Rest, okay? I promise I’ll look out for Cali.”

As I made my way to the door, Greyson started muttering again.

“Her life is in your hands. Her life. It’s in your hands!”

I closed the door softly, shutting out his fitful words and hoping that this state was only temporary. I had no problem keeping Cali safe—I’d done it many times before. Right now, I was comforted by the fact that Cali wasn’t in any immediate danger. I didn’t love that she was downstairs having a heart to heart with everyone’s favorite undercover agent, but I could keep her safe from Kendall easily.

I was still working to get over my anger at being left in the dark about the goings-on at the Vanguard palace, but there was no use remaining all bent out of shape over it. I recalled one tidbit of information I’d gotten from Ava—something about Lucian feeling sick.

*But is there more she hasn’t told me?*

I quickly shook that off. It didn’t matter now, anyway. I was up to speed and more than prepared to do what I could to make sure this problem didn’t bleed over and hurt anyone I cared about. The bigger worry was what she’d told me about Lucian’s condition—that she’d never seen an Alpha look as bad as he had.

*Right now, I can say the same thing about Greyson.*

His condition was worsening, and I felt obligated to find a way to help him before he took a turn for the worse.

My other priority was limiting the amount of stress Cali was feeling about all this. I didn’t want to give her any more reason to go running over to the Vanguards.

I ran into Torin in the hallway. He was carrying a cold compress for Greyson. “Thanks for that, man. He needs that,” I said.

“Good timing, I guess. Don’t worry, we’ll watch over him, Xavier. He’s in good hands,” Torin said as he slipped into Greyson’s room.

I thanked Torin again and then ducked into one of the spare bedrooms. I closed the door behind me and called Big Mac.

I expected her to snap at me for calling her so soon after our tense conversation in the living room, but she sounded concerned.

“Hey. Is Greyson okay?” she said.

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m calling.”

Big Mac went quiet before asking, “What, are you getting sick now, too?”

“No, thankfully, but I’m really worried about my brother. His condition is getting worse by the second. It’s hard to watch. Greyson’s an Alpha…we’re not supposed to get sick like this ever. And I can only imagine that Lola’s much worse.”

“That might not be the case,” Big Mac said. “Lola may not be an Alpha, but she’s a hybrid. Vampire blood is hearty.”

“Do you think that really makes a difference? I mean…Steinar did say that whatever this is—if it’s what’s responsible for everyone’s state—only affects werewolves.”

“And it’s obviously affecting you, too.”

I stopped pacing, confused. “What do you mean? I just told you that I’m not sick.”

Big Mac scoffed. “But you’re calling me about your brother, and I can hear the worry in your voice plain as day. I’ve never heard you like this when it comes to Greyson. You’re obviously extremely worried about him, and that means that the impossible has happened and hell has frozen over.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” I said. “Greyson’s pack is part of our alliance. He’s the Alpha of the Redwood pack and—”

“Just say it,” Big Mac interrupted. “You’re worried sick about him. I mean, why is that so hard to admit? He *is* your older brother.”

I gritted my teeth and then relaxed with a sigh. “Is there anything you can do to help him? Conjure up some medicine, speak a spell over him? Anything?”

“Well, in case you’ve forgotten, my fiancée happens to be Greyson’s mother, so I’ve been working on a treatment ever since the moment I heard he was sick. Do you think I’m heartless or something?”

I hesitated, wondering how truthful I could be in answering that question. It was obvious that Big Mac wasn’t without tenderness—she’d helped us far too many times for me to even think that—but she didn’t make it easy on us ever. She always made it a point to show that her help was given only because we were twisting her arm.

“I didn’t say that,” I said cryptically.

“Good, because if you had, I’d kick your ass. Anyway, I’ll let you know as soon as I come up with something.”

After the call, I started to feel at least a little hopeful. I went to check on Lola and hated to see the strain of worry on Jay’s face as he held vigil at her bedside.

Like Greyson, Lola’s skin was covered in a sheen of sweat and she was tossing and turning as she mumbled a bunch of gibberish.

“How you holding up?” I asked Jay even though I could see the answer written across his face.

“I’ve never seen her this sick. I’m worried, man.”

“I talked to Big Mac and she’s working on a cure as we speak. Just keep her comfortable until we can fix this.”

“Thanks, man. That gives me at least a shred of hope that this isn’t permanent.” Jay turned back to gaze at Lola, holding her hand to his lips and kissing it.

I lingered for only a few minutes more before I decided to leave them alone. There was nothing more I could do, and it was hard seeing my friend this way. Lola and I had gone through our share of differences, but I never wanted to see her in any pain.

Back out in the hallway, I was trying to look at the bright side. As bad as all this was, at least Cali wasn’t sick.

*But what about Ava? Could she be coming down with something? Could this cursed illness take her out next?*

Like so many of the others, she’d been at Lucian’s and had seen him fall ill. If this was contagious, she could be in real danger.

I took out my phone and called Ava, wondering if she was even going to answer since she was still angry enough to have thrown me out of the Samara pack house. Again. If only she could show a little more understanding about what I was going through.

*Why can’t she trust that I would never hurt her on purpose?*

Knowing Ava, that wasn’t going to happen. When it came to my complicated relationship with Cali, Ava had absolutely no patience or understanding. It was like Big Mac had said…Ava would be more supportive when hell froze over.

I was pleased when Ava’s voice came on the line, but there was a wariness in her tone that made my head hurt.

“What do you want?” she barked.

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay,” I said.

“If you’re asking if I’m okay considering my mate is in love with another woman…I think you know the answer.”

“Ava, please, let’s not get into that right now. I just want to know if you’re getting sick.”

Ava sighed. “No. Are you?”

“No.”

There was an awkward silence before I asked, “What about any of the Samaras? Any signs of this weird illness?”

“No, we’re all fine.” She sighed. “I’m glad you asked about me first. It means something. Only a little something considering your loyalty is shit, but something.”

I gritted my teeth against falling into the trap she was setting for me. I wanted to keep this call on good terms, even if she was making it hard.

“When are you coming home?” she asked.

The question made my wolf stir and a jolt of hope sprung into my chest. Maybe she was thawing toward me just a little.

“I have something to do first, but soon.”

I ended the call, smiling.

*Maybe Big Mac is right. Hell has frozen over. Ava wants me back.*

I went downstairs, calling out for Cali. She didn’t answer, and after looking around the pack house, I realized that she and Kendall were nowhere to be found.

I ran into Ravi just as I was about to go outside to search. “Hey, have you seen Cali?”

Ravi shrugged as he edged past me. “Yeah, she just left with Kendall.”

“Fuck,” I said as I bolted out of the pack house.

**Episode 5698**

I was on the back of Kendall’s motorcycle holding on for dear life. It seemed like Kendall was riding at the speed of light.

“What’s the hurry?” I screamed over the howling wind. “It won’t do anybody any good if we die before we get there!”

“Calm down,” Kendall said over her shoulder. “I’m not going to crash. I could drive this thing in my sleep.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“Stop distracting me with your bitching, Cali.”

“But the wind is making my eyes water!”

“Close the windshield on your helmet. That’ll save me from having to hear you whine, too. It’s a win-win.”

I snapped the shield closed but was also relieved when Kendall slowed down a bit. Little by little, my heart began to recover.

*This is even more awkward than I thought it would be. Kendall has to feel the same.*

Having ridden on the back of both Xavier and Greyson’s motorcycles many times, I typically enjoyed the ride. I’d always loved being so close to them with a powerful machine humming between our legs. It had been a bonding experience every time.

I could lean in and talk to them while we rode, and I’d been comfortable enough to enjoy the scenery and be present. They were my mates and I’d trusted them completely. They also hadn’t ridden like bats out of hell.

This was a far cry from that.

This was weird. I had my arms locked around my mate’s mate in a show of intimacy that was way out of place in our relationship.

*This is like mates squared weirdness.*

Kendall suddenly veered off the main road, and I cinched my arms tighter around her.

“If you keep squeezing me like that, I’m going to pass out, and then we’ll meet that awful death you seem so worried about,” Kendall shouted.

I loosened my hold. “Wait, this isn’t the way to the Vanguard palace!”

“I know a different route,” Kendall replied. “They’re not expecting us, so I don’t think we should just pull up in their driveway. Trust me.”

*Um…no. Why would I trust her? What reason has she given me?*

“We’re going to park and walk the rest of the way,” she explained.

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Thanks for your vote of confidence.”

“Do you always have to be so snarky?” I shot back.

“When it comes to you, yes. I’m not your mates, I don’t hang on to your every word and feel the need to treat you with kid gloves. Get used to it.”

I wanted to snap at her, but there was no point. If she wanted to play tough girl with me, so be it.

We’d driven quite deep into the woods when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I lifted my ass off the seat just enough to slide my phone out of my pocket and glance at the screen.

Xavier was calling.

*Shit. What do I do? If I answer it, he’s going to flip and try to talk me out of this.*

I knew I was only going to make him angrier, but I rejected the call and slid the phone back into my pocket. There would be plenty of time to explain later…if we didn’t die on this little mission of ours.

