TORN BETWEEN ALPHAS

Season 45

**Episode 5707**

**Artemis**

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

I gave Marius a sideways glance. “That’s the fifth time you asked me that,” I said quietly. I looked up at Zale, who was walking ahead of us, not privy to our conversation. “I don’t have a new answer for you, Marius.”

The fact was that I didn’t want to answer Marius, because I wasn’t sure if letting this stranger come with us was a good idea. But I was also running low on good ideas for this search, and I hadn’t been able to come up with a good enough reason for him to not come.

Zale had told us we were going the wrong way when we started out, which was either the truth or a trap. Either way, we were going to have to deal with the outcome. If there was a chance he actually knew where the Ceruvela Mountains actually were—and this area that my father might be in—then trusting him was a chance I had to take, no matter what the risks. It wasn’t like I had a lot of options here—the very weird Zale was all I had.

I still wanted to find another way to speak to my mother, though. My mom hadn’t given me much to go off of the last time. I needed to talk to her, and to tell her just how earnest this search really was. I knew it was hard for her to hear, and to talk about, and to remember. I didn’t want to hurt her or to dredge up the terrible past. But I was just trying to take ownership of my own story here, and maybe even get some real answers about what had actually happened to my family.

After all, it was the trees that had once told my mom that my Kadmos might be alive, and it was my own mother who had given me that information. That *had* to matter. It just had to. I didn’t want to live in a world where it didn’t mean anything—I’d worked too hard for it.

And no matter what, I had a right—an obligation even—to follow my father’s trail. Wherever it might go.

“You know, Adair isn’t happy about this either,” Marius said in a low voice, interrupting my thorny train of thought.

I glared at Marius. “Thanks for the update.” I shook my head. “Seriously, Marius. How blind do you think I am? Do you really think I didn’t know that? Adair is my family, I think I can tell even better than the rest of you.”

Marius shrugged. “I’m just saying what I’m seeing.”

I looked up at Adair. He was walking ahead of me, shoulder to shoulder with Tabitha. Rishika was walking next to Tabitha, and the two of them were speaking quietly. Zale was in front of all of them, leading the way.

Of course I knew that Marius was right, and that Adair wasn’t happy about any of this. That had been obvious from the start. Adair clearly didn’t trust the stranger and hadn’t wanted to let him come with us. He kept telling me how foolish this whole search was. But in my heart, I believed that—deep down—Adair wondered if his brother was alive. I was certain he was as curious as I was to find out.

We continued to walk until we reached the crest of a steep hill, and when we looked out, there was an expansive view of the valley, and a huge mountain range beyond.

I stared at them in wonder, then looked over at Zale. “Are those the Ceruvela Mountains?”

He laughed, showing a row of bright white teeth. “Come now, if they were that easy to find, you wouldn’t need me, would you?”

Adair gave Zale a dark look. “I’m not sure we need you at all,” he said in a cool tone.

I sighed. The last thing we needed was for the two of them to start fighting. Of course there was a part of me that wished we could have done this alone, without help, and we could have told Zale to take a hike back at the inn. But there was another part of me—the rational part of me—that knew it would be too risky to attempt this on our own. As capable as each of us were, we didn’t know where we were going, or what we were doing.

“I know you don’t trust me,” Zale said with an amiable shrug, “but I promise that if you’ll keep letting me guide you, you’ll know without asking me when you see the Ceruvela Mountains.”

Adair gave the stranger a skeptical look. “Fine,” he grunted. “If we’re going to go, let’s go.”

We started walking again, heading down the steep decline of the hill, and Marius fell into step next to me.

“Is your uncle always that way?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said without needing further explanation.

Rishika stepped next to me and hooked an arm through mine. “Hey, we’re going to find him, you know.”

I took a breath, reminded again why I was glad I hadn’t come alone.

Suddenly, Zale stopped short as we came to a curve in the switchback. He looked at us and put his finger to his lips.

“Everyone keep still,” he said quietly.

Adair began to speak, but Zale held up his hand to silence us, then gestured to the left.

I looked at Rishika, then at Marius. They both looked as confused as I felt.

Zale started to steer us back up the hill, the way we’d come. He kept looking over his shoulder, his gaze tense and nervous. “When I say run, you run,” he hissed at us.

“What are you—” I started.

There was a deafening roar so loud it made my ears ring, followed by the sound of trees snapping in quick succession.

“*RUN!*” Zale bellowed.

He started to break a path through the underbrush, but I grabbed him before he could go far.

“What are we running from?” I demanded.

“A troll!” Zale called out.

I looked quickly at Marius, who stared back at me with a terrified expression. We both knew in an instant how dangerous a troll could be.

“That sounds bad,” Rishika said, looking between us.

“We shouldn’t bother running,” I said, shaking my head.

“What are you talking about?” Zale exclaimed.

“If it’s after us, the only way to stop it will be to fight it,” I said, turning toward the sound.

Zale looked back in the direction of the roar. “Or be crushed by it.”

Adair glowered at the stranger, then looked at Tabitha. “Stay behind me at all times.”

The crashing of the underbrush and snapping of trees grew louder and louder as the troll drew nearer. Marius drew his sword, and I readied my magic arrows. As I loaded my bow, I tried to think about the last time I’d fought a troll, but I couldn’t remember.

Next to me, Rishika pulled off her shirt, ripped off her pants, and shifted to her wolf form.

I let my eyes take her in, marveling at how beautiful she was. So majestic and so primal, all at once.

Next to her, Adair snapped his magic whip, and it cracked through the air.

The ground shook as the troll appeared through the trees. It knocked down the tall pines with a lazy sweep of its arm before lunging forward. It stopped when it saw us and stared dumbly, licking the drool dripping onto its chin with its thick, green tongue.

We all—as one—took a step back.

“*Gross*,” Marius muttered.

When Adair looked behind him, making sure Tabitha was safe, he rolled his eyes and scoffed. “Our tour guide is quite the brave heart.”

I glanced quickly around and realized that Zale was gone. But I didn’t have time to think about it because just at that moment the troll attacked with a roar, swiping at Adair.

Adair jumped quickly to avoid the troll’s attack and sent his whip cracking at the troll, who howled and turned away.

This was his opening, and Marius took his shot. He got a running start and jumped onto the thing’s back. The troll felt blindly for him, waving its arms and trying to knock him away.

I readied an arrow to shoot when Rishika leapt onto the troll, blocking my shot. The troll howled and flailed wildly, sending both Marius and Rishika flying. They both landed hard on the rocky ground and were still.

Breathing hard, the troll turned toward me and took a step.

I pulled my bow back and shot, but I misfired when the ground beneath my feet began to shake.

“Dammit,” I hissed.

“*Ari!*” Marius bellowed, pushing himself up as the troll came nearer. “*WATCH OUT!*”

There was a sudden, high-pitched scream, and I swung around to see Zale sprinting out from behind a tree, armed only with a slingshot.

“Zale! No!” I screamed, but it was too late, and Zale fired at the troll.

**Episode 5708**

Xavier grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet, but he stood up too fast and knocked his head into the low cave ceiling.

“*Fuck*,” he swore, putting a hand to the back of his head as rocks rained down. “Okay, that’s it. We’re getting out of here.”

“What?” I gasped. “Why?”

“*Why?* Are you kidding me?” He pointed at Kendall. “You heard her. *Danger, kill us*. Seems like a pretty good reason to get the hell out, Cali.”

I shook my head. “Come on. You don’t actually believe her, though.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You just said that she was crazy with fever,” I reminded him. “What she said was probably just gibberish,” I argued.

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t,” he said grimly.

“So if she was talking crazy before, then why are you believing her now?” I asked.

“Because I—” He turned and managed to hit his head on the ceiling again. “*Fucking hell*.”

I looked at Kendall, then around, thinking hard. “Kendall got in here before us, but not that much before us. She couldn’t have been down here by herself for that long. And you and I traveled the same way she did from the door down here. Other than the gaps in the path—which weren’t that bad—we haven’t seen anything I’d describe as really dangerous.”

I bit my lip. So given that, how could Kendall know if there was anything down here that was really dangerous? She’d barely seen any of it.

“What are you thinking?” Xavier asked.

“I think she probably means whatever’s making everyone sick,” I reasoned. “And she’s wrong about that, at least. Because it can’t harm me, at least we think.”

Xavier gave me a hard look. “Right. Exactly that. We *think* it won’t. So you really want to keep going?”

“It’s not that I want to, it’s that I *have* to,” I said emphatically. “I *have* to find a cure, Xavier. Look at her,” I said, gesturing to Kendall. “It could get worse. And Greyson and Lola… Lucian and Elle… And it could spread to everyone. To all packs. The whole area. But if I can find a cure—”

“*If* there is a cure,” Xavier interjected, looking dubious.

I frowned at him. “I told you, you don’t need to come if you don’t believe me. I can do this on my own.”

Eyes flashing, Xavier stepped toward me and took me in his arms. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, Cali. I do. I trust you with all my heart. I hope you know that. It’s just that I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

That caught me completely by surprise, and I stared up at him in shock. *Fuck*. I would kiss him if I could, but all our hazmat gear made that impossible.

I scowled at him. “Dammit, Xavier. Just when I was so angry at you, you had to go and say something like that.”

He gave me a mischievous grin. “That’s my gift. Now, let’s go and find your cure so we can get the hell out of here.”

I nodded and he took my hand as we started down the path.

“Hang on,” I said, and turned back to Kendall.

She was unconscious again and shockingly feverish. Her face was pale, and her lips were dry and white as she murmured in an exhausted sleep.

I wiped the sweat away from her forehead. “We’ll be back,” I whispered to her.

Xavier took my hand again. “If we’re going to go, let’s go.”

We headed down the path, which began to grow narrower, and more difficult for Xavier to navigate. He kept bumping his head on the low ceiling, no matter how carefully he walked.

“*Dammit*,” he hissed for the fifth time.

For once I was glad to be built the way I was—there was no chance I was going to hit my head in here.

Suddenly, Xavier paused. “Did you hear that?” he asked, looking around into the darkness.

I strained to listen, but all I could hear was the sound of us—our breathing and shuffling feet—echoing off the stone walls. “No.”

“It sounds like…” He frowned, like he was trying to come up with the word. “Come on.”

We stepped through a rough doorframe and into a chamber. Something brushed my face and I took a terrified step back, screaming.

“Bats!” Xavier bellowed.

I stumbled back a step, and when I lost my footing and fell backward, my headlamp swept upward, taking in the high ceiling of the chamber, and the *hundreds* of bats hovering over us.

That would be terrifying enough, but these weren’t ordinary bats—there was something very strange about them. But before I could get a good look at them, they took off in a flurry of wings and high-pitched squeals as the light from my flashlight hit them.

“Oh god!” I screamed, curling into a ball.

I’d always thought bats were kind of cute, but they were significantly *less* cute when there were hundreds of them, and they were swarming and swooping down on me.

Xavier scooped me into his arms and pulled me to my feet, then half-dragged, half-carried me through the chamber, doing everything he could to shield me from the swarming bats.

As we moved, he looked frantically around. “How the hell do we get out of here?”

I squinted and saw an opening for the path on the opposite side of the chamber. “There!” I shouted, pointing at it.

Xavier nodded, and together we headed for it, bowing our heads and charging through the onslaught of bats. Something landed on my back, making me shriek, and Xavier reached behind me and swatted the bat off of me as we raced toward the opening.

A bat swooped close and charged, biting Xavier’s shoulder, but he hit at it, grabbing it and throwing it off just as we ducked through the opening.

Amazingly, no bats followed us through, and we collapsed against the wall of the pathway, breathing hard.

The bats continued to swoop and scratch and flutter behind us, and the sound made me shudder.

Xavier looked over at me, and when I met his eyes, something absurd about the whole situation made me smile. He must have felt the same way, because he smiled back, and before I knew it, we were laughing.

Maybe it was the adrenaline or the fear—maybe it was the bats—but I doubled over, laughing until I cried.

“Why are there bats so far underground?” I gasped, wiping my eyes. “How did they even get here?”

“I have no idea,” Xavier said, getting ahold of himself.

“How’s your bite?” I asked.

Xavier yanked the hazmat suit so he could look at his shoulder. “It’s already healing.” He shook his head. “I used to really like bats.”

“Me too. At least these are normal sized.”

That made Xavier snort with laughter, and we got started again.

“It’s always fucking something,” Xavier said, shaking his head.

As our laughter died away, I listened to the bats in the chamber behind us, glad that it sounded like they were settling back into place.

“I’m glad you came,” I said, looking over at him.

“You didn’t give me much choice,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“So, what does Ava think?” I asked.

He frowned at me, puzzled, and I wished I could take the question back. I was immediately sorry that I’d even brought up her name.

“About what?” he asked.

“About you being here,” I said.

“I didn’t tell her,” Xavier admitted. Then quickly added, “There really wasn’t time.”

I smiled. “I guess I better make sure you get back in one piece, or she’ll want to kill me all over again.”

Xavier didn’t respond to that. He stood up and held out a hand. “Let’s go find that cure.”

I could tell that was the end of the conversation, and when I got to my feet, we moved away from the bat chamber. As we continued on, the pathway continued to slope downward, so I knew we were going deeper underground. The slope grew worse and worse, and I kept stumbling. I lost my footing again and again, and I finally just slipped my arm through Xavier’s and leaned against him for support as we walked.

But the pathway underfoot was rocky, and when he slipped going around a curve, he took me down with him.

I screamed as we rolled downward, landing in a dusty, tangled heap.

“Oh god,” I groaned.

“Sorry about that,” Xavier said, carefully extracting himself from me and getting to his feet. He helped me up and we both dusted ourselves off and looked around. “At least there aren’t any bats,” he noted.

“Yeah, that’s something,” I said.

We seemed to be standing at the entrance to another chamber, even larger than the first one. And as we stepped inside, I realized that the walls were covered with drawings or etchings of some kind.

Baffled, I stepped forward for a closer look. “What *is* this place?”

**Episode 5709**

Xavier stepped behind me, his hand resting on the small of my back as he leaned forward and looked at the drawings on the rock walls.

“You know what these remind me of?” he said quietly, his eyes scanning the wall.

“What?” I asked.

He squinted. “The pictures in Lucian’s wine cellar. Have you seen those?”

“Oh, yeah, I have,” I murmured. “Yeah, now that you mention it, they do look similar, but these are different.” I looked around. “The ones in the wine cellar are just doodles, if that makes sense. These seem different. Like they’re trying to tell a story, you know?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Xavier said, though he didn’t look convinced.

I stepped back so that I could see more of the drawings, which were spaced out across the wall. There were a few, drawn large, but in separate cells, each depicting a different scene. There were a few of them, and I was trying to figure out where they began, though that was difficult to determine in the strange, circular chamber. I was stepping back for a better look when Xavier grabbed hold of my arm and jerked me forward.

“Hey! Watch out!” he growled.

I looked quickly around. “What?” I asked, startled as he pulled me into him.

“*What?*” he asked incredulously. “Cali, look around. This whole place is a fucking nightmare.”

He pointed behind me, and when I turned, I saw that my heels were on the edge of a round hole in the ground, right in the center of the room. My stomach dropped as I looked at it, realizing how close I’d been to stepping through the hole and into the darkness beyond. If it hadn’t been for Xavier grabbing hold of me, I could have easily fallen into it.

“What is that?” I asked aloud. “Why put a hole in the ground?”

“Yeah, it’s weird,” Xavier said, frowning at it.

“Do you think it’s just a natural spring or something?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. Look at it. It’s too smooth to have happened naturally. So I think the better question is *who* put a hole in the ground?”

I looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I can’t imagine that Lucian has ever been down to this place, so whatever this is, it must pre-date him, right? And the Vanguard pack,” Xavier reasoned. “So who else would have been responsible for that? And all of this?” he asked, gesturing around.

It was a good question, but thinking about it made me quiver with fear. It was scary enough to be down here, without thinking about how all of this had ended up down here. I bit my lip and took a hesitant step toward the hole, peering into it. “I wonder what’s at the bottom. And how deep it goes.”

“Let’s find out.”

Xavier picked up a loose rock and chucked it in. We listened, and after a few seconds, we heard a distant splash.

He frowned. “Maybe it’s a well?”

My eyes widened. “A well? Wait—it *is* a well!”

He frowned at me. “What?”

I hurried over to the drawing I’d just noticed. It was a group of four figures standing around a hole, just like the one in the center of the cavern. “Look at these people!”

Xavier stepped next to me. “Um, Cali, those aren’t people,” he said, shaking his head.

“What?”

“At least not *human* people. Look at their hands,” he said, pointing.

I squinted at the detail he was pointing to and gasped. He was right. They weren’t hands—they were paws, with long, sharp claws at the end. And when I looked more closely, the noses on the figures looked more like snouts than anything else.

“They’re werewolves,” I breathed. “But what are they doing at the well?”

Xavier looked closely at the drawing next to it. “It’s tough to say. It looks kind of like they’re drinking from it, which checks out.”

“Drinking?” I repeated.

He wiped his forehead. “Yeah. I mean, that’s not very informative or special. That’s what wells are for.”

I nodded, but I was only half listening. I’d already shifted my attention to a drawing farther down. This one was a depiction of two half-shifted werewolves, each with a symbol or marking of some kind on their dark fur. There was another werewolf who was holding onto a fourth wolf. The fourth wolf had a gray stripe down its back and was on its knees and kind of slumped over, though it had its mouth open.

One of the first two wolves was holding a goblet and was pouring some liquid into the fourth wolf’s open mouth.

I looked back at Xavier. “What do you think this means?”

Xavier leaned forward and looked at it, then shrugged with a chuckle. “Hell if I know. Maybe that guy’s thirsty? Early werewolf keg stand?”

I glared at him. “This is not a time to joke. I’m serious, Xavier. This has to mean something, right? Why would it be here otherwise? Why would anyone bother drawing it on a wall if it’s so obvious what a well is for, like you said?”

I looked back at the first drawing—the wolves at the well—trying to figure out what it all meant, and how these two drawings fit together. Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. “Wait—what if these aren’t in the order we think they are?”

“What?” Xavier asked.

I swung around, sweeping the headlamp on my suit along the rock walls until I found the drawing showing the werewolves all standing around the well.

“Okay,” I said, speaking to myself. “That’s two.”

I looked around again and found another one. All four werewolves were present, but one was lying prone on the ground. The one on the ground was the same one who had been on its knees in the other drawing. It had the same grey stripe down its back.

“That’s three,” I murmured.

I looked quickly between the three, trying to suss out their meaning, and as I shifted between them, an idea took hold.

“Wait…I think I know what’s happening,” I said, my heart thudding. “I think these pictures are showing these wolves giving that fourth werewolf the cure!”

Xavier wasn’t looking at the pictures. He wrinkled his nose and scowled. “This place reeks.”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring his complaint. Though he was right, the place did smell. It was the same smell I’d caught earlier—the foul rotten egg smell. I thought it smelled bad, and because Xavier was a werewolf and his senses were so much more sensitive, it was probably worse for him. But that seemed pretty irrelevant, given what I’d just realized.

“Come on,” I implored, grabbing hold of his arm and towing him toward the picture. “Look!” I said, pulling Xavier to another drawing on the far side of the chamber. “Here’s a fourth picture!”

This one depicted all four of the wolves running. “Look! Do you see how they’re fine here, but then one of them gets sick,” I said, pulling him to the other picture. “Then look at this one, they’re giving him water from this well, and then…”

I pulled him around to the first one we’d looked at, the one with all four wolves standing, and I watched as Xavier’s eyes went wide.

“Oh shit,” he said quietly. “They’re all okay. They cured him.” He turned to look at me in wonder. “Cali!”

I beamed with pride.

“I can’t believe you figured that out!” he went on.

“Thank you very much,” I said with a bashful nod.

Xavier’s eyes darkened. “But that means…” We both turned to look at the well behind us as the meaning of what we were looking at hit us.

“Could that be the cure?” I gasped, feeling somewhat hopeful for the first time.

Xavier and I hesitated for a moment, then stepped toward the edge. We peered down into the darkness. When I looked over at Xavier, my headlamp caught the sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” he said, wiping his head.

“But how?” I wondered. “How are we going to get to it?”

I looked around, wondering if there could be a bucket and a rope around here somewhere. Something that might let us access the water deep in the well. As I started to walk around, investigating the dark corners of the chamber, the ground began to shake again, and the stone walls rumbled ominously.

I grasped onto a wall and held tightly until the shaking subsided, but when it did, I heard something else that made my blood run cold—Xavier gasping.

Whipping around, I saw him swaying on his feet. I stared at him, baffled. That made no sense. The ground had stopped shaking, so why was he having trouble with his balance?

“Xavier?” I called out.

He looked up at me, and in the light from my headlamp, I could see that he’d gone pale as a sheet.

“*Cali*…” He gasped, then he fell to his knees and pitched forward—right into the well.

**Episode 5710**

**Greyson**

Big Mac had told me that it was possible that I might not wake up. It had been a dire warning, but I was choosing to ignore it. It wasn’t even something I’d had to give a lot of thought to—I just knew I could worry about that when and if her temporary spell wore off.

“Greyson, please, you need to rest,” my mom said, grabbing for my hands.

I let her take them and gave her hands a reassuring squeeze. “I’m fine,” I told her.

She didn’t look convinced. I hated to make her worry, but I wasn’t about to just sit here and wait around while I had my strength back. Well, most of my strength back, anyway.

“Cali went to the Vanguard palace with Kendall, and if Xavier is with them, they could all be in danger,” I pointed out.

Big Mac scowled at me. “You realize that key and the ancient magic in that place is the reason I had to conjure up that potion. Which wasn’t easy, for the record.”

“You’ll expose yourself to whatever it is all over again,” my mother pleaded with me.

I took her hand again. “I promise that I’ll be careful, “I told her. “But you know I can’t leave my brother and my mates—” I stopped myself. I’d spoken thinking of Cali and Kendall, but I shook my head. “My brother and my *mate*.”

My mother gave me a quizzical look.

I turned to Big Mac. “Is it possible that the spell you just used on me will keep me immune from whatever’s getting people sick?”

“How the hell should I know?” Big Mac asked irritably. “You’re lucky I found this spell at all. Do you have any idea what I had to do to get it to work? There was a lot involved, which you seem to be just throwing away as you rush off to—”

She only stopped her tirade when my mom put a hand on her arm.

I looked at my mother’s pleading eyes. I knew this was hurting her, but what could I do? I reached for her and hugged her tightly. “I’ll be okay,” I promised. Then I headed out of the room and down the stairs.

Ravi followed me. “Hey, man, do you want me to go with you?”

I turned when I reached the bottom of the stairs. “Why?”

“Oh—um—in case you get sick again,” Ravi stammered, looking uncomfortable.

I clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, man, but if I get sick, I need you here, safe from whatever ancient magic is out there. I need you to keep an eye on the pack, okay? You’re in charge while I’m gone.”

Ravi looked a little shocked, but he nodded. “Okay. I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t,” I said, then headed out the door.

As I stepped outside and closed the door behind me, I thought about Ravi, and what it meant to leave him in charge. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust him. I did. Ravi was a good guy, but I would just feel a hell of a lot better if Rishika was back.

I would have asked Jay to help out, but I knew he was looking after Lola, who I assumed would get the potion from Big Mac next.

I thought of how long Rishika had been gone. I knew Cali would feel better when Artemis was back too. But there was nothing to be done about that. They were in the Fae world, and I sure as hell wasn’t going after them. I had my own shit to deal with here.

Stripping down, I pushed my clothes into the bag I’d grabbed on my way out the door, slung it over my shoulder, and shifted as I leapt off the porch.

As I ran toward the woods, I glanced back over my shoulder at the pack house. There, in an upstairs window, was my mother, watching me. She raised her hand in farewell as I headed into the woods.

I knew I couldn’t screw this up. That woman had suffered enough with Silas robbing us of each other for so long. I knew I had to come back to her. And I would. With Cali.

Dropping my head down, I ran at full speed through the woods, racing against the clock. But it was a strange feeling—it felt like a clock without any hands. How long did I really have before Big Mac’s cure wore off, and I grew sick all over again?

What if I didn’t even make it to Vanguard territory?

Given how freaked out I should be, I was surprised at how good I felt, compared to how shitty I’d felt when I’d been lying in my bed, racked with pain and fever.

I considered this as I ran, wondering if that sickness would have just continued to make me weaker and weaker until I had no more strength left to fight it at all?

That was a grim thought, and I knew I shouldn’t spend any more time thinking about it.

I slowed my pace as I began to pick up Cali’s scent. And Kendall’s. And even Xavier’s.

I took some comfort in knowing that Xavier had fulfilled my fevered demand to keep his eye on Cali. Not that Xavier would have needed a lot of encouragement.

I wondered if Xavier was okay. What if he had succumbed to the illness emanating from the Vanguard palace too?

Dammit. I wished none of them had gone at all. As I drew closer to the Vanguard palace, my thoughts went back to the steamy, feverish dream I’d had about Kendall. No wonder I’d also had a fever dream about the three witches. Whatever else happened, I needed to break that damn mate bond.

When I got to the massive front doors, I shifted back to my human form and got dressed again. I had just pulled on my shirt when the door cracked open and Armin peered out, dressed in what looked like a hazmat suit.

“What the hell is Lucian up to now?” I growled, frowning at him.

“About one hundred and seven degrees and rising,” Armin said tersely.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry to hear that, but I need to see Cali.”

Armin shook his head. “We aren’t allowing any more visitors in.”

He started to close the door, but I slammed it back open, kicking it wide. “You’re going to make an exception,” I told him.

Armin looked at me for a moment, then nodded.

Less than a minute later, I was in a decontamination chamber.

“Fucking Lucian,” I muttered as I was blasted with a jet of water, then hot air.

I’d tried to argue to Armin that whatever it was that was making people sick wasn’t the flu and couldn’t be transmitted by coughing, but Armin had only informed me that he had his orders.

When I was finally dressed in the hazmat suit, Colton walked over toward me, dressed in the same suit. Even with the mask on, I could see that he was laughing.

“You look…really stupid,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “You look…like Colton,” I told him.

“Did you find your family’s precious fountain pen?” Armin asked Colton irritably.

I gave Colton a look, but he didn’t return it.

Colton slapped Armin on the shoulder. “Still looking, but I’m sure it’s around here somewhere.”

Armin huffed and strode quickly away, leaving us alone.

I turned to look at Colton—about to ask him about the pen—but before I could say anything, Colton turned to me.

“Armin doesn’t look well,” he said, frowning.

I ignored that. Armin wasn’t my problem. “Where’s Cali?”

“Basement.”

“Shit. Let’s go.”

I led the way into the basement and hurried toward the locked door, which we found swinging open. We stepped through and started down the pathway, which descended sharply.

“Uh, what the fuck is this place?” Colton asked, looking around. “It stinks in here.”

“Honestly, I’m not really sure,” I admitted.

Colton was right. It did smell bad. I could barely make out Cali, Kendall, and Xavier’s scents over the foul smell wafting through the tunnel. But they were there, and I quickened my pace as the path sloped downward. There was something pulling me forward—an urgency I could just feel in my gut.

We passed by glowing rocks, and I just managed to catch sight of the slight gap in the pathway before I tripped. Jumping it was no problem, but it was a warning that the path wasn’t all it seemed.

“Hey, man, slow down!” Colton called from behind me.

But I didn’t slow down. Not until I saw the figure on the pathway in front of me.

“Kendall!” I breathed. I hurried toward her.

She looked pale, and her eyes were closed.

“Kendall,” I said again, shaking her shoulder, trying to wake her up. But she didn’t respond.

My wolf howled within me, horrified at the sight of her—sick and unconscious.

“Shit,” I muttered. I pulled off the hood of the suit and ripped off the mask. I put my cheek against her mouth so I could feel if she was breathing.

“Greyson…”

My eyes widened when she breathed my name.

“Kendall?” I said quietly.

I looked at her as her eyes fluttered.

Then, without opening her eyes, she wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me.

**Episode 5711**

**Artemis**

The rock in Zale’s slingshot zinged through the air, leaving a streak of sparkling colors in its wake. It had enough momentum to smack the troll so hard in the forehead that it stunned the huge creature, and it stumbled back, disoriented and growling with anger.

Adair took advantage and immediately used his whip to wrap it around the troll’s legs. With his teeth bared and with a loud war cry, Adair yanked the whip, and the troll toppled backward, smashing its huge head on the mountainside on the way down.

It landed in a huge heap on the ground, and we all watched it, stunned for a few beats before Rishika whispered, “Is it dead?”

We all got closer to see if we were lucky enough to have beaten it, or if it might be playing possum.

I stooped down and checked its head where I could already see a huge lump forming from where it hit the mountain. It was breathing faintly, and its eyes were partially open and rolled to the whites. I wasn’t a troll expert, but he looked like he was down for the count.

“He’s not dead, but it’s probably safe to say he won’t be bothering us anymore,” I said. I let out a deep breath and looked around at Marius, Rishika, and the others. “Is everybody good?”

“We’re better than the troll, that’s for sure,” Marius said as he leaned forward to take a closer look at the troll’s prone form.

Zale approached the troll, shaking his head as he put his slingshot away. “Nasty, nasty things. Some are so cordial, and others—well, others are just downright assholes. This one, as we all saw, was of the asshole variety.”

“Sounds like some Fae I know,” I grumbled.

To my surprise, Zale laughed.

“Wait, aren’t you going to kill that thing? Or at least make sure it’s dead?” Rishika asked. “I mean, it did try to kill us. What if it’s just pretending to be zonked and gets up and starts swinging?”

Zale gave Rishika his full attention. “I understand you’re not from around here, but killing a troll when you don’t have to is a big mistake. This is just one troll, but he’s likely a member of a huge family of trolls who will stop at nothing to get revenge if we kill him. Do you want ten, twenty, hell, a hundred of these things coming after you?”

“Hell no,” Marius said, shaking his head. He was looking around like he expected more trolls to show up at any second.

“If we perform troll overkill, I can guarantee none of us will make it to the mountains. That’s a guarantee,” Zale said. “It’s best to let sleeping—or unconscious in this case—trolls lie.”

Rishika had looked skeptical when Zale started talking but now had a sober look on her face, like she was imagining a small army of huge trolls chasing us through the woods.

Zale’s attention was back on the troll. He stooped down beside it and pulled something out of his satchel.

“What are you doing?” Marius asked. “I don’t think you should be…messing with that thing.”

Zale didn’t answer at first, and we all watched as he tied the troll’s feet together.

“If this thing wakes up while we’re still within smelling distance, this will slow down his pursuit,” he grunted as he started tying a complicated-looking knot. “His confusion will buy us the time we need, and once he gets himself out of this rope, hopefully he won’t even find us worth snacking on anymore.”

Rishika gulped. “Wait a minute…snacking on? That’s what he wanted? To eat us?”

“Um…yes. Trolls love Fae, and you would have been a particularly interesting delicacy, you being a werewolf and all,” Zale explained.