*Why did I even think that? We’re not going to die. I’ve been through worse things than exploring the musty caves under Lucian’s house.*

Kendall slowed the motorcycle to a stop and pulled off her helmet. I did the same and looked around at the dark woods closing in on us from all sides.

“Where the hell are we?” I said.

Kendall hopped off the bike and stowed her helmet. “I’d say we’re about a mile or so away from the Vanguard palace.”

“Really? Why so far? When you said we needed to be discreet, I thought that meant we’d park a few yards away, stash the bike in the woods, and sneak around back. But a whole mile? In the woods? In the dark?”

Kendall groaned. “Are you always like this? I thought you trained with the crew team or something.”

“I have! Though admittedly not as often as the coach would like.”

“Well, I’ve heard crew training is intense, so even with your half-assed effort, this walk should be a piece of cake for you.”

“Half-assed? You use any excuse you can to poke at me, don’t you?”

Kendall smirked. “Some think it’s a talent. I consider it a calling.”

She threw her pack over her shoulder and started walking. I rushed to follow her. I was damn near blind in the deep velvety darkness of the woods, and I found another thing to be jealous of—Kendall’s wolf senses meant this darkness wasn’t an inconvenience for her at all.

We walked in silence for a while before I said, “I’m still not clear why you’re willing to risk this.”

Kendall turned toward me, her purple eyes glowing faintly in the moonlight. “Really? This again?”

“Sorry, but I do like to know the motives of the people I decide to entrust my life to. Why are you really doing this? I don’t buy that it’s for your anthropology major thesis or something.”

“Is it that hard to understand? I’m risking it for the same reason you are.”

I was still clinging to the hope that Kendall was using her mate bond with Greyson as an excuse. The bond was there, and it would be stupid to ignore that, but I liked it better to think that she had no interest in Greyson despite it. I didn’t want to believe that their connection meant this much. I was hoping that it really was because of her obligations to the MIB.

And the more I thought about her whole doctorate story, the more I believed that it was pure, unadulterated bullshit.

“I’m not taking the risk you are. I’m not a werewolf, so I’m not going to get sickened by whatever we find in there.”

“Oh, are you worried about my health all of a sudden?”

“I—um—it’s not that I—”

“Relax, Cali. It’s a rhetorical question. It’s obvious that you’d rather I stay out of this, but if I hadn’t pushed you, you’d still be back at the Redwood house waiting for someone else to tell you what to do.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Cali, be honest with yourself. You weren’t ready to trust yourself to handle this without Xavier or Greyson holding your hand.”

Anger boiled up inside me. “You’re really starting to piss me off with that.”

“Just starting to?” Kendall teased. “You have the patience of a saint.”

I wanted to scream. She was so damn prickly, and it was getting on my nerves. She knew just the right buttons to push, and she pressed them like she was just filing her nails. Like it didn’t matter at all.

“Or…would you prefer Xavier was here with you, risking his life and safety? I’m sure you’d rather I risk mine, right? Come on. Admit it.”

“I would rather nobody had to,” I grumbled.

Kendall laughed. “Come on. You live in a werewolf pack house. You’re used to high stakes. You can’t be naïve enough to think that we’re all going to get through whatever this is unscathed. What’s that saying? You have to break a few eggs to make a cake?”

“I guess. Though I don’t foresee us finding anything as sweet as cake in the caves.”

Kendall stopped and turned to face me. “Just…relax. It’ll be okay. We’re in this together for now. And under different circumstances, we might actually—”

“Be friends?” I interrupted.

“Um, no. I was going to say we might actually be civil.” She laughed and turned around to keep walking. “You’re way more naïve than I thought.” She snorted. “Friends. Wow, that’s rich.”

*God she’s the worst!*

“I thought we were being civil. Or at least I was.”

“I am being civil. You wouldn’t want to see me being combative,” she said.

I kept my mouth shut until we came to a ridge. I spotted the spires of the Vanguard palace over the tops of the trees. We were close.

“We’re almost there,” I said.

I took a step forward, but Kendall stopped me.

“You’re sure you have the key, right?” she said.

I glared at her in the darkness. “Yes. I already told you I do. Why are you doubting me? If anyone should be skeptical, it’s me!”

“It’s not that I don’t want to trust you, I just don’t know you enough to trust you. Can you at least show me the key? Just to give me peace of mind?”

*Why is she acting like this?*

I pulled the key out of my pocket and flashed it at her before putting it back.

“Good. I had to make sure. We’re about to break into the Vanguard pack house and that could be dangerous. I don’t want to take the risk for nothing.”

I scoffed at that. “You don’t know Lucian very well. We don’t have to break in.”

Kendall dropped her bag on the ground and pulled out a stick of lip gloss. “Here, hold this.”

I looked at it in confusion. “Makeup? Here? Now?”

“It’s best that nobody knows what we’re doing,” she said. “Even you.”

A jolt coursed through my body, and then everything went dark.

**Episode 5699**

**Maya**

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as I parked in front of the Grimcrest pack house. The log house wasn’t particularly tall, but it still loomed over me, its dark cedar wood exterior bringing back memories I’d rather forget.

Since taking over the Grimcrest pack, I’d trimmed back some of the vines covering the structure, and Colton had helped me fix up the yard. The interior wasn’t as drafty and sparse as it used to be, and I could even, kind of, consider the place homey—a word I never would have used to describe it during my childhood.

Still, I had that twang of uneasiness every time I saw it, and today was no different, especially considering what I’d come here to do.

*Stop being such a wimp. You’re the Alpha, you can handle this.*

I balled my hands into fists as I stalked up the walkway. I shouldn’t be nervous. This was my pack. I was in charge.

*What I say goes. Simple as that.*

Still, there was this lingering feeling that they could reject me, that everything I’d gone through had been for naught. The idea that something good could come out of this transitional period in my life didn’t seem realistic. I felt naïve for thinking that anything could go right for me after all the wrong shit that had dogged me for so long.

I found that I’d stopped walking and was frozen in place. It was like my entire body was resisting going in and facing the music.

I lifted my chin and forced myself to feel even a shred of determination and confidence and continued to the house.

*Get a backbone, Maya. It’s going to be okay.*

I’d already put this off for long enough. I had to do it now or it would only get harder down the line. My pack deserved to know what was going on. I was about to ask a lot of them, and I needed to look like I knew what I was doing when I did.

As soon as I reached the door, I yanked it open, trying not to overthink as I stepped inside.

Just to do something with my limbs, I made a show of wiping my boots off on the welcome mat. I did it loudly, wildly, and then took another step inside, hoping that no one would notice how unnatural I was acting.

“Hello?” I called out.

Despite all the improvements I’d made, today the place seemed deserted, empty, barren. No one had lit the fireplace and there was a chill in the air.

But I could smell that there were plenty of wolves here.

I called out again and then made my way to the living room. When I walked in, I spotted three young werewolves sitting together, or rather, huddled. I knew them well—Bennett, Genji, and Davina. They didn’t look particularly thrilled to see me and stopped talking the moment I came in.

*Okay. This isn’t quite the reception I was hoping for. But then again, I wasn’t hoping for much.*

As they stared and the awkward silence stretched and morphed into something I could almost feel weighing on my shoulders, I realized that I should feel more at ease here.

But I didn’t.

This house and the cold, empty feeling I got whenever I walked in here reminded me of everything we’d been through at my grandfather’s hand.

It felt so different here than at the Redwood pack house, or even the Samara pack house that Xavier had managed to rouse back to life.

There was a warmth in those places, a camaraderie that endured even when they were at each other’s throats. I didn’t feel that here, and that more than anything reminded me that I was making the right choice, even if I was scared as hell to tell everyone about it.

All I knew was that I was determined to make the Grimcrests into a pack that rivaled the Redwood and Samara packs. But I wasn’t going to be able to do it here in this place. There were too many ghosts for that to work.

“Where are the twins?” Davina asked. “Not used to seeing you without them perched on each hip.”

Davina’s warm words pulled me partially out of my funk, but I knew that the hard part hadn’t started just yet.

“Colton’s got them,” I said.

“In Oregon?” Genji asked.

His questions sounded suspiciously like an accusation, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

“Why is that so surprising? Colton has family there,” I said.

“And why isn’t Colton with you?” Genji said.

“Why the third degree?” I snapped. “Give me a break.” I rolled my neck and looked around. “What were you all talking about? You seemed to clam up pretty fast when I came in.”

“Nothing you’d be interested in hearing,” Bennett said.

“I don’t know. I think I’d like to be the judge of that.”

I was about to press further when a bouquet of scents hit my nose as the front door opened. Nadine, an older werewolf, came walking in with over a dozen others behind her. They rounded out a large chunk of what remained of the Grimcrest pack, and while I knew all of them, I didn’t feel close to many.

It didn’t help that they were looking at me like I was trespassing in my own pack house.

“So, Colton’s not with you,” Nadine said. “Have you abandoned him like you’ve abandoned us?” Nadine’s frown made her already wrinkled face look even more worn and weathered.

“You should smile more, Nadine,” I said breezily. “I don’t think that permanent scowl is doing you any favors.”

Nadine smiled, though I was sure it wasn’t because of my advice. “There she is. You’re always good at hurling insults. Not good at much else.”

“Give me a fucking break, Nadine. You started it. All your theatrics about me abandoning you when all I did was leave to take care of something. I told you I was coming back,” I snarled.

Nadine scoffed. “But for how long, Alpha?” She spat the last word like it tasted bad on her tongue.

“Give her a chance to explain,” Bennett said. “Sheesh. I wouldn’t want to be here either if someone jumped down my throat the second I walked in.”

“Did I ask you to open your mouth, Bennett?” Nadine sneered. “Stay in your lane.”

I gave Bennett a grateful nod and then looked around, gathering my nerve. “That’s actually what I came back to discuss—the future of the Grimcrest pack.”

Nadine snorted. “Future? What future? And what makes you think you have any say in what lies ahead for this doomed pack?”

“What a vote of confidence,” Bennett muttered.

I balled my hands into fists and turned to face Nadine head-on. “Watch it, Nadine.” I couldn’t get into a fight with my own pack. Not with so many who’d turn on me in a second, and not when I was here to ultimately bring everyone together, but I couldn’t let her talk to me however she pleased.

*But man, what I wouldn’t give to pound Nadine right into the floorboards.*

I took a deep breath and relaxed my hands. I knew what Colton would tell me right now. That I was a certified badass, and that I’d earned my place as Alpha of the Grimcrest pack no matter what anyone thought. This was the time to show it.

“Everyone gather around,” I said, motioning to those who were still lingering near the door.

They moved slowly, some not at all.

“It wasn’t a request,” I snapped.

Once everyone had gathered in the living room, I dove right in. It was now or never, and while I would have loved a huge helping of never, that wasn’t an option.

“You all lived in squalor and fear when my grandfather was Alpha of this pack,” I began.

I didn’t miss the haunted look that sprung into the eyes of many at the mention of my grandfather. They obviously weren’t big fans of mine, but I saw pure hate in some of their eyes as they undoubtedly thought about how life had been under his rule.

*Maybe that’s why so many of them are having a hard time warming up to me. They probably believe that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.*

“You want better than that, I know it. And that’s what I’m here to offer. A fresh beginning. For all of us.”

There were some murmurs that I couldn’t make out, but Nadine’s stance was obvious. She rolled her eyes, and her cohorts didn’t look convinced, either. I took a breath and pressed on.

“We don’t have to live in the shadow of my grandfather’s mistakes. As your Alpha, I want to build strength in our pack, but also equality among every Grimcrest pack member. It’s not only about me, but also about all of us getting the support that we need from this pack. Rebuilding together.”

This was maybe some of the cheesiest stuff I’d ever said, but I meant every word of it. I’d been looking for a place to call home for so long, for somewhere to belong after my grandfather ousted me from the Grimcrest pack all those years ago. Maybe if I could give security to any others who felt even a shred of the hopelessness that I had, this could work.

I had such good intentions, but that couldn’t keep the doubt at bay.

*Are they even listening to me? Do they care what I have to say? Does anyone here support me?*

“As Grimcrest Alpha, I vow to protect each and every one of you. I swear it on my mate’s life, on my children’s lives, and on my own.”

I looked each and every one of them in the eye, feeling uncertain, like I was speaking to them and they weren’t hearing me.

“So,” I said, just grateful that my voice wasn’t shaking. “Who’s with me?”

**Episode 5700**

**Xavier**

I glanced around the Redwood yard, dumbfounded. I couldn’t believe it. Cali had just taken off into the night without telling me. Without a warning. Without checking in.

No, things weren’t completely back to normal between us, but I at least thought Cali would have told me something before just up and leaving. We were there at least, weren’t we?

*Kendall is behind this. No question about it. She was so eager to get back to the Vanguard palace.*

I’d called Cali so many times and she hadn’t answered or texted back, either.

“Fuck! Why would she do this?”

I looked up at the Redwood pack house, my eyes trained on the window I knew belonged to Greyson. I’d promised him I would take care of Cali, and I’d failed.

Greyson’s words echoed in my head like he was standing right beside me saying them.

*Don’t let her go alone.*

Technically, she wasn’t alone. If my gut feeling was right, Kendall was with her. But that did little to lessen my concern. Kendall didn’t give a shit about Cali. Hell, I doubted Kendall gave a shit about anyone but herself. She wasn’t someone to rely on.

*Once Greyson gets his wits back about him, he’s going to tear me a new one for letting Cali slip through my fingers, and he’ll be right to.*

I was angry that Cali had slipped away without a word, but that was tempered by my firm knowledge that she was doing this out of the goodness of her heart. She wanted to help, as always, and was willing to do whatever she could to take care of the people she cared about. But at the same time, she should know by now that there were people who wanted to take care of *her*. Like *me*.

My phone rang, and I answered it without even looking at the screen, hoping it was Cali.

It wasn’t.

“Blue or black?”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Colton?”

“Blue or black drapes in the living room? The ones Greyson has in here are hideous, and Maya hates them.”

“Has she even seen them?”

“No, but I know her. You’d think she wasn’t the type of woman to care about this stuff, but she does. Believe me.”

I groaned and pulled the phone away from my ear, contemplating hanging up on him before deciding that I didn’t want to take my anger out on my twin.

“Colton, this isn’t a good time. In fact, it’s the worst time.”

“Really? I mean, you do sound tense. Or rather more tense than usual. Ava trouble? Or wait, has Cali found out she has yet another mate?”

“Colton, I’m not in the fucking mood. Cali might actually be in trouble. She’s getting herself into some serious shit as we speak.”

Colton sighed. “Trying to remember a time when she *wasn’t* getting herself into some serious shit.”

“That’s not the point. She’s missing.”

“Oh shit. Okay, whatever it is, I’m in.”

“What?”

“I’m in. I’d rather be helping you track down your ever elusive mate than picking out fucking drapes. It’s stressing me out. Mikah and Gabe can watch the twins.”

I opened my mouth to tell him that it wasn’t necessary…but when I really thought about it, I realized I wouldn’t mind Colton’s help. Greyson was out of commission, and who better to trust by my side through this than Colton?

“Thanks, I could really use some support.”

“Consider yourself supported,” he said.

“Meet me outside the Vanguard palace, but don’t let anyone see you there. I’ll explain later.”

Shortly after, I was running alongside the highway in wolf form, my nose tuned to Kendall and Cali’s scents. I’d caught their trail easily enough, even though I knew exactly where they were going and didn’t necessarily need to follow their scents at all. Still, it was good to know that I was on the right track.

The stronger Cali’s scent became, the less stressed I felt because I knew I was getting close.

I was still wrapping my head around Cali running off on me like this. She was usually so good about making sure Greyson or I knew where she was…but obviously Kendall had gotten into her head and lured her away.

Not like it could have been hard for Kendall to do.

Cali was always itching for adventure, and when I really thought about it, she was also always trying to go on said adventure without Greyson or me at her side to protect her.

*Cali’s finally gotten her wish. She’s out in the world taking risks and chasing excitement without either of us breathing down her neck.*

The only thing bringing me even minimal comfort was Steinar’s claim that this ancient magic only affected werewolves, but what if he was wrong? It was just like Big Mac said, magic—especially the ancient kind—wasn’t bound by convention. There was no way to know what this magic was capable of. Who it could hurt.

I was running along the main road that led to the Vanguard estate when their scents suddenly faded away.

I slowed to a stop, confused.

*What the hell? Did they go somewhere other than the Vanguard palace?*

I paused and looked around, sniffing the air like crazy.

I finally caught a trace of their scent on the breeze, and I followed it just before it faded away. It had led me to a dirt path that veered away from the road. I followed it for a few feet and spotted tire marks. I stopped and took a deep inhale.

The scent was still faint, but it was there. I wondered why they’d gone this way instead of just taking the main road to Lucian’s. This road still led to the Vanguard palace, but it was far from a straight shot.

I followed the tire trail until I reached a ridge. Parked off to the side, half obscured by leaves and branches, was Kendall’s motorcycle.

I approached the edge of the ridge and looked down. I could see Vanguard palace looming in the distance but no sign of Cali.

I reached out to her via mind link. If she was close, she should be able to hear me.

*Cali? You here?*

Nothing.

I assumed that they’d stopped here and walked the rest of the way, though I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why. It was over a mile from the palace. Even if they’d wanted to keep a low profile, they certainly could have stopped closer than this.

I was about to turn and leave the ridge when a burst of Cali’s scent reached my nose. Determined not to lose it again, I followed it, skidding to a stop just before I reached the edge of the ridge. I looked down and that’s when I saw it—someone lying on the ground.

My heart almost exploded from my chest.

I leapt off the edge and shifted as I ran, skidding to a stop beside Cali. I scooped her into my arms and held her close.

“Cali, what the hell happened to you?”

Her skin was cool—which made sense given the chill in the air—but she wasn’t cold. I quickly ran my hands over her body, searching for any wounds.