“I don’t know. That makes me want to kill it more and just take our chances against his family *maybe* coming to find us,” Rishika said.

I mulled over Zale’s warning. I totally understood why Rishika wanted to kill it, but Zale had a point.

“I don’t want to tangle with a vengeful troll family,” I said. “So maybe we should follow Zale’s lead on this. Though I’m not sure about the whole tying the troll’s legs together thing. By the time he wakes up, we should be long gone.”

“We may be, but our trail won’t be. Trust me. This is very necessary,” Zale said.

“Fair enough. I have to give you credit for your initiative.”

“And not for knocking the troll in the head with a stone before it devoured you?” Zale said.

“I give you some of the credit for that, personally, and the rest to Adair for felling him,” Marius said before pulling me, Rishika, and Adair aside. “If you’ll excuse us for a moment, Zale, we need to have a little original crew discussion.”

Once Tabitha had joined us, Marius lowered his voice and asked, “What do we think of this guy?”

Adair shot Marius a warning look. “Marius…”

“I’m just saying what we’re all thinking. He seems a little too good to be true, a little kooky…”

“And he did save our asses,” Rishika interrupted him.

“Only time will tell,” Adair said. “He proved himself, that’s for sure. He seems to be looking out for the group, and he doesn’t have to.”

“I have to agree. I mean, I’m still of the mind that one less troll in the world is a good thing, but I have to give the guy credit for having a knowledge base I didn’t even know I lacked. If we’d been alone, we may have killed the troll and pissed off a whole family of them,” Rishika said.

“Okay, okay, I sort of trust him, I guess, and the fact that he has a vote of confidence from Rishika and Adair is promising… Ari, what do you think?” Marius asked.

I gulped and glanced at Zale who was still working on his strange knot. “I agree with Adair, I guess. Time will tell. But…I do think he’s the best shot we have. If this troll is any indication, things are only going to get more dangerous from here on out. It’s nice to have someone around who knows the terrain, the flora, the fauna.”

Marius nodded. “I agree with that, I guess.”

“But I’m not going to force anyone to trust him, either,” I said. “Either we all agree to continue on with him, or we don’t.”

Marius looked thoughtful for a few beats before he nodded. “If everyone else thinks it’s fine, I vote that we continue along with Zale. For now.”

When we returned to Zale, he was putting the final touches on the knot. “If I had to guess, that little powwow you had over there is because you still don’t trust me.”

I shrugged. “We don’t, no, but you are making a good impression.”

Zale studied me closely as he stood up straight, finally finished with his complicated knotting job, from the looks of it. “You’re smart not to trust anyone at face value. I mean, how can you ever really know someone, right?”

*Now that’s an odd thing to say. Doesn’t inspire trust at all.*

Zale glanced up at the sky, and then at the troll. “Now, we’d better keep moving. If this troll does have a family, they might start to wonder where he is.”

Zale led the way over the ridge toward a thick wooded area. Out of instinct, fear, habit, or maybe all three at once, I kept looking over my shoulder as if expecting the troll to rise, despite its tied feet, and pursue us.

*But I saw it hit its head on the mountain. That would take anyone down, troll or bigger.*

We came to a path that forked in two different directions, and Zale paused at the juncture to explain our options.

“The path to the right is shorter, but it will take us through dangerous territory. We could face not only trolls, but thunderbirds as well. And I’ve heard word of skirmishes happening there between Light and Dark Fae. It would be best to avoid all that.”

“And the other way?” I said wearily.

“The left path is considerably longer, and while it’s not entirely safe, it is by far the safer option,” Zale explained.

The choices frustrated me, and I didn’t bother hiding it. It seemed like every step I’d taken on this journey to find Kadmos was complicated and rife with danger. I didn’t want to waste any extra time, but I was smart enough to know that avoiding unnecessary danger was always the best move.

“So, unless anyone objects, I suggest we go to the left,” Zale said.

Everyone looked at me.

“I agree,” I said after a long pause.

We started to follow Zale, and I was making peace with the extra time this decision would add to our journey when a voice boomed from everywhere and nowhere all at once, “I wouldn’t go that way if I were you!”

**Episode 5712**

**Greyson**

I was surprised as Kendall tightened her hold on me, her voice silky smooth as she whispered against my lips, “Greyson. Kiss me, Greyson.” She dragged her lips against mine, then swirled her fingers through my hair and pulled me against her so that her lips pressed against mine, hard and soft at the same time.

My wolf was going wild, stirring, yearning for me to shift. I wanted to shove her off of me, but a mix of hesitancy to be rough with her while she was in this state and the confusion about my own feelings about what was happening to me stopped me from being as firm as I could have been.

*You have to stop this. It isn’t right for a million reasons. Stop this, now!*

I yanked her arms free of my neck. “Kendall, you don’t know what you’re doing. You’ve been infected with Dark Fever magic, and you’re not thinking straight. You have to stop doing this…”

Kendall was looking at me, but her eyes were hazy as if she didn’t understand a word I’d said. She moaned, grabbed me by the hair and kissed me again. Her strong hands latched onto my shirt, and she tried to pull me on top of her.

I was resisting her the best I could, but it wasn’t like when Cali tried to push, pull, or shove me and I could resist it easily—Kendall was a wolf. I was an Alpha, but her strength was nothing to take lightly.

“You’re my mate, Greyson. What is there to understand? I want you, you want me. We belong together, so we should stop pretending. Stop behaving as if there isn’t something strong and real between us.”

“Kendall, no. When you’re better, when the sickness passes, you’ll realize that none of these feelings you think you have are real.”

I was still trying to extricate myself from her as gently as I could as Colton came running up.

“Whoa, what the hell is going on here?” he demanded. “I didn’t know you…liked to get a little side action on Cali.”

“Colton, stop. That’s not what this is.”

I pushed Kendall off me again and connected eyes with my shocked brother. He had the smallest smirk on his lips, like he’d caught me in something.

“It’s not what you think, Colton, so don’t start. This isn’t fucking ‘side action.’”

“What exactly do you think I think?” Colton said. “Because what I think is that you were kissing her while she was whispering sweet nothings about you being her mate. Is that not what’s happening here?”

I cursed under my breath. “Yes, but it’s still not what you think…” I cursed again, unwilling to get into the complicated relationship that Kendall and I had. Not with Colton. Not while we still had to find Cali and Xavier.

“I don’t know if you noticed, but Kendall is out of her mind right now. She doesn’t know what she’s saying. Besides, you know that Cali’s my mate and that I would never willingly betray her.”

“Uh-huh, but do *you* know that? Because you don’t look like you’re too upset about what’s happening here. In fact, you two kind of look good together—”

“Colton, *please* fucking shut up. I’m not enjoying this. I’m only trying to be gentle with her because she’s out of sorts. Do you want me to slap her or something because she’s out of it and doesn’t know what she’s doing?”

“No…but do you really expect me to buy that you’re hating this? You look happy, Greyson, I’m just saying. I know that look in your eye—”

“Respectfully, Colton? Shove it. I don’t look fucking happy right now, I look like I’m not on my deathbed, which, I can assure you, is quite different. You should believe me because I have no reason to lie. Kendall has a fever just like I did. She’s delirious, that’s all. I’m not trying to make out with her in some dank cave below Lucian’s palace. She’s sick, that’s *it*.”

As if he needed proof, Colton put a hand on Kendall’s forehead. “Okay, I’ll give you the fever part. She’s burning up. Though that could be from the passionate kiss you two just shared.”

I gave him a look that luckily shut him up, though I knew it wouldn’t last long.

I glanced up at the path ahead. “We need to find Cali and Xavier and get the hell out of here.”

Kendall stirred again and mumbled something I couldn’t understand.

“What did she say?” Colton said.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m sure it’s just the fever.”

*I need to put as much distance between me and Kendall as I can while Colton is sitting here judging and forming his wrong opinions of what’s going on here. And if she starts shouting out that we’re mates again it will only make things worse.*

“I need you to stay here with Kendall. She shouldn’t be left alone, and I need to find Cali.”

“And Xavier,” Colton deadpanned. “Don’t forget Xavier. I know when Cali’s involved, nothing else seems to matter.”

“Stop, Colton. Of course I want to find Xavier, too. He’s my brother for shit’s sake.”

“Uh-huh. Anyway, yes, I can stay here with your other *mate*.”

“Stop saying that.”

“What? That’s what she is, right?”

Colton was being way more annoying than Xavier right now.

“Listen, I don’t have time to get into the…all the ways that that’s not the whole story. Stay here with her, but remember that the longer you stay here, the more likely that you’ll get infected.”

Colton frowned. “And Maya’s going to be pissed if that happens.”

I jumped in surprise when I felt Kendall’s arms around me yet again. She pulled me toward her, trying with all her might to kiss me again.

Colton chucked. “Man, she’s got it bad. She wants a piece of Greyson, and she’ll do anything to get it apparently.”

I glared at him. “Fuck. Off.” I peeled Kendall’s arms from around my neck and started to get up when Kendall grabbed me once again.

“Kendall, you’re sick, and you’re not in your right mind, okay? My brother is going to stay here with you while I go find the others. They may be in trouble—”

She wasn’t listening, and her grip on my arm tightened, her strange purple eyes suddenly sharp and locked on me. “Don’t go in there, Greyson. Please. You don’t know what’s in there. It’s not safe!”

“Kendall, I’ll be okay. You have to trust that.”

I gestured at Colton to take over and he nodded and came near, but not within arm’s reach.

“For all I know, she’s open to kissing any Evers brother she can get her hands on, and I don’t want Maya to kill us both,” he said. “She’d kill you, too, Greyson, just to even things out.”

“Not safe!” Kendall moaned loudly. “Don’t go! Don’t go!”

Colton kneeled down beside her, his nurturing side taking over as he stroked her forehead and gently unfolded her fingers from around my arm.

“Take it easy, Kendall, okay? Let’s just take a breath here,” he said in a soothing voice that seemed to calm her just a little.

“Thanks,” I said to Colton. “I’m going.”

“Make smart choices,” Colton called after me.

As I started moving, I heard Colton telling Kendall about Maya and the twins.

“Thanks for not trying to kiss me like you did my brother. My mate and fiancée, the mother of my beautiful twins, would kill you…”

As I moved deeper into the caves, I touched my lips and thought about the kiss. Kendall had been adamant about rejecting me as her mate…as if it were that simple. But just now, that had been the furthest thing from her mind. She wanted to kiss me, touch me, rambling on and on about us being mates even though a few days ago she hadn’t even wanted to talk about it.

*Does she or doesn’t she want to be my mate?*

I quickly pushed the thought away. She was delirious. There was no point in pretending like anything she’d said meant something when she obviously wasn’t herself right now. I thought back to some of the crazy hallucinations I’d suffered while out of my mind with the Dark Fever.

*That’s all it was. Hallucinations and delirium. It would be unfair of me to put any stock in the things she’s saying and doing when I know why it’s happening.*

I continued down the path, still having trouble parsing out Xavier and Cali’s scents over the thick, sulfurous odor in the air—which seemed to only worsen the farther into the caves I went. Soon, I worried that I wouldn’t be able to catch their scents at all.

*Greyson, please. It’s not safe.*

It was Kendall’s mind link.

*Please. Don’t go. Come back to me. I don’t know what I’d do—*

*I have no choice, Kendall*, I responded. *My brother and my mate are lost here somewhere, and they need me. I can’t just abandon them.*

I didn’t care how dangerous Kendall thought it was, or even how dangerous she knew it was. I was going to find my mate, and nothing in this world was going to stop me.

**Episode 5713**

I screamed as Xavier disappeared into the well. One minute he was there, and the next his feet were in the air and he was gone. I couldn’t believe it.

I shrieked as I rushed over and threw the top half of my body over the edge of it, and in the process nearly slipped and went tumbling in after him.

As I steadied myself, gripping the rough yet slippery edge of the ancient well, I heard a distant splash followed by a groan. I peered over the edge, searching in the darkness for any sign of Xavier.

“Xavier, are you okay? Please tell me you’re okay!”

My voice echoed back to me, and I was trying my hardest not to freak out. He wasn’t answering, which meant there was a good chance that he wasn’t okay. I wanted to think that the splash meant he’d slipped into the water—and that had broken his fall—but I wasn’t confident about that. There were way too many ways for him to have hurt himself on the way down.

*Xavier, just tell me that you’re okay, that you can hear me*, I said through mind link, but he didn’t reply.

Fearing the worst, I clicked on my cell phone’s flashlight, but it was too weak to penetrate far enough for me to see the bottom. I tried not to think about the rock that Xavier had tossed down the well…nor how long it had taken for us to hear the splash. If he’d reached the bottom and not caught himself on something on the way down—which seemed like a longshot—he’d fallen a long way.

*Xavier’s an Alpha, and he’s tough. Even if he did hit the ground way down there, even if he tore or broke something, he’ll heal. He’s survived landslides and a vampire-witch and dating Ava…he’ll be okay.*

I smiled a little at the thought, hoping that a touch of humor would help me keep it together.

But Xavier was also sick, which meant that he didn’t have the strength and vitality that he usually did. I couldn’t forget the look on his face as he’d fallen to his knees in anguish when the fever had taken hold. He wasn’t himself, and that meant I was going to have to help him.

I hated that I’d been right all along. Xavier never should have come here. I’d known deep in my gut that something like this was going to happen, and it had. I’d never in a million years predicted that he would fall down a well, but I wasn’t surprised in the least that something so strange and out of left field had happened. That was our lives in a nutshell—strange and out of left field.

Guilt hit me like a wave. I should never have allowed him to come here. I should have tried harder to keep him out. I should have demanded it. Why did my mates always have to be so brave? Why didn’t they ever heed my warnings?

I knew why.

It was the same reason why I never listened to them when they warned me off from doing some dangerous thing—especially when I was trying to do it to protect them or someone I cared about.

*We always risk everything when it comes to saving our mates.*

I put my phone down. It was useless right now anyway. I was racking my brain for solutions when I realized that magic might be the answer. I stepped back and concentrated on reaching it deep down within myself. It had been a while since I’d used it, so I was a little rusty for sure.

I glanced down at the well. My shield would be too cumbersome, and it could knock rocks down on him, and that was the last thing I needed. I was going to use my sword instead and hope it was enough.

I conjured the sword and lowered it into the well.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, but before long I saw that the well was deep and seemed to tunnel down for what looked like infinity. But way down at the bottom, a sparkle of light reflected back up at me—my sword’s reflection.

*That must be the water!*

And just to the right of that sliver of light was Xavier. His legs were in the water, but he’d pulled himself or landed half out of it and was sitting on a cluster of rocks just outside the watery pool. I couldn’t see if he was moving or not, but at least now I knew where he was.

I shook the sword away and shouted Xavier’s name, hoping that he could hear me, even if he couldn’t answer and was unconscious.

“Xavier, I’m coming to get you, okay?”

But how? I leaned back on my heels and took another look around the chamber. I scanned the drawings on the walls to see if there was some kind of clue. But nothing there shed any light. All I could think was that they must have had a rope and a bucket, otherwise the well wouldn’t have served much of a purpose.

I looked around, losing hope until I spotted a little alcove near the mouth of the tunnel. It was nothing more than an opening in the wall, and when I peered inside, I couldn’t see anything.

I took out my phone again and shined the flashlight in, hoping that I would have better luck this time. I spotted something lying coiled way in the back.

*Is that a rope?*

I hated the idea of sticking my hand inside, but if it was a way to get to Xavier, I had to grin and bear it.

As I squeezed my arm into the narrow fissure, I suddenly recoiled in fear. I could be reaching for a rope…or I could be reaching for a snake.

*There’s only one way to know for sure. I have to do this.*

I extended my fingers, scraping my shoulder against the wall as I reached. My fingers brushed against something, and I trembled and almost pulled my arm back out, thinking it felt suspiciously like snakeskin. I gritted my teeth and kept my shit together and slowly wrapped my fingers around whatever it was.

I panted out a breath and pulled it out and saw…a rope. *Thank god.*

I sighed and wiped the sweat from my brow, relieved that I wasn’t holding a python or rattlesnake or something. Who knew what I could have encountered in these horrible caves?

I winced at the pain in my shoulder from where it scraped against the wall, hoping that in the end it would be a small price to pay for saving Xavier.

My hope faltered as I started to examine the rope. It felt and looked as old as the caves themselves. I tugged at it, testing its strength. It was beyond frayed and worn, but it was stiff, and it was all I had.

I returned to the well and began searching for something to secure the not very secure rope to. I stubbed my toe on something as I rounded the well and looked down to see a rusted metal hook jutting out from the floor of the cave.

It looked just as dubious as the rope. A match made in hell, to be sure. I bent down and tied one end of the rope around the hook, some of the rope crumbling away as I did. I tried to ignore the feeling that this wasn’t going to work and tested the knot a couple of times. It held.

I stood up and shouted down into the well, “I’m dropping a rope, and I’m going to climb down and get you, okay? Hang in there, Xavier. This will all be over soon.”

Once again, my voice echoed back to me as I took hold of the rope and carefully stepped over the edge. Carefully, I began lowering myself down, one fraught step at a time. My stomach was quivering in fear, and since it was so dark I closed my eyes—and pictured the rope snapping and me falling to my death.

The brittle rope cut into my hands as I continued down, and I took one last glimpse at the cave drawings on the ceiling before I was too far down into the well to make them out anymore, lowering myself blindly into the darkness.

I continued down, gaining confidence before I heard, and felt, a rumbling. The entire well quivered and shook around me, and I lost my footing and slammed against the side of the well. Knowing that if I let go, all would be lost, I kept my hold on the rope even as my hands and arms burned.

When the rumbling finally stopped, I secured my feet against the side again and started down, trying not to let my fear get the best of me.

I glanced down below me, and I knew there was still a long way to go. But if I kept moving and didn’t let fear slow me down, I would make it eventually.

In the next second, I heard a loud snap as the rope broke, and I plunged down into the darkness.

**Episode 5714**

**Xavier**

I thought I’d heard Cali’s voice, but it could easily all be in my head. When I fell, I banged my head on the stone walls a few times on the way down and landed in ice cold water…but somehow, I survived. But why was Cali calling for me? Was it a dream? Could the sweet sound of her voice be real?

My eyes fluttered open, and I saw something coming toward me. I raised my arms to shield myself, and only at the last second did I realize that it was Cali.

I braced myself as she careened off a wall and slammed on top of me, sending us both sliding into the water. The shock of the cold made me gasp, and she shrieked on impact and sputtered as she thrashed around in the water, trying to regain her bearings.

“Cali, is that really you? Are you really here?” I said, my voice echoing strangely in the well.

I remembered Greyson’s delirium, his inability to determine what was real and what was in his head. But right now, there was no denying this. Cali was in my arms. I knew it, and my wolf knew it. Falling down a well was pretty bad luck, but having Cali here with me showed that my luck was finally starting to turn around.

Cali huffed and swiped the water out of her eyes as she took me in. “Are you okay, Xavier? I was so worried!”

I grinned despite the pain and in spite of waves of disorientation that caused my awareness to flicker, dimming and brightening like a light with a short in it. Cali’s image swam for a moment before melding back together, reminding me that this wasn’t a hallucination.

“I am now,” I said.

“Are you sure?” she said. “Let me look you over, just to be certain that you’re not hurt.”

She started to pull away, but I held her tighter and kept her pressed against my chest. “No. Please don’t go.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Xavier. I just want to examine you.”

“No,” I said. “Just stay right where you are.”

Cali felt so good, so right, in my arms that I couldn’t possibly be injured. I didn’t feel any pain. All I felt was happiness and relief that I was able to hold Cali at a time like this.

Cali stopped struggling, and I clung to her, drawing in her scent, luxuriating in her warmth. The weight of her body and the warmth of her invigorated me, made me see things clearly again.

“Just tell me you’re okay. You fell, too. Are *you* okay?” I said.

I could see Cali’s smile clearly in the darkness, so at least my wolf senses were working properly.

“I’m okay,” she said. “I mean, I banged myself up a bit on the way down, but I’m okay. I didn’t fall far.”

Hearing that gave me overwhelming relief, but my hold on Cali began to slacken, and darkness was eating at the edge of my vision.

*Oh fuck. I’m about to fall unconscious again. I feel it coming.*

Cali’s voice drifted in. It was distant at first, but gradually, it became clearer.

“Stay awake, Xavier. Don’t you pass out on me. Fight back. I need you to stay awake so that I can help get you out of here. Do you hear me?”

Her hands were on me, and it felt so good, so comforting, as she ran them over my body and face to check for injuries. Cali had always been so nurturing, so sure of her ability to help whenever she could, and right now I was thankful for her and her concern.

“We don’t have to leave,” I said. “I would rather stay here with you. Where it’s warm and bright and nothing and no one can hurt us. Don’t you think it’s wonderful down here? Have you ever seen a place as beautiful and serene as this?”

“Xavier, no. You don’t know what you’re talking about. This place sucks, okay? That’s the fever talking.”

Cali smoothed my hair out of my face and leaned close to look into my eyes, as if trying to gauge the severity of my symptoms. “Your eyes are hazy and unfocused. If you could see yourself right now, you’d know that something isn’t right.”

“I’m serious. We could easily make a life here. Can’t you see it? A couch over there? A bed over there?”

As I pointed, I saw the furniture popping into the bright corners of the room. My little love shack with Cali. A place where no one could find us. Not Greyson, not Ava, no one. We could just be together and finally start our lives.

“Xavier, listen to me. You’re infected with the Dark Fever. That’s why you’re talking that way. You’re not in your right mind.”

“Aren’t I? Being sick doesn’t change the way I feel about you. Not by a long shot.”

Cali caressed my forehead and kissed me on the cheek. She took my hand, and I brought it to my lips and kissed her palm. “I’ve missed you so much. Holding you, kissing you, talking to you into the late hours of the night.”

Cali arched an eyebrow at me and then scrambled upright. “Stay right there, Xavier. I’m going to conjure my sword so I can find a way out of here, okay?”

The sword popped to life, and the light of it was so bright at first that I squinted against it.

Cali gasped as she looked up, and her glowing sword revealed a frayed piece of rope dangling way above us.

“The only way we can get out of here is to climb. Are you well enough to try, Xavier? Do you think you can do it?”

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be okay.” I motioned to the bed in the corner. It was covered in crisp clean sheets and a girlie bedspread that Cali must have picked out. “I like the comforter. It’s very you. Flowers and pink and so many bright colors.”

“Xavier—”

“Yes, I think I’m going to stay here and have a nap in that soft bed. You climb out, okay? I’ll be fine right here.”

Cali glared at me. “Xavier, no. I’m not leaving without you. Think hard and look around. We’re at the bottom of a well. There is no bed. No furniture. This is an awful place, and I’m taking you with me because I can’t leave you here. I won’t.”

I smiled. “Oh, I know that look. There’s no chance I’ll be able to change your mind. No use arguing! But I’m too weak to climb a rope. And even if I can build up the strength to do it, what if the effects of the Dark Fever hit me again halfway up and I fall, dragging you down with me?”

“I won’t let that happen.”

I was lucid enough to know that she was making a promise about something she really had no control over. Cali stood up on the stone lip that surrounded the well water and immediately slipped and slid into the water up to her knees.

She coughed and sputtered and clung to the stone protrusions, pulling herself up and out of the water. I tried to help her up, but she suddenly went still.

“Wait, what is this?” I saw her scraping something moss-like from the surface of the rocks. She squeezed it in her hand and the water began to drip out from between her fingers. She looked up toward the opening of the well and mumbled something before turning to me and saying, “Xavier, take off your hazmat mask and open your mouth.”

I eyed the mossy clump in her hands and backed away. “What? No! I’m not eating well slop!”

“Calm down and don’t argue with me, Xavier Evers.”

“What? Why? I’m sorry, but I am going to argue when you’re trying to feed me something gross.”

“It may be gross, but I think it’s the cure,” Cali said.

My jaw dropped in shock. “The cure? Really?”

Cali didn’t answer. She was busy tugging off my mask. Then she grabbed my chin and tilted my head back. “Open your mouth, Xavier. Now.”

I grimaced but did as she said. The water dripping from the moss in her hand didn’t taste nearly as gross as I thought it would. In fact, it was cool and refreshing if not a little salty as it hit my tongue.

I closed my eyes and relaxed, letting it drip onto my tongue.

“Do you feel anything?” Cali asked.

I started to tell her I wanted more when my tongue started to burn like I’d just swallowed mouthfuls of liquid fire. I clawed at my throat and threw myself back against the wall of the well, sending a different kind of pain slicing through my body to mix with the scorching feeling in my throat.

“Xavier, what’s happening?”

I couldn’t tell her because I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t do anything but blink in pain and suffer in silence because I was suffocating.

**Episode 5715**

I watched in horror as Xavier clutched at his throat and started to fall back into the water, his eyes rolled back to the whites. I’d never seen him this way before, and fear was like an icy talon clenching around my stomach.

I managed to grab him just before he slipped beneath the surface of the water and vaulted back, bracing my back against the side of the wall as I struggled to handle his weight.

There was a sharp, stabbing pain in my ankle that made me yelp—either a result of the first fall or the other fall I’d just suffered when I slipped on the rocks and fell into the water—but whatever the reason for it, it was bad enough to take my breath away.

“Oh my god, Xavier, what have I done to you? I was sure that the moss would cure you, not kill you!”

In my vision, Big Mac had revealed that the cure was somewhere down here—and how else to explain the drawings that seemed to say the same thing? Could I really have misinterpreted what they meant and fed Xavier something that wasn’t the cure, but *poison*?

Then I remembered what Kendall had said as I left her delirious and yammering in the cave…something about danger lurking deeper inside.

*Fuck! Is this the danger? The moss water? Did I just seal Xavier’s fate based on a hunch?*

I pulled Xavier against me and held his head in my lap. I panicked at how listless he was, his arms hanging limp at his sides. His eyes were closed, and his dead weight lying on me was alarming.

“Xavier, I’m so sorry. I thought I’d found the cure! I didn’t mean to hurt you,” I said. “Forgive me. I only wanted to help. I only wanted to release you from this awful sickness.”

I got choked up, suddenly overwhelmed by the reality of the huge mistake I’d just made. Being bold and not thinking things through entirely had served me well in the past, but this time…well, this time I’d done something that there was no coming back from.

I was getting choked up and held my breath to keep from sobbing.

*This can’t be! He can’t die like this, in the bottom of a well in my arms—or at all! He means too much to me!*

Xavier’s body went rigid as he started to cough, and then he blinked his eyes open and looked around wildly before zeroing in on me. He smiled.

“Hey, tiger. Why so glum?”

“Xavier?” I gasped. “You’re awake!”

He tried to sit up, and I wrapped my arms around him, burying my face in his neck as tears of happiness and relief spilled down my cheeks.

“Don’t cry, it’s okay. I admit that was pretty nasty. For a second there, I thought my insides were going to spontaneously combust and leak out of my ears…and maybe my eyes and mouth, too.”

“Xavier!”

“What? I don’t feel that way now. Now…” He drew in a deep breath, shaking his head. “Now I feel good…like a million bucks. Your salty well slop worked.”

I showered him with kisses, so overjoyed and thankful that I hadn’t killed one of my mates. How would I have ever lived with myself knowing that I’d poisoned Xavier? Ava would kill me if I didn’t die down here first.

Xavier gave me a tight squeeze and smacked a kiss on my forehead. “It’s okay, Cali. I’m good, I promise.”

He pulled away and tried to get to his feet. I could tell his strength was coming back, and his eyes had lost the unfocused look, but he still had to brace himself against the wall as if he were still regaining his strength.

He looked up. “Like you said, I think the only way out is up.”

He held out a hand to help me stand, but as I put pressure on my right ankle, the same pain as before, sharper this time, made my leg give out. I collapsed against Xavier, and he wrapped me in his arms.

“Wait, Cali, what’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

I breathed through the pain, trying to play it down. “I don’t really know. I think I twisted my ankle in the fall. Hopefully it’s not a big deal, but it feels a little tender.”

I pushed off of Xavier and tried again, knowing that I was going to be in trouble if I couldn’t even stand on my right leg, but the pain was still there, and it wasn’t going anywhere. I leaned against Xavier again, who at least by now had regained enough of his strength to support me as I sagged against him.

“Okay, so your ankle is shot. But that’s okay, I’m here. Are you strong enough to get on my back? It looks like I’m going to have to carry you out of here,” he said.

I hesitated and peered up into the darkness. “It’s too far. You’re looking better, but there’s no way you’re fully recovered. I don’t think we can risk it. Maybe we should wait down here until—”

“Cali, please. I’m an Alpha. Now stop making excuses and put your arms around my neck. Hold on, we’re getting out of here, okay?”

I hesitated, unable to ignore the feeling in my gut that this wasn’t a good idea, that it wasn’t going to work.

“Come on, I promise it’ll be okay. The only thing you have to do is hold on, and I know that will be hard enough, but you can do it.”

I nodded and took a step forward to wrap my arms around Xavier’s neck. “Okay, if you think this will work…”

“Hold on tight,” he said. He shifted his hands into claws with hopes that they would help him climb, but the walls were slimy and slick, and he lost his grip before he’d made any real progress.

“Shit,” he said as we both clambered back down to the rocky ground. “I’ll try again. This has to work. This is the only way.”

“I think we’re going to have to wait until you’re a little stronger,” I said.

“Who else knows that we’re here?”

“Colton knows,” I said.

“Then Colton will help.”

I gave him a look. “Colton? I don’t know about that. He has no idea where we are, no idea about the well or this chamber. This cave forks off and winds in every direction. No one will know how deep in here we are.”

Suddenly Greyson’s voice echoed above us. “Xavier? Cali?”

We both looked up, my heart swelling with excitement. Greyson’s masked face looked tiny from way down here, but I would know that voice anywhere. The flicker of a candle suddenly appeared over the edge of the well, and even that gave me hope.

*Wait a minute, am I delusional now, too? How is Greyson here? Last I saw him, he was sick and delirious in bed!*

“Are you hurt?” Greyson called down.

“Cali hurt her ankle and can’t put any weight on it, and I’m not strong enough yet to climb up. We aren’t going to be able to get out of here on our own.”

“But I found the cure!” I added excitedly.

“What? Really? That’s great news. I’ll be right back, okay? Sit tight!”

“I’m so confused,” Xavier said. “My brother was as sick or sicker than I was.”

“Big Mac gave me a temporary fix for the disease,” Greyson said, and then he disappeared.

“I’m glad that he feels better…but temporary? That doesn’t sound good at all,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it. If your hunch is right, we have plenty of the real cure for this bullshit ancient magic right down here with us.”

A few minutes later, Greyson returned with a length of rope.

“Wow, where’d you get that?” I asked.

“In a disgusting bat-filled cave that I hope neither of you had the horror of stumbling across,” Greyson said. “Now watch out.”

He dropped one end of the rope down, but it fell just short of our reach.

“I’ll boost you up so you can grab it, and then Greyson can pull you up,” Xavier said.

“But what about you? I told you I’m not leaving without you.”

“Don’t worry, Cali. I’ll be right behind you. I promise,” Xavier said.

“What’s going on down there? Are we coming or not?”

“Coming!” I sang out before rushing to shove piles of moss into my pockets.

“Ready?” Xavier said, ready to boost me up.

“Ready.”

Xavier made a basket of his hands, and I stepped on it with my good ankle, and he pushed me up to grab the rope.

“Got it!” I shouted up to Greyson.

“Good. I’m going to pull you up,” Greyson called down.

With him pulling and me relying on my good ankle to help propel me up against the wall, I pulled myself up and over the lip of the well, but what I saw nearly sent me falling back down in shock.

Greyson had collapsed.

**Episode 5716**

I hobbled to Greyson’s side as Xavier shouted up from the well. “Cali, what happened? What’s wrong? Are you okay? It sounds like you fell.”

“I’m fine, it’s Greyson! He collapsed!” I shouted back. “He doesn’t look too good.”

I knelt at my mate’s side and pulled off his mask. I could tell right away that he was feverish. In the flickering candlelight, I could see the flush on his cheeks and the spray of perspiration across his forehead and down his nose.

*He said that the cure Big Mac gave him was temporary, so the Dark Fever must have come back with a vengeance. Poor Greyson!*

I glanced at the drawing of the werewolves giving the cure and pulled a mound of moss from my pocket. I opened Greyson’s mouth and dropped the dripping moss onto his tongue before holding him as tightly as I could.

“You’re going to be okay, Greyson. I know it. Let’s just hope the moss does its magic again.”

Greyson moaned and convulsed as the burning sensation that Xavier had felt only minutes before likely seized his body. He tensed and relaxed for a few seconds more before he fell quiet. I cradled him in my arms, swiping the sweat off his forehead and pressing soft kisses to his face, hoping it would calm him if the pain was still affecting him.

A few long minutes went by without him moving or reacting. “Wake up, Greyson. Just like Xavier did, please. Please don’t let that have been a fluke. *Wake* *up*. You’re going to be okay.”

After a few minutes more, he blinked once, groaned, and then blinked again. He dragged his tongue across his dry lips and smiled. “Love, is that you?”

My heart squeezed as I helped him up to a seated position. “It’s me, Greyson. I’m here.”

“The rope…what happened? I’m so glad you’re okay. You’re okay, right?”

“I’m okay, and now so are you. Your temporary cure expired, and I gave you the one we hope is permanent. How do you feel?”

Greyson paused as if to check in with himself and then said, “Much better.”

Xavier’s voice echoed up to meet us. “Hello? What’s happening up there? You two haven’t forgotten me, have you?”

“Hold your horses, little brother,” Greyson grunted as he got to his feet. He grabbed the rope again and threw the other end down to Xavier. “Are you strong enough to leap up and grab it, or should I come down and get you?”

Xavier’s scoff echoed against the cavernous walls. “Please. I can make it. I’m a big boy. Just don’t let go, okay?”

Greyson rolled his eyes, but I could see the little smirk on his lips. As he strained to hold Xavier’s weight as he climbed up, my eyes went to the drawings on the wall yet again. I looked at the one where one werewolf was offering the other water.

I hobbled closer to look and realized that they didn’t have goblets in their hands at all, but tangles of moss with water dripping through their clawed hands.

Xavier grunted as he heaved himself up and over the lip of the well. “Thanks, man,” he said to Greyson as he swung his leg over and landed on solid ground.

I looked between them both. “How are you two feeling? Do you think you’re better? Any lingering symptoms?”

“I feel good as new,” Xavier said. “But this guy still looks a little peaked if you ask me.”

Greyson cursed under his breath. “Please. I’m in tip-top shape, or else I wouldn’t have been able to drag your big ass up out of that well. You’re a big boy, remember?”

Xavier chuckled.

“I can’t believe it. My vision of Big Mac and her guidance about the cure was real. It worked. It may have saved your lives!”

“We’re lucky. Or rather, you’re our good luck charm,” Greyson said.

“Do you think that you have enough moss to cure the others?” Xavier said.

I patted my sopping wet pockets. “I think so. It doesn’t seem to require more than a few drops. We can give some to Kendall on the way out.”

Xavier looked around and shuddered. “I’d rather not stick around here for too much longer. This place gives me the creeps, and I didn’t want to come into Lucian’s subterranean mindfuck to begin with.”

“Thanks for sticking with her,” Greyson said.

Xavier scowled. “Save it, Greyson. You don’t have to thank me for that. What, did you think I was just going to leave her to fend for herself? When have I ever done that? I would have gone through hell and back for this girl without you asking me to.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. You’ll give your life for Cali,” Greyson mocked, putting on a tortured voice to mimic Xavier.

“Okay, please don’t start fighting when we should be celebrating this triumphant moment. I was really worried about both of you, and now I know that you’re going to be okay,” I said.

“Thanks to you,” Xavier said. “I don’t know if these drawings would have gotten through to me the way they did you, Cali.” Xavier looked around, shaking his head. “And Big Mac’s vision was a bit of luck, too.”

“I wonder what Big Mac will say when I tell her about all this. Will I earn a little praise for figuring out the cure, I wonder?” I said.

Big Mac wasn’t one to dole out compliments or props easily. And since she’d appeared in my vision and was a big part of our success here, it was likely that she wouldn’t be giving me any this time around, either.

“Don’t count on it,” Greyson said. “But as for me? I’ll never forget what you’ve done.”

Greyson threw an arm around me, and I leaned into him, wondering what I would have done if my mates had gotten sicker. Who knew how the disease would have progressed? Maybe they would have gotten better on their own, but there was no way to know that.

We moved through the tunnel, putting the cavern and its creepy well and drawings behind us. I was very aware that Xavier was watching Greyson and me clinging to each other as we moved through the tunnel. I was supporting myself on Greyson because my ankle still hurt like hell.

“How’s your ankle?” Xavier asked as if reading my mind. “I can carry you if you like.”

“She’s fine, I’ve got her,” Greyson snapped.

As we started up the passage, Xavier shouted out a warning. “Watch your head here, brother. There are more than a few tight spots ahead.”

“Surprised you didn’t try to set me up and get me knocked out so that you could carry Cali,” Greyson teased.

“I’m not that underhanded, no matter what you’d like to think of me,” Xavier snapped.

We continued walking until I heard a distant, strange sound.

“Wait, do you guys hear that?” I said.

It sounded like the flutter of wings…and the squeal of bats.

“Great, the bat chamber,” Greyson grumbled. He paused at the entrance and took the slightest step back. “I wish there was another way through.” I knew he was aiming that worry at me.

“Thanks, but I can handle it,” I said.

We entered the chamber with Greyson leading the way, holding his flickering candle out in front of us to light the path. It made the walls come to life with the movement of the bats swooping around us.

“Did you see Kendall on the way in here? Is she okay?” I asked as a distraction from the creepiness of walking through a cloud of squeaking, flapping creatures. “We had to leave her behind.”

“I saw her. She was pretty out of it, delirious from the Dark Fever when I saw her. I left her with Colton,” Greyson said.

“What’s Colton doing down here anyway?” Xavier asked.

“You know Colton. When you’re in trouble, he comes running,” Greyson said.

Something fluttered by a little too close to my face. A bat—and it was a huge one. I jerked out of the way, knocking the candle out of Greyson’s hand. It clattered to the floor, and the flame went out.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry! That bat just startled me. I thought it was going to get in my hair!” I wailed.

“It’s fine,” Greyson said. “X and I can see down here. We’ll help you out.”

I felt Xavier grab my other arm and together, the three of us plowed forward through the darkness. I could imagine that it was a little awkward for Xavier and Greyson, and I felt a little awkward, too, being bookended by them, but it was reassuring, too.

We’d just managed to step through to the other side of the bat cave when Greyson stopped short.

He slipped away from me, and in the darkness, I could just make out his form spinning around as if he were looking for something.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I swear I left Colton and Kendall right here,” he said, his eyes wide. “They’re gone.”

**Episode 5717**

**Greyson**

Xavier eyed me skeptically. “You’re sure this is where you left Colton and Kendall? Maybe you were coming down with the Dark Fever and misremembered?”

“I was completely clear when I came in here,” I snapped. “I found Kendall lying right there”—I pointed to the spot right in front of me—“after I cleared that gap in the passageway.”

“And that’s where I last saw Kendall, too,” Cali said.

“You never should have dragged Colton into this,” Xavier snarled. “He has babies to think about. He doesn’t need to be drawn into our bullshit.”

“Somebody had to help me find your sorry ass!” I snarled back.

“You have a whole pack of lapdogs to do your bidding! Why would you rope Colton into it?” Xavier snapped.

Cali limped between us looking pitiful and favoring her right ankle. “Stop it, both of you! This isn’t helping! We need to stop bickering and find them!”

Xavier and I went silent, but that didn’t mean we stopped staring daggers at each other.

“I have to wonder if maybe Colton got worried about Kendall? Greyson, you said she was in pretty bad shape, right? Maybe he carried her out?” Cali said.

I stopped to consider that. “Maybe so.”

*And maybe I can reach out to her via mind link…*

I closed my eyes and turned away from Cali, feeling a little like I was betraying her somehow by communicating with another woman in such an intimate way right in front of her face.

*Kendall, are you okay? Can you hear me? I’m looking for you.*

I waited a beat, but there was no response. That didn’t worry me all that much since if Kendall was still as riddled with the Dark Fever as she had been when I left her, she likely couldn’t connect via mind link anymore.

“Shouldn’t we be looking for them?” Cali said, interrupting my thoughts. “It seems wrong to just be standing here when they might need us.”

Xavier was already moving away, racing down one of the darkened pathways, muttering to himself.

“Stop,” I said. “You don’t even know where you’re going, and you’re going to end up leaving us behind.”

Xavier turned around slowly to face me; his face warped with anger. “Did I sign a consent form authorizing you to tell me what to do or something? Watch it!”

Xavier had always had a short temper—especially when it came to me—but there was something about the way he was acting that made me wonder if the aftereffects of the Dark Fever had left him particularly abrasive.

“Is your shittier-than-normal attitude due to you being sick, or is this just your normal dick self, shining bright for all to see?” I said. I sounded a little unhinged to my own ears.

Xavier looked like he was about to say something extremely biting, but he just turned away and scoffed. “You can stand around here throwing insults, but I’m going to find my brother.”

“He’s my brother, too,” I said.

“Then act like it, asshole!” Xavier shouted.

Cali hobbled herself between us again. “Wait, wait, calm down, okay? Greyson, I don’t think Xavier’s the only one suffering the aftershocks of the Dark Fever.”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to calm down. “You may be right. I admit I’m feeling a little…volatile.”

“No kidding. You demanding that I wait for you like you’re my parent proved that,” Xavier said. “I wasn’t going *without* anyone. I was just going. The longer we don’t know where Colton is, the more trouble he could be in.”

“Will you back off and relax?” I snapped. “I’ve admitted that I’m a little on edge—can you do the same?”

Xavier threw up his hands and started to walk away, but I ran to catch up with him.

“Will you please just wait a fucking minute?” I said.

Xavier’s eyes flashed as if he were seconds from shifting, but then he saw Cali approaching and his expression softened.

“Cali’s right, Xavier. Neither of us are a hundred percent just yet. The only reason I wanted you to wait is that it’s better if we stick together. We don’t know what might be lurking in these tunnels, and three of us will better help Colton than one of us. Can we at the very least agree not to leave each other’s sight?”

Xavier huffed and looked away. “Fine, if it means you’ll stop whining.”

“I’m not whining. I’m just trying to think straight despite my head still feeling a little funny,” I said.

“So can we finally do something instead of standing around talking about doing something?” Xavier said.

I thrust my hand out in front of him. “Certainly. Lead the way.”

Xavier started forward only to curse when he smacked his head on the ceiling. Cali and I both steered clear of him while he let out another string of curses and lashed out at the ceiling as if he were any match for thousand-year-old carved stone.

Cali sidled up to me. “Are you sure you’re up to this?”

“I feel physically fine,” I said. “I’m just a little, um…”

“Short-tempered?” Cali finished for me.

“Yeah, I guess so. And my dear brother isn’t making me feel any better. I just hope that whatever this residual stuff we’re both dealing with passes, and we can get the hell out of here in one piece.”

Cali squeezed my arm. “I hope so, too.”

As we continued through the tunnel, I tried again to reach out to Kendall via mind link. When I still didn’t get a response, my wolf flared and started to grow restless.

*Where the hell is she? I hope Colton didn’t do anything stupid and move her somewhere he shouldn’t have.*

I was getting more and more worked up, so I took a deep breath and tried to think rationally. Kendall was my mate, there was no getting around that, which meant it made perfect sense that my wolf was so affected. It didn’t make much of a difference whether or not I wanted to be her mate—and I didn’t want to be—not even a little.

She’d made it clear that she didn’t want to be my mate either—though those last delirious moments I’d shared with her had suggested otherwise. But whatever our logical feelings were about each other, our mate bond was still affecting us both, and it would until we found a way to dissolve it.

The Dark Fever wasn’t helping matters. It was hands down the reason she’d kissed me, and the reason why Colton had thought I enjoyed it when I’d been confused and thrown off by how aggressive she was being under the circumstances.

*As for that kiss, I should probably tell Cali about it. But not with Xavier here.*

Cali spoke again, interrupting my guilt trip.

“Do you think Lucian knows about all this?”

Before I could answer, Xavier stopped short and whispered, “Who’s that?”

“Who’s who?” I said.

We all peered up ahead to where someone was lying on the ground. I knew immediately who it was. I could tell by the way her hair fell over her face and the way my wolf was going crazy that it was Kendall.

I tried to keep my composure as we rushed over to her only to stop short when we realized she was lying right at the edge of the gap that I’d had to jump over on the way to the well.

“Is she okay?” Cali gasped.

I stooped beside her to check her pulse. It was faint, and even as we called her name and Cali shook her, she was unresponsive.

Xavier gasped when he looked down into the gap. “Is that Colton down there?”

Cali and I rushed to look, and sure enough, Colton was down in the gap wedged between two large rocks.

“Colton!” Xavier called out, the panic and fear evident in his voice. “You okay, man?”

He didn’t answer, and pure panic flushed across Xavier’s face.

“It must be the Dark Fever,” Cali said. “Does it look like he’s hurt?”

I glanced back at Kendall, who was starting to stir and moan softly. “Cali, give Kendall the cure while Xavier and I figure out a way to get down there to help Colton.”

Xavier was closer to Colton than I was by a long shot. They were twins and saw eye to eye in ways that I never had with either of them, so I was ready to defer to Xavier on this.

“Tell me what you need from me. I’ll do whatever you think is best,” I said.

“I think you should hold onto my legs or something while I stretch down to try to pull Colton up,” Xavier said as if he’d been thinking about this from the moment he laid eyes on Colton wedged down there.

We set about making Xavier’s plan a reality. Xavier scooted to the edge while I latched onto his legs to hold him while he stretched to grab Colton.

Kendall’s piercing scream cut through the air, shocking me so badly that I nearly dropped Xavier.

I whipped around to look at Cali. “Is everything okay back there?”

“Yes, it’s just the cure. You remember how painful it is, I’m sure?”

“Painful doesn’t begin to describe it,” Xavier remarked, his voice sounding far away since he was still dangling over the edge and reaching for Colton.

“Got him!” Xavier said triumphantly, and then I started to pull, and together, we lifted Colton out of the gap.

He was shivering and mumbling, just like Kendall had been.

“Cali, quick, give Colton the moss juice,” Xavier said.

We really needed a better name for this stuff.

As Cali pulled the mossy sludge out of her pockets, the ancient key clattered onto the ground, and we all glared at it.

Cali scowled. “What the hell should we do with this cursed thing?”

**Episode 5718**

Greyson started reaching for the key, but I scooped it up just before he got to it.

“No. Do. Not. Touch. This. We’ve already seen what just being in the cave does to you. I’m not about to let you touch the key—the key that could be the literal source of all this madness,” I said.

“You’re touching it, Cali. And it’s sitting in your pocket like it’s just any normal key when we all know that’s not true,” Greyson argued.

“Yes, and I’m not a werewolf, am I? Neither of you listened to me about steering clear of this place, and look what happened. Do I need to stop and remind you both that I’m the only one who’s still uninfected?”

Xavier and Greyson exchanged a look, then glanced at Kendall and Colton, who were the other unwitting victims of the Dark Fever that they’d undoubtedly picked up from this cave.

“I may have had the briefest of moments when I felt something weird because of our mate bonds, but it was nowhere near the severity of what you two suffered,” I explained. “The sickness doesn’t affect me. I think we can all agree on that. If it did, it would have already.”

“Cali’s not wrong. And I’m not convinced we can’t be reinfected,” Greyson said. “We have no idea the resistance the moss water has—”

“Or even if the healing effects are permanent,” Xavier finished. “Anyway Cali, I don’t think we should keep the key as some sort of souvenir. I think we should destroy the damn thing. It’s caused enough harm already, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. What if tampering with it makes things worse? According to Big Mac and Steinar, the key is enchanted with ancient magic. Destroying the key could release that magic, allowing it to do untold things.”

“Untold things like making some werewolves vomit blood?” Greyson said wearily.

“Or make them see furniture at the bottom of a well?” Xavier added.

“Yes, that and worse,” I said. “With the key intact, at least we know the magic is somewhat contained.”

Greyson looked uneasy when Kendall gasped out, “Cali’s right. Don’t go blowing that thing apart. We have no idea what we’re dealing with.”

I had to bite my lip from smiling in satisfaction.

*It’s weird and kind of cool to be on the same wavelength as Kendall for once. Maybe she’s still delirious from the Dark Fever.*

“So I think it’s best that you give it to me,” Kendall added.

“No,” I said. “I meant what I said. It’s too dangerous for werewolves to handle. Until we figure out what’s going on, I’m going to remain the keeper of the key.”

Kendall just stared at me with those piercing purple eyes of hers, and I wondered if she was about to come clean about who she really was. If she would just admit that she was an MIB agent, I wouldn’t have any choice but to hand the key over.

*If she wants to keep her secret, or what she thinks is a secret, anyway, then I’m going to keep the key.*

Kendall said nothing, so I slipped the key back into my pocket.

“Is anyone going to do anything about Colton, or should we wait for him to succumb to the Dark Fever?” Xavier hissed at no one in particular.

“Oh, sorry, Xavier,” I said.

Xavier held Colton’s mouth open while I administered the moss water, and then Xavier pinned him to the ground as he reacted violently to the pain of the moss water coursing through his body and clearing out the infection.

A few beats later, Colton’s eyes flew open, and he scowled as he coughed and spat on the ground. “What was that? It was so damn salty, and it made my throat feel like I ate a pile of embers.”

He tried to sit up, but I put a gentle hand on his shoulder to keep him where he was. “Take it easy while you recover. The cure is working, but you’re not going to be a hundred percent just yet.”

Colton looked between Kendall and Greyson and started to say something but stopped himself. He turned his attention to Xavier. “Help me up, man. This ground is hard as shit and hurting my back.”

“If I do, do you promise not to tumble down off that cliff again?” Xavier said.

“Shut up!” Colton threw a weak punch at his brother that Xavier easily dodged.

“What? I’m just saying. You’re giving werewolves a bad name, falling into crevasses and such,” Xavier joked.

“Listen, I was busy trying to keep Kendall from losing her shit. I didn’t see where I was going, and down I went.” He sighed. “But thank you for saving me. Maya would have killed me if I died.”

“Maybe we should talk about how murderous Maya is,” Greyson grumbled. “Though I know you’re just kidding.”

Colton nodded slowly and smirked. “Yeah, just kidding…ish.”

Together, we all began the trek back to the basement. I was excited to leave the creepy caves behind, and even more excited that our trip into its depths hadn’t been for nothing. I’d emerged with a cure.

But by the time we reached the heavy door barring the entrance to the caves, my hopes that all four werewolves were good as new—or at least would be in no time—were dashed. They were all winded. I’d never seen Greyson or Xavier panting like they were right now.

“What do we do with the door?” I asked.

“Easy. Lock that fucker and never, ever, open it again,” Colton said.

“We should close it at the very least,” Greyson said. He moved to shut the door, but it wouldn’t budge. It took all of us working together to finally wrench it closed.

I took out the key and slipped it into the lock, and as soon as I turned the key, the ground began to shake.

I fell into Xavier, and Kendall toppled into Greyson, who quickly steadied her and then released her.

I felt a twinge of jealousy even seeing their quick interaction. There was something…intimate about it, even though I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was.

*It’s stupid of me to feel jealous right now. What, was he supposed to cringe away from her and let her hit the floor?*

“I’m done with basements and hidden rooms. I’ve had enough cave adventures to last me a lifetime, trust me…though this wasn’t the worst network of underground caves I’ve ever been in, so there’s that,” Colton remarked ominously.

We finally began to go upstairs where Armin intercepted us. “Where are your masks?” he said, obviously annoyed. “I was gracious enough to allow you into Lucian’s palace against Aysel’s wishes, and you don’t have the decency to keep your masks on?”

I could tell that Xavier wanted to snap at him, but I shook my head to stop him. Armin wasn’t wrong. As annoying as Lucian was, this was his house, and as such we should have at least attempted to follow his rules. But down in those tunnels, masks had been the least of our concern, nor had they done anything to shield the wolves from getting sick.

“Sorry about the masks,” I said. “How are Lucian and Elle doing?”

“They’re terribly sick and getting worse by the second,” Armin lamented. “Aysel is beside herself. I’ve never seen her so distraught.”

I reached into my pocket and handed him huge piles of the dripping moss. “Squeeze the liquid from this into their mouths, and they should be good as new in no time.”

Armin stared down at the dripping mess in his hands with surprise. “Is this a—”

“Cure,” Xavier finished for him. “You’re welcome. Better than any mask.”

“Yes,” I said gently. “And it should work for anyone who’s affected by the Dark Fever.”

As we peeled off our hazmat suits and handed them to Armin, he narrowed his eyes at Colton.

“There never was any fountain pen, was there?”

Colton grinned. “You caught me, big guy.”

Once we were back outside, Kendall smirked at Colton. “Fountain pen?”

Xavier glared at Colton. “Just Colton being Colton, I’m afraid. Don’t bother asking.”

Kendall stopped and caught my attention. “Thanks a lot. Without you, I would still be lying in that cave babbling about who knows what.” She started toward the woods but faltered after a few steps and leaned against a fence post to support herself.

Greyson raced over to take her by the elbow. “Where are you going?” he asked.

Kendall pulled her arm free. “Home. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“But you shouldn’t be alone right now,” Greyson said.

Kendall gave him a sly smile. “Oh, no? What do you have in mind?”

Greyson glanced back at me, and another wave of jealousy, stronger this time, almost bowled me over. Kendall’s little smirk was like a kick in the gut, and Greyson’s look back at me to see if I caught it didn’t help. I wanted nothing more than to smack that little self-satisfied smile right off her face.

Then Greyson said, “You’re not going home alone. You’re spending the night with us, at the Redwood pack house.”

**Episode 5719**

**Greyson**

Kendall laughed. “Seriously? You want me to have a slumber party at the Redwood pack house? Wow.”

I could see the surprise and hurt in Cali’s eyes and quickly realized that I should have played that better and asked her first. I could only imagine what was going through Cali’s head right now.

I glanced at Colton and Xavier, trying to soften the blow that I’d undoubtedly landed on Cali. “Honestly none of us should be alone right now. Sure, we all had the moss water thanks to Cali, but we have no idea if we’re out of the woods yet. We should stay together until we know that the Dark Fever is no longer a threat to any of our health.”

“Eh… Maya is not going to be happy,” Colton said.

“What else is new?” Xavier grumbled. “I’d rather stay at the lake house with Colton,” he said. “Personally.”

“Okay, I get it that everyone is eager to be alone right now and get some rest, but trust me when I say I don’t think it’s a good idea. Cali’s moss may have been a treatment, not a cure. We need to play it smart until we know for sure,” I said.

“I don’t need to be babysat. I’m fine,” Kendall said. She pushed away from the fence post only to wobble on her feet and cling to it again.

“None of us are fine,” I scoffed. “You can’t even stand up straight, Kendall. I don’t know you all that well, but I’m pretty sure you used to be able to walk unassisted.”

Kendall scowled but didn’t argue.

“Greyson’s right,” Cali said. “There’s plenty of room at the pack house, and at least this way we can all keep an eye on each other.”

Almost in complete unison, Kendall and Xavier let out terse grunts of approval. That was likely all I was going to get from two people as fiercely independent and stubborn as Kendall and Xavier were.

“I do not want to drink any more of that moss shit,” Colton said. “It was nasty, and I think it gave me heartburn.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “*Heartburn?* We just saved your sorry ass from being the ham and cheese in a rock sandwich, and that’s what you’re complaining about?”

“What? I have a refined palate. I can’t help that!” Colton complained.

Xavier waved Colton off as I cut in.

“Okay, let’s shift. I’ll carry Cali, and we can all run back to the Redwood pack house together.”

“That’s the best idea you’ve had all day,” Kendall grumbled. “I need a good run in wolf form after the fucked-up day I’ve had.”

“Something we can agree on,” Xavier remarked.

I was the first to shift, and I immediately felt better when Cali straddled me and wrapped her arms around my neck. As we started out, I reached out to Cali through mind link.

*I hope you don’t mind having Kendall stay with us. I should have asked before—*

*It’s fine, Greyson*, Cali interrupted. *I’ll admit I was surprised at first, but I get why you asked. And besides, if you were up to something with her, I doubt you would have asked her to stay right in front of my face.*

*True, but you never have to worry about that anyway. Despite the whole mate thing, I don’t think of her in that way.*

That wasn’t entirely true, and there was still the kiss I shared with Kendall in the caves to tell Cali about, but now wasn’t the time. And hopefully, Cali would see things the way I saw them, and the way Kendall would see them…if she remembered how she’d acted. The Dark Fever was the only reason she’d come onto me so strongly.

*But I do want to hurry and get the cure back to Lola*, Cali said.

It didn’t take long to arrive at the pack house, and Cali wasted no time jumping off my back and hobbling inside.

I barely had time to shift back before the door slammed shut behind her and she was gone. I could only hope she was being honest with me and my proposal to Kendall about staying with us wasn’t pissing her off more than she was admitting.

*My guilt over kissing Kendall is why I’m feeling weird about this. But I didn’t initiate the kiss, and that’s what that matters.*

I was about to follow Cali when I felt a hand on my arm. I turned to see Kendall standing behind me.

“Where exactly am I supposed to sleep?” she asked.

My wolf stirred at the question, and I gritted my teeth to calm down. I couldn’t ignore the pointed look Xavier threw over his shoulder at me as he and Colton went inside.

“We’ll find you a spare room. No big deal.”

Kendall nodded. “Sounds good.” She paused, kicking her bare toe into the grass as if she was trying to decide whether to say what else was on her mind. “I…don’t think your mate is too thrilled to have me stay.”

I paused, figuring now was as good a time as any to address the elephant in the woods. “Do you remember what happened when I found you down there?”

Kendall’s eyes darted away for a split second before she looked back at me. “I…was pretty out of it, so no, I don’t. Why? What did I miss?”

I studied her for a moment, strongly suspecting that she was lying.

*If she wants to act like it didn’t happen…fine.*

“Nothing. You didn’t miss anything,” I said.

I left her standing there and went inside, where I ran into Ravi.

“Hey, Greyson. You’re looking better.”

“Thanks, feeling better, too. Kendall’s outside. Can you bring her in and show her to one of the spare rooms?”

“Sure thing,” Ravi said just as Kendall came walking in.

Not wanting another confrontation of any kind, I went upstairs only to run into my mother halfway up.

“Greyson, you made it back! Is everything okay?”

Big Mac walked into the living room, sipping a cup of tea.

“It is now,” I said. “I’ll explain soon.”

I rushed upstairs to check on Lola. When I walked in, Jay was standing between a bedridden Lola and Cali, who had a clump of slimy, dripping moss in her hand.

“Come on, Jay. You’re standing between me and giving your mate the cure!” Cali was pleading.

“That looks like rotten seaweed salad, Cali. I’m not letting you give that to her while she’s out of it.”

“She’s telling the truth, Jay,” I said. “It’s a cure. I took it, and I feel better.”

Jay glanced at a feverish, mumbling Lola. “Okay, sorry, Cali…but it just looks and smells disgusting.”

“It’s both,” I said. “You’d better hold Lola down while Cali administers it.”

“It’s going to burn a bit, but once that’s over, you’ll be good as new,” Cali whispered to Lola as she squeezed a few drops into her mouth.

As soon as it hit her tongue, Lola grimaced, spit, and started coughing.

“Keep holding her down,” I said to Jay. Lola was convulsing and shaking. Her reaction was way worse than Kendall’s, and Cali looked shaken. I pulled her close to comfort her while we waited for the cure to take hold.

“What the hell was that?” Lola snarled at Jay once her eyes were open again and her tremors had calmed.

Jay grinned at her, then at us. “She’s better. I can tell.”

“Oh, Lola!” Cali said, rushing over to hug Lola, who was still making a fuss. “We gave you well moss to cure you of the Dark Fever.”

“Thanks, but you need to get to work creating a cherry-flavored version, because that was awful,” Lola said.

“Keep an eye on her,” I warned Jay. “None of us are fully recovered just yet.”

Cali and I made our way out of Lola’s room, and once we were alone, I beckoned Cali to follow me. I put an arm around her to help her limp to my room, and there, I sat her on the bed and went to the bathroom to grab the first aid kit.

I took her shoe off, and Cali hissed in pain. “Careful, it’s tender.”

I pressed down on a few spots and asked, “Does that hurt?”

Pouty, Cali said, “It hurts a little there, yes.”

I started to wrap her ankle, and just as I finished, I decided that it was now or never.

“There’s something I have to tell you, Cali.”

Her face fell. “Is it about Kendall?”

I nodded. “It is, but I doubt it’s what you’re expecting. When I found Kendall on the ground in the tunnel, she was delirious and not thinking straight and…she kissed me.”

The pain in Cali’s eyes was instant. I hated to see the hurt in her eyes, but I had to be honest and tell it all.

“But I stopped her. You have to know that. I had no desire to kiss her.”

Cali smiled. “I know that, Greyson. But I also know what she’s going through. I don’t like it, not even a little, but I understand.”

Emotion welled in my chest as I pulled Cali into a hug. “I love you Cali, I really do.” I pulled back to stroke her cheek. “You did it again, love. You saved us.”

Cali vaulted forward to wrap her arms around me. “I don’t know about that.”

I leaned up to kiss her again and then pressed her down onto my bed. “I do…”

**Episode 5720**

My jealousy over Kendall dissolved as Greyson moved his strong body on top of mine, pressing me into the bed. I trusted Greyson, that was top of mind. He would never do anything to hurt me. Not purposely, and I knew that.

But…

Hearing about Kendall kissing him yet again, even if she’d been delirious because of the Dark Fever, still got to me. And then again, why wouldn’t it? She was a beautiful woman with an edge. She was mysterious and self-assured, and she was Greyson’s other mate above all. She wasn’t some run-of-the-mill girl I could just write off.