“Cali! Cali, can you hear me! Are you hurt?”

Cali’s eyes flickered open and she stared at me with a woozy smile on her beautiful face.

“Xavier? Where’d you come from?”

I pulled her into a hug and kissed her cheeks. “Cali, fuck! I was so worried.What happened? Why are you lying here on the ground? Did Kendall do this to you?”

“Kendall?”

My blood ran cold and then hot with anger in a matter of seconds.

*Did that bitch wipe Cali’s memories with some MIB bullshit?*

I was trying not to panic, trying not to jump to conclusions, but it was hard not to. I helped Cali sit up on her own, happy that she seemed to be coming out of whatever stupor she’d been in.

“What happened?” she said, her eyes alert.

“I just found you here, knocked out. Do you remember anything?”

Cali frowned, her hand going to her head. “I was talking to Kendall and—”

“Did she do something to you? Where is she?”

Cali looked around. “I don’t know. We were looking at the Vanguard palace through the trees and preparing to approach when…when…” She trailed off and shook her head as if trying to jog her memory.

She suddenly reached into her pocket and her expression changed to shock. “She stole the key,” she said. “Dammit!”

Cali tried to get up, and I rushed to help her.

“She’s going to use it to open the door! She shouldn’t go in there alone!” Cali said.

I took Cali by the shoulders. “Are you strong enough to ride me?”

Cali nodded wearily, and a few minutes later she was perched on my back as I raced toward the palace. It felt comforting and nostalgic to have Cali on my back like this. It felt good to have her close and know that I was able to protect her now. Whatever happened next, I would be by her side.

Then a strange thought hit me.

I never did this with Ava because she was a wolf herself and didn’t need me to. If I were honest, I liked that Cali had to ride on my back. I liked that she had to hold me close and that her scent enveloped me as I ran. It made me feel close to her in a way I never had with Ava.

I slowed down when Colton’s scent hit my nose. It didn’t take me long to spot my brother waiting for us, leaning against a tree.

Cali hopped off my back, and I shifted to human form as we walked toward him.

He spotted us and smirked. “So, I’m here and I see you found your mate. Now, you going to tell me what this is all about?”

**Episode 5701**

*You going to tell me what this is all about?*

The short answer was that no, I *didn’t* want to tell Colon what this was all about—I didn’t even know why he was here or how much he really knew—but I knew there wasn’t going to be any getting around it. It wasn’t like I could pretend like I didn’t know what he was talking about, so I sighed as I looked helplessly between the two brothers.

“Listen, there’s a…*situation* happening at the Vanguard palace,” I started.

“A situation?” Colton repeated. “What kind of a situation?”

“People are getting sick—really sick,” I explained.

Colton frowned. “Sick? Sick how? Why?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. I think it’s because of this door in one of the tunnels in the basement,” I went on. “Or what’s behind it. I’m honestly not completely sure,” I admitted. “It’s all kind of a developing situation.”

Colton looked at me, his expression baffled. “And what does that have to do with you missing?”

“That’s also kind of…a long story,” I said.

Colton shook his head. “I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about with any of this shit, Cali. None of this sounds remotely believable—”

“It’s all true,” Xavier confirmed, nodding at his brother. “People are getting sick. Greyson is sick now. I saw him myself.”

“Wait, really?” Colton’s eyes widened and he looked taken aback by this information. “Greyson, as in Greyson Evers? Is sick? Redwood Alpha? *That* Greyson?”

I ground my teeth. “Yes. *That* Greyson. And we need to figure out what’s going on, which means we need to get to the Vanguard palace and get that damn key back from Kendall. She did something to me, left me in the woods, and took it. The only place she’d come that makes sense is here.”

“A key? What’s going on?” Colton asked. “What is she going to do?”

I shook my head. “I just think she’s about to do something very stupid, and I want to stop her,” I said.

“What do you think she’s going to do?” Colton questioned.

I rubbed my head, which was aching. “I think that whenever we opened that door in the basement something…happened. And I have a feeling that the curse that’s hurting people is down there, behind that door, but I’m the only one who doesn’t seem affected by it. I think it’s because I’m Fae.” I pressed my lips together, preventing myself from adding where I’d gotten this information.

It had come to me in a sort of vision where I spoke to Big Mac about it—though I’d never actually spoken to Big Mac about it. Considering the very wary look Colton was already giving me, I didn’t think now was the time to tell him any of the details about that.

I shook my head. “Anyway, I think Kendall is going down to that basement herself.”

I had a sinking feeling she was doing it because she wanted to find the cure for whatever was wrong with Greyson herself, and that she was motivated by the mate bond between them. This thought made my stomach clench and soured my goodwill and concern for her for a moment. But I shook my head, trying to push through it.

I was here to help, and besides, I didn’t have any interest in bringing up my frustration with Greyson and Kendall’s mate bond situation—especially not in front of *my* other mate. Complaining to Xavier about Greyson and Kendall seemed way too petty.

“Kendall could end up really hurt, so I want to get a move on,” I said, and started off toward the Vanguard manor with a determined stride.

Xavier followed me, and—after a moment—so did Colton.

I glanced back at them over my shoulder. “I need to get the cure for the others.”

Xavier caught up to me, shaking his head. “No. There’s no way you’re going in there alone. That’s why I asked Colton to come. That’s why I’m here, Cali.”

I looked over at him, and I could read the concern on his face. I appreciated him being with me and that he had found me in the woods. It felt really good to have him at my side again. But I knew he couldn’t come with me. It was too dangerous. I opened my mouth to tell him so, but Colton spoke before I could—

“So, you want us to get this key, but Kendall might be in exactly the place that made Greyson sick. Greyson, the ever-so-great Alpha.”

Xaiver shot his twin a dark look, which Colton ignored.

“That seems risky,” Colton added with a shrug.

“It *is* dangerous,” I confirmed. “And I didn’t ask either of you to come with me. But since you’re here, I’m telling you now that I don’t want either of you to actually go down there.”

“Cali—” Xaiver started, but I shook my head firmly.

“I’m serious,” I growled.

Xavier looked like he wanted to keep arguing, but we’d made it up the Vanguard driveway and reached the front doors. I knocked, then turned to him with narrowed eyes.

“This isn’t up for discussion,” I told him.

“Like hell it isn’t,” he snorted.

“I’m Fae, and you’re not, so just let me do this,” I huffed. “We don’t know what’s down there, or how risky it could be—”

“Exactly!” Xavier exclaimed.

“Listen, for the record, I’ve always admired your ‘jump first, ask questions later’ attitude,” Colton told me, “but I’m actually with my brother on this one.”

I glowered at them both and knocked again. I could hear the sound echoing around the cavernous entry hall inside as I turned to glare at the brothers.

“If I can take down two Alphas, I can certainly take down more,” I warned.

Then I looked over at Xavier, mind linking, *Please, Xavier. I appreciate you helping me and coming along, but I don’t want you to get hurt, too.*

*You’re not going alone*, he growled back at me. *And I’ll be damned if I let you.*

I was about to carry on arguing when the door cracked open. I looked over, expecting it to swing wide, but it never did.

Armin stood in the crack of the door, peering out at us. From the little I could see of him, I could see that he was wearing a face mask and a plastic shield over his face, along with a full orange hazmat suit.

I stared at him in shock for a moment. “Um, hi, Armin. Can we come in?”

He shook his head. “Unfortunately, no.”

“Why not?” I asked, baffled.

“We’re under a strict quarantine.”

“A *what*?” I gasped. “Quarantine? Have Lucian and Elle gotten worse?” My mind went immediately to Greyson, and I felt my heart contract. Had I just made a huge mistake leaving him? If Elle and Lucian had gotten worse, then that was what was in store for Greyson, too.

Armin shook his head again. “I’m not at liberty to disclose anything of that nature, but the Vanguards are having no guests at this time.”

“But most of us have already been exposed,” Xavier pointed out, a harsh edge to his voice. “Greyson is sick, and Cali was here when Lucian and Elle got sick.”

My stomach was a knot of nerves. I thought of Kendall and wondered if she too had been turned away.

“Did Kendall happen to come by?”

Armin frowned at me. “We’ve had no visitors,” he huffed.

I blew out a frustrated breath and tried not to look as annoyed as I felt. I had no idea why I’d even bothered trying to come through the front door. Clearly that’s not what Kendall had done.

“If we mask up, is there a way we could come inside?” I ventured. “We really need to get inside because…” I glanced back at Xavier and Colton, thinking frantically for a reason why we’d need to get into the manor. “Because Colton thinks he left something inside the other night.”

Armin peered suspiciously at Colton, who looked surprised for a moment, but coughed and nodded quickly. “Um, yeah. I think I might have left my…fountain pen.”

“Your fountain pen?” Armin repeated dubiously.

Colton nodded. “Yep. Take it with me everywhere, you know. It’s a priceless Evers family heirloom, that…pen. I’d hate to think I’d lost it. This guy—” he nudged Xavier in the ribs, “he might kill me if I didn’t get it back. He loves that damn pen. Sometimes, I think more than me, but what can you do?”

It was one of the more absurd exchanges I’d ever heard, but I supposed it was what we were going with.

I turned back to Armin. “Please, can we come inside and look for it really quickly?”

“Seriously, man, you’d really be doing me a solid,” Colton said, really putting on a show. Now that he’d started, he was really committed to the role. “My fiancée is pissed about it too. I’m in pretty hot water. We’ll do anything you want us to do if you’re concerned about safety. Whatever you need.”

Armin had been listening with a stony expression, but when Colton spoke, his face seemed to soften slightly, and he looked intrigued. “You’ll do *anything*?”

**Episode 5702**

**Greyson**

Sleep came and went, without me really realizing when I was slipping in and out. I was aware of being awake, and then consciousness would just slip away without me really noticing until I jerked awake again.

Every time I blinked myself awake, I felt tired and restless. I was hot all over one minute and would kick away the sheets and blankets of the bed. Then, the next minute, I’d start to shake with cold. It was the strangest sensation, as werewolves almost never felt cold. My teeth would start to chatter and my whole body would seize up, and I’d have to grab up the blankets again, trying to warm back up.

“*Good god*,” I groaned, putting my hand on my burning head.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so sick. Hell—I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been sick period. Part of werewolf power included a kick-ass immune system, so this felt particularly shocking—and not in a good way.

The worst part of it was the dreams. I kept seeing visions of Cali and Kendall. They were there with me in the room, or sometimes with me in bed. They were speaking to me, expecting me to answer, but I felt as though I couldn’t even open my mouth. It was a terrifying feeling. And then, as the dreams continued, Maren began to appear. First just at the edge of the room, then moving closer and closer.

“Greyson,” she whispered to me. “Do you miss me?”

I sat up with a gasp. Looking over, I saw a glass of water on the nightstand. I tried to reach for it, but my hand didn’t work, and I knocked the glass over, spilling water everywhere. It felt as though my limbs weren’t working—like they had a mind of their own.

I readjusted my sitting position with a grunt, trying to breathe, trying to relax. I felt a flash of heat, and I kicked away the sheet over my legs, which suddenly felt as though it was suffocating me.

*Don’t make a mess*, Kendall’s voice said, speaking from inside my head.

I looked around quickly, wondering if she was in the room with me, but it was empty.

“Fuck,” I breathed, shaking my head. It was just my mind playing games with me, and maybe the heat of the fever.

*Be a good Alpha and do what you’re told for once*, she said.

I gritted my teeth as an arc of anger flashed through my chest. “You rejected me, and I rejected you. So why am I still fucking *hearing* you?”

There was no response. Of course there wasn’t. Why would there be? The whole damn thing was happening in my head.

I blew out a frustrated breath and ran a hand down my sweaty face. I closed my eyes, trying to picture Cali. She was the one I really wanted here right now. I saw her face before my closed eyes, and I felt a small spark of hope in my heart.

*Hang in there, Greyson*, her voice said to me. *I love you. I’m trying to help you…*

I frowned, wondering what she meant. And then it hit me—she was going to the Vanguard palace, to the door.

I shook my head, almost laughing to myself. At least I could remember something while in this altered state.

Groaning again, I dropped my head back against the headboard. I just hoped that whatever she was doing at the Vanguard estate wasn’t dangerous. And I really hoped that Xavier was with her. He’d told me he would go but…

Fuck. If Xavier *wasn’t* with her…

The door opened, and I looked over as light spilled into the room. Torin and Ravi stepped in, with Ravi carrying a tray and Torin carrying a glass of water—which I was glad to see.

“Greyson, how are you feeling?” Torin asked as they moved slowly toward the bed.

“Like shit,” I grunted.

“Yeah, that tracks. You don’t look so good,” Ravi said. “Do you think you can eat?”

“I made soup!” Torin said.

“My mother’s recipe,” Ravi added.

“I’m not so sure I’m up for food, but I’ll take that water,” I said, nodding toward the glass in Torin’s hand.

My hands still felt strange and unwieldy, and Torin had to put the glass to my mouth and help me drink. I hated every minute of it. I hated feeling like an invalid. It went against my nature. But I was grateful for the water and drank it down.

“Thanks,” I said when I drained the glass. I looked between the two of them. “I don’t want either of you to get sick.”

Torin glanced at Ravi. “Well, it seems to only be affecting werewolves right now. So far no one else is sick. Not even Jay, who’s looking after Lola.”

“That’s good,” I mumbled, glad to hear that it didn’t seem to be spreading.

“I want to try something,” Torin said. “I don’t know if this will help, but my healing magic—maybe it would work on this condition. I don’t know for sure, since this seems to be some kind of ancient magic—”

“My man!” Ravi said, slapping a hand onto Torin’s shoulder. “That’s a great idea.”

“It might not help,” Torin warned. “But…”

“Do it, please,” I said desperately. “Anything would be better than the way I feel right now.”

Torin set his jaw and nodded. He stepped closer to the bed and looked me over. He took a deep breath, then reached out and put his hands on my chest. For a moment, nothing happened, and then, slowly, I felt my skin begin to heat, and Torin’s hands began to glow with a faint blue light.

Suddenly, it felt as though all the oxygen had been sucked from the room. I gasped for air like a fish yanked out of water, and Torin began to move his hand. They were hovering over me, an inch from my skin.

My whole body felt strange and tingling, and then, all at once, it felt as though something in my body had been switched off. The tightness in my chest went away in an instant, and the pressure and heat in my head began to clear, like my fever had broken. In just a moment, it felt like I could breathe again.

“I think it’s working,” I said quietly.

“Keep going, Tor,” Ravi said encouragingly to our friend. “You’re doing it.”

I took a deep breath in, letting the incredible feeling wash over me. I felt alive again, and almost completely better.

But that was miserably short-lived. As Torin continued to work his magic over me, the pain rushed back like a tide coming back in. This felt even worse, and I had to grit my teeth not to groan in agony. It felt as though the pain in my body was actively resisting—like it was revolting against Torin’s magic.

The pain continued to grow until I couldn’t stand it anymore, and I yelled out as I began to convulse in the bed, my whole body jerking with the spasms of pain. The pressure in my head came back with a vengeance, and it felt as though the fever had come to a rolling boil.

“What’s happening?!” Ravi asked, though his voice sounded far away.

“I don’t know!” Torin squeaked, panicked. “I don’t know! This shouldn’t be happening!”

“Then stop!” Ravi yelled.

“I already did!” Torin yelled.

I squeezed my eyes shut as the pain closed in. I could see Cali’s face, then Kendall’s took her place, which pissed me off.

“Get the fuck out of my head, Kendall!” I bellowed.

“*Kendall?*” Ravi asked.

There were two sudden pops, and then the sound of two additional voices, one harsh and one soft.

Suddenly, I felt warm, soft hands on my head, and when I opened my eyes, I saw my mother’s face hovering over mine.

“Greyson,” she said softly, “my son. I’m here. You’re going to be okay.”

I nodded dumbly back at her. Having my mother here to comfort me at this moment of pain and confusion felt really good, even if it might just be all in my head. I wasn’t sure at that point what was real and what was a delusion brought on by fever and pain.

Her hands were soft and her voice comforting, but even that wasn’t quite enough to ameliorate how awful I felt. My head felt as though there was a vice grip tightening around my temples, and as I shifted in the bed, a jolt of pain shot down my spine like an electric shock. My chest tightened, and pain radiated through my whole body once again.

Feeling my body stiffen, my mom’s hands tightened on my arm.

“Oh, Greyson,” she said, and I could hear the concern in her voice. “MacKenzie?”

Big Mac appeared next to my mother, her face stern and grim. She narrowed her eyes as she looked at me. “I think I have something that might help you.”

**Episode 5703**

**Xavier**

I yanked my shirt off and glared at Colton. “I think I’m going to kill you.”

Colton snorted as he pulled off his jeans. “Oh, I’m *so sorry* I saved the fucking day, Xavier.”

I stared at him. “You call that saving the day, Colton?”

He rolled his eyes. “I was kind of on the spot. It’s not like your girlfriend gave me time to think of anything else, man.”

The comment stung more than it should have—and probably more than Colton intended. Cali wasn’t really my girlfriend—not right now. Which he knew.

“That doesn’t fucking matter how much time you had,” I snapped. “I still can’t believe you couldn’t think of anything better than a fucking *pen*.”

“Hey, that’s an *heirloom* pen to you,” Colton corrected. He pulled off his shirt and balled it up with a sigh. “Hey, it worked, didn’t it? We’re inside—*ish*,” he added with a shrug.

“Whatever,” I muttered as I pulled off my jeans and boxers. I supposed he was right. As dumb as his story was, maybe Armin had a soft spot for fountain pens, because he’d finally let us inside. Though I wasn’t convinced that being forced to strip down was exactly what I’d describe as a rousing success.

Naked, we both stepped in front of a glass door leading into a chamber. I had no idea how the Vanguard had set this shit up so quickly, but it kind of checked out. The Vanguards were crazy, and I couldn’t put anything past them at this point.