I would be a saint not to feel some kind of way about their connection and the fact that this wasn’t the first time they’d swapped spit.

And now, the same woman who’d pressed her lips against Greyson’s not even hours ago was staying under my roof, and I was supposed to be okay with it.

*Why won’t she just go away? She doesn’t seem to want to pursue Greyson, but then every time I turn around, it seems like they’ve had some kind of moment between them. I hate this.*

It would have been far easier if Kendall had just gone back to her place. Out of sight, out of my and Greyson’s mind.

But at the same time, and as angry as I was and as uncomfortable as I was about the connection she had with my mate, I didn’t want Kendall to suffer or get sicker without anyone around to help.

All the werewolves needed to keep tabs on each other until we were sure that the Dark Fever was really out of the picture. I felt confident that the moss water was the cure, but again, this wasn’t some scientifically tested remedy. All I had to go on was a vision and some drawings on a cave wall that could have been made by anyone.

*And Greyson’s with me, not Kendall. I’m the one he’s kissing. I’m the one he’s looking at with all that love in his eyes. He makes it a point to make sure I know how special I am to him. Just because some lines are blurred right now with his other mate…that doesn’t change Greyson’s respect for me.*

Greyson had just tended to my ankle with tender love and care. And more than that, Greyson had told me the truth when he could have lied.

Again, I was reminded that if my mate was up to something, there were a million other ways he could go about it. He would certainly keep it from me to knock me off his trail. He wouldn’t ask his mistress to sleep at our place right in front of me.

Greyson was doing his best to navigate a very complicated situation, and I wasn’t going to make this harder for him. Not when he’d spent a long time dealing with my strong bond with another man—a bond that was willful and not resisted by either of us.

If Greyson could deal with me sleeping with another man, kissing him, loving him, then I could certainly deal with a few accidental, Dark Fever–induced kisses. It would be hypocritical of me not to. None of this was normal or ideal for anyone.

“But I don’t want you to think about Kendall anymore,” Greyson said, as if reading my mind. “I want you to think about me. About us.”

He rolled over onto his back and pulled me on top of him. He gently wrapped my hair in his fist and pulled me down until our lips met, smashing together almost clumsily, hungrily. It felt good to be with Greyson like this. We’d been through a lot today, and even the memory of him lying sick in bed had stuck with me.

But he was certainly on the mend now, and I was ready to take advantage of it.

Overcome with desire, I reversed our positions, rolling Greyson onto his back and kissing his neck, his chest, inhaling his scent. I tunneled my hands under his shirt and let my fingers enjoy the sensation of his tight, flexing muscles.

“You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I know I’ve told you that so many times, but I never want you to forget,” Greyson said.

I whipped my shirt off and tossed it away, then gasped when Greyson closed his big, strong hands around my breasts and squeezed them together.

I watched him do it, liking the way my breasts looked encased in lace and Greyson’s hands. He leaned up to kiss them, and then, almost roughly, he ripped my bra off and buried his face in my cleavage while moaning in pleasure.

“You smell so good. How is that after you’ve been spelunking all day?” he said.

“Armin hosed us all down at the Vanguard,” I said, my breath catching.

We both laughed until Greyson kissed me again, deeply, snaking his tongue into my mouth and licking my lips, pulling me tightly against him.

Playfully, he threw me back down onto the bed, carefully at the same time and making sure I didn’t jostle my ankle, and removed my pants.

When he’d slid my pants to my ankles, he slowed down and took his time pulling them off, making sure not to hurt me.

“You okay?” he asked once he was on top of me again.

“I’m okay. Especially now that I’m alone with you.”

His warm hand reached down between us, and I felt his fingers dance across my sex, testing me out to ensure that I was ready for him.

While his fingers continued activating my core, making me revolve my hips in desire, he pressed kisses up and down my body.

When he entered me, I moaned in surprised pleasure. I spread my legs so that he could push in deeper, and then closed my eyes as he rolled and pitched on top of me, our bodies sliding together quickly, building up friction and heat and sweat as the bed rocked and creaked under our weight.

“Greyson,” I moaned, unable to stop thinking about how he was inside of me right now, not Kendall, and that I was getting to experience a part of Greyson that she never would.

I hissed in pain when I moved my leg a little too fast, jostling my ankle, and Greyson stopped moving and gave me a worried look. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“No, it was me. Keep going. Don’t stop.”

And he didn’t. He pushed and thrusted and pistoned against me until I was calling his name, screaming it, knowing that someone might hear me—even Kendall—but in no position to care.

Greyson did his own screaming, and I loved hearing my name on his lips like that.

When we were done, he wrapped his arms around me, then made a show of kissing me from head to toe, paying special attention to my ankle.

“How about a shower?” he said with a smile.

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Clean and relaxed, Greyson and I went downstairs with Greyson helping me, almost carrying me into the living room where Mrs. Smith was waiting.

Greyson kissed me. “I want to talk to my mother. She’s worried, and I want to fill her in on what happened.”

“Okay. Find me later?” I said.

“You know I will.”

I waved at Mrs. Smith and then went to the kitchen where Big Mac was nursing a cup of tea. Her eyes immediately fell to my wrapped ankle.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” Big Mac deadpanned. “And I heard about your cure. Glad it worked.”

“It’s not my cure. I think ancient werewolves discovered it and wrote about it on the cave walls, but do you think it could be the real deal?” I said.

Big Mac shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. As I’ve said a million times before, magic plays by its own rules, and the older the magic, the more unruly and unpredictable it is. But I suppose we’ll know how effective it is soon enough.”

“Being that my vision held some truth, there must be some reason I was so determined to go there and seek the cure.”

“I would have to agree,” Big Mac said.

It felt good hearing that, but I hesitated and then said, “Thank you for helping Greyson.”

“I had to. I’m marrying his mother.”

I smiled at that. “Yes, but you still helped him.”

“You should be thanking Xavier, not me,” she said. “He was the one who persuaded me to do it. Practically begged me.”

I was stunned. “What? Xavier did?”

“Yes. He was really worried about his brother, but maybe that’s not so surprising, despite the way he acts toward Greyson sometimes. Xavier’s just a big softie like all these werewolves who try to play all big and bag but are soft as suede.”

“I still can’t believe it.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Xavier’s sitting out there on the back porch. Ask him yourself.”

I glanced through the screen door, feeling a little tense. “I guess I will,” I said, wondering why I felt so nervous as I walked out to speak to him.

**Episode 5721**

**Xavier**

“—and she’s feeling better?” I asked.

Jay nodded. “Yeah, she’s feeling a lot better. That moss juice is pretty gnarly, though. Lola about ripped my head off when I told her she had to drink it.”

I shrugged. “I mean, it’s not the best-tasting thing in the world, but better than whatever that sickness was. I’m just glad Cali figured out that it was the cure. Or,” I admitted, “at least relieves the symptoms.”

“Wait, what do you mean by that?” Jay asked, his brow creasing.

“What? Nothing,” I said.

“Do I need to be worried that Lola is going to relapse or something?” he asked. “And you. And everyone else?”

I sighed and pushed a hand through my hair. “Honestly, I’m not exactly sure, man. I don’t know, but I just can’t worry about that at the moment. I gotta say, I’m a lot more worried about what caused everyone to get sick in the first place.”

“What do you mean?” Jay asked.

I looked out onto the lawn, which still looked dried out and frozen from the cold weather. “I mean that screwing around with ancient magic is never good.”

“How many others do you think have been affected by this?” he asked.

“I don’t know for sure,” I admitted. “I know a few of the Vanguards were in the proximity of the whole thing when the door in Lucian’s underground hell hole was unlocked, so maybe them.”

Jay took this in. He was quiet for a moment, then asked, “Do you think Lucian did something to summon that magic?”

That was the question that I kept thinking about. “Lucian denies that he had anything to do with anything—”

“Of course,” Jay said, rolling his eye.

“But yeah, I think there’s probably something to that. I mean, Lucian’s a weird dude.”

Jay snored a laugh. “That’s an understatement.”

“No one’s going to forget about his obsession with Seluna and the fucking havoc that caused for us all.” I shook my head as a bitter taste rose up in the back of my throat. “It still pisses me off when I think about how much danger he put Cali in.” Anger felt as though it was clawing up my chest. “I might have to pay Lucian a visit, actually. It might be time to grill that bastard like a sausage to see what he does and doesn’t know about all of this.”

Jay grinned. “Even if it turns out Lucian isn’t responsible for what happened to Lola, I’m happy to help hold his feet to the fire.”

I returned Jay’s grin and slapped his shoulder. It was nice to talk like this again, and to have his support.

“I’m going to go check on Lola,” Jay said, getting to his feet.

As he walked into the house, I realized that I should probably check in on Ava. Though the thought felt a little uncomfortable—checking in on Ava when Cali was so close. She was just inside the house.

It wasn’t like I was a fucking idiot—I knew what had happened between Cali and Greyson when we’d gotten back to the pack house. And it wasn’t like it was the first time, either. But first time or thousandth time, it never got any easier, and it still pissed me the hell off. I could feel the anger and bitterness stirring in my heart.

I took a deep breath and blew it out, trying to shake off some of the heat brewing inside of me. I knew that—whatever I was feeling—I couldn’t let myself take it out on Cali. None of this was her fault, and it wasn’t fair to her. And I certainly couldn’t let it affect my conversation with Ava. She might know that I wanted Cali back, but there was no need for me to rub it in her face.

As I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed Ava’s number, I thought about how I was going to need to keep it together when I talked to both women. But Greyson was another story, and there was nothing stopping me from giving him a piece of my mind. Or maybe even giving him a right hook right in the—

“Hey,” Ava answered the phone, interrupting my violent train of thought. Her voice had a hard, angry edge. “You didn’t come home. Where are you?”

I rolled my eyes, exasperated at the immediacy of her accusatory tone. “Of course I didn’t come home. You kicked me out, remember?”

She scoffed. “Great answer, Xavier. So since you’re completely avoiding answering my question, I can only assume that you’re at Cali’s—”

“I’m at the Redwood pack house,” I interrupted.

There was a pause. “The one where Cali lives, if I’m not mistaken. Splitting hairs, aren’t we?” she said tightly.

“Me staying here was Greyson’s idea,” I said, unable to keep the irritation out of my voice. “He wouldn’t shut up about it. He wanted Colton and Kendall and me to stay here.”

“What? Why?” Ava asked.

“Why do you think? You saw what happened to the little princeling and the rest of them. Everyone’s getting sick,” I snapped.

“Wait—sick? Did *you* get sick? Are you okay?” Ava asked, her voice now anxious.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I wasn’t feeling great for a while there, but I’m okay. At least for now.”

“For *now*? What does that mean, X?”

“Cali found some kind of a cure for what’s making everyone so sick, but we’re keeping an eye on everyone who got sick just to make sure,” I said, remembering the sickening feeling of passing out while I was in that underground cave beneath the Vanguard palace.

Another pause. “Cali found the cure?”

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing my forehead. I was still trying to shake off the feeling of dread from the caves.

“So you were with her?” Ava asked.

“Ava, come on. Will you just stop?” I snapped. “It wasn’t like a fucking walk on the beach. We were in the disgusting caves under the Vanguard basement. We were there to find out what the hell is going on down there.”

Ava didn’t answer. Neither of us said anything for a tense moment. A cold wind whipped around me.

“Are you okay?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“Nice of you to ask,” she said waspishly. “Yeah, I’m fine. When are you coming back here?”

I had walked down to the lawn during the course of the conversation, and when I looked back at the house over my shoulder, I saw that Cali had come out onto the porch. Any response to Ava’s question flew out of my head when I saw her. Hell—I forgot that I was talking to Ava at all. My eyes were on Cali, watching her—missing her.

“Hello?” Ava asked. “Are you there?”

“You’re confusing the hell out of me, you know that, right?” I snapped at Ava. “You want me there, you don’t want me there. It’s hard to know what the hell to do anymore.”

“I—” there was a sharp pause. “I just want you here,” Ava finally said, her voice softer, more vulnerable.

I could hear the pain in her voice, and I hated that I was the one causing it.

Cali had been looking around, and when she caught sight of me, her face brightened and she raised her hand to call out to me.

“Xavier!” she called and started toward me.

My heart lifted. I just never got tired of seeing her or hearing my name from her lips.

“I guess you’d rather be somewhere else right now,” Ava snapped, her anger back. She clearly must have heard Cali’s voice. “With someone else.”

I groaned. “Ava, I’m talking to you, aren’t I? And you’re the one who told me to fuck off, right?”

“God—who’s being dramatic now?” she demanded. “That isn’t what I said to you.”

“Uh-huh,” I murmured. I was trying to listen to Ava speaking, but my eyes and thoughts were on Cali, who was walking toward me. It took all the strength I had not to throw down my phone and wrap my arms around her. My wolf felt it too—I could feel him howling for Cali.

Technically Ava was right—she hadn’t told me to fuck off. She’d told me to get the hell out, but if I brought it up now, that would only cause more arguing.

“I was looking for you,” Cali said breathlessly as she drew near. Then she glanced at the phone in my hand. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were on the phone.”

“Of course,” Ava said in a choked voice. “Of course it’s her. Perfect timing.”

Cali smiled, though I could see a flash of disappointment in her eyes. “I can come find you later—if you’re busy.”

“Xavier?” Ava asked. “Are you busy? Are you going to talk to her, or are you going to work this out with me?”

Clutching my phone tightly, I stared at Cali. My heart was torn—what the fuck was I going to do?

**Episode 5722**

**Kendall**

As I stared up at the ceiling, the dark wooden beams crisscrossing the room seemed to bend. I blinked, trying to clear my eyes—*and* my head—but when I opened my eyes again, things felt blurrier than ever. My eyesight was blurry, but my mind felt blurry too. Muddled, like I couldn’t think straight. That was worse than eyesight.

I swallowed, tasting the last of that disgusting moss water on my tongue. It had been gross, but it had made me feel a little bit better, which was not nothing.

I took a deep breath and tried to think. The thing that was bothering me the most was the question of how in the hell I had gotten here to the Redwood pack house the night before—and into this bed. My memory of everything still felt murky.

The last thing I remembered was being in the cave…with Greyson.

The memory of that made my stomach tighten, and my wolf began to stir.

I shook my head. I got it—it was the mate bond and all the shit associated with it—but it still bugged me.

I closed my eyes again, thinking hard and trying to remember what had happened. I remembered I had felt feverish and disoriented. And then I’d felt overpowered by a sudden lust I couldn’t begin to control.

My face began to flush as I thought of the all-consuming feeling. I remembered it, but I couldn’t remember if I had actually acted on it.

I gave my head a shake. I was being crazy. I doubted I had done anything. It wasn’t like I was in those basement caves on the prowl or something, looking for a hookup. It hadn’t been anything like that. I had been working, trying to figure out what the hell was going on beneath the Vanguard palace.

But…if that was true, then why did my lips still tingle like I’d recently been kissed?

I closed my eyes with a sigh, but they shot open again and I sat up with a gasp.

“*Shit*,” I breathed. I had just remembered—*Colton* had been there. I groaned as I rubbed my head. I really hope I hadn’t lost my fucking mind and made out with Xavier’s twin brother by accident. That was the last thing I needed.

Colton was also Greyson’s younger brother, I couldn’t help but remember with a twinge.

It wasn’t that he was unattractive. Far from it. But Colton was *not* my type. Besides the fact that he was mated—*and* engaged—was plenty to steer me away. I could run pretty loose and pretty wild, but I had my standards, and I drew the line at cheating assholes.

My wolf seemed to answer for me, growling angrily at the thought of Colton.

I closed my eyes, trying desperately to remember what had happened in that cave. But the harder I tried, the hotter my face flushed. The heat seemed to travel down my body. I shook my head, baffled. Was it the fever making me so hot? Had Cali’s moss water not worked on me?

My heart thudded, and in frustration, I got shakily to my feet. I held onto the bed, then the wall as I padded to the bathroom. I considered a cold shower, but I didn’t feel steady enough on my feet for a slippery shower floor, so I had to opt for a washcloth. I doused it with cold water and held it to my face, then the back of my neck. I needed to cool down.

I caught myself in the mirror and saw how bright my eyes were and how flushed my cheeks. I pushed a finger to my lips and—the second I touched them—I was rocked by a memory. Or what I believed to be a memory.

It hadn’t been Colton I’d kissed in that cave, which was a relief. But I had kissed *someone*… *Could* it have been Greyson?

In answer to this question, my wolf howled, and I was suddenly flooded with the sensation of his lips against mine, my hands in his hair, his growling breath in my ear…

“Holy shit,” I said aloud, holding onto the sink for support as I swayed on my feet. Was that what happened?! “*Dammit*,” I hissed. I hated that mate bond that connected us. It had to have been that—and whatever delusion I’d been under with that Dark Fever.

Back in the bedroom, the door burst open, interrupting my troubled train of thought.

I looked around the bathroom doorframe and frowned at Colton, who was standing in the middle of the room, shirtless, looking confused.

“What’s going on?!” he demanded.

I rolled my eyes, annoyed. What the hell was up with these Evers brothers anyway? Did they all just walk around shirtless, entering rooms without knocking?

“What do you mean?” I asked. “You came in here.”

He frowned at me. “I saw you,” he said in a low voice.

“Saw me *what*?” I snapped.

“Saw you trying to choke Greyson with your tongue,” he hissed back.

I scoffed, but I couldn’t stop my face from flushing. Or my wolf from growling. My damn wolf was a traitor. I had rejected Greyson, but my wolf didn’t seem to have gotten the memo. In fact, she didn’t seem to care in the slightest.

“Well?” Colton pressed.

I shook my head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe you were delirious from the Dark Fever.” I shrugged. “Maybe you still are.”

His eyes narrowed. “I know what I saw, Kendall. Besides, I drank some of that nasty ass water Cali got from the cave, so I’m fine.”

I sighed. “I don’t know what you saw or think you saw, but whatever it was, it meant nothing. If it was anything, it was just the Dark Fever.”

Colton gave me a skeptical look. “That’s a pretty convenient excuse.”

I ground my teeth. “Look,” I snapped, stepping toward him and getting right up into his face, “I rejected your brother, okay? You would do well to remember that.”

Colton looked surprised for a moment, then he laughed. “You *rejected* him? Um, okay. You know this mate shit doesn’t work like that. My mate, Maya, tried to break the mate bond with me, too. We both did, and it *epically* failed.” He grinned. “And now I’m glad it did. But that’s not the point,” he added hastily.

“Okay, as far as I can see, the point is that you barged into my room without knocking, Colton. I have headache and I’m fucking tired, so you need to go and put a shirt on, or just otherwise get of my room.”

“But—”

“There is nothing going on between me and your brother, so just get out!” I yelled and pushed him out of the room. I slammed the door and leaned back against it, my heart thudding.

I’d almost just asked Colton what he and Maya had tried to break their mate bond. I knew that it was damn near impossible to do it, and Colton had just said he and Maya had failed.

But just because they’d failed didn’t mean that it *couldn’t* be done. It didn’t mean there wasn’t *something* out there that would work. It just meant it was hard to find. After all, I could only avoid Greyson so much—at least until I figured out what was going on underneath the Vanguard estate.

I sighed and pushed a hand through my messy hair. I guess it could have been worse—what if Cali had stumbled across Greyson and me together again. But this time we had been kissing? That would have been a total shit show.

I looked up when I heard a buzzing sound, confused until I realized it was my phone.

When I picked it up, I realized it was Agent Imamu.

“Great,” I groaned. For a moment I considered not picking it up, but the thought made my head throb.

I knew why he was calling—having been infected by the Dark Fever, I could pose a grave threat if it began to spread. Cali had found that cure, but how much moss juice could there actually be?

Steeling myself, I took a deep breath and accepted the call.

“Agent,” I said, trying to sound steady and professional.

“Agent,” Imamu responded. “You know why I’m calling.”

I thought I did. “I expect you’d like an update.”

“Of course.”

I gave him a quick overview of what had happened when I’d gone beneath the Vanguard palace, leaving out the parts about making out with Greyson. I didn’t think that was relevant to the MIB investigation.

“I’m sorry to hear you were infected, but as you’re feeling better, we need you to go back,” he said brusquely. “You need to figure out what this is before it spreads out of control. It’s possible that it could affect other supernaturals—or even humans. Going in, you have the full resources of the MIB at your disposal. Do whatever you need to do, but you have to do it. You *must* get answers. You cannot afford to fail, Agent King.”

**Episode 5723**

As I watched Xavier’s face, I didn’t need to hear a voice on the other side of the phone to know he was talking to Ava. I could just tell.

I knew I had no right to feel jealous—or to feel anything at all. It wasn’t reasonable, and I knew what the deal was. After all, I had just been with Greyson…

I bit my lip as a guilty feeling washed over me. I was suddenly wishing I hadn’t come out here looking for Xavier at all. Because I knew all the reasons and I could rationalize all I wanted, but—no matter what I kept telling myself—I still felt jealous that Xavier was talking to Ava.

Xavier’s blue eyes met mine, locking in. “I have to go, Ava,” he said, then ended the call.

“I—I’m sorry,” I sputtered. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you. If you’re in the middle of something, we can talk later…” I turned to walk away, but Xavier grabbed hold of my arm and spun me back around to face him.

“That’s okay,” he said evenly. “I was just finishing up anyway.”

I had to wonder if he was only saying that to spare my feelings. Whatever Ava and Xavier had been talking about certainly hadn’t seemed settled when Xavier hung up.

That worried me, but Xavier’s hand remained on my arm, which felt good. Too good, maybe. Shit.

He stepped closer to me, his eyes sweeping down the length of me, then back up. The look made my whole body feel warm.

Partly to cover for the fluttery feeling in my chest, partly because I really wanted to know, I asked, “How’s your head feeling?”

He shrugged, his blue eyes still intent on me. “I heal fast, remember? There’s nothing to worry about, Cali.”

He was probably right about that, but I *was* still worried. I couldn’t help it, and a big part of me wanted to pull him into my arms, hold him closer, and kiss him gently, just to make sure that he felt better. But I wasn’t going to do that. I *couldn’t* do that—not after his call with Ava.

“Is everything okay…with Ava?” I asked, though it pained me to say the words.

Xavier’s face tightened. He glanced away and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “No, not really,” he finally said. “But when are we ever?”

“What does that mean?” I asked cautiously.

He smiled at me, but the expression felt forced. He reached out and lifted my chin gently. “I don’t really want to talk about that, and I bet you don’t really want to hear about it.”

Absentmindedly, I nodded. I was only half listening at that point. I was mostly thinking about how his hand felt on my skin, and how close we were standing, and how easy it would be to close the remaining space between us. And I thought of how incredibly nice it would be to just never hear Ava’s name ever again.

*Stop it!* A tiny voice in my brain yelled at me, and I gave my head a shake, snapping out of my reverie.

“I just came out because I wanted to make sure you were okay after…everything,” I said, clearing my throat.

As Xavier’s hand drifted down from my chin, his fingers brushed lightly against my neck. My breath hitched, and my pulse sped up.

“You came out to ask about me?” he asked quietly, a smile—a real one—lifting his lips.

I felt hot all over all of a sudden. Words left my head, and all I could do was nod silently again.

Finally I got ahold of myself. “Big Mac told me what you did,” I said quietly.

Xavier’s brows furrowed. “And what does the witch say I did?”

“She told me that you came to her concerned about Greyson and how sick he was. She said you were determined to make sure Greyson was okay.”

Xavier rolled his eyes, scoffing. “I wouldn’t say that’s what I was doing. It really wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“It *was* a big deal,” I disagreed. “Come on, Xavier.”

“What?” he asked, looking away.

I put my hands on my hips as I gave him a stern look. “You know why it’s a big deal,” I insisted. “There was a time—not long ago—when you wouldn’t have lifted a finger to help Greyson.”

He shrugged. “If I hadn’t done something, I would have been stuck with only Colton for a brother. And that would have driven me crazy.”

“Come on,” I pushed. “I know you’re just trying to avoid the truth.”

“The truth?” he asked, raising a brow.

“Yeah, the truth. That despite everything you say, you really do care about Greyson a lot more than you’re willing to admit. Even to yourself.”

He didn’t meet my eyes.

“Why don’t you just be honest with yourself?” I pressed. “For once.”

He took a breath. “If I was being honest…” He trailed off, his eyes blazing. He lifted his hand and stroked my hair, then let it rest on the back of my neck.

For a breath-holding moment, I thought he was going to lean forward and kiss me.

But he didn’t, and a moment later he dropped his hand away from me.

“I can’t remember if I thanked you for the moss juice,” he said gruffly.

“What?” I asked, a little muddled.

He gave me a half-smile. “The moss water. It tasted like shit, but it saved me. It saved all of us.”

The sexual tension that had been building was broken, and the moment gone. I laughed and shrugged. “Well, someone has to look out for all the wolf-bears like you.”

He chuckled. “So does that make you the wolf-bear savior?”

“Something like that,” I said. I was smiling at him, but all I really wanted to do was kiss him. Ugh, that was so fucked up.

There was something in Xavier’s eyes that made me think he felt the same way. His blue eyes flashed as he leaned toward me. He kept coming, moving close enough that I could feel his breath on my cheek.

My own breath caught in my throat. I looked at him, my eyes on his lips, which were so full, so luscious, and so, *so* close. All I’d have to do is just rise up on my toes, and then I could…

A scream broke the air—and the moment. I stumbled back, my heart racing, and turned around to look at the house. That hadn’t just been any scream—

“That was Lola,” I said breathlessly. “What the hell is happening now?”  
 Xavier gave a casual shrug. “I don’t know—that sounded like Lola’s happy scream, didn’t it?”

“I’m going to go find out,” I muttered. I hurried back toward the house, and Xavier followed me.

When we went into the kitchen, we found Lola wrapped around Jay as he carried her into the room.

“Lola, is everything okay?! Why are you screaming?” I demanded, my heart still racing.

She grinned at me. “I feel *great*!”

Xavier gave me a knowing look, and I was finally able to take a deep, relieved breath. It felt amazing, and I was so glad the moss juice seemed to be doing what it was supposed to.

“Hey.” Greyson leaned in through the kitchen doorway. “I want everyone in the living room. Now.” His eyes scanned the room, finally landing on me—and then Xavier.

Seeing me standing next to Xavier, Greyson’s jaw clenched. Next to me, Xavier’s did the same.

There I stood, literally in the middle of them. Again. Fucking *due destini*.

“Let’s go,” Greyson said sternly.

We all headed into the living room, where Big Mac, Mrs. Smith, Colton, and the rest of the pack were all waiting for us.

“How long do you think we need to stay?” Colton asked as soon as Greyson walked into the room. “Gabriel and Mikah can only watch the twins for so long. And Maya’s not back yet, so I really need to go.”

“I get that, Colton, but isn’t it better if you stay here? You wouldn’t want to infect the kids—or Gabe and Mikah—if there’s still a chance you’re contagious,” I pointed out.

Ravi had been looking around the room, completely bewildered. “Okay, will someone just stop for a minute and tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Listen up,” Greyson said briskly. He gave a quick recap of everything that happened at Lucian’s, and how they had all been exposed to something, resulting in the Dark Fever.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Lilac asked, looking horrified.

“This is some horror movie shit,” Charlie muttered. Violet nodded, hugging her mate close.

“I’m not kidding. It’s all very real,” Greyson said gravely. He looked over at Xavier. “Since you and I have dealt with Lucian most often, we’re going to deal with this.”

“What did you have in mind?” Xavier asked.

Greyson’s face was stony. “First thing in the morning, we’re going back to the Vanguard palace and getting a straight answer out of Lucian—for once in his damn life.”

**Episode 5724**

**Artemis**

We looked around. All of us—Marius, Rishika, Adair, Tabitha, Zale, and me—were searching for the source of the voice.

My heart beat hard, and I put my hand on my dagger, ready for something to happen. Maybe another troll was going to pop out on us.

Marius and Rishika closed in on either side of me, each of their stances protective.

“Over here!” the voice came again.

I turned, but all I could see was a tree. “Who’s there?” I called out.

“You’re looking right at me. Don’t you see me?”

I frowned, confused. What the hell did that mean? Why did everything here have to be so backward sometimes? It was so frustrating.

“The tree,” Adair said quietly.

I looked over at him. “What?”

Adair nodded up. “The tree. Look.”

I looked, and sure enough, the tree seemed to be…*waving* at me?

My breath caught. *Good gods*, I forgot how freaking weird the Fae world could be. I sure didn’t miss any of this shit when I was in the human world, but that had plenty of its own strangeness to deal with.

When I stepped closer to the tree, it seemed to shiver its leaves a bit.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Othello,” the tree said in its low voice.

“What the fuck?” Rishika muttered behind me.

Adair came to stand next to me. “And why wouldn’t you go that way?” he asked the tree.

“Because there’s quicksand that way. It just developed after a terrible rockslide we had the other day,” Othello explained. “I’d hate for you to get caught up in it. It’s certainly very treacherous.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Zale. I was glad to see that Marus and Rishika were standing next to him, subtly flanking him. I still didn’t know what to think of that Fae.

When I turned back to the tree, I was surprised that I could actually see a face in the trunk. It was subtle, but undeniably there.

“And why should we believe you?” I asked. “What if you lead us to another dangerous path?”

The tree shook slightly, seeming to chuckle. “Always so paranoid, little Fae?”

“Maybe I am,” I admitted. “You don’t know me.”

“I am a tree,” Othello pointed out. “What would I do to you? What could I do to you?”

“I can think of a few things,” Marius said under his breath.

“I’m not going to be convinced by a tree,” I said, standing my ground. “I know that everything in this world has only its own best interest at heart, so there must be a reason you want us to go the other way.” I looked over my shoulder at the others. “Forget him—let’s carry on the way we were going.”

I had only taken a step before the tree called out—

“*Wait!*”

“What now?” Adair snapped, looking even more impatient than I felt.

“Okay…you caught me,” the tree admitted. I didn’t know how, but I could practically hear a sheepish smile in its voice. “I do only have my best interests at heart, but it’s not what you think!”

I glanced at Marius and Rishika, who looked suspicious. “What is it then?” I asked.

“Alright, it is true that there was a rockslide the other day, and it is also true quicksand formed because of it. And the honest truth is that if you go that way, you will absolutely get sucked in and die. But after you die, your bodies will break down, aided by the moisture of the quicksand, and all your blood and liquified bones get absorbed into the soil, which feeds my roots, and I do not like the nutrients from bodies. It just causes all kinds of problems for me—including the worst gas.”

Marius snorted. “So you’re trying to protect us so you can prevent yourself from getting…*gas*?”

“Do trees get gas?” Rishika asked, looking confused.

Tabitha frowned. “I mean, it would be the first I’m hearing about it. I thought trees gave off oxygen.”

“Well, there certainly are ailments that the trees here get,” Zale put in, “but that still doesn’t answer the question that you two asked,” he said, gesturing to Adair and me. He looked back at the tree. “Why should we trust you?”