Standing inside the chamber was a figure wearing a hazmat suit, and the figure nodded and waved us through. I opened the door and stepped into the chamber. The door closed behind us.

Looking around, I was shocked to see Cali coming through another door. Even more shocked to see that she was completely naked too. When she caught sight of Colton and me, she blushed from head to toe. She crossed her arms, trying to cover herself, but it didn’t do much.

At the sight of her, my wolf went wild, and I forced myself to look away—anywhere but at her. The last thing I needed was to get an erection in a fucking decontamination chamber.

“Looking good, Hart,” Colton said with a grin.

I smacked the back of his head and gave his nipple a painful twist for good measure.

“*OW!* What the fuck, man?” Colton snapped, turning and smacking me back.

“Don’t look at her,” I growled.

“It’s fine,” Cali said, shaking her head. I could tell she was just trying to play it off. “We’ve all seen each other naked before.”

I was about to say that I’d rather no one else ever see Cali naked, but before I could speak, a robotic voice came from a speaker over our heads:

“*Disinfectant about to begin*.”

Unsure of how this was all going to work, I looked around.

“*Please step into the center of the room*,” came the voice again.

There was a circle marked in the center of the stone floor, and the three of us stepped into it.

“*Closer*,” the voice said.

As I stepped closer, my arm brushed Cali’s naked side and it took every ounce of discipline in me to not look at her. But even looking away, I could still see the swell of her breast in my peripheral vision, and even just the smell of her was torture to me.

“*Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one*…”

Cali’s hand slipped into mine, and she squeezed tightly.

*It’s going to be okay*, I said automatically, speaking through the mind link. *It’s just some stupid Vanguard bullshit.*

She barely had time to nod before it started.

It was like a shower spray, but it was from all sides, from the ceiling and every wall. The water was cold and then hot, and all three of us yelled in shock. It was like being thrown into the worst car wash ever, and I kept my grip on Cali, my arm snaking around her waist to keep her upright as the blasts of water pushed her back and forth.

The only good thing was that as fast as it came on, it stopped, and we all stood in the sudden silence, coughing and gasping for air. That only lasted for a moment, and then came a sound like a jet engine. The room heated as hot air began to blow through, drying us off. I felt like a dog at a groomer.

After a few seconds, the whole thing was over, though my ears still rang from the noise.

Colton started to laugh, and I looked over at him.

“What?” I snapped. I was feeling edgy and not in the mood for his fucking attitude.

“You look fucking incredible right now, Xavier,” he said, chuckling.

I ran a hand through my hair, which felt tangled and wild. Glancing down at Cali, I saw that she looked like she’d been caught in a tornado. It was cute, but I got why Colton was laughing—it was kind of funny.

“You are now clean. You may proceed through the open door,” the voice said.

There was a click and a new door opened.

Cali stepped away from me and raked her fingers through her hair, trying to smooth it out as the three of us stepped through the door.

Armin waited for us on the other side, and he nodded as we walked toward him. “Here you are,” he said, handing each of us what appeared to be a set of scrubs.

When we each had those, he handed us socks, white shoes, and a hazmat suit, like the one he was wearing.

“You can look for your heirloom for an hour or so,” he said as we pulled on the clothes. “If you need longer than that, you’ll have to come back another time.”

“We’ll find it,” I said firmly. I had no intention of going through that decontamination bullshit again.

Armin nodded.

I glanced over at Cali. *You hear that?* I asked her through the mind link. *We have to find Kendall fast. If she’s even here.*

Cali looked grim as she pulled on the shoes. *I have no doubt that Kendall found a way inside. We’ll find her here*, she assured me.

When the three of us were all dressed in our suits, Armin waved us through a passageway and into the main hall of the Vanguard palace. Even through the hazmat mask covering my face, I could tell that the whole place smelled strongly of harsh cleaning products and bleach. The smell was strong enough that it burned the back of my throat.

“Okay, why don’t we split up,” Cali suggested. “Colton, where do you think the…pen is?”

“Well, Maya and I had sex in that side room—” Colton started, pointing.

I cleared my throat meaningfully.

“Didn’t you also go to the basement?” Cali asked pointedly.

Colton paused for a beat too long, then nodded. “Oh, yeah. The basement too.”

I had to fight not to roll my eyes at Colton. “I think Cali’s got a good idea. Let’s split up.”

Armin looked like he wanted to protest this idea, but I grabbed Cali’s arm and started toward the basement stairs before he could say anything to stop us.

The reality was that there was only one place Kendall would go in this house, and we needed to get there fast so we could end all of this once and for all. I didn’t like Cali involving herself like this, but I knew that it would be useless to try to stop her. It was just her way. Especially with Greyson being sick. So the best I could do was to just make sure she stayed safe.

We headed down the flight of stairs to the basement level, then turned toward the wine cellar.

Cali took the lead. “The door is this way,” she said walking briskly. Then she stopped and turned back to look at me. “Xavier, I don’t want—”

“Let’s go,” I interrupted, cutting her off. “I’m not staying here, and I have this whole fucking suit on. If it’s magic and it’ll spread, then what does it matter? I’ve already been exposed, like I said to Armin. If it’s not magic, then I’ve got this suit on, and I’ll be fine, okay?”

“I really don’t think—”

“Let’s just go,” I said again, more firmly.

Cali clamped her mouth shut. She looked frustrated, but she finally sighed and turned around, apparently realizing that it wouldn’t do her any good to continue to argue with me.

The Vanguard palace always seemed like a freaking maze to me, and the basement was no exception, but Cali must have remembered where she was going, because she walked purposefully onward.

But as we rounded a corner, Cali pulled to a stop with a gasp of shock. A gust of strangely warm wind hit us, bringing with it a dark, earthy, musty smell. Peering into the darkness, I saw a wide wooden door that looked about a thousand years old. The door was hanging open, creaking slightly in the strange wind.

There was no sign of Kendall anywhere.

**Episode 5704**

I stared at the open door—where the hell was Kendall? There was no sign of her. Not that I expected her to have left a note or something, but there was nothing. But why had she gone inside?! That seemed like the one thing none of us should do alone.

The longer I looked at it, the more anxious I became. My stomach was a tight knot as I looked at the swinging door—the door that had made everyone so sick. The key that Kendall had stolen from me was still in the lock. I stepped forward and pulled it out, then slipped it into my pocket.

The strange breeze from beyond the door continued to gust. Where was it coming from? The door led into some kind of a cave, so it didn’t make any sense. As I stood there, I noticed that it almost felt like it was coming in a particular rhythm, blowing out, then drawing back.

I peered into the darkness beyond the door. From what I could see, it looked like a cave inside, the walls and floor rough stone. I couldn’t believe that Kendall had gotten into it. And Armin hadn’t seen her, so it wasn’t likely she had gone through the decontamination chamber. That’s how she had gotten here so fast, but it also meant that she didn’t have any protective gear on.

I bit my lip. I was genuinely worried about Kendall and how she might react to what lay beyond that door. I was worried about Xavier too, who had just stepped next to me.

“Hey, you should go back,” I said, turning to him. “I have to go in there.”

He shook his head. “No way. We’re not having this discussion again.”

My thoughts went to Greyson, who I’d left sweating and shaking, lying sick in bed at the Redwood pack house, and I felt my heart rate tick up. “Xavier, please,” I said, feeling panicked, “for once in your life, please listen to me! You’re already exposed, who knows what’s going on in there, and what it will do to you. If anything happened, I would never be able to live with myself. Please!”

I felt completely overwhelmed, and hot, and suffocated by the mask and the suit. Tears sprang to my eyes as Xavier’s arms encircled me. I leaned into him, wishing I could smell him, wishing I could feel all of him against me without our suits in the way.

“It’s going to be alright,” he said quietly. “We’ve been through worse shit. And so has Greyson. We’re going to figure all of this out, and it’s going to be fine.”

“But how can you know that?” I asked. “We don’t know if this will spread—”

“You have to trust me,” Xavier said, cutting me off. “You know the amount of shit we’ve all been through. This is nothing, okay? Nothing.”

I took a deep breath. Then another. Talking about it had helped, and I felt calmer. Xavier was right—we’d been through so much it was hard to count it all on one hand. This was not the moment to crumble—not now, with whatever was going on. I needed to be strong. For Greyson. For Lola. For everyone.

“Thank you,” I said, pulling away from the hug. I felt a little sheepish for my moment of weakness and cleared my throat.

Xavier cradled my face—as best as he could through the mask and shield. “You’re not going in alone, Cali. Got it? Over my dead body.”

That was exactly my fear, but I could see in Xavier’s blue eyes that there was not going to be any convincing him otherwise.

So I just nodded. “Okay, let’s go.” I could only hope that if Xavier did get sick—and my vision was right—that the cure was somewhere ahead.

With a steadying breath, I turned back to the door just as the breeze gusted through again. It almost felt warm, but it had a foul odor, like rotten eggs, strong enough that it came through my mask. It was unsettling, to say the least.

“Kendall!” I called out.

There was no response. I stepped toward the door, with Xavier right beside me.

Just before we stepped into the tunnel beyond, I stopped and turned to him. “Are you sure?”

He didn’t answer but stepped in first.

I gritted my teeth. There was no turning back now, so I stepped in after him.

Looking around, I saw that the passageway did look like a cave, and I was glad for the hazmat suits. The path sloped downward, and the pathway was lit with an eerie light coming from…somewhere. I wasn’t exactly sure of the source, and it wasn’t bright enough to really see anything.

“Hey, look,” Xavier said, and I looked over just as he flipped on a headlamp built into the hazmat suit.

“Oh, that’s useful,” I murmured and switched mine on too.

“Yeah, it might be the first time the Vanguards have ever done something actually useful.”

I half-smiled. Normally I’d laugh at the remark, but I wasn’t in the laughing mood.

We made our way along the pathway. Beside the downward slope, the path grew rougher, becoming loose rock, then boulders we had to scramble over to get around. Xavier helped me every time, his hands at my waist, making sure I was secure.

“Kendall!” I called every few feet. “Kendall?! Where are you?! Are you there?”

Still no response.

We continued onward and had just passed over another patch of boulders when I heard a low rumbling. The sound grew and grew until it reached a deafening roar, and we were surrounded by a rush of that foul smelling wind. It was so strong and sudden, almost as though we were closer to its source. Shocked and scared, I yelped and threw my arms around Xavier, clinging to him tightly.

When the wind finally began to die down, I shuddered and shook my head.

“What is this place? And how long has it been under the Vanguard palace without Lucian—or anyone here—noticing it?” I looked around. “I just can’t believe it. It feels so shocking that no one knew. Lucian seems to know every nook and cranny of his palace.”

Xavier shrugged, his face grim. “Beats the hell out of me. Maybe it’s just so creepy down here someone locked the door and just forgot about it.”

I couldn’t argue with that. It *was* creepy, and as I looked around the cave, I was clear that we’d gone even deeper underground. Some of the rocks appeared to be glowing. I rubbed my eyes, thinking I was just seeing things, but—no—the rocks had a low, blue-green glow.

I thought about what Big Mac had said in my vision—about the cure being down here. But—where? Was it one of the glowing rocks? How could that be?

Not sure what else to do, I reached out a hand and ran it lightly along the rough wall. The rocks felt slightly warm beneath my palm. I stepped toward them, trying to get a better look, but as I did, I felt my foot slip. I cried out and reached out blindly, trying to catch myself.

I hadn’t seen it in the darkness, but the cave dropped off sharply into the darkness beneath.

“*Xavier!*”

“*Cali!*” he bellowed, and grasped hold of my arm.

With a roar of effort, he stopped my momentum and dragged me back onto the path. I clung to him, breathing sharply, nearly crying with sudden relief.

“Fuck, Cali,” he breathed, sounding terrified. “Be careful.”

“Sorry,” I said, stepping slightly back. My heart was still thundering in my chest, but I tried to speak normally. “I just wanted to look at one of those rocks. What if one of them is the cure?”

He shook his head. “It’s not worth it if you’re going to fall.”

“How *did* I fall?” I wondered, and we both turned to look at the gap that separated the path we were standing on from the one that was just ahead.

The gap wasn’t so wide we couldn’t easily jump it, but we just hadn’t noticed it. We hadn’t been looking down—we’d both been so mesmerized by the rocks.

I jumped when I heard someone moan. “Did you hear that?” I asked Xavier.

He nodded. “It sounded like a person.”

“Kendall?!” I called out. There was no answer, but that didn’t matter. “We need to keep going.”

“Cali, we really have to—”

“We *have* to!” I insisted. “Come on!”

I stepped back, then started to run. This time I had enough momentum to clear the gap easily, landing hard on the other path. I scrambled to my feet and kept running.

“Cali! Stop! Slow down!” Xavier called after me, but I ignored him.

I kept running with my headlamp pointed down, wanting to see any other drop-offs before they caught me by surprise, but I stopped in shock when I saw a body lying prone on the path.

“Kendall?!” I gasped. She didn’t move.

Holy shit—was she dead?

**Episode 5705**

**Greyson**

I stared up at Big Mac, baffled. I was so confused, and though my throat felt like fire, I managed to get the words out, “I thought there was no cure.”

Big Mac shrugged. “Well, there’s not.”

“Then what—”

“It might just be a temporary one. If that. But it’s worth a try.”

I grunted. I wasn’t so sure that it *was* worth a try. That was what I’d thought about Torin’s cure, and given what had just happened when he had given his healing magic a try, I was a little skeptical. Yes, it had made me feel better for a minute, but then it had just made me feel worse. But I was desperate for anything at this point—anything that would get me well enough to get me to Cali so I could help her.

“Okay,” I managed. “Let’s give it a try. Not much to lose here, is there?”

Big Mac nodded, then turned to Ravi and Torin. “Don’t just stand there.”

“What do you want us to do?” Ravi asked.

Big Mac gestured. “Get him on his back, and keep him there.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, and I groaned as Ravi and Torin turned me back from my side. It hurt to move, and my back ached like it had been recently set on fire. My body hurt so much it felt better to curl into a fetal position, and once Ravi and Torin let go, I curled up again, my body contorting itself without me even thinking about it.

The pain was everywhere again, coursing through me like poison, and spots appeared in my vision as I tried to breathe through it. This was hell. I just wanted this feeling to stop. I felt so useless and out of control, and it was fucking awful.

I tried to think of Cali again, which had helped before. I thought hard, trying to conjure up a picture of her beautiful face and soft smile, but the work of concentrating made my head pound like someone was hitting it with a hammer. I closed my eyes with a hiss as pain exploded at the base of my spine.

“*Fuck*,” I muttered as the pain began to travel down my spine.

“Greyson,” my mother said soothingly, her hand on my head. “I’m so sorry you have to go through this. Are you alright?”

No, I was definitely *not* alright, but I couldn’t get the words out. For a moment it felt good to hear her voice, but that feeling was fleeting too.

“I need him on his back! Do it again, and this time, hold him there!” Big Mac said firmly, speaking to Ravi and Torin.

I felt hands on my shoulders and my ankles. It was Ravi and Torin, and they were pulling me back onto my back, holding me down even as I struggled to move again.

I moaned in agony, and when I managed to open my eyes, I saw a blurry vision of Big Mac hovering over me, with my mother just next to me, her face lined with concern.

She was stroking my hair, pushing it from my sweaty face. “There, there,” she said quietly. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“Greyson, I need you to swallow this, okay?” Big Mac commanded.

I grunted, which the witch must have taken for a yes, because she reached forward and opened my mouth. She stuck a glass vial filled with purple liquid into it and poured it down.

The liquid was god-awful and burned my tongue. I tried to spit it out, but Big Mac clamped a hand over my mouth to stop me.

“You need to swallow it, Greyson,” she insisted.

“Swallow it, son,” my mother said anxiously.

So I tried, but it felt like my throat was closing up, and I couldn’t swallow. My whole body began to shake, and with Big Mac’s hand over my mouth, I couldn’t breathe.

“You’re suffocating him!” my mom cried out. “We have to do something!”

Big Mac’s face was grim. “He has to swallow it. Keep holding him!”

It felt like it had when Torin was trying to heal me—like my body was trying to reject whatever it was. Darkness came and went as I slipped in and out of consciousness. I felt like I was going to pass out—or possibly choke to death right here in my bed, in front of my mother.

Everyone in the room was freaking out—Ravi and Torin yelling at each other, my mother yelling at Big Mac, Big Mac yelling at everyone.

Then, suddenly, it was quiet.

The room had gone completely silent.

I opened my eyes and saw that I was in a white room, alone. The room was completely empty.

I looked around. “Hello?”

My voice echoed off the walls and ceiling.

I frowned. I had no idea what the hell was going on. Had I passed out?

Had I died?

I turned around, looking to see if there was a door behind me, or a window—some way to get the hell out of this creepy-ass room. I took a step forward, but it was the strangest feeling—when I moved it felt like I wasn’t going anywhere.

My heart thudded in my chest as I tried to run, but I couldn’t seem to move anywhere.

“Hello!” I called again, more frantically.

The back of my neck prickled, and when I spun around, three figures stood behind me.

It was Chloe, Posie, and Lauren. They looked just as I remembered them—all three had dark hair and looked at me from dark eyes. They wore short sleeves, which showed off the tattoos all over their arms, chest, and necks. The tattoos were runes and other ancient symbols I didn’t understand.

I stared at them, my breath coming in short, painful gasps. “What the hell is happening? Why am I here?”

The three women didn’t speak, but they moved across the room toward me. They stopped just in front of me.

“What is this place?” I asked. “What am I doing here? What’s happening? Can you hear me?”

Chloe smiled at me. “Greyson Evers, fate isn’t done with you quite yet.”

“What?” I asked, baffled.

Each sister reached out a hand, extended their index finger, and tapped me on the forehead.

I didn’t have time to think about how fucking weird that was, because a sharp jolt passed through me, and suddenly I was gasping for air.