I was surprised. I hadn’t expected Zale to back us up. Maybe I’d been a bit wrong to be so suspicious of him. This unexpected support was certainly a step in the right direction.

I turned back to the tree. “Yes, please explain.”

Othello’s branches shook. “Well, now it’s my word against yours, isn’t it? You could go see the quicksand for yourself if you don’t want to believe me, but I really wouldn’t advise it. What can I do to gain your trust? I would prefer it vastly.”

An idea jumped into my mind almost immediately. “Othello, can you help me contact someone in the human world?”

“Of course,” he said without hesitation. “I can contact any tree in the world, whatever dimension it lives in.”

“Really?” Rishika asked.

Othello seemed to nod, his branches bowing toward us, then back again. “Yes. We’re all connected. We are quite the network, of course, throughout every place in all of time and space.”

“Wow,” Rishika breathed, seeming impressed.

“Great,” I said briskly. “Well, if you can help me contact someone in the human world, then we’ll believe you. We’ll go the other way. No gas.”

“Alright,” Othello agreed.

“What are you doing?” Adair hissed at me. “Who could you possibly need to contact so desperately that you would put your trust in this tree?”

“I need to talk to my mom again,” I hissed back. “Come on, Adair, think about it. We’re working blind out here. We didn’t get answers from her the last time we asked, and we don’t have Kastian around anymore to use his plant abilities, so a tree is our next best option. Our *only* option.”

Adair looked thoughtful, then he nodded. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. It’s a good idea,” he admitted.

“So how does this work?” I asked, looking up at the tree. The last time I’d done this with the help of Kastian who had similar magic to my mom, but this was just a…tree.

“The way I can help Fae communicate with other trees or beings in other worlds is through the hollowed-out part of my trunk that a thunderbird once nested in. It’s here, on the other side of my trunk,” he said, moving a branch to point.

“I’ll go with you,” Marius said, moving to my side.

“Me too,” Rishika said, stepping to my other side.

I nodded, and the three of us walked around the back of the huge tree. And sure enough, there was a hollowed-out depression in the tree. Looking at it, I could tell it was old—at least based on the rings we could see from inside the tree.

“Only *one* may enter,” Othello said in his low, gravelly voice.

“No,” Marius said, shaking his head. “We’re all going.”

“No, I’m afraid not. That is not how this is going to work,” Othello said. The voice was without emotion—but it was clear there was no arguing with him.

“It’s fine,” I said, turning to Marius.

“It’s really not,” he argued.

“Come on,” I said, and gestured to the hollow of the tree. “It really doesn’t look like it’s big enough for all of us. And if anything happens, it’s a tree, right? What can he do to me? Scratch me with his bark?”

“I’ve got the claws to do some scratching,” Rishika added threateningly, glaring at Othello.

I gave her a small smile, grateful for the support, then I took a deep breath before I stepped inside the tree. It was like a little doorway, and the space inside the tree was small and close. As I stepped inside, the whole tree shuddered, and when I turned around, I could see the bark was moving, closing up the entrance I had just stepped through.

“What the hell?!” Marius yelled. “Artemis! Where are you?!”

“Artemis!” Rishika called. “What do you think you’re doing, tree?!”

But it was too late. They were outside, and I was in.

“Othello!” I snapped, hitting my fist against the trunk. “What is this? Is this some kind of a trick?!”

“No, it’s not a trick, little Fae. Think about who it is you need to connect with,” Othello’s voice came, surrounding me on all sides. “Think about who you wish to speak to, and we will.”

Still tense, I tried to take a breath. I could still hear Rishika and Marius calling for me, angrily yelling at Othello on the other side of the tree, but I shut my eyes and tried to think.

I thought of my mother. I wanted to speak to my mother.

“That’s it,” Othello said encouragingly. “You’re doing it. Keep calling out to them.”

“Mom! Mom! Can you hear me?! Orla! Orla Wrenthorn?!”

“*Artemis?*”

My breath caught in my throat. It was my mother. My mother’s voice was calling my name. And she was close. It sounded like she was in the same room…er, trunk with me.

My heart sped up, and when I opened my eyes, I gasped. Somehow, someway, my mother was standing right in front of me.

**Episode 5725**

**Greyson**

I looked over at Xavier as I finished speaking. I braced myself, fully expecting him to say something sharp or snarky in response to my suggestion, but—to my surprise—all he did was nod.

“That makes sense,” he said.

I nodded back. I was trying not to let my brother’s close physical proximity to Cali distract me from the matter at hand. So they were standing next to each other. What of it? After all, it had been my idea to keep everyone here at the pack house in the first place.

But I wasn’t stupid. Xavier had made it perfectly clear that he still wanted Cali. And I had seen them come in from outside together. Fuck knows what he was saying to her out there.

My hands curled into fists, but I forced myself to relax them. I sighed. I wasn’t angry. How could I be when I was still dealing with the mate bond with Kendall? That was causing me plenty of grief.

The only good thing was that I had already been honest with Cali about the bond and those feelings. I’d even told her about Kendall kissing me in the cave when she’d been under the Dark Fever. And I’d meant it when I’d told her that the kiss had meant nothing to me…even if my wolf *was* still reacting to the memory of it.

Cali stepped toward me, a determined look on her face. “You know I’m coming with you tomorrow when you go see Lucian.”

I looked at Cali for a moment, thinking about the statement. The truth was that I didn’t see any reason to even try to stop her. “I guess so,” I said. I glanced over at Xavier, who shrugged.

“After all,” he pointed out, “Cali is the one who literally saved all our asses.”

I looked around. It had suddenly occurred to me that Kendall wasn’t in the living room with everyone else. I frowned, trying to remember if she’d been downstairs at all since we’d come back from the Vanguard estate. I knew I shouldn’t be worried about her, but I was, mate bond or not. She had been down in those caves to help me figure out what was going on. She knew—probably more than most of us—that it had been dangerous.

“I’ll be right back,” I muttered, striding from the living room. I headed upstairs to check on her.

I knocked on her door, but when I didn’t hear a response, I cracked the door open. It was dark, but in the dim light, I could see that she was lying still in the bed. Probably asleep.

I figured I probably wouldn’t be able to talk to her about the kiss. She had been so delirious when I’d found her. She’d been burning up with that Dark Fever, barely been conscience.

I was about to leave the room when something made me pause. I turned back into the room and stepped inside.

Closer up, I could see that Kendall was only partially covered by the blanket, which was bunched at her waist.

My wolf stirred, but I reached forward and pulled the blanket up, covering her bare shoulders. Gently, I placed a hand on her forehead to check her fever. She moved, murmuring something I couldn’t quite make out.

My stomach tightened, but she didn’t feel feverish. That was good. She was probably just exhausted. We all were.

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I looked up at the ceiling, sighing with contentment. Cali lay next to me in my bed, her head resting on my chest. I felt relaxed in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time. What would I give to close off the world beyond this room so that we could just stay here together like this—just the two of us.

Cali looked up at me. “How are you feeling?”

I smiled down at her. “Right now? I’ve never felt better.” And to prove it, I ran my hand along her thigh.

She rolled her eyes. “Greyson, I’m being serious. You really worried me when you got so sick.”

“I know, love,” I said quietly. I brushed my lips against hers. “But I really am feeling better. Thanks to you and that god-awful-tasting moss water.”

She frowned. “You’re so tall, Greyson. I wonder if the dose I gave you was enough. Maybe we should do another dose, just to be sure.”

I pulled back in mock disgust. “No! Anything but that,” I said with an exaggerated shudder.

She smiled, then fell quiet again, resting her head and stroking my chest absently.

The feeling of her next to me was the best medicine I could think of, and I closed my eyes, pulling her tighter to me.

“You know Xavier was worried about you, too,” she said.

“What?”

“He asked Big Mac for help.”  
 I opened my eyes. “Did he tell you that?”

She laughed. “He admitted to it after Big Mac told me. And even then, he was pretty reluctant to say.”

I took that in. I felt strangely comforted by this information. I knew I would have done the same thing for either of my brothers, and it felt good to know that Xavier was looking out for me—in his own prickly way.

Cali sighed. “I wish things between you and Xavier weren’t so…”

“*Due destini*-ish?” I suggested.

“Yeah,” she said. She yawned. “I’m glad that everyone is feeling better now. I don’t want to ever go through something like that again…”

Her voice trailed off as her head grew heavy on my chest. She was asleep, and I stroked her hair as I looked up at the ceiling. I was so lucky to have this amazing woman in my life. I knew my wolf loved her and wanted her. But then my wolf had also reacted strongly to Kendall.

I could feel my wolf stirring within me and I narrowed my eyes.

*Don’t fuck this up*, I told my wolf. *I love Cali*.

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The next day when I woke up, I stared blearily at my phone. I yawned as I looked out the window. Tuesday morning had dawned grey and cold, but I pulled myself out of bed and got dressed.

As I walked into the hallway, I saw Kendall stepping out of her room. She looked…good. Far better than she had when I’d brought her back from Lucian’s. There wasn’t that sickly tone to her skin anymore.

And despite my very stern warning to my wolf the night before, I could feel my wolf call to attention at the sight of her. Her scent wafted toward me, and I felt myself react.

“Greyson,” she said coolly, her purple eyes assessing. “I assume you’re feeling better.”

I nodded. “I assume the same for you.”

“Yes, fine. So I should probably get going.”

“Hang on,” I said, stepping in front of her so she couldn’t start toward the stairs. “Don’t you think we should talk?”

Kendall stared up at me, her purple eyes blank. For a moment, I wondered if she really had no idea what I was talking about, and no real memory of our kiss.

“About what?” she asked.

“About what happened. In the cave.” I lowered my voice. “About you kissing me.”

She flinched. “I really hoped we were never going to have to talk about that again.” She shook her head, like she was ridding herself of the memory. “I was feverish, half out of my mind.”

That had all been true, so I wasn’t going to argue with that. But… “Are you sure you’re not just saying what you think I want to hear?”

She sighed. “Maybe it had something to do with the fever, and the mate bond, and it all just caused me to act on impulse. But—I promise you, Grey—I *meant* it when I said that I rejected you.” Her eyes took on an icy glint. “I hope that doesn’t hurt your sensitive Alpha feelings.”

“What?”

She smirked at me. “I can’t imagine you’re used to being rejected.”

I felt the frustrating confusion I almost always felt when I spoke with Kendall. I didn’t know what it was about her that just drove me crazy. It was like she enjoyed pushing my buttons. “You’re not going to take this seriously, are you?”

“Should I?” she asked with a casual shrug. “Why? It’s clear neither of us want a bond between us, and if you’ll recall, I have bigger things to worry about.”

She started to push past me, but I grabbed hold of her arm, stopping her.

She stopped, and her eyes flicked down to my hand grasping her arm, then up to my face.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Back to the Vanguard palace to find out what’s going on,” she said firmly.

“You can’t go back there. It’s too dangerous,” I said, shaking my head. “Look what happened to you the last time you went.”

Her eyes narrowed and when she spoke, her voice was low. “It’s my job.”

She tried to shake her arm free, but I tightened my grip.

“You’re not going anywhere, Kendall,” I growled. “I won’t allow it.”

**Episode 5726**

**Kendall**

I pulled my arm free from Greyson’s grasp as anger sparked inside of me. “I’m sorry? You won’t *allow* it?” I repeated. “Who the hell are you to talk to me like that?”

“Kendall—” he started, but I wasn’t in the mood to listen.

I was feeling trapped by the feelings crawling up my chest, and hearing Greyson talk like that just pushed me over the edge. “I don’t know who you think I am, but I am *not* your submissive little Luna, Greyson,” I snapped. “I’m going to the Vanguard palace, and I’m *not* looking for permission.”

“It’s too fucking dangerous,” he growled, his eyes flashing.

“Too dangerous for me, but not for you?” I challenged. “My memory of what happened might be fuzzy, but I did recall that you had been affected by the Dark Fever just as much as I was. I don’t know if it’s the mate bond, or just your fucking personality that makes you act like you own me, but I’m not into it so you need to back the hell off.”

“I’m not trying—”

“Did you forget the threat I made, Greyson?” I asked, my throat tight with anger. “That I have the ability to do anything I want to you? That I could take this entire pack—the house, the wolves—*everything* from you.”

When I took a step toward him, closing the gap between us, his eyes flashed in a way that made my whole body buzz. Fuck.

“And when I say everything, I *mean* everything,” I said in a low, menacing voice.

His face darkened. “Are you making a threat about Cali?”

My wolf snarled at the sound of Cali’s name. That threw me enough I didn’t actually have a response. *Had* I just threatened Cali? I didn’t think I’d meant to. I didn’t like her, but I suspected that might have something to do with the mate nonsense. As a person, I didn’t have anything against her. She was kind, if not a little goofy sometimes. But after all, she had been the one who had managed to save us all from whatever that Dark Fever was.

I hesitated, so thrown I wasn’t sure how to respond.

Greyson scoffed. “You make these threats, but they’re hollow. I know they are even if you don’t. I don’t think you’d ever do anything to me. I don’t think you have it in you.”

I bristled and I shoved down my wolf’s growl at being so close to Greyson. “I’m not screwing around,” I hissed. “And if you’re so sure I’m bluffing, maybe you’d like to test me. But I have to tell you, you’re going to find out you were wrong, and then you’re going to lose everything.”

Greyson’s jaw worked. “Why is it so important for you to go back to the Vanguard palace?”

“Because it’s my *job*,” I snapped. “I don’t get to decide to just not do my job because it’s too hard. It doesn’t work like that. I don’t get to choose—they don’t let me.”

Greyson glared at me. “Just tell me what’s going on. I can’t help you or my pack if I’m kept in the dark.”

I considered that for a moment, wondering how much I should tell him. If anything. Or if I should just keep my mouth shut and not reveal anything at all. I’d already told him I was an agent with the MIB. And while that had been risky—and I’d had plenty of reasons to regret that choice—it also felt incredibly good to be able to tell him. I’d lived with so many secrets for so long and had to hide behind so many lies, they started to feel like a crushing weight on my shoulders. There was something kind of like relief to tell Greyson and have him help me share that weight.

I looked up at Greyson. He wasn’t moving. He was waiting for me to respond.

I ground my teeth. Even if I hated it, he was my mate—at least for now. I knew I shouldn’t be tempted to open up to him—or to anyone—but why was it that he made me feel like I wanted to? Was it the mate bond? Was I still under the power of the Dark Fever?

None of it mattered.

I shook my head. “You know how much secrecy I work under,” I said. “It would be too risky to talk about it openly. Risky for me and for you—”

“I already know about MIB,” he insisted. “And isn’t it riskier for me to now know what’s going on? I’m going to Lucian’s whether you tell me or not. So you decide.”

I looked up at him, meeting his stormy grey eyes. I could feel my wolf stirring within me, and all at once I was hit by the memory of kissing Greyson. The sensation of it followed, making heat flood through my body.

*STOP!* I screamed at myself. *Just make this stop already!*

“If I need to tell you something, I will,” I said tersely. “You’ll just have to trust me.”

Greyson opened his mouth to respond, but before he could say anything, my phone buzzed. I grabbed it from my pocket and looked at it. It was a text from Emory.

“Who is it?” Greyson asked hoarsely.

“It’s from my brother.” I didn’t know what made me tell him. Maybe I just didn’t feel like lying about something so benign.

“Okay,” Greyson said, stepping away from me.

I hadn’t realized how tightly I was holding myself until Greyson moved and put some oxygen between us. I started to step past him, but he put his hand gently on my arm. I looked up at him.

“I’m trusting you, Kendall,” he said in a low voice. “Don’t make me regret it.”

I stepped past him without a word and looked down at Emory’s text.

*Hey! I think I can get away during spring break. Love to come for a visit if ur free.*

My heart clenched as I looked at the message. I could really use my younger brother’s company at the moment. I was used to being alone, but for the first time in a long time, I *felt* alone, and I could use some company.

But if he came, I’d have to lie to him. He thought I had a job as a college administrator. He thought my life was extremely boring as a Rogue, and that was how I wanted to keep it. I had no qualms about lying to anyone else—not even to Greyson—about my real job working for MIB. I wouldn’t have taken the job in the first place if lying was going to be a problem for me. But lying to my own brother always hurt. I’d had to do it—for his own good—but it sucked.

Sometimes I wondered if on some level he suspected I was lying but was too trusting to question me.

I bit my lip as I looked down at the message, wondering what to do.

*I’d love to see you, Em*, I wrote back. *Plan on it.*

It was a risk, but I figured by the time spring break rolled around, the mysterious sounds coming from under Lucian’s palace would be solved and dealt with, and I would be free to spend some *un*mysterious time with my brother.

Slipping my phone back into my pocket, I headed down the stairs. I could smell coffee, and I followed the smell toward its source, in desperate need of caffeine. When I walked into the kitchen, I practically ran into Cali, who was trying to walk out.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, jumping back. She smiled at me. “Good morning, Kendall. Feeling better?”

I looked at her warily. If she was at all suspicious about what had happened between Greyson and me, she didn’t show it. She was probably too trusting, but as far as I was concerned, she really had nothing to worry about. I had no interest in stealing her man.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Just feel like I have a hangover,” I told her. I looked around. “Tell me there’s some coffee around here.”

She grimaced. “There is, but Lola made it, so don’t get your expectations too high.”

“I heard that, Caliana Hart!” Lola yelled from the kitchen.

“But I made pancakes!” another voice yelled.

I looked into the kitchen, and the other Fae, Torin, waved at me with a pancake turning. Walking in, the camaraderie of the place made my stomach turn. It was way too early for this kind of high energy. Besides, I was used to being alone. I preferred it that way, too.

Lola handed me a cup of coffee, and I took a sip, trying not to make a face as I swallowed. The brew was dark and bitter, like the beans had been incinerated before they’d been brewed.

“Thanks,” I managed.

Greyson walked into the kitchen. He must have followed me down the stairs. He glanced at me, and when our eyes met, my wolf growled with desire.

I gripped my cup more tightly, and Greyson looked away, moving toward Cali, who was going around, asking everyone how they were feeling after the moss juice.

It quickly became clear that everyone who had been affected was feeling better and showing few signs of the Dark Fever. From the sound of it, everyone felt like I did—better, with some lingering aches.

Colton clapped his hands together. “Great. I miss those stinkin’ cute babies, and I need to get back to check on them.”

“Wait, hang on!” Cali said, looking around the kitchen frantically. “Has anyone seen Xavier?”

**Episode 5727**

**Xavier**

*Cali.*

She was all I could think about. No matter what else was going on—and there was a *lot* going on—I just couldn’t get her out of my head. I had dreamed about her last night. All my dreams had revolved around her, and I’d gotten terrible sleep as I’d tossed and turned.

The whole night was doomed from the start. I’d felt okay after the moss water, definitely not like I was about to die, which was good. But I’d still felt groggy and muddled. And it didn’t help matters that I was back in my own house, but she wasn’t with me in my bed. I had woken up confused and restless. I’d woken up before dawn and I’d been driven from the house, desperate for some way to blow off the crazed energy I was feeling.

Deep in the woods, I dropped my head and ran faster, my wolf form stretching long in the cold morning air. I was running my old route, which I normally loved to do. But this time I was trying to shake off the lack of sleep from my body, and Cali from my head. But that was turning out to be more difficult than I would have thought.

As much as I loved a good run, I knew that it wasn’t going to solve anything, and my problems were going to be waiting for me when I got back. However fast I ran, I knew I still had to deal with Ava.

But how? She was upset with me—and rightfully so. I couldn’t blame her for being pissed—I’d screwed up. I should have told her when I left for the Vanguard estate. But then that would have hurt her too—knowing I was going there with Cali. Now she knew, and that only made things worse.

I shook my head. I should have told her. But that was typical for me—I always thought of the right thing to do *after* I had already done the wrong thing.

Fucking Adéluce. Everything that was going wrong in my life all came back to her. I wished that monster wasn’t dead so that I could kill her all over again and make her suffer more for what she had done to my life. It wasn’t that things had been exactly easy before her, but since she’d turned everything upside down, it all felt so much harder and more complicated. I was trying to mend things with Cali, and I knew I was close, but the harder I tried with Cali, the more I hurt Ava. Which really fucking sucked.

My chest ached, but it didn’t have anything to do with how hard I was running or the frostiness of the winter air. How the hell had Cali survived as long as she had with the pressure of the *due destini*? It was unbearable. I knew that it sucked for Greyson and me, but Cali must be a lot stronger than either of us truly appreciated.

Having two mates—two people you deeply cared for—was maddening.

I knew I should go back to the Samara house and clear things up with Ava—as well as I could. Even hurt and angry, I knew she would still welcome me back. That was the strength of the mate bond. But I hated that she was hurt at all.

The frustrating thing was that I had nothing to hide. I hadn’t done anything with Cali.

Though when I thought of the conversation we’d had in the backyard of the pack house, I had to admit that I’d come pretty close.

But I could tell Ava that Greyson had asked me to keep an eye on her, to protect her. But I knew Ava would know that I didn’t go with her only because Greyson had asked me too. Ava knew me too well for that.

As I circled back toward the Redwood house, I picked up on a familiar scent. It was Cali’s, and I felt my heart beat harder. What was she doing out here?

I followed the scent until I caught sight of her, standing near the edge of the forest in a small grove of trees. She was holding a mug in her hands, and she had a smile on her face. She looked relieved when she saw me, and my wolf urged me to run faster.

She waved as I drew close. I slowed down to catch my breath, just enjoying seeing her. Then I shifted and walked toward her, wiping sweat from my head.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked her.

Cali had just taken a sip of her drink and she nearly choked as her eyes scanned down my naked body. Her face turned bright red, and she shook her head, wiping drips of mocha from her chin. “I got worried when I didn’t see you this morning,” she explained. “You didn’t come downstairs with everyone else. First I panicked, then hit hit me that instead of you being kidnapped or whatever else my brain thought up, you might be out running, since that’s what you like to do when you…”

She paused and her cheeks flamed again.

“When you need to sort things out,” she finished.

My heart swelled. She knew to come out to look for me. I loved that she just knew me so well. “Yeah, that’s what I was doing. Running.”

She nodded. “Good… That’s good… I assume you’re feeling good. I can tell because you look good. I mean—” She got flustered again.

I smiled. I missed how easily she blushed. I took a guilty pleasure in knowing that it was me making her blush. I shouldn’t have, but it was what it was.

“If you were worried about the Dark Fever, I’m fully recovered.”

She nodded, looking relieved again. “I’m glad to hear it. That was pretty scary.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think it affected me very much. I didn’t have it nearly as bad as Greyson did,” I pointed out.

“I guess not,” she agreed. “But that’s just because you weren’t down there as long. You probably would have gotten to that point. I just hope that the moss we found works in the long term, and that no one’s symptoms come back.”

I stepped closer to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’m fine. Really. You did a good thing, Cali. Even if it was one of your classic hairbrained schemes.”

She scowled and playfully shoved my hand off her shoulder. “Hey! It worked out, didn’t it?” she demanded, laughing.

“It sure did,” I admitted with a chuckle.

“Come inside,” Cali said, tipping her head toward the house.

I followed her without argument. It felt like such an easy feeling, both of us smiling and not trying to fight through any awkwardness. It was such a great moment, I didn’t want it to end. I wanted to exist like this with her all the time.

But just as I thought that, Greyson came walking out the backdoor of the house.

He stopped at the bottom of the porch steps, watching Cali and me walk out of the woods toward him. My sharp werewolf vision allowed me to clearly see the displeasure on his face at the sight of Cali and me together.

I knew I should care, but all I could think was: Good. Now Greyson knew how it had been for me since Adéluce stole Cali from me.

“Hey!” Cali called, waving to Greyson. “I found him.”

He nodded. “We’re getting ready to go to the Vanguard estate.”

I groaned. I knew that’s where we were going, but it certainly wasn’t the best way to start the day.

“Just give me a second,” I muttered.

Greyson glared at me. “The longer we wait, the better chance there is that someone else is going to get infected.”

I had some serious doubts it was actually that urgent. We’d waited all night—what was another twenty minutes? “Go ahead then if you’re itching to go,” I said. Then the next words came out of my mouth before I could really think about them. “I’ll take Cali, so you can just run along.”

Greyson clenched his jaw, glancing between the two of us. “*Fine*. I don’t have time to argue.”

My wolf was surprised at Greyson’s response, but liked that he had given in so easily, and even better when he turned and strode back into the house.

Next to me, Cali shifted, looking uncomfortable.

“What?” I asked, looking down at her. “I have to get dressed, don’t I? Or didn’t you notice?”

Cali looked flustered again, and my wolf reacted to her sudden vulnerability.

“Come on,” I said, gesturing for her to follow me inside. I took her by the arm to start up the stairs, and the sudden contact sent a jolt of electricity into my body.

It was wild. How many times had I touched Cali? Thousands, maybe. How many times had I walked into the pack house with her at my side? But still it still felt good. Really fucking good.

As we reached the steps, I could hear the roar of Greyson’s car as he pulled away. There was something about it that sounded angry, and I figured Greyson was pissed. Too bad.

Fuck him. The guy should be grateful that I’d saved his ass. He could’ve pushed back if he’d wanted to, but he hadn’t.

Just as we reached the door, Cali stopped me.

“Xavier,” she said hesitantly. She looked up at me. “Is there a reason you wanted us to go together?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is there a reason you wanted us to go…alone?”

**Episode 5728**

My heart thudded as I stood there, waiting for Xavier’s response. The silence seemed to press in on all sides, and I had to fight to keep breathing. Seeing him in the woods a moment ago in his wolf form—and then, after he shifted, *naked*—had stirred something in me. And try as I might, I hadn’t been able to ignore it.

It hurt me that Greyson had seen us together when we’d emerged from the woods, but he hadn’t argued when Xavier had said he would take me to the Vanguard estate. I hadn’t argued either. I hadn’t even really even thought about it—until now. I wasn’t sure what troubled me more.

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t know, it really isn’t that big of a deal, is it?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Greyson seemed like he was in a hurry to get over there, and we’re going too, but I do need to get dressed. He could’ve waited, but he didn’t. Anyway, I’d rather light my fur on fire than spend a minute longer than I have to with Lucian. Just because my brother wants to rush off doesn’t mean I have to do the same thing.”

He started into the house, but I put my hand on his arm again, holding him back.

“Okay, but you could have asked me what *I* wanted to do first.”

He turned around to look at me, facing me fully, and it was all I could do to not let my gaze wander anywhere below his chin. It was hard and took a lot of concentration. It was like trying not to eat the last donut. It was all you thought about until you took a small bite. Then a little more. Then bit by bit, until it was completely gone.

My eyes were drifting down to his sculpted chest when he spoke:

“I’m sorry I didn’t ask you, but I didn’t want to make a scene out of it,” he said. “And you could’ve said no, too Cali.”

I gulped. “Yeah that’s… Yeah. You’re right.”

What else was there to say really? I’d been surprised when Xavier said it, and even more surprised when Greyson hadn’t pushed it. I wasn’t sure if itw as because Greyson felt bad about the whole Kendall situation or if he just didn’t want to argue right now with so much other stuff going on… But as soon as Xavier’d said it, I’d needed to know why.

“The truth is…” he said slowly. “I said I would take you because I wanted to spend some time alone with you.”

My eyes flew back up to his and my heart fluttered. “Oh? Why is that?” I managed to squeak.

He smiled. “I feel like we were interrupted yesterday before we really had a chance to talk. I was hoping to make up for that.” And with that he opened the back door into the kitchen and gestured for me to go in, stepping back to let me pass.

I stepped through the door, brushing against his bare stomach, his chest, and his…

I dragged in a breath, wondering if the woozy feeling in my head was what the Dark Fever felt like when it first hit.

Without really thinking about it, I followed Xavier though the kitchen, but when we got to the stairs, my wits returned, and I froze, wondering *why* I was about to follow him upstairs to his room. Muscle memory?

Maybe guessing at what I was thinking, Xavier turned back to me with a smirk. “I’m just going up to get my clothes.”

I nodded, but I knew where I was, and I knew that smirk on Xavier’s face. I knew what could happen if I followed him upstairs. “I—I’ll just meet you by my car,” I stammered and spun on my heel. Driving sounded better than riding him in his wolf form all the way to Lucian’s.

Grabbing my keys off the table by the door, I rushed outside, only pausing when I’d reached the porch and slammed the door behind me.

*Get a grip!* I fumed at myself.

I shook my head, wondering why it had felt so easy and so natural to follow him up the stairs. It would be so easy to turn around right now and…

No. It would just make things more complicated than they already were—which was already very, *very* complicated.

I took a few deep breaths as I walked to my car, and when I got there, I kept pacing. This was for the best, I tried to tell myself. He said that he wanted to talk—that was fine. I could talk to Xavier. There was no danger in talking. Was there?

I was so keyed up that when I heard the front door open, I nearly jumped out of my skin. I turned around and the beating of my heart went into overdrive as Xavier emerged, dressed in dark jeans and a grey T-shirt. He headed down the stairs, each stop closer to me making me tremble.

What the hell was wrong with me? Why was I acting like we’d only just met? This wasn’t a date. We were just going to drive to the Vanguard palace—that was it.

My hands shook as I unlocked the car, the beeping sound loud in the early morning silence.

“Get in,” Xavier commanded. “I’ll drive.”

I didn’t have the energy to argue, so I slid into the passenger seat, my eyes following Xavier as he walked around the car.

When he got in, he looked at me curiously. “Why are you so nervous?”

“What?” I asked, the words sticking in my throat.

He shook his head as he started the engine. “If you’re worried about whatever the fuck Lucian has hiding in his basement, don’t.”

The dark basement caves had been the furthest thing from my mind, so I shook my head. “I’m not worried about that.”

He smiled at me. “Good.” Then he put the car into gear, and we drove down the driveway.

He turned onto the main road, which was still quiet. It was early in the morning, and the sun still hadn’t fully burned through the clouds, giving the day a patchy feeling.

I tapped my fingers on the tops of my thighs. I was waiting for him to start talking. After all, wasn’t that what he said he wanted to do? The whole reason he had declared he would drive me himself.

I bit my lip, trying to remember exactly what he had said. But it was hard to remember. All I could think about was how powerful and lithe he had looked in his wolf form. And then after he had shifted, how strong and…well…*naked*. I thought of how he had been looking at my lips yesterday when we were standing in the backyard. It was almost as though he had wanted to kiss me. There had been a strange, tight tension in the air.

The silence of the car pressed in on my ears. Though I knew it wasn’t actually physical, I had to take a deep breath, trying to breathe through it.

Finally, when I couldn’t take it anymore, I broke the silence myself. “So why are we here?” I asked.

Xavier looked over at me. He moved his hand causally down, letting it brush lightly against where mine rested on my leg. “Do I need a reason? We’re supposed to be going to the Vanguard estate. So I’m driving you there.”

I scowled. “You know that’s not actually why we’re here,” I said. “You said you wanted to talk to me, so start talking.”

He looked back at the road. I could hear him chuckle to himself, but he offered no other explanation.

I looked down at his hand, which he hadn’t moved. It was still brushing against mine.

My fingers twitched, and then—before I could stop myself—I reached over and placed my hand on top of his. As I did, I heard his breath hitch.

He slowed the car and turned onto a small, narrow road.

I looked around, confused. “This isn’t the way to Lucian’s, Xavier.”

He pulled the car to a stop and threw the car into park. “I know,” he said, turning to me.

I frowned. “Then why are we stopping?”

He turned off the engine and took a deep breath. His eyes were on the center of the steering wheel, and he stared at it like it held the secrets of the universe. “We stopped because… Cali, I…”

Then, without warning, he leaned over and kissed me.

It happened so suddenly that I felt something like an electric shock echo through my body. The feel of his lips jolted me awake—more awake than I’d felt in days. My body responded before my mind could, and I kissed him back. He responded to that by wrapping his arms around me, pulling me close.

Finally, my brain caught up with what we were doing, and I pulled away, gasping for breath.

Xavier stared at me, his eyes smoldering. “Cali,” he growled, and pulled me back.

I didn’t fight him—I didn’t want to—and opened my mouth as his tongue slipped inside.

My brain was yelling at me, and I finally gathered the strength to pull away again.

“Wait,” I said, gasping. “This isn’t… We shouldn’t…” I shook my head, unable to string a sentence together.

His eyes darkened. “Maybe we shouldn’t, but you’re my mate, Cali. That’s as true as ever,” he said, his voice deep and slightly raspy. “Tell me the truth, baby, you want to, don’t you?”

**Episode 5729**

**Xavier**

The car was silent—the whole world was silent—as I waited for Cali to say something. I *needed* her to say yes. I needed her to tell me that she wanted me as much as I wanted her. My whole body was bellowing for her, and my wolf was going crazy. It was like all this need for Cali had been bottled up inside of me for so long, and it was just waiting to burst free.

I knew that it was fucked up—that there were so many complicating factors it made my head hurt—but I just wanted her. My wolf wanted her, I loved her, and—hell—I knew she felt the same way. I could feel it. And so I was going for it, ready to show her how I felt.

She hadn’t said anything, but I could feel how shallow her breathing was. I could feel the flutter of her heart in her chest. Her whole body was surging with heat, and I just wanted to get at it.

I licked her jawline, moving up to her ear, which I nipped lightly. This made her moan, but she swallowed the sound.

I adjusted her against me and spoke right into her ear. “I’m not going to do another blessed thing until you say yes. So what’s your answer, Caliana?”

It took all the discipline in my body, but I stopped myself from touching her again. My whole body was humming, but I just waited.

She moaned again, this one more like a purr. “Y—*yes*, Xavier,” she finally breathed. “I want you, too…”

Thank fucking god. My wolf growled with gratitude as well, and I kissed her again, practically devouring her. My tongue plunged into her mouth, and she moaned against my lips. I couldn’t stand it another minute, and I slid into the backseat, pulling her after me.

Once we were back there, I tugged her on top of me. As much as I wanted her at this moment, completely, wholly—I also wanted this to last. I wanted to be in this moment for as long as possible. I didn’t want to think about anything else except for her—not Lucian, not the Dark Fever, none of it. The only thing I wanted to focus on was the feel of her weight on top of me, the way her mouth tasted, the way her skin felt under my hands.

I kissed Cali again, my hands sliding up her legs to her hips. She felt so good, and I couldn’t stop myself from grabbing her everywhere, working my hands under her shirt slowly.

She hitched up her knee and straddled me, sliding her hands into my hair and gripping tightly. “Is this what you wanted to talk about?” she murmured.

The question surprised me—and pleased me—and I pulled her down hard, so she was riding my erection through my jeans. “Fuck yeah it is,” I murmured back. “This was exactly what I wanted to fucking talk to you about.”

I pulled at the button of her jeans. It came undone with a flick of my fingers, and I pulled them off of her with one hand. Her shirt was next, so in a moment, she was only in her black bra and panties. She slid her finger under her bra strap, snapping it back on her shoulder. “It seems like I’m doing a lot of the talking here and you’re not doing enough.”

I didn’t know where this was coming from, but a new, confident Cali was driving me wild. I kissed her again, coaxing my tongue into her mouth. If she thought she was taking charge, I was going to show her she was dead wrong. I held her tightly, pulling her against my chest, then I released her so she rocked back, breathless.

Slipping my hands around her back, I unhooked her bra and tossed it into the front seat. Then I reached up and took her breasts in both hands, running my thumbs over her nipples.

“Oh *god*, Xavier,” she breathed, her head falling back.

I could have stayed like that for hours, just feeling the soft weight of her breasts in my hands, listening to her moan, but my cock had other ideas. My eyes strayed down to her panties. I wanted to rip them off, but I knew we still had to go to the Vanguard palace, so I slipped them off. Knowing exactly what I was doing, she pushed herself up, helping me out.

Now she was fully naked, and I took my time, looking her over, taking her in. I was consuming her with my eyes, and after a moment her confident aura broke a little.

She crossed her arm across her chest. “Why do I feel like you’re trying to eat me alive?”

“Because I am,” I growled, sucking her nipple into my mouth.

“*Xavier*,” she moaned. She reached down and pulled my shirt up over my head, tossing it away. Then her hands went to my belt, fumbling until she managed to get it unbuckled.

I was growing impatient, so I unbuttoned my jeans myself and pulled them off, along with my boxers.

When we were both naked, I pulled her down on top of me again. “I’ve been fantasizing about fucking you for so long, baby,” I growled, kissing her neck.

I ran my hand up the outside of her left leg. When I reached her knee, I moved my hand to the inside of her thigh, which made her gasp.

“You’re going to want to go a little higher, Xavier,” she said, though her eyes stayed closed.

I grinned to myself. “Two.”

She opened her eyes. “What? Two what?”

My grin turned into a smirk. “You’ll see.”

I slipped one finger into her sex, which was already dripping wet with arousal.

“*Oh god*,” Cali moaned.

Then I put in another finger. I stroked her, turning her on and winding her up, loving the sounds she made. Her hand went to my dick, and the pressure of it made me see stars.

She clenched it, but soon she was lost in a spiral of arousal. “*Yes*,” she breathed. “Xavier, that feels so *good*.”

The car was filled with Cali’s scent—the flowery smell of her body, but now it was more intense—filled with the scent of her arousal—and I couldn’t get enough of it. I could hear Cali’s soft breathing, and the small whimpers that almost sounded like pain but that I knew were pleasure. Her eyes were half closed as she looked at me, and I looked back, keeping my eyes locked on hers. All my senses felt heightened—even more than usual. I wanted to take in as much of this moment as I possibly could.

I could feel her bucking against my hand, growing closer and closer. So I pulled back, resting my hand on her thigh.

She opened her eyes. “Xavier—what? I was so close.”

“Were you?” I asked innocently.

She growled with displeasure, and I slipped my fingers back into her, adding a third one, making her moan with delight. When she drew close again, right on the verge of coming, I pulled my hand out.

“*Xavier*,” she moaned, leaning forward and nipping my shoulder, “what are you doing to me?”

I grinned up at her. “How have I never edged you before?”

“I’m *so* close,” she moaned.

“I know, baby,” I said with a wicked smile.

I did it twice more, and I almost laughed when Cali started to beg. It was the sweetest sound in the world.

“*Please*,” she cried, gripping my shoulders. “Please, Xavier!”

I leaned forward and kissed her long and hard. Then I shifted my hips, and with one hard thrust, pulled her down on my cock.

“Oh *god*!” she cried out.

She moved against me, adjusting to take me in more completely.

“*This* is how you get fucked,” I growled, thrusting into her. It felt so amazing to be inside of her, and I rocked against her, bucking my hips to match the rhythm she was setting.

Panting, she looked into my eyes, her gaze steady as she rode me. Looking at her, it was like being caught between heaven and hell.

“*Xavier*,” she breathed.

“*Cali*,” I whispered.

“I’m going to come,” she purred, gripping hard around the back of my neck.

I pulled her down, so my cock went deeper into her. “Yes, baby. Come for me—”

And with that, her orgasm broke through. She clenched around me, the feeling exquisite. She dug her nails into my skin as she cried out, but I kept going, drawing out her climax until the sound of my name filled the car completely.

“You’re not breathing,” I said. “Breathe, tiger. Breathe for me.”

She drew in a ragged breath, then clenched around me again. “Xavier! Oh god!”

I growled, the sound deep in my chest. The feeling of her climaxing again pushed me over the edge, and I grasped her ass roughly as I pulled her down, thrusting into her. “Fuck, Cali!”

My heart was beating like a drum as the blood pumped through my system, faster than ever before. Cali had melted into me, and kept riding me as I wound down, finishing me off to the very last pump.

“Oh my god,” Cali breathed. When she leaned back to look at me, her eyes looked wide and wild. “That was—”

“Amazing,” I supplied.

She nodded, her breath still coming fast.

I had to say it, so I said it. “I love you, Cali.”

Her wide eyes went wider, and her face turned pale. The mood had suddenly completely shifted.  
 My stomach clenched with fear. “What? Say something…”

“I—I love you, too, Xavier,” she stammered, that look of fright in her eyes. “B-But I—I’m sorry, I can’t be here right now.”

**Episode 5730**

**Greyson**

I looked around, feeling myself growing more and more irritated as the minutes passed.

Where the hell were Xavier and Cali?

Jay gave me a sideways look. “I’m sure they’ll be here any minute.”

“Yeah, for sure,” Lola agreed, looking a little nervous.

“I don’t see any reason we should wait for them,” Kendall said, but I noticed a slight smirk on her face as she spoke.

“Cali and Xavier were the ones who found the cure,” I growled, “so we probably need to wait for them. It wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t even be here.”

Kendall shrugged. “Fine. You can wait all you want, but I can’t.”

She gave me an even look, and I knew what she was intimating—that she was here as an MIB agent, and she had a deadline.

As she started toward the door of the Vanguard estate, I fumed. I knew I should be glad that Cali hadn’t shown up. I hadn’t really wanted her to come in the first place. I hadn’t wanted her in danger. But what really bothered me was my brother, claiming her like he had.

I wasn’t an idiot—I got the *due destini* stuff—but was it really necessary to hold her back so he could bring her himself, so it was just the two of them.

I blew out a frustrated breath. I realized what I was feeling—it was jealousy. I knew I shouldn’t be, and certainly not now. But it bothered me that I hadn’t fought him more on it.

Kendall reached the door and looked back at me over her shoulder. “Are you going to sit there and pout, or are you going to come with me and figure out what the hell Lucian is doing?”

I swallowed a snarl.

“I swear, if that pompous ass had anything to do with that Dark Fever shit, I’m going to go vampire on him,” Lola warned, flashing her sharp teeth.

Jay leaned over and whispered something into Lola’s ear. Whatever he said made Lola laugh, then clap her hand over her mouth. She flushed as she gave Jay a playful jab in the ribs.

I rolled my eyes. Maybe Kendall was right. The longer I stood here stewing, the angrier I got. And what was the point of that? It wouldn’t help what we had to do right now.

Kendall banged the side of her fist on the giant front door, sounding like a SWAT team demanding to be let inside. A moment later, Armin opened the door.

“I wondered when you were going to knock,” he said flatly. He looked around at all of us. “Are you going to stand outside all morning, or were you planning on coming in?”

Lola opened her mouth to respond—something snarky, I was sure—but I shot her a look, and she closed it again.

I probably knew Lucian better than anyone here, and I knew how to deal with him. Snarky comments weren’t the way.

“Let’s go,” I muttered, nodding into the palace.

Armin let us inside and closed the door behind us.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Armin.

He shook his head. “Aysel and I never succumbed to the fever. In fact, the only ones who did were Lucian and his beloved, Elle.”

“And how are they?” Kendall asked shortly.

“I believe they have recovered,” Armin told us. He gestured us forward. “Come.”

He led us into a parlor sitting room. There were leather couches and a huge fireplace set with a roaring fire. It made the room feel stifling. Above the fireplace was a massive oil portrait of Lucian and Elle, depicted as Olympian gods.

Seeing it, I shook my head. “Such a dick,” I muttered.

“I will fetch Lucian,” Armin said, leaving the room.

“Yeah, you fetch him,” Lola said, shaking her head in disgust.

I looked at her. “I’m going to do the talking when Lucian gets here.”

Kendall rolled her eyes. “Get real. Talking is way too passive at this point.”

I shook my head, wondering if I should have done this alone. It felt weird to be back here with Kendall, after everything that had happened. And my wolf wasn’t making it any easier. I could feel it getting agitated, being so near Kendall, while also growling because I knew Cali was somewhere with Xavier.

Before I could let myself fall down that rabbit hole again, the door opened and Lucian swept into the room. Elle was by his side, and Aysel trailed behind them both.

“Greyson Evers! What a pleasant surprise! And you’ve brought friends!” Lucian declared. “To what do we owe this great—”

“We need to ask you about what happened yesterday, Lucian,” I said, cutting right to it. I didn’t have the patience for his theatrics today.

Lucian looked confused. “I have nothing to offer in the way of information, Greyson. We got sick, and now we’re better—”

“We’re trying to find out why we all got sick,” Kendall interrupted.

Lucian frowned at her. “Surely you don’t think *I* had anything to do with it.”

“No one’s accusing you of anything,” I said pointedly, looking at Kendall.

“Not yet,” Lola whispered under her breath.

Elle looked around. “Where is Cali? If it wasn’t for her, we’d all still be sick.”

“Yes, where is your little mate, Greyson?” Aysel asked.

A growl rumbled in my chest. I didn’t like to be reminded that Cali was with Xavier—though of course none of the Vanguard wolves would know that.

Kendall shot me a look.

“She’ll be here soon,” I said, clearing my throat.

Elle beamed at that. “Good. Cali’s nice.”

“So if we’re done here, I have a pack to attend to,” Lucian said. He had lost his jovial tone.

But as he turned to leave, I stepped forward and grabbed his shoulder.

“We’re not done here, Lucian,” I said. “We need answers. Now.”

“Greyson!” Aysel said sharply, stepping forward. “Get your hands off my brother.”

Lucian looked down at my hand gripping his shoulder, then back at me. “I’ve told you, Greyson, I have no idea what any of this is—”

“Cut the bullshit, Lucian,” Kendall snapped. “What happened here isn’t just about you or your pack. It’s affected other packs too, so we need to know what’s going on.”

Lucian eyed Kendall coolly. “What do you want from me?”

“Your cooperation,” I said frankly.

Lucian scoffed. “I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“Really?” Kendall scoffed. “Nothing at all? No demons we should know about?”

I shot Kendall a look. She knew about Seluna? I knew I shouldn’t be surprised. Kendall was MIB, and good at her job. Of course she knew all about Lucian and Seluna, it didn’t even really matter how.

“You think I have a *demon* here in my basement?” Lucian snarled, his eyes narrowing.

Kendall didn’t flinch. “I don’t know, Lucian. Do you?”

Aysel drew in a sharp breath. “How dare you accuse him! Who are you to come into our palace and make such accusations?!”

I could see this had the potential to escalate quickly, and I stepped between Kendall and Aysel before it had a chance to.

“You need to stop being an asshole,” I warned Lucian.

“Wh—*what*?” Lucian sputtered, looking stunned. “*I’m* the asshole? Me? You come barging into my home, accusing me—Prince Lucian of the Vanguard, esteemed Alpha—of what, exactly? What are you accusing me of?”

“Of keeping secrets,” Kendall shot at him.

Lucian puffed out his chest. “Don’t you snap at me, young lady—”

That was when I knew Lucian had fucked up.

Sure enough, Kendall stepped closer to him, her purple eyes flashing so dangerously that even I nearly took a cautious step back.

“Don’t you call me ‘young lady,’ you patronizing asswipe!”

Lucian growled, and I knew this was getting way out of hand. Part of me knew I should be the rational one in this situation, but it was hard with Kendall so close to me, causing my wolf to howl. Added to that was how distracted I felt by Xavier and Cali’s absence. I was trying to keep a clear head, but I had a lot of emotions swirling around, making it hard.

The fact was that I was pissed—and why not take it out on Lucian?

The part of my brain that was still thinking logically knew the answer—because I knew we needed Lucian’s cooperation here. And this face-off between him and Kendall wasn’t helping.

Lucian thought he could just intimidate Kendall, but I knew better. Apart from the fact that I didn’t think Kendall *could* be intimidated—and certainly not by Lucian—I happened to know the resources she had at her disposal. If provoked, who knew what she might hit Lucian with? It wasn’t worth the risk, no matter how satisfying it might be to watch Lucian squirm.

I turned to Kendall. “Let me handle this.”

She didn’t like that, and her eyes narrowed. “I don’t need your help, Grey.”

I put my hand on her chest as she tried to move forward, my palm resting just above her breasts. As I touched her, my wolf reacted, howling with desire. At the same moment, I was hit with a flash of the kiss Kendall and I had shared in the caves. The memory came roaring back, hitting me like a tsunami.

Kendall slapped my hand away and moved toward Lucian, but before she could get far, there was a sudden, ear-splitting sound that stopped everyone in their tracks.

**Episode 5731**

Xavier pulled back, hurt and disappointment flashing in his eyes as he said, “You can’t be here? What do you mean?”

I reached out to stroke his cheek, hoping to calm him. “I told Greyson that we were going to follow him to Lucian’s, and we haven’t. We got…distracted. I don’t want him to worry and think that I’m not coming.”

Even though technically I wasn’t doing anything wrong, I was starting to feel like I’d betrayed Greyson…and it was draining after feeling the same way about Xavier after sleeping with Greyson.

“But we are,” Xavier said easily. “We just took a little detour, that’s all. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. We needed a little alone time.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I ducked my head. “Xavier, this isn’t fair to Greyson. I don’t want to disrespect him…”

Xavier sighed and shifted uncomfortably. “Greyson knows that things are different now. There’s nothing for you to worry or be sorry about.”

I shook my head at him. “Does he?”

“Yes. I told him that I want you back in my life—that I want you back. I was honest with him, as always.”

I was shocked to hear that. “You told him that?” It made me a little uneasy, thinking about them both talking about me like that when I wasn’t around. It wasn’t that I ever wanted to lie to Greyson and I was happy that Xavier had been honest, but I could only imagine how hearing that from Xavier had made Greyson feel.

Xavier pulled me into a soft kiss that made my heart thunder in my chest. “I never stopped loving you, Cali. You know that. Don’t you know that by now?” He deepened the kiss and then pulled away. “I want to shout from the rooftops that you’re giving me another chance. I don’t have any plans to hide it.”

My heart squeezed at his admission.

“I never stopped loving you, either, Xavier…though I gave it a try after you broke my heart into a million pieces.” My breath caught as I relived those days right after Xavier had left me for Ava and the Samara pack. Everything with Adéluce had fucked us up so much.

A pained expression passed across Xavier’s face. “I hate that I did that to you. You have to know by now that I’ll never do that again. I care too much about you to hurt you like that again, and I’d never wanted to in the first place.”

“I know that there were…circumstances outside of your control that made that happen, but I can tell you that it didn’t make things easier on me.”

I went quiet, still thinking about how Greyson had to have felt when Xavier expressed his feelings for me, his intentions for bringing me back into his life and us rebuilding our relationship into what it used to be.

“Xavier…just because Greyson knows, do you think it makes everything okay? I don’t want to hurt him, and I don’t think you want to, either.”

Xavier looked away, frustration evident on his face. “We’re mates, Cali. We’re supposed to be together. My brother must understand that by now. With all due respect, I’m not going to live my life worrying about how Greyson feels about us. We’re meant to be together, and that’s that. The *due destini* has spoken.”

I loved hearing that from Xavier—proof of him claiming me as his own—and immediately I thought about what it meant to have a mate. There was so much in that word—commitment and love and passion…never-ending devotion.

*And it’s a reminder of what Ava and Xavier have together as mates. Doesn’t that mean that he and Ava are supposed to be together? They’re mates the same as we are. And what about Greyson and Kendall? Ugh. This is all too complicated and painful to think about right now.*

All I knew for sure at this moment was that I loved both Xavier and Greyson dearly. While I was as excited and eager as Xavier was to rekindle things, it put me in a difficult position. Once again, I was caught in the middle, walking a fine line of trying to keep from hurting anyone’s feelings.

Xavier cupped my chin. “We’ll work it all out, Cali. We don’t really have a choice.”

He moved to kiss me and then stopped midway, his face twisted into a grimace. He let go of me and clapped his hands over his ears.

“Xavier? Xavier, what’s wrong? What’s going on?”

“It’s that…*sound* again,” he said through clenched teeth.

My stomach dropped. I knew that the sound only affected werewolves—it had blared at Lucian’s bachelor party and at the Alpha meeting there, too…which had led me to think that the sound was centered around the Vanguard palace.

As Xavier folded into himself, the noise obviously hurting his ears, I wondered if the sound had some link to the cave and the Dark Fever.

I grabbed Xavier. “We have to get to the Vanguard estate, now!”

Xavier nodded and a few beats later, he finally peeled his hands away from his ears. “Fuck, it stopped,” he said, nearly breathless.

“Good, but I still think we should get going. I’m starting to worry about the others.”

We started picking up our clothes and getting dressed while I fought down my guilt. I knew that there really couldn’t be a connection between Xavier suddenly suffering that sound again and us having sex, but the timing wasn’t great. It was like a bad omen or something.

*I hate that I’m feeling guilty about us stealing time together, because in those moments in Xavier’s arms, I forgot everything that was going wrong…but now it’s all flooding back to me. Ugh, why does everything have to involve so much whiplash?*

I was having trouble pulling on my shirt in the tight confines of the car. Xavier stopped yanking at his pants, having the same difficulty as I was—maybe worse seeing as he was so tall—and tried to help me.

He accidentally tickled me, and despite everything, I giggled and pushed his hands away. “Stop! You’re making me laugh!”

He stopped, but then he was looking at me with a hunger in his eyes that I knew too well…and it could only mean trouble. Trouble we didn’t have time for. Again.

“Stop it, Xavier. I know what you’re thinking, and—”

“What if I don’t want to stop?” he said, his eyes wild and intense.

I gave him a look that I knew was not as much of a deterrent as I hoped it was and kept trying to pull my shirt on when the car began to shake, a loud rumbling filling the air.

“What the hell is that?” Xavier said, sitting up ramrod straight and looking around.

Before I could tell him that I had no idea, the shaking stopped. We looked at each other. My heart was pounding.

Xavier shrugged. “Okay…I think it was just an earthquake. Not the craziest thing in the world. Oregon is prone to them.”

“That’s even worse!” I said, starting to panic. “If that earsplitting sound was an omen, and I’m thinking that it was, that may mean that the earthquake is a warning.”

Xavier didn’t seem concerned. “It’s just mother nature, Cali. I know we tend to experience a lot of crazy stuff, but I don’t think this is one of them. Earthquakes happen all the time here.”

“Are you just trying to keep me from panicking?” I said.

“Yes, but it’s also the truth. It felt like an earthquake, and if it was, there’s nothing to worry about.”

I stopped to think. Did I ever experience an earthquake in Minnesota? I couldn’t remember ever feeling one, but I supposed that didn’t mean that it never happened. Either way, this was the first earthquake I’d knowingly felt, and I didn’t like it.

“I know that look, and you shouldn’t worry,” Xavier said. “It’s nothing.”

He wrapped his arms around me and whispered in my ear, “You’re okay, baby.”

I leaned against him, comforted to hear him calling me a sweet pet name, how he’d slipped it right in as if we’d never been apart. It felt so right, and I realized how much I missed being with him like this, the comfort and intimacy that we’d built in our time together hadn’t waned at all while we were separated.

My heart clenched as I wondered why this had to be so difficult when it should have been so easy.

*Why can’t I help but love both of my mates? Why do they each have to have other mates, which makes all of this so much harder?*

My thoughts were twisting in on themselves when the car began shaking again. Xavier pulled me against him. “It’s all right, we’ll just ride it out, okay? It’ll pass soon.”

But it didn’t pass. In fact, it was getting worse by the second, more violent and louder and scarier. I shrieked when the airbags deployed in the front seat with a loud bang that set off the car’s alarm.

I looked at Xavier and saw that he didn’t look as unbothered as before. He was worried, I could see it, though he was still rubbing my back and telling me that everything was okay.

I jumped again at a loud snapping sound as a large tree cracked in two and came crashing down toward us.

**Episode 5732**

**Greyson**

The sound was loud and shrill enough to hurt, but despite it, Jay and Lola squared up to Lucian, ready to throw down.

“Calm down!” Elle was shouting over the blaring noise. “Why is everyone getting so worked up?”

Aysel’s eyes flashed as she wedged herself between her brother and the rest of us. Her wolf eyes were flaring. “If it’s a fight you want, it’s a fight you’ll get,” she growled.

I didn’t catch who threw the first punch, but before I could stop it, fists were flying in every direction. I had my hands full restraining Kendall, an effort made more awkward as my wolf yearned to do way more than just hold her back.

All the while, the sound was growing louder and angrier, and just before it grew so loud I thought I might pass out from the pain of it, it stopped.

Thrown by the sudden silence, I only just managed to avoid one of Lucian’s punches, and his eyes were flashing as if he was seconds from shifting.

*Fuck. I should have come alone. This was a huge mistake.*

Armin came bursting into the room with a bunch of angry Vanguards on his heels, obviously itching for a fight. Lola bared her fangs and before I could tell her to relax—as if she were in any state to listen—someone slammed into me, and we both crashed to the ground.

As I fought to free myself from the snarling Vanguard’s hold, the ground began to shake and rumble.

*Oh great, and now on top of everything…an earthquake? Or wait…is this an earthquake?*

Whatever it was, it was throwing everyone off balance. Vases shattered as they hit the ground, pictures flew off the walls, the very foundation of the Vanguard palace seemed like it was about to break apart, but the fighting continued.

“Stop it!” Elle was shouting. “Everyone, stop!”

Kendall threw a Vanguard to the floor, and then Jay pounced on Armin, and Aysel shrieked at him.

“Get your dirty Redwood hands off of him!” Aysel said, running and jumping onto Jay’s back.

Lola hissed, her eyes going feral as she launched herself at Aysel, who slipped out of the way just in time so that Lola ended up landing on Jay—her fangs hovering inches from his neck.

The sound blared back, and then everyone was clutching at their ears and groaning in pain, using their hands to protect their ears even though it wasn’t helping at all.

I gritted my teeth and slammed back against the wall, doing my best to work through the pain as it threatened to overwhelm me. I fell to my knees, and I wasn’t the only one. All around me, the others were crumpling to the floor, their faces twisted in pain. The fuck was this?

Kendall was in a fetal position on the floor with tears running down her cheeks, and suddenly, I was consumed with worry for her.

My wolf was chomping at the bit.

*You have to help her. She needs you!*

I crawled toward her as the sound grew worse, and I grabbed her, pulling her out of the way just as a chunk of plaster exploded on the floor beside us.

The air went cloudy with dust and debris as someone shouted, “It’s a fucking earthquake!”

I looked over at where Lola and Jay were clasped in each other’s arms, Jay shielding her from the debris. Armin was holding Aysel close. Lucian crawled over to Elle just as their latest portrait came crashing down.

“No!” Lucian screamed. “Our masterpiece!”

“Get off of me!” Kendall was screaming in my ear as she tried to wrench herself out from under me.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “I’m trying to keep you safe!”

“This isn’t the way!” she hissed. “We need to get into a doorway!”

I grabbed her, and together, we plotted a shaky path to the doorway, but we didn’t get far. A particularly violent rumble sent me tumbling to the ground, and I landed right on top of Kendall. Something slammed into my back, pressing me down on Kendall as she screamed out in frustration and likely pain, too.

I did my best to push up off her, grimacing with effort…and then I saw her purple eyes shimmering and sparkling, and my wolf howled inside of me.

And then the rumbling stopped.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“I would feel a lot better if you would just get the fuck off of me!” Kendall snapped. She shoved me, and I rolled off onto my back, just in time to see another large chunk of the ceiling falling toward us.

Just before it hit her, I grabbed Kendall and pulled her out of the way. This time, she landed on top of me as the plaster exploded, sending up another plume of dust.

“Fuck, that was close,” I said.

The ground began to shake again, harder than ever before. The vibration caused our bodies to rub and shake together. It was all too much. The fear of nearly dying, my wolf ignoring the danger and instead yearning for Kendall as her face was pressed into my neck, my efforts to focus on keeping us safe and not how much my wolf wanted her.

*Kiss her. Take her. We must have her!*

*And forget about Cali? Fuck no!*

With much effort, I pushed my wolf’s desires away and snatched back my composure just as the shaking stopped. I heard a collective gasp of relief in the dust-filled room. We were all coughing and choking as we staggered to our feet.

Kendall was straddling me, coughing into the crook of her arm with her eyes squeezed shut. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Lola glaring at us.

Even as my wolf longed to stay just the way we were, I untangled myself from Kendall, and we both got to our feet.

“Is everyone okay?” I asked. “Is anyone hurt?”

“We’re fine,” Jay said. “Though had that fucking sound gone on any longer, I think my eardrums would have exploded.”

Lola said nothing, her glare still trained right on me. Lucian was holding and kissing Elle, and they didn’t seem to be paying attention to anyone else in the room.

“My sweet forest rose, did you injure any of your petals?” Lucian cooed at her.

Kendall rolled her eyes at the over-the-top display as Lucian looked Elle over like he was inspecting a plum for bruises.

“Ugh! She’s a werewolf, not a delicate flower!” Kendall hissed.

Lucian ignored her and pulled Elle into a tight hug. “All that matters is you. This entire place could have come crumbling down and killed everyone on the spot, but as long as you survived, all would be well!”

Kendall gave me a look that said, *What’s with this guy?*

I just shrugged. I was so desensitized to Lucian’s bullshit at this point.

As I looked around, I realized that the entire room *had* almost come down around us. The new portrait was half buried in dust and debris, its gilded frame cracked in two. I was suddenly glad that Cali hadn’t made it here after all. What if one of the large chunks of the ceiling had come crashing down on her like it almost had with Kendall?

*And if Cali had been here, she would have been my priority…so what would have happened to Kendall without me looking out for her?*

My logical mind told me that Kendall could take care of herself, but my logical mind wasn’t the one in charge when Kendall was in the same room with me. My behavior during the quake—my wolf howling and longing for Kendall even while our lives were in danger—had proven that.

*But where* is *Cali, anyway? She should have been here by now.*

I wondered how far the earthquake’s effects were felt, how much destruction it had caused. I was reaching for my phone to call Cali when Kendall said quietly, “We need to go check out the basement.”

I eyed her with my phone in hand. “Do you really think that now is the best time for that?”

I glanced at Lucian, who was still fussing over Elle. I still needed answers from him, and I doubted the basement was safe right now.

“This entire palace was shaken to the foundations…do you think it’s smart to go poking around in the basement? What if there are aftershocks? What if more quakes come?”