When I looked around, I realized I was back in the room, sitting up on the bed. Ravi and Torin were at my sides, looking freaked. It was clear they’d been trying but hadn’t been able to hold me down any longer.

I was breathing hard, like I’d just been sprinting up a mountain or something. When I managed to look up, I saw Big Mac and my mom watching me anxiously. They looked terrified, and I understood why, but when I thought about it, I realized that I actually felt okay.

“What the fuck just happened?” I asked, running a hand through my hair.

“I forced you to drink a potion I made,” Big Mac said cautiously. “How do you feel?”

How *did* I feel? As my heart began to slow slightly, I realized that I felt better. There was no pain, and while I was still hot and sweaty, even that was going away. “I feel okay. Better. What was in the potion?”

Big Mac waved a hand. “Oh, it’s probably better that you don’t know. But what you should know is that it’s just temporary. If Torin’s magic couldn’t heal you, mine won’t either. Not permanently, anyway.”

“That’s fine.” I looked over at Torin. “Thank you for trying earlier. Thank you both for trying.” I moved to get off the bed.

“Whoa!” Ravi said quickly.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Big Mac asked.

“Greyson, please,” my mom said.

“I have to get Cali,” I explained. “I think she needs my help.”

“Greyson, you’re still very sick,” my mom reminded me.

I shook my head. “I’m fine. I really do feel better.” I looked up at Big Mac. “How long do you think I have?”

“What?” she asked.

“Before I get sick again? How long do I have before I…regress?” I wondered.

Big Mac glanced at my mom, her expression grave. “That’s hard to say, Greyson—”

“Take a guess,” I growled. “I want to know what I’m working with here.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. A couple of hours, maybe. A day?”

I grimaced. That wasn’t what I had wanted to hear, but it would have to do. “That’s good enough,” I muttered as I stood up.

“But you should know something,” Big Mac said, watching me warily. “Unless we find the real cure, if you go back into the state you were in—the next time we use my potion, that might be it.”

I frowned at her. “What does that mean? What might be it?”

“You might not wake up.”

**Episode 5706**

My heart thudded hard in my chest as I dropped down beside Kendall. Despite my complicated feelings about Kendall—and about Greyson and Kendall, and the fact that Kendall had done some kind of shady MIB shit to me to get the key to the door—I was worried about her. I couldn’t not be, despite everything.

Whatever was down here was making werewolves really sick, and I didn’t want her to be harmed by whatever it was. I wasn’t that kind of person. I wasn’t like Ava who would probably be thrilled if I were hurt and left for dead. I didn’t have that in me.

“Kendall? Can you hear me?” I asked quietly, taking her hand in mine. It felt clammy. “Shit,” I breathed, leaning closer.

Xavier knelt beside me. “Is she alive?”

I put my hand to her mouth, where I felt her breath coming in and out at short, irregular intervals. “I can feel her breathing—she’s alive.” I put my hand on her forehead and realized in an instant that she was burning up. “But she’s sick,” I said, my voice breaking.

“Fuck,” Xavier breathed.

I turned to look at him. “She’s sick because she came down here. And you could be next. You need to go, Xavier. Now, while you still can.”

He shook his head stubbornly. “I’ll take my chances.”

“But that’s not a chance *I’m* willing to take. Xavier, we can’t keep doing this. I know you want to watch over me, but you won’t be any help to me if you get sick—”

I stopped talking as the ground around us began to rumble. There was a cracking sound, and rocks from the cave ceiling above us began to fall.

Xavier covered me while I covered Kendall, all of us doing our best to shield ourselves from the falling debris.

Kendall moaned and turned. Her eyes flickered open and she looked wildly around, her expression terrified.

“Hey,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm, “it’s okay. Are you hurt?”

Kendall continued to look freaked, and she drew her brows down, confused. She looked between Xavier and me. “Greyson?” She sat up with a groan of pain. “You’re not Greyson.”

“You got that fucking right,” Xavier muttered under his breath.

It made me uneasy, but I thought I knew why Kendall was confused—it was the mate bond. At least, I *hoped* that’s what it was, and not real feelings. I didn’t like the fact that Greyson and Kendall were mated, but it would be even worse if Kendall wanted Greyson in this moment because…

I shook my head. I couldn’t even let myself *think* about it.

Kendall tried to move again but gave a shudder and a small moan of pain. I helped her back down and tried to get her into a more comfortable position against the wall of the cave.

“I think you’ve been infected, Kendall. Did you get sick when you came in here?” I asked.

Kendall looked at me like I’d just spoken to her in another language. She shook her head, muttered something under her breath that I didn’t catch, and leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes.

“Dammit,” I said quietly. I looked ahead, then behind, back the way we’d come. “I have no idea what to do.”

“We go back,” Xavier said firmly.

“What?” I asked.

“Kendall didn’t get very far,” Xavier pointed out. “And it sure doesn’t look like she found anything useful before she got sick. So let’s get out of here before there’s another quake and this cave crashes down around us.”

“But what about the cure?” I protested.

Xavier sighed. “I don’t want to minimize your belief that the cure is down here…somewhere,” he said, “but the truth is that we don’t know if it actually is or not. That’s just a hypothesis, right?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t want to admit where I’d gotten the information about the cure being contained in these passageways.

Xavier continued, “And even if the cure *is* down here, we don’t have any idea what it is, or what we’re looking for. I think the best thing we can do at this point is to go back the way we came and get the hell out of this place.”

“What about Kendall?” I asked.

Xavier looked at her prone form. “I can throw her over my shoulder and carry her out of here.” He glanced over his shoulder at the way we’d come. “It won’t be easy, with all those boulders, but we should be able to make it back the same way.”

I bit my lip, pensive. I was thinking hard. “I think I might have a better idea.”

“What is it?” Xavier asked warily.

“I think you should take Kendall back, and I’ll stay here and keep looking. I might not know what the cure is, but I have a strange feeling that I’ll know it when I see it.”

Xavier stood, and I could see from the look in his eyes that he was never going to agree to what I’d just suggested.

I looked up at him with a sigh of resignation. “You can’t make me go back.”

The expression in his eyes darkened. “You know I can.”

I set my jaw. “I’m not going to give up just because you want me to.”

Xavier looked at me for a moment, then knelt back down so he could look into my eyes. When he spoke, his voice was softer, “Cali, listen to me. I know you think there’s something down here, and I know you want me to listen to you, but you need to listen to me, too. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Whatever it is that’s making everyone is only affecting werewolves,” I pointed out. “Which means that I’ll be—”

“That’s just what we know about it now,” Xavier countered. “That’s just short-term effects. What if that isn’t true? What if there are other symptoms that just haven’t shown themselves yet?”

“What about Greyson?” I asked.

Xavier hesitated for a moment. He glanced away, his eyes on the darkness of the cave beyond my shoulder. “My brother is strong. Whatever this is—whatever’s making him sick—he’ll be okay. He’ll pull through. He always does.”

I shook my head. “You don’t know that. Not for sure. Are you really willing to take that chance?”

My stomach was a nervous knot. It was like I could feel the tick of a clock in my head. The longer we stayed down in this cave, the closer Xavier could be getting to becoming sick, just like Greyson had, just like Kendall had.

I could feel the tension radiating from my head down to my jaw and into my shoulders. If he would just listen to me and go back to the door and leave this place completely, instead of trying to save me from this ancient magic that wasn’t even affecting me, he might have a chance to be safe.

“You need to go,” I said again.

Xavier shook his head. “If you’re staying down here, then I’m staying down here.”

I looked over at Kendall. “What about her?”

He thought for a moment. “Until we find a cure—if one actually exists—there’s nothing we can do for her. We’ll make her as comfortable as we can, leave her here, and keep looking.”

When I turned to look back at her, the light from my headlamp caught the sweat on her face. She looked pale and as weak as I’d ever seen her.

“Kendall,” I said, leaning close, “we’re going to keep going. We’re looking for something that’s going to help you—”

Moving faster than a rattlesnake, Kendall darted a hand out to grab my wrist and pull me close.

“It’s here,” she whispered. “It’s here, and it’s dangerous.”

I stared at her in shock. “Dangerous? No, Kendall, we’re looking for the cure. Something that will *help* you. We’ll be back soon, I promise.”

Kendall shook her head, like I was missing something important. “No!”

“Don’t bother trying to explain,” Xavier said. “She’s out of her mind with fever. She thought you were Greyson. She’s probably half unconscious right now.”

But Kendall struggled to get up. “It’s here! *Here!* It’s dangerous!”

She was too weak to get to her feet and didn’t put up much of a fight when Xavier helped her back down to sitting.

“I know, I know,” he said. “We’re trying to help by finding the cure. You need to rest. You’re sick, but we’re going to help. Maybe,” he added with a shrug.

Kendall looked over at me, and suddenly her startling purple eyes looked focused and clear, like she could see me perfectly well. “You will find it.”

My stomach dropped. “You mean the cure?” I asked hopefully.

She shook her head as sweat poured down her temples. “The cause.”

“The cause?” I repeated.

She nodded. “What…here…danger…” She swallowed hard as her bright eyes dulled and went distant again. “…*kill us*…”