Kendall shrugged. “If you want to be cautious, stay behind. I have a job to do.”

She turned and headed for the door. Just before I called out to stop her, Lucian bellowed, “I suppose you all want to blame me for that quake, too? You all think this is *my* fault? I understand that you’re all in awe of my power, but even *I* can’t cause earthquakes!”

Kendall narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you sure it was an earthquake?”

Lucian stared at her. “I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“Oh, I think you do,” Kendall shot back.

They were starting to get angry again, and I didn’t want a repeat performance of the all-out brawl from before, so I stepped between them.

“Are we really about to do this again?” I said wearily.

Three Vanguards rushed in, breaking the rising tension. “You have to see the courtyard!” one of them said to Lucian.

Lucian shot another angry look at Kendall before he, Armin, Elle, and Aysel followed the Vanguards out of the room with us falling in close behind.

We all stopped short at the door that led to the courtyard…or what was left of it.

Lucian screamed in horror. “My precious statue! Ruined!”

But that wasn’t what I was looking at. Kendall grabbed my arm as she saw what I saw—large fissures crisscrossing the ground with steam spewing out of them.

“Grey,” Kendall said, her purple eyes wide, “what in the *hell* is going on?!”

**Episode 5733**

**Artemis**

I was shocked to see my mother standing in front of me. I’d thought maybe I’d hear her voice, like last time, not actually *see* her. I reached out for her just as she did the same, but our hands passed through each other like we were nothing but mist, and we couldn’t embrace.

“What’s going on?” Mom asked, her eyes clouded with confusion. “I heard your voice, so I came outside… What are you doing? Is everything okay?” I hated to see her so worried, but I wasn’t surprised that she was. I hadn’t been the most predictable person lately.

Feeling a little choked up and not exactly knowing why, I nodded. “Yeah. Everything’s fine.” I hadn’t expected to see my mother show up in some Fae version of a video call. I wished I could touch my mother, hug her. It would be really nice to…just be with her and feel normal for a little while.

I felt the ache of missing her and Cali and even the Redwood pack house. While it had never quite felt like home, I had fond memories and cared about a lot of the people there—the people I’d left behind to go on this journey, which would, hopefully, help me feel complete.

I shook off that nagging sadness to the best of my ability and tried to clear my head as I heard Rishika and Marius’s muffled shouts sounding outside the tree.

“Rishika, Marius, will you shut up?!” I snapped at the sound of their concerned voices echoing around me. “I’m trying to talk to my mom!”

Mom gave me a puzzled look.

“Sorry, I’ll explain later…but like I was saying, everything is fine, but I needed to talk to you. Our conversation was cut short last time, and I still need you to answer me.”

I couldn’t help but notice how her expression darkened. She crossed her arms over her chest and said, “Artemis…you know why I was upset last time.”

“I do,” I said. “I know you’re not happy I got married here without telling you first…but it was me or Cali. I did what I had to do to protect her as her older sister. But I don’t want to rehash that right now, Mom. There are other things on my mind—”

“Like Kadmos?” she interrupted stiffly. “That seems to be the only thing you want to talk about these days.”

“Yes, it’s about Kadmos. I know you don’t want me to look for my father, but I have my reasons that I must keep looking for him, and I need your help. You’re my mother, you knew him better than maybe anyone, and…I already know about the Ceruvela Mountains, but I need more.”

I stopped, waiting for her to say something if she had anything to respond with, and when she was quiet, her gaze fixed on me in a quiet show of what I hoped was growing support, I continued.

“What did he tell you, Mom? What do you know about his connection to this place?”

I waited for her to answer, hoping that she understood just how much I needed this. Finding my father…it felt like something I had to do. I knew it would give me the understanding of myself that I didn’t fully have just yet.

I had a feeling that seeing Kadmos again would feel almost the same as it had when I met Orla—a sense that something had popped into place inside of me. Meeting my mother had exposed me to a part of myself that had always been a question in the past.

Mom sighed and pressed her fingers into her temples. “You’re not going to stop, are you?” she said wearily.

I shook my head. “I can’t, Mom. I just can’t. Please help me. What did Kadmos tell you about where he would take you and me after I was born?”

Mom paused for a moment, and I suddenly got the sinking feeling that she was going to tell me that he’d told her nothing, that this would end up as yet another missed, wasted opportunity.

But then she began to speak. “Because I’d never been there, Kadmos would always describe it to me. It sounded like the most beautiful, tranquil place. Far away from all the fighting and the intense demands of our families. It was supposed to be a place where we could just be a family together.”

My heart twinged at the thought of that—me, my mother, and my father together enjoying each other’s company and being a real, true family, something that I still longed for.

*It sounds so nice…much nicer than the childhood I ended up with, an orphan pawned off to the Kollector and being trained as his bounty hunter. Only ever having my basic needs met, never nourished or treated with compassion…*

I was surprised at the break in my voice as I asked, “Did he tell you what it looked like? I don’t know…I just have this feeling, Mom…that if he’s alive, and I truly think he still is, that he’s there. Or even if he isn’t there, that there’s a clue or something there.”

Mom sighed, and her brow furrowed as she tried to remember. “All he told me was that it was deep in the mountains, almost at the heart of the range. He said it was a place where the stone of the mountains would turn this brilliant purple that shined almost blue in the sunlight. He said he’d never seen stone like that anywhere else.”

I closed my eyes, imagining it and the wonder and awe and excitement that he’d likely felt as he told her about what would become their new home, their sanctuary.

“He said there was a waterfall that met a small river, and it was protected on all sides by the mountains, and that there was a meadow there…”

I was picturing it all, and it seemed so beautiful, but I wanted to see it in real life.

“So, the stone with the purplish-blue hue, he said he’d only seen it one place?”

“Yes,” Mom replied. “And he once said that he wanted to mine some and fashion for you, when you were old enough, a necklace—something with the family crest.”

She shook her head as her voice caught. She was getting emotional, too.

“Does that help you at all?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “It helps so much, Mom. Thank you.”

I was starting to get excited, too. This was a real, true clue. The stone—if we could find it—could lead us to my father.

I was starting to get giddy, but I was trying to hold back from getting too excited. I knew that we still had a few hurdles in front of us, and I didn’t want to get my hopes up too much. My mother’s information was a good hint, but that didn’t mean it was a sure path to my father.

Still, it might be enough for me to even lay eyes on this place that had meant so much to him, a place that he’d fantasized about as a haven for the three of us.

“Artemis, I want you to know that I’ve not been against you finding your father. I’m the one who told you that I thought he was still alive, remember? The trees told me about it, and I believed it. I just…I worry for you, Artemis. Your father led a complicated life, and he had many enemies. My family had so many enemies as well.”

I nodded at her, too overcome to say anything. I hated that she’d had such a hard life in the Fae world, that she hadn’t been able to lead a calm, loving existence with her partner and child like she deserved.

“I only just got you back, Artemis, and I don’t want to lose you. Hopefully that shows you why I’ve been…reluctant.”

I smiled at my mother. “I do understand, Mom, and I appreciate it. Honestly, it makes me feel so loved… In a way I didn’t know was possible… But it won’t stop me.”

“I know it won’t. I love you, Artemis, and I support you…but try to check in when you can. I worry.”

“I will, Mom. Thank you.”

We said our goodbyes, and as the image of my mother faded, I sighed, feeling rejuvenated. Not only had my mother given me the insight I needed, but I’d also confirmed her support. I wanted to find my father and I had no plans to abandon my quest to do so, but I didn’t want to upset my mother in the process.

The tree shuddered around me, and the bark crackled as it parted into a doorway to the outside world. Marius and Rishika gasped when I came into view, and they rushed over to pull me out of the tree.

“What the fuck was that?” Marius said. “What happened?”

“Are you okay?” Rishika asked.

“I’m more than okay,” I said. “I talked to my mom, and I know what we’re looking for. Now, all we have to do is find it.”

**Episode 5734**

I opened my eyes as my magic sizzled under the strain of my shield. Xavier had his body on top of mine, shielding me from the blow that never came. Over his shoulder and through the windshield, I could see the tree, the lower half of its trunk lying across the hood and the rest hanging over us as my shield kept it from crushing us.

I grimaced as I gently pushed Xavier away, bolstering the magic of my shield to push the tree off the car so that it crashed onto the ground.

Xavier looked around. “The quake has stopped, at least.”

I tried to get up, but Xavier still had one arm slung across my waist, a feeling of protection that I would never tire of.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I am…though I feel a little weak from pumping all my magic into the shield.”

Xavier kissed me. “You saved us.”

“As usual,” I said with a wink. “But what about my car?”

We both stared out at the crumpled hood, steam rising from the engine block.

Xavier sighed. “I’ll get you another. The dealer knows me by name.” He shook his head. “It’s getting to the point that we’re losing a car a month. Fucking ridiculous.”

“The hazards of werewolf car ownership as a werewolf, I guess,” I said.

He chuckled as he pulled away from me, but before he could get too far away, I linked my arms around his neck and pulled him into a kiss. I wished that we could just stay here, making out in my trash heap of a car, but I was still worried about Greyson and the others—and he was likely worried about me.

“We have to get to the Vanguard palace right away,” I said.

Xavier didn’t argue, and I had to wonder if he was worried about his brother, too—though he would never admit it.

He tried the door. It made a loud grating sound, but it didn’t open as he pushed it.

I frowned at it. “Maybe we can crawl out of the window—”

Xavier leveled a swift kick at the door, and it flew off the hinges and crashed to the ground. He looked back at me and smirked. “I’m a werewolf, remember? Strong as shit.”

I smirked back, tickled by his smug confidence.

He stepped out of the car and offered me a hand to pull me out. Together, we surveyed the car’s damage.

“It’s definitely totaled,” I said.

“Which means we won’t be driving the rest of the way to the Vanguard estate,” he said.

I took note of the look on his face. He was wearing a sly smile as he started to remove his clothes.

“What are you doing?” I sputtered.

He stepped out of his pants and then peeled off his shirt, and I couldn’t help but gape a little as I took in the naked glory of him. He handed me his clothes.

“What’s happening?” I said.

“Cali, come on. You’ve been around me and the others long enough to know what’s happening. And you don’t plan on walking, do you?”

Without another word, he shifted, and I chided myself for thinking he was interested in something else. He was right, I’d been surrounded by werewolves long enough to know that getting naked wasn’t always an invitation for intimacy—in fact, most of the time it wasn’t.

Yet, if he had intended to snatch another chance to enjoy each other’s bodies after the near miss we’d just had, I didn’t think I would have given in…though I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that it would have been tempting.

My life would be so much easier if the sight of a naked Xavier didn’t cause such a strong reaction in me.

His wolf growled in a sexy way, and then he lowered his body in invitation for me to climb on. I threw one leg over his body and pulled myself onto his broad, soft back and wrapped my arms around his neck, comforted by his radiating warmth and thick fur. I never felt as safe as when I was riding my mates. It was like no matter what, nothing could get to me.

He shot off into the woods so fast that I tightened my grip on his neck to hold on. As he carried me toward the Vanguard palace, I reached out to him via mind link.

*Do you think things are okay at the Vanguard palace?*

*Not sure. That was a pretty bad quake, but the palace has survived worse.*

*I hope you’re right.*

As we got closer, I began to feel that guilt creeping in again.

*About what just happened…*

*I’m guessing you’re not talking about the earthquake?* Xavier interrupted.

*No. I’m talking about what happened just before the world started shaking around us.*

*We don’t need to talk about that right now*, he said. *Bigger fish to fry.*

Part of me was frustrated that he’d shut me down, but part of me was relieved, too. Honestly, I wasn’t in any state to sort out all my tangled-up feelings right now. But despite my misgivings, I smiled at the memory of how good it had felt to be with him that way.

When we finally arrived at the Vanguard estate, I couldn’t help but gasp at what I saw. The northernmost part of the tall brick wall that encircled the palace had crumbled to a pile of dust and bricks. I saw a group of Vanguards swarming around it, already hard at work repairing it.

Xavier stopped and lowered himself for me to hop off his back, then he shifted back to human form. As usual, he wasn’t breathing hard, wasn’t flushed, and there was no sign at all that he’d just run that long distance here at top speed with me on his back. Another reminder of his power…a power confirmed by the musculature of his tall, broad body.

A warm glow erupted in the pit of my stomach at the sight of him as I handed him his clothes, our hands touching briefly. He dressed quickly as we made our way to the front door. We knocked, and someone answered, one of Lucian’s many attendants.

“Hi…we’re looking for Lucian?” I said.

“He’s out in the courtyard,” the man answered.

I shuddered at the mention of the place, remembering how that had been the stage for our struggle with Seluna. Xavier draped his arms over my shoulders as we made our way through the foyer—which was piled with debris from the quake.

“Damn. This place got hit hard,” Xavier said as we navigated our way to the courtyard.

When we arrived, I was shocked again at what I saw, and Xavier was, too. The courtyard seemed to have taken the brunt of the damage. It was almost unrecognizable.

My heart skipped when I heard Greyson call my name. He came running over to me and pulled me into a tight embrace. The comfort and relief I felt in his arms was cut short when I felt him tense.

*He can tell what happened between me and Xavier. He can probably smell Xavier all over me.*

He pulled away and kissed me on his forehead. I could see the turbulence in his eyes, but it was obvious that he wasn’t going to mention however he was feeling. Now wasn’t the time or the place…or maybe Xavier’s conversation with him about the burgeoning state of our relationship had truly laid the groundwork.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said before shooting a cold, loaded glance at Xavier.

*Okay…so maybe his conversation with Xavier about us didn’t smooth things over ahead of time…*

He took my hand, and together we went to where the others were standing. I swiped the sweat from my forehead.

“It’s really warm and humid in here,” I said.

Lola grabbed me as soon as she saw me and then she pulled back, her gaze swinging accusingly between me and Xavier.

*Oh great. She smells Xavier on me, too. How can anyone have any secrets or privacy around a bunch of werewolves?*

“Cali, you have to see this,” Lola said, obviously deciding, much like Greyson, not to mention the obvious.

As Lola led me to what she wanted to show me, I spotted Kendall standing nearby. Before I could react to her presence, a blast of hot, steamy, sulfur-smelling air hit me smack in the face.

“What the hell is that?” I said as I looked at a network of fissures in the ground of the courtyard, wide cracks with the strange-smelling steam pouring out. “It looks like it’s breathing!”

The sulfur spewed forth only to be sucked back in repeatedly, like the cracks hid a pair of lungs taking in and expelling the steam. I’d never seen anything like it.

“I know, weird, right?” Lola said. “We have no idea what’s happening.”

I leaned closer to get a better look, and I realized that there was an almost hypnotic rhythm to it. The closer I got, the more powerful it felt, and then I suddenly lurched forward as the suction pulled me in.

**Episode 5735**

**Xavier**

I was staring down one of the many strange openings in the ground when I heard Cali yelp. I whipped around to see her arms flailing as she plummeted into one of the crevices. Lola scrambled to grab her but just missed her, and in the next second, Cali dropped out of sight.

I lunged, shoving past Lucian and Armin and catching hold of the tips of Cali’s fingers just before she fell out of reach. I started to lift her and quickly realized that she wasn’t just falling—something was fucking sucking her down into the depths.

Caught off guard, I dug my heels in as the strange force threatened to pull me down with her. I skidded backward, fighting against the strong pull as Cali screamed in pain—her body the rope in my tug-of-war with whatever was trying to pull her from down below.

Cali’s fingers began to slide out of mine, but just before I lost my grip, Greyson grabbed her other hand. Together, we pulled Cali up over the edge. The three of us collapsed in a pile, Cali still whimpering and screaming.

I scrambled to my feet and immediately began checking Cali over. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Greyson was doing the same thing, asking the same questions. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Kendall watching us. She took one long look at Cali and then shouted, “Everyone step away from the opening. Common sense should tell you not to get close to the edge.”

As usual, she was barking at everyone, but I’d seen the look in her eye, and I wondered what she was thinking. Was she as conflicted as I was when I saw Greyson and Cali interacting?

Cali scrambled away from the opening, her eyes wide with fear.

“What happened? Did you fall in?” Elle asked Cali.

“No, I didn’t fall! I was just trying to get a closer look and then it felt like something sucked me down!” Cali explained, trembling. I could tell she was embarrassed.

Everyone looked from Cali to the opening.

“Sucked down by what?” Elle said.

Without getting closer, everyone craned to peer down into one of the dark fissures.

“I have no idea what it was,” Cali said. She looked at me. “Xavier, did you see anything?”

“No,” I said.

*All I saw was the woman I love nearly plummeting into who knows where. I was not about to let that happen. And I’m not about to thank Greyson for helping…though I’m sure he doesn’t expect it. Neither of us need to be thanked for helping Cali.*

“Whatever it was, I had nothing to do with it,” Lucian added.

Lola glared. “Maybe not directly, but I’m not convinced you didn’t do something to cause it.”

“Like I care what you think. If you’re so troubled, you can leave my house,” Lucian said smugly. “I didn’t invite you here. You’re little more than an interloper.”

“Cool it,” Jay said.

“You cool it. I’m tired of you ruffians barging into my house whenever you get the urge and throwing accusations around. If you’re so concerned that I’m dangerous or that I’m causing earthquakes and the like, then you should stay far, far away from me!”

“We would love to, but if we do that, who knows what you’ll unleash out of this horror show of a house you have!” Lola spat.

“Thank you,” Cali said, turning her back on the argument and focusing on me. “And you too, Greyson. Thank you for saving me. I was so scared.”

Greyson and I exchanged a look.

“Of course, Cali. You know I would never let anything happen to you,” I said.

Greyson gave a stiff nod of agreement. Assuring Cali’s safety was just about the only thing we ever agreed on, but that didn’t mean that he was eager to make it known that we were on the same page.

“Did either of you notice the same thing that I did? The steam seemed to be emerging from those holes in some kind of strange pattern.”

“I didn’t notice,” I said. “I was too worried about making sure you didn’t fall in.” I stopped to think about those first few moments of seeing the strange holes and steam before Cali fell in. “But now that you mention it, you’re right. The steam billows from the hole and is pulled back in at steady intervals.”

Everyone went quiet and watched the steam billowing in and out of the crevices in an obvious rhythm.

“I don’t get why it’s happening that way,” Cali said.

“And I hate the smell,” I said. “Do we have to stand right in the path of it?”

Kendall came walking over. “I think we should go to the basement to investigate. There’s something weird going on, and we’re not going to get to the bottom of it by standing around and talking about it up here.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” Cali said.

“I have to agree,” Greyson said.

Kendall rolled her eyes. “If you guys want to stand around here talking about it, I’m not going to stop you. You can stay or you can go. Makes little difference to me. I’m going to figure out what’s going on either way.”

Cali frowned at her, and I was about to hit her with a snide remark when she turned her back on all three of us to address Lucian, who was still in the thick of arguing with Lola.

“Lucian, are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell us?” Kendall asked him.

“For the last time, I have NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS. How many times are you people going to ask me that?”

I laughed. “You doth protest too much, Lucian. I’ll bet anything you know what’s causing this, even if you don’t have anything to do with it.”

I knew the princeling well enough to assume that this was just another one of those times where he wasn’t being forthcoming about what was exactly happening here. And if whatever he was hiding was somehow responsible for nearly swallowing Cali into one of the rancid, steaming holes, I was going to make him pay for it.

“Your ancestors built this place—you never let us forget that,” I said. “You must know something. Has anything like this happened before?”

Lucian deadpanned. “I would know if it did. That’s a stupid question, as usual.” And then he frowned. “But…”

“But what?” I snapped.

“There are some family ledgers I could reference, just for the sake of due diligence.”

“You do that,” Kendall barked at him.

Lucian opened his mouth as if to snap at Kendall, but Elle’s calming touch made him think better of it. He turned heel and rushed off in a huff, grumbling about respect and unwelcome guests.

“Armin!” he bellowed. “Come with me to the archives. I can only hope they look marginally better than the courtyard.”

As soon as they were gone, Greyson pulled me aside.

I chuckled. “Wow. You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“Really? You just saw what happened and yet you thought getting Cali alone for a few minutes was more important?”

“I wasn’t the only one,” I shot back.

“Maybe not, but you’re the one who bent over backward to make sure she came here with you. What if something happened?”

I shrugged. “Something did happen.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed angrily, and for a second, I worried that he was about to haul off and hit me. If he did, I’d be ready.

“Stop questioning me like you’re in charge of me or something. You and I both know I’m perfectly capable of taking care of Cali. And besides, Cali’s her own woman. I didn’t force her to come with me, and you sure as shit didn’t say anything in the moment, did you?” I asked. “Cali does what she wants. In fact, maybe you should be having this argument with her.”

I waited for Greyson to reply, knowing that he wouldn’t dream of taking his frustrations out on Cali when he much preferred blaming me. After all this time, it was clear that he hadn’t come to grips with the fact that the *due destini* held all the cards.

“You know what, you need to focus on the real culprit here, the *due destini*. That’s the reason we’re in this constant battle over her attention. Blame that, not me, got it?”

“It wasn’t the *due destini* this time. It was all you. You made a choice,” Greyson said.

“And so did she,” I said.

Greyson gritted his teeth, and he had that look again, like he wanted to pounce on me and pummel me until his anger waned. I was tempted to shove him into one of the steaming holes in the ground and be done with the whole thing.

Fortunately, before things could escalate, Lucian came walking back in with a musty old leather-bound book in his hands.

“According to this tome, something like this happened about five hundred years ago,” Lucian announced.

“Really? And what caused it?” Kendall asked.

Lucian hesitated for a moment before saying, “I don’t know,” he started slowly, “but according to the book says it’s a sign of the end of days.”

**Episode 5736**

“I’m sorry, the end of days? Did I hear that right?” I squeaked to Lucian, who was already nodding before I could finish.

“Yes, according to what it says here, that’s what all this means,” Lucian replied. “All of these disruptions are harbingers of the apocalypse… I’m paraphrasing, but that’s what it says.”

“That’s bullshit,” Kendall snapped. “Because guess what, we’re all still here. So that can’t be right.”

“We’re here for now,” Lucian said darkly, obviously enjoying disagreeing with Kendall for the hell of it, even if it meant he was putting a nail in all our coffins.

I realized that I was squeezing the life out of Lola’s hand and let it go with an apologetic look.

“Anyway, you asked me if I knew anything about what’s going on here, I said I’d check, and I did. This is what it says. Don’t kill the messenger,” Lucian said. “Though I’d like to see you try.”

Kendall narrowed her eyes at him with her hands balled into fists.

*Wow. They* really *don’t like each other…but Lucian seems to have that effect on people. Understandably.*

“What else does it say?” Greyson asked, reaching for the book.

Lucian swiftly pulled it out of his reach. “Relics need to be handled with care, so keep your eager paws to yourself.”

Greyson glared at him but didn’t reach again.

Lucian furrowed his brow as he began reading from the book once more. “It says here that they sealed it back up.”

There was a heavy silence as everyone waited for Lucian to elaborate, but he only flipped through a few more pages, his brow furrowing as he grew visibly more frustrated.

“What do you mean they ‘sealed it up’?” I asked when the anticipation got to be too much. “What did they seal up?”

Lucian frowned. “It doesn’t say.”

Kendall snatched the book from him. “What are you trying to hide? There has to be more here that you’re not sharing.”

“I’m not hiding anything!” Lucian snarled, his wolf flashing in his eyes as he took a menacing step toward Kendall.

Greyson rushed over to stand between them, and I couldn’t help the twinge of jealousy I felt.

*Wait a minute, is Greyson trying to protect Kendall, or is he just stopping Lucian from taking the book back? I suppose it shouldn’t really matter…but it does. Doesn’t it?*

Kendall flipped through the pages.

“Careful, the pages are very delicate, and if you tear them, you’ll be hearing from my lawyers,” Lucian said.

“Half your place just crumbled to the ground and you’re worried about pages in a book?” Xavier snorted.

Lucian cut his eyes at Xavier. “I don’t expect someone like you to understand, nor do I give a shit about your opinion on me protecting something that’s been in my family for centuries. Maybe if you had a legacy to speak of, you’d understand.”

Xavier growled, and it was my turn to defuse a burgeoning brawl. “Relax, you two. We’re all on the same side here,” I said.

“He’s telling the truth,” Kendall suddenly said with a sigh. “There’s nothing else here about it. Though some of the pages are missing and the ink is smudged in places. Very convenient, if you ask me,” she said, cutting her eye at Lucian.

“I assure you that I don’t care enough about any of your opinions to hide anything. What you all seem to be forgetting is that I’m suffering the consequences of whatever this is, too. As Xavier so bluntly put it, my palace is crumbling because of whatever happened, so why would I be trying to protect someone or hide anything?”

Everyone went quiet, because he had a point. Whatever was going on here, he was suffering it, too. I supposed it was our own permanent distrust of Lucian that made us suspicious of him no matter what. He’d earned it, but maybe he wasn’t the culprit right now. For once.

Whatever was causing this likely came from below, which was probably what Kendall was thinking since she’d been so eager to go downstairs and explore.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “What if all of this is coming from the caves? The door we opened was blocked by old magic—is that what Lucian’s ancestors wrote about?”

“Obviously,” Kendall said dryly. “Which is why I’ve been wanting to go down there and explore, but maybe now since Cali has said it, everyone will be on board?” Kendall chuckled before training her gaze on Lucian. “Are there any more of these books?”

“Of course there are more. Our proud history was written by the most gifted, prominent scribes, and the lore goes back centuries. You cannot even dream of the tales that are told…”

As Lucian waxed poetic about his musty book collection, I started to wonder if using the key in the door unsealed whatever Lucian’s ancestors were trying to lock up…which meant this wasn’t Lucian’s fault, it was mine. If I’d never taken the key, maybe none of this would have happened.

*I wish I’d never found that stupid key to begin with.*

“Nobody gives a shit about your great-aunt Gertrude!” Xavier was shouting.

“Lucian used the key to open the door,” I said. “Isn’t that when that piercing sound and all the rumbling began?”

Lucian was already on the defense. “Just because I used *my* key in *my* house to open a door in *my* cellar doesn’t mean I caused it. And keep the facts straight—the first time we heard the sound was at the bachelor party *before* I opened the door. Everyone here—at least all the werewolves—heard it then, too.”

“You’re right,” I said, feeling frustrated that we were at a loss once again. At this point, I didn’t even care whose fault it was, I just wanted it all to stop.

“Granted, I can posit that opening the door likely didn’t help matters,” Lucian said.

“You think?” Xavier snorted.

“Yes, just like I think if Cali hadn’t stolen the key in the first place, none of this would have happened. So we’re both *thinking* things, aren’t we?” Lucian said.

Xavier growled and bawled up his fists, but so did Lucian.

“Boys, please, save your pissing contest for later,” Lola said. She trained a hard gaze on Lucian. “Are you sure there’s no other information that might help us in any of those books of yours?” She grabbed Jay. “Let’s go check them out.”

“I think the proper way to put it is, ‘*May* we go check them out’. You all seem to repeatedly forget that you’re in my house, not your shabby pack house, and I don’t permit you to *check* anything out without my express allowance,” Lucian said.

I rolled my eyes. “Lucian, can Lola and Jay go look for information that will help all of us with our mutual problem?” I grumbled before Lola could fly off the handle.

Lucian lifted his chin in the air. “Thank you, Caliana, for your manners. Maybe you should teach the others one day?” He turned to Armin. “Show the vampire hybrid and her manservant to the Edwardian period library, please.”

Jay growled at Lucian’s insult, but Lola put a hand on his arm. “Fuck him, baby. Let’s just find those books.”

“Careful,” I called out to them before they left. “The palace may still be unstable, and things may fall.”

As they left, I couldn’t shake the bad feeling I was getting. Part of me wanted to jump back on Xavier’s back and get the hell out of here, but this was too big to ignore.

It didn’t help that everyone was at each other’s throats and that Greyson and Xavier hadn’t stopped glaring at each other. The tension between them was palpable, and I knew I was at least partially to blame. I shouldn’t have been so quick to go with Xavier. But I hadn’t been thinking—it all felt so normal—and I hadn’t felt that easy connection with Xavier since Adéluce fucked everything up.

*Should I try to patch things up between them? At least long enough to get through this latest crisis?*

I immediately decided against that. How many times had I tried to smooth things over between Greyson and Xavier only for it to get worse?

I jumped when Lola came running back into the room with Jay and Armin staring after her in confusion.

“One more thing. Keep an eye on Kendall,” she whispered in my ear.

“I don’t have to worry about Greyson!” I huffed.

Lola scoffed. “Did I say anything about Greyson? I’m telling you, she’s hiding something.”

“I will,” I assured my friend before she rushed off.

I glanced at Kendall, who was kneeling a safe distance away from the steaming hole in the ground. She was looking between her phone and the steaming fissure as if checking something.

Kendall was with MIB, so there was a good chance she was using some kind of secret device to evaluate the fissures. But I couldn’t ask and I couldn’t say anything because I wasn’t supposed to know.

*Does she know more than she’s letting on? Maybe Lola is right. Maybe Kendall is hiding something.*

Kendall suddenly looked up and caught me looking at her.

*Oh no, she’s heading right for me!*

Kendall held out her hand. “Cali, do you still have the key?”

**Episode 5737**

**Greyson**

I stared at the steam billowing from the fissures with an uneasy feeling circling in the pit of my stomach. It was bad enough that we had no idea what the hell was going on, but it was even worse that Cali was here and therefore in danger. The only thing that mattered to me was keeping the woman I loved out of harm’s way.

Now, I was pissed that Xavier had actually brought her here. He should have talked her into staying away…which made no sense since I’d been planning to bring Cali here myself.

*Fucking jealousy. It twists everything. Nothing feels right, so much confusion, so many mistakes being made over and over again…*

I calmed myself and saw Kendall talking to Cali for a few minutes before they both came over to me. “We’re going down into the lower levels. To the door,” Cali said. She held up the key.

My stomach twisted in knots at the sight of it. “That seems like a really bad idea. Do I need to point out what happened the last time we were down there? The trouble it started?”

“Not this again, Grey,” Kendall grumbled. “I’ll agree that it’s not ideal, but we don’t have many options.”

“And you don’t need to worry about me, anyway. I’m the only one here immune to the Dark Fever,” Cali said.

Xavier gestured to the statue of Lucian sinking into one of the dark, menacing cracks in the ground, steadily spewing steam. “That isn’t Dark Fever.”

“Agreed,” I said without looking at my brother. I was still mad at him and didn’t trust myself to look at him for too long without risk of popping him one. “This is something else altogether, Cali.”

“Maybe it’s just a matter of us having not sealed the door properly when we left. After all, everyone was infected and delirious at the time,” Cali said.

“She’s right,” Kendall said. “We need to check it out at the very least, but this doesn’t need to be one of the patented Redwood field trips. Everyone doesn’t need to go.”

“It’s my palace,” Lucian said. “I will lead the way.”

“I’d stop yelling about how this is your palace when you don’t even have the foggiest idea what’s going on behind its walls. As a homeowner, shouldn’t you know whether you have a fucking sickness and maybe something much more sinister lurking in the cellar?” Kendall said.

“So you’re saying that you know every shred of history about the place you live?” Lucian shot back.

“What, you mean my rental, which was built like five years ago?” Kendall deadpanned. “You have a library full of books that outline this place’s history, for shit’s sake. I think my place is a hell of a lot different from a sweeping palace that has, as you’ve mentioned a million times, been in your family for centuries.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re insufferable?” Lucian spat.

“Everyone, let’s not argue, it’s not the time. Lucian, Kendall, we’re all going,” Cali said.

Kendall rolled her eyes. “Of course.”

“Not everyone,” Lucian said. He pecked a kiss on Elle’s lips. “You’ll remain up here, my forest rose. My life would be so empty without you, and I’m not going to risk your life for the sake of you simply wanting to be involved.”

I didn’t know if that was a dig at Cali, but I didn’t care. It was clear that Cali and Xavier didn’t care, either, because they both rolled their eyes at the display.

Once Lucian had said his goodbyes, we headed for the basement entrance. I flanked Cali on one side, and Xavier was on her other side. My jealousy quickly gave way to relief. Now I was actually glad that Xavier was here—he was another set of eyes on Cali to keep her safe.

“Lucian, you couldn’t have brought up your ancestor’s book before?” Kendall asked Lucian.

“It didn’t seem relevant,” Lucian huffed.

“What do we think happened five hundred years ago?” Cali whispered.

I eyed Lucian. “Clearly it was something bad enough to lock up.”

“And can magic even be locked up? I feel like Big Mac would scoff at the idea that a simple door could contain it,” Cali said.

“Maybe magic sealed the door,” Xavier said.

Cali squeezed my hand. “But why did it affect you?”

“I suppose it could be a way of keeping people away from whatever they were trying to contain. Too bad we unleashed it despite their best efforts.”

We reached the basement, which was filled with dirt and debris from the quake.

“My wine cellar!” Lucian moaned. He started toward a door where a dark pool of wine had formed. The air was pungent with the scent of wine and sulfur.

“Spilled wine is the least of your concern, don’t you think?” Xavier said.

“Once again, you’re giving your opinion where no one asked for it. Don’t you ever get tired of it?” Lucian said.

“Of razzing you? Never,” Xavier said. “There’s constantly something new.”

“It’s obvious that none of you have enough compassion for the damage my home has suffered to support me, so if you don’t have anything nice to say, say nothing at all!” Lucian hissed.

Xavier started to reply, but I saw Cali nudge him into silence.

“Do you think Vander would know anything about this?” Cali asked.

“Vander? What made you think about them?” I asked her.

“Well, Vander is nature personified, and hasn’t nature been around since forever?” Cali reasoned.

“You have a point there,” I said. Vander had often been a source of information for us during times when all other avenues to figure out a problem had failed. “Too bad getting in touch with Vander is always a little hit or miss.”

“True…but maybe it’s worth a shot later?” Cali said.

“Couldn’t hurt to try.”

Lucian leading the way, we negotiated the mounds of stone and rock that had fallen from the walls and ceilings and nearly blocked our path to the door in places. The destruction down here was as bad as I’d pictured, and I could tell that everyone was on edge.

“This looks bad, but this palace was erected by the finest builders in the land…and there are plenty of support beams in place to keep us safe,” Lucian said. It sounded like he was reassuring himself more than everyone else, but I was happy for the information even if I didn’t entirely believe it.

I noticed that Kendall had slowed and was hanging back behind us with her back turned.

“Stay with Cali,” I said to Xavier. “And don’t let anyone go anywhere.”

“Excuse me, but I go where I please.” Lucian’s face was red. “Who do you think you are?”

“It’s for your own safety, Lucian. We don’t need to mourn a foolish hero today, and we know how thirsty you are to be the knight in shining armor,” I said.

Lucian crossed his arms over his chest and huffed, but he stayed put.

As I approached Kendall, I realized she was on the phone, her words hushed and hurried. I had a pretty good idea of who she was talking to—MIB. There was urgency in her voice as she hissed, “I may need backup.” She stopped when she spotted me watching. “I’ll call you back.”

My wolf stirred uneasily.

“What?” she said. “Are you eavesdropping?”

Ignoring her questions, I said, “You can’t bring MIB here.”

“I’m sorry, did I ask for your tactical advice? Anyway, I’m MIB and I already *am* here.”

“You know what I mean, Kendall.”

She gestured to the door. “Not that I need to explain myself to you, but I don’t really have a choice. This Pandora’s box is way outside my paygrade, and all of yours too. You shouldn’t even be down here. You’re nothing but civilians having an adventure, and I shouldn’t be party to it.”

“I think you’re selling us all short, especially yourself. If you call in the big guns, your cover will be blown.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “And why do you care?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. I shouldn’t care, and I knew that…but I did.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “I had a…flash…of you dying.”

“What?” I stammered.

“We’re supposed to be rejected. I rejected you, anyway, but it seems that I can’t shake you…or can’t shake the link that we have and all that comes with it.” She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. “Maybe your brother was right. Maybe there’s just no way.”

“Wait, you talked to *Xavier*?” I asked. “What did he say?”

“No, your other brother. Carlton or whoever.”

“Colton.”

“Yeah, him. He said that I won’t ever be able to shake our bond.” Her voice softened as she looked up at me and said, “Grey, I…I don’t think there’s a way out of this.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” I said with a slight tremor in my voice brought on by my wolf’s frenetic energy.

“Meaning, you need to stay the hell away from me. This pull I feel to you…it’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced or anything I could have imagined, and it will only get worse.”

“Kendall…I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

Kendall’s brilliant purple eyes flashed. “What I’m saying is if we mate, Greyson, then you’ll die.”

**Episode 5738**

I looked back to where Greyson stood huddled with Kendall, both talking in hushed tones and taking furtive glances around as if they were ensuring that no one was listening or approaching, though Greyson hadn’t looked my way even once since he went back to talk to her.

Even though I was trying my best to fight it, I felt uneasy and jealous and a little angry that Greyson seemed so focused on Kendall. I kept telling myself that Kendall was only here because she was doing her job…which meant that had to be what their little private exchange was about, right? But it still didn’t feel very good, not with their whole mate situation. How could it?

Thankfully, Lola and Jay came to join us. I was happy to see my friend and chuckled to myself as Jay paused to help her shake the dust out of her hair.

“You okay?” I asked as they approached.

Lola scowled at me. “A chunk of Lucian’s ceiling fell on us. We were coughing and choking the whole way down here.”

“You can take a bath later,” Xavier said. “Did you find anything?”

“It was a dead end,” Lola said, but then her face lit up. “But…I’m thinking it might be a good idea to contact Steinar. That well-read gargoyle might have the answers we need. He knows everything, right? A guy like that would be so useful on trivia nights.”

“That’s a great idea,” I said. “Steinar might be able to give us insight on what’s going on here, and what happened even five hundred years ago.”

“Do you think Steinar was around then?” Lola said. “I mean…how long do gargoyle’s live, anyway?”

“No idea, but I don’t think he was turned into one that long ago. Either way, I’m sure he has access to texts that will shed some light on this.”

I pulled out my phone, thankful that Lucian’s Wi-Fi worked down here, and logged into the library. The familiar page loaded, and I wasted no time clicking the chat link to ask for Steinar. He answered the call almost immediately, his smiling face filling my phone’s screen.

“Caliana? Lola? Welcome back. How may I be of service?”

“We’re looking for some specific information, Steinar,” I said.

“Of course you are…that’s the only reason anyone ever gets in touch. What is it that you need? I’ll do my best to supply you with the info.”

“We’re looking for information about an event that happened to werewolves about five hundred years ago. I’m sorry that I don’t have more to go on than that. We’re calling you because we have a lot of blanks to fill.”

“Hang on,” Steinar said, his face already taking on the distracted look that signaled he was going through his archives. A second later, he was staring straight at us again with a dark expression on his face.

“The packs around that region were…wiped out five hundred years ago.”

Lola and I gasped at Steinar’s revelation.

“All of them?” I asked, my voice shaking.

“Most of them—the Redwood, the Vanguard, the Samara, the Blue Blood—all have lineage going back to that period, so they survived, but the news wasn’t as good for the Hollow Oak, Broken Ash, and a few others, who were completely wiped out.”

I was sick and saddened by the news, my ears ringing with anxiety as Steinar named a few of the other packs that didn’t survive whatever extinction level event that had hit this region during that time period.

Greyson came walking over and his tense expression softened when he saw my face. “What’s going on, Cali? Are you okay?”

I glanced at Kendall as she came barreling past, not bothering to spare any of us a word or a second glance as she stalked off toward the door. She stooped in front of it and snapped a few pictures.

“What happened between you two?” I asked as I brought my attention back to Greyson just in time to catch him watching Kendall, too.

“It’s nothing,” Greyson practically snarled at me.

“Whoa, why are you snapping at me for asking a simple question?” I said, instantly a little hurt.

Greyson raked a hand through his hair and threw a pained glance in Kendall’s direction, though I noticed that he took pains to make sure his expression was as blank as possible by the time he met my eyes again.

“I’m sorry, I just…it’s *complicated*.”

*Is he pissed about me and Xavier? Is that why he’s lashing out? I guess I don’t blame him but…he’s never usually like this.*

I choked back the hurt, realizing that now wasn’t the time or place to delve into our complicated relationship. “Forget about it for now, it’s fine,” I blurted out. “I’m a little shaken up because we contacted Steinar.”

Greyson raised a brow. “Really? The library stone man?”

“Gargoyle,” Lola corrected.

Greyson nodded, and I could tell he was still distracted, his mind either wrapped up in what had happened between me and Xavier or his conversation with Kendall…or very likely, both.

“My bad, that’s what I meant,” he said. “So, what did he have to say about all this?”

“He said that Lucian’s book was right about the end of days…at least for some. Something happened about five hundred years ago that wiped out many of the werewolf packs.”

“Fuck. Really?” Greyson said, surprised.

“We were about to get more details when you and Kendall came back,” I said.

Greyson reached out to lift my chin so that I was looking him in the eye. I could see the tenderness there, and that wiped away a lot of my doubts regarding how he felt about me right now.

“I’m sorry snapped at you,” he said. “I think the stress of the day is getting to me.”

I smiled, still wondering what had him so on edge after his hushed conversation with Kendall, but right now, I knew there were more important things to worry about.

I turned back to Lola, who’d taken my phone to continue the conversation with Steinar. “What did Steinar have to say about what wiped out those packs?” I said.

“I don’t fucking know!” Lola said, frustrated. “The Wi-Fi went out!”

I glared in Lucian’s direction. “Really, Lucian?”

“Really, Caliana?” Lucian shot back. “You do realize we just had an earthquake, right? Give me a break!” Lucian turned his back on me before I could reply.

I glanced at Greyson, who shrugged. “Well, he does have a point. It’s a wonder it worked in the first place.”

I was about to tell Lola to try to reach Steinar once more when the ground started to tremble again. Confusion broke out as everyone tried to take cover in preparation for another earthquake, but this time, the shaking lasted only a few seconds and the walls didn’t start crumbling around us.

Instead, Vander appeared.

“Wait, what is a park ranger doing here?” Kendall asked as she looked around. “And out of thin air, too. What the hell is going on?”

Vander ignored Kendall and instead glanced at the ruin around them, looking annoyed. “Just what did you all do to cause such destruction?”

I gulped. Usually, Vander was pleased to see me and was typically good-natured enough. Today, they didn’t seem like their usual bright and shiny if not serious self.

“Do you know anything about the door?” I asked.

Vander scowled. “The door? Really? I thought that had been taken care of.” Vander stalked toward the door and ran their fingers along where it slotted into the wall. “Wait. You opened this, didn’t you?”

I followed Vander, not ready to answer right away. “What *is* it?”

Vander didn’t answer, and instead shook their head and spoke to themselves as if they were the only person here.

“There is something dark here, and I’ve seen…or rather felt…this before. I thought it was gone for good.”

“What? What did you think was gone for good?” I pressed. I was really starting to worry, now. If Vander, who was always calm and cool and collected and didn’t seem surprised by much of anything, was worried, then we really were in bad shape.

“This is bad,” Vander said.

I gently took Vander’s arm. “You have to tell me what you’re talking about, Vander. You’re scaring me.”

Vander finally looked at me. “You should be scared.”

I jumped back as if their words were an electric shock. “Wait, please tell me what you mean. And if whatever this is is something you thought was gone, it was stopped once before, right? Does that mean we can stop it again?”

I scrambled in my pocket to show Vander the key. They looked at it, but they didn’t seem relieved.

“We have the key,” I said. “That means we can lock it back up and seal it away like they did in the past, right?”

Vander wasn’t answering me. They were still shaking their head with that faraway look in their eye like they were seeing an army of ghosts drifting our way.

“This is really, really bad,” Vander repeated. “Maybe the worst I’ve seen.”

I stomped my feet, knowing that I was acting like an angry toddler but unable to help myself. “Please, Vander, you’re not only scaring me, you’re scaring us all.”

“Fear is the only response that makes sense,” Vander said. “This is beyond me. In fact, this is almost *before* me. And there’s no way to stop it.”

**Episode 5739**

**Xavier**

“I call bullshit,” I said to Vander. “What do you mean there’s no way to stop it? Wow. That’s rich, coming from you. Figure it out. You’re an all-powerful being! I’m sorry, but that means there’s no problem you can’t fix, right?”

Cali shot me a warning look, but I meant what I’d said. If anyone could fix this, Vander could. Maybe they just weren’t thinking outside the box.

Vander’s reply was curt. “I don’t know what I don’t know, sorry. The universe is a lot of things, but it’s not all-knowing.”

“Then fuck it! We’re all screwed, then?” I said. “I may as well just let the chips fall like Lucian’s crumbling walls!”

“Hey, I resent that remark!” Lucian said.

I turned my back on them all, not even in the mood to argue with Lucian.

“Xavier, come on, don’t be like that,” Cali said.

I wasn’t in the mood to convince her that I couldn’t help feeling this way. I felt useless. Confused. Angry. I guess I couldn’t wrap my mind around the idea that we’d fought so many tough battles and come out on top only to be bested by what, exactly? Loud noises, a mysterious sickness, and earthquakes originating from the princeling’s house? It just didn’t make sense to me.

Never in a million years did I think that our undoing would be so…nebulous.

I pulled out my phone and saw that I’d missed calls from Colton and Ava.

*Fuck. I suppose I’ve been MIA for a while.*

I was about to call Ava first to make sure she was okay, feeling guilty that I hadn’t checked on her after the quake, when my phone rang again. It was Colton.

I answered, and Colton wasted no time sharing his confusion.

“What the fuck was all that? Tell me you felt it!”

“I felt it, all right,” I said to my brother. “Are you and the twins okay?”

“They’re fine,” Colton said. “I held them close and took shelter in a doorway until the worst of it passed.”

“Good. And are Mikah and Gabriel okay, too?”

“They’re fine,” Colton said.

“Glad to hear it. How’s the lake house? Everything intact?”

“Seems so. Nothing’s broken as far as I can see, and the place is still standing…though a few things did get knocked around. It’s funny, at first Orion and Lyra were laughing their heads off at all the shaking…but that didn’t last long. It wasn’t long before they got scared and started screaming their heads off.”

“I’m sorry they had to go through this.” I took a quick look around. “The Vanguard palace got hit pretty hard. Parts of it even collapsed in on itself. And then there’s a…situation in the courtyard here. Lots of fissures formed in the ground and there’s gross steam leaking out.”

“Gross steam? What the fuck?”

“I know. It’s weird.”

“Should we come?”

“What? No. You all should just stay put. The last thing I need is for something to happen to you, leaving Maya to raise the kids alone. She’d literally kill me.”

I shuddered as I realized I wasn’t being facetious at all. Maya was intense, and despite her whole “Colton gets on my nerves” act, she was very protective of her mate. She’d always counted on me to protect him when she wasn’t around, and if I failed…well…Maya was one Alpha I didn’t want to go toe to toe with.

“Well, keep me posted,” Colton said. “And take care of yourself, okay?”

As soon as we hung up, I called Ava. The phone rang and rang, and my guilt and worry grew. If she didn’t answer soon, I knew that my thoughts were going to go all sorts of dark places. I’d left her on her own with the pack to be with Cali and if something had happened to them…

The phone clicked, and relief flooded through me at the sound of Ava’s voice.

“Xavier?” Her voice was panicked.

“Hey, hey, you good?” I said, breathing a little easier now that I knew she was okay. “Did you feel the earthquake?”

“Yes,” she said. “I was confused at first, didn’t realize what it was…and then by the time I realized it was like all hell had broken loose over here. Everyone running for cover and such. What was that? I’ve never felt one that bad before…not even when we were kids.”

“Same,” I said. “It was something for the record books.”

“For sure. Knocked pictures off the walls, broke a few dishes.”

“Damn. No, this was nothing like what we experienced those few times as kids.”

“Where are you?” Ava asked. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good. I’m at the Vanguard palace.”

“Really? And how did the palace fair?”

I bit my tongue, knowing that I couldn’t quite speak to what had happened here during the earthquake, seeing as I’d been somewhere else entirely…

“It’s in shambles,” I said. “Again.”

“Wow. Did you guys take cover in a bomb shelter there or something? That place has to have plenty of areas to take shelter in.”

I sighed. “I wasn’t here during the earthquake,” I said. “I was in the car with Cali when it hit.”

I knew that I should tell her all the details…but that was for another time. I wanted to see her face when I told her, wanted to be close just in case it prompted a meltdown.

“Oh,” Ava said, and then went quiet.

“Yeah…but the Vanguards, as usual, have some pretty weird shit going on over here.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“I mean… Did the quake open up any fissures in the ground over there?” I asked.

“Fissures? No.”

“So the house really didn’t suffer any damage?” I asked.

“No…but is that really any surprise? Remember, the place isn’t made of wood and nails like other places, it’s made of magic. It’s all fine and obviously earthquake proof.”

“Good, happy to hear that you and the pack are safe there.”

*Thanks Kira.*

“We are,” Ava said. “Anyway, since we’re fine here and the Vanguard is in shambles, maybe I should come there?”

“What?” I said.

“I’ll see you soon, Xavier.”

And then the line went dead. I wasn’t sure whether she was reacting to my comment about being in the car with Cali, or true concern about the state of the Vanguard palace (which made no sense), but I didn’t like the idea of her putting herself in danger to come here. But I knew better than to call her back and talk her out of it. Ava would only get angry at that, and stopping her was like trying to block a freight train.

“Is everything okay?” Cali asked as she appeared beside me. I stared at her for a few beats, lost in how beautiful she looked, even in the dark ruin of Lucian’s basement. I wondered just how awkward things would be when Ava got here.

“Ava’s on her way,” I said simply.

Cali’s eyes widened. “Oh…did you tell her about…you know…what happened in the car?”

“No. Didn’t seem like the right time.”

Cali looked both relieved and worried.

“But I’ll deal with it,” I said. “Don’t you worry about it.”

The ground rumbled a little, and Cali and I fell against each other to keep steady.

*Damn, even the slightest touch feels so good. I’m addicted to this woman. That’s the only way I can describe it.*

“We should probably get out of here,” Jay shouted. “I don’t think the basement is the place to be during an earthquake.”

“You all can go, I’m staying!” Kendall shouted over the rumbling.

I shook my head. She was being stupid.If this place came down, nothing would save her. What good would it be for her to end up buried under a pile of Vanguard rubble?

I grabbed Greyson. “Don’t you think you should talk some sense into your mate? What she’s suggesting is bad for her health.”

I noticed the pained look on Cali’s face at the mention of Kendall being Greyson’s mate.

*Shoot. Screwed that up, didn’t I? But it’s the truth. She’s Greyson’s mate, and Cali needs to come to terms with that.*

Greyson shoved past me and grabbed Kendall, who immediately began fighting him off.

“We need to get out of here!” he shouted, keeping his grip firm. “All of us!”

Right about now, I was really wishing that Ava hadn’t decided to come. We had enough excess mates here to start a softball team.

I grabbed Cali and started marching everyone back toward the stairway that would take us back to the upper levels, hoping that with all this shaking, there was still a staircase to use.

As we made our way through the shaking hallways, a strange sensation overtook me. For a second, I ignored it, thinking that it was likely due to the shaking ground. I tried to steady myself by placing a hand on the wall, but as soon as I did, a deep, gravelly voice rang out in the depths of my mind.

“*I AM DEATH, AND I WILL COME FOR WHAT IS MINE!*”

**Episode 5740**

I watched as Xavier’s knees buckled. His hands scrambled helplessly along the wall as he dropped to his knees. He didn’t stay down and immediately attempted to stagger to his feet.

“Xavier! Are you okay?” I rushed over to help him, barely catching him before he collapsed to his knees again. His body lurched on top of me, and I caught him, or more like, he landed on me and pinned me on the ground beneath his heavy bulk.

The second we touched the ground, I heard Greyson and everyone else calling for me, but their voices seemed muffled and far away as if we were miles away from each other. Then, I wasn’t sure that we were in the Vanguard palace at all anymore. In fact, I was certain that we were very far away from the damp darkness of the Vanguard basement.

I blinked my eyes and saw that we were in some kind of…field. Xavier was lying with his back to me and was dressed in old-timey clothing. His neck and hair were smeared with ash. The air was thick with smoke, and I coughed and sputtered as I tried to make sense of what was happening.

Relief rushed through me as Xavier got up and helped me to my feet. I stumbled around in confusion, blinking away the burn in my eyes from the smoke, swallowing repeatedly to clear the sooty taste from my throat.

“Where are we? Why are you dressed like that?” I said to Xavier.

Xavier turned to face me, and I screamed so loud my throat burned. His eyes were completely hollow. I staggered back in horror as his arms stretched toward the ground like roots spreading. A shadow passed over us, and I looked up as a wave of dark clouds filled the sky.

“What’s happening?” I shrieked, backing away from Xavier as his skin began to vibrate and harden, turning dark and textured like bark. He opened his mouth to reveal blackened, elongated teeth with sharp points. I screamed again, but it was drowned out by an ear-splitting roar that erupted from his widening mouth.

It was one of the most frightening things I’d ever seen, and I couldn’t believe it was my mate.

I fell back, covering my ears. And then I heard a chilling voice in my head, so deep and dismal that it sounded anything but human.

“*I AM DEATH, AND I WILL COME FOR WHAT IS MINE!*”

Xavier took a lurching, halting step toward me, and I screamed as I skittered away from him. And then I wasn’t in the field any longer. I heard voices, and it took me a long moment to realize that I was in the Vanguard basement yet again, clutching at Xavier as he lay slack on top of me.

I saw Ava’s face hovering over us as she yanked me away from Xavier. “Get away from him!”

Still out of it, I didn’t resist when Ava all but tossed me against the wall. I had no concept of how much time had passed or when Ava had arrived. I remembered Xavier telling me that she was on her way, but that seemed a lifetime ago.

Ava knelt at Xavier’s side, calling his name over and over as she shook him gently, trying to rouse him from his stupor.

I still couldn’t get that image of him out of my mind. What had that been? Some kind of vision? Of what? I felt like I was losing my mind.

Relief finally came when Xavier’s eyes fluttered open—and they were his eyes, not the yawning black holes he’d had in my hallucination.

I turned to Greyson, grasping at him as I tried to make sense of everything. “I think…I think I had another vision. Something brought on by all the dark magic down here.”

Greyson paled. “You think the magic’s getting to you?”

“Are you sure?” Lola said.

“What did you see, love?” Greyson said.

Hearing his voice and his gentle pet name helped ground me and take the edge off my panic, but I didn’t know where to begin to describe what I’d seen.

A second later, I whipped around at the sound of Xavier gasping for air. Everyone rushed over to him, clamoring to ask him what was wrong.

“Is he okay?” I said, joining the others.

Xavier was sprawled on the ground, and Ava had his head cradled in her arms.

“Focus on me, Xavier, no one else,” Ava was saying. “Shh, it’s going to be okay.”

When Xavier finally spoke, his voice was raspy and raw. “I heard…I heard a voice in my head. It sounded like a demon, the voice of something evil and dark.”

A chill raced down my spine as I remembered that I’d heard a voice, too, and it had sounded exactly as Xavier was describing it.

“What? What was it?” Ava pressed. “What did it say?”

Xavier shook his head, and I was shocked by how much fear I saw in his eyes. It was rare for Xavier to ever look afraid, but that was exactly what was going on right now. He was shaken to his core.

“I don’t…I don’t know. Its voice was so loud that my ears are still ringing from it. My head is pounding.” He furrowed his brow as if trying to recall the words. “It said…it said…shit, I’m not sure. My head feels so cloudy.”

I gulped and said the words that I’d heard clear as day. “It said, ‘I am death, and I will come for what is mine.’”

Everyone was looking at me now.

“What did you just say?” Lola asked.

“The voice! It said, ‘I am death, and I will come for what is mine.’” I shook away the shudder that threatened to take over my body and not let go. Every time I said or even thought the words, it was like the voice was clawing its way through my mind again. “It almost felt like a mind link,” I said.

“And you don’t know who was speaking to you?” Lola asked. “Or from where?”

“I have no idea, but my head is starting to hurt really badly.”

“Are you sure that’s what you heard?” someone asked. My head was so fuzzy, so clouded that I could only guess that it was Lucian who’d posed the question.

“She’s right. I heard it, too. Those exact words.”

Everyone fell into a heavy, tense silence as the ground continued to quake beneath us. In the confusion, I’d barely noticed that the shaking was still going on. The strange voice had stolen all my attention, and Xavier’s condition had distracted everyone as well.

“Let’s get him up,” Greyson said.

Ava helped Xavier to his feet as Greyson wrapped an arm tightly around me. I could tell that he was doing it to show that no matter what, he would protect me…though I wasn’t sure he could do anything about whatever had invaded my mind to share its creepy message.

Xavier lulled against Ava, still so out of it that I wished I could do something to help him.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Greyson said, ushering everyone toward the stairs. “We need to leave while we still have a chance.”

I glanced at Greyson, admiring how in-control he seemed right now even while things seemed so dire. He was still the Alpha. Still leading.

“You must have really done it this time,” Vander remarked. “This is epically bad.”

“How were we supposed to know? It wasn’t like it said ‘danger, don’t open,’” I said.

Vander pinned me to the spot with a stare. “I’m sure there were plenty of signs you ignored.”

I couldn’t argue with him there…though the signs still weren’t enough to suggest that we were in danger of unleashing anything with this kind of power.

I was relieved when the staircase finally came into view. As we approached it, the ground started to shake more violently, almost as if it didn’t want us to reach the exit. It shook so hard that we all toppled to the ground like bowling pins.

I watched as everyone suddenly smacked their hands over their ears, covering it in reaction to the sound again, was my guess. I was the only one besides Vander who remained unaffected by the sound.

“Can’t you help me get them out of here?” I snapped at Vander.

Before Vander could respond, the air crackled with a snarling roar, and I felt a hot, moist burst of air on the back of my neck. I turned around just as the ground began to crack open, unleashing a rush of putrid air that smelled ten times worse than the steam that had billowed out of the fissures in the courtyard.

A giant claw emerged from one of the cracks and clamped down onto the shaking ground.

I screamed as a giant creature with glowing red eyes, a long, spiked tail, and a form that seemed more like smoke than anything solid, clawed its way out of the hole and fixed its deathly stare right on me.

**Episode 5741**

I screamed as the creature loomed, rising up from the steaming seam in the ground. It was like something out of a nightmare, and the scream caught in my throat.

Staggering backward, my heart hammered hard against my chest, and I tripped, crashing to the ground. Pain from the fall shot through me, but I barely noticed. I looked around, desperate for help, but no one was coming to my aid. Everyone had their hands frantically clamped over their ears, writhing in agony on the ground.

Everyone, that is, except Vander.

Vander reached out for me and pulled me to my feet. The ground shook beneath us and—still unsteady—I fell on top of them.

“What *is* that thing?!” I asked breathlessly, shooting a terrified look over my shoulder.

Vander shook their head, their eyes wide. “I have no idea.”

As we watched, the creature’s head smacked against the basement ceiling. The creature didn’t respond to the impact, but the basement ceiling did, and the rock crumbled, raining debris onto our heads.

“*Oh shit*,” I swore, trying to cover my head with my hands.

Vander stretched over me, trying to use their body to shield me from the falling rock and dirt from the ceiling.

I closed my eyes but opened them again when something thudded hard near my hand. I looked up to see a large, jagged rock. And—without thinking—I grabbed it and chucked it as hard as I could at the creature.

I watched it sail right into the thing…but it had no effect.

The creature’s horrific jaws opened, and suddenly I could feel its hot breath. It seemed to envelop me as a shrill, high-pitched shriek erupted from its mouth.

The sound made me cringe, like hearing nails on a chalkboard, but it made the werewolves all around me scream in absolute anguish.

My stomach tightened with fear. I had to do *something* to protect them. Whatever was happening seemed to be killing them. And if a rock wasn’t going to work, then I had to think of something else. Luckily, I had other weapons at my disposal.

I pushed Vander off of me and sat up on my knees. I flexed my fingers, feeling magic flowing through them. I summoned my magic and stretched my hands upward, sending a blast of energy up at the creature. The thing was too big to miss, and I hit it straight on.

But instead of driving the thing back—to my horror—the creature seemed to simply shake it off. Unlike the rock, however, the creature did seem to notice the blast, and its evil little eyes looked *pissed.*

Vander let out a low groan. “Okay, we should get out of here.”

I gritted my teeth. I wasn’t about to give up—not now. I clenched my hands into fists, summoning more magic, and tried again, blasting the creature with as much energy as I could summon.

But this time the creature seemed to be expecting it. It dodged, avoiding the blast, and my energy blast hit the wall just behind it, making the stone explode.

I flinched against the blast, and when I opened my eyes, I was terrified to see the creature was moving again, clawing its way out of the hole in the ground from which it had emerged.

“*Shit*,” I hissed, feeling my heart beating at the base of my throat.

Panic was threatening to take over, but I wasn’t ready to let it. I still had one more big try in me.

I summoned my shield this time, and swung hard, striking the monstrous creature with all my strength.

That seemed to do something, and the creature hissed with what I prayed was pain. Whatever it was, the impact made the thing lose its grip on the side of the cave and it slipped back down into the seam of the ground.

“*Yes!*” I exclaimed, thrilled with myself. “Did you see that?!” I asked, turning to Vander.

“I see *that*!” Vander said, pointing, looking terrified.

My heart sank as I turned back. The creature was rising again, and it looked even angrier this time. It was growling with a low, hissing sound. In a flash, it lashed out, and I barely moved out of the way before it struck me.

“This isn’t going to work!” I said aloud, though I was mostly speaking to myself. I shook my head. I couldn’t keep this up. I couldn’t fight this thing.

“Cali?” Vander asked, looking over at me.

“Help me get the others out of here,” I commanded.

Vander nodded and got right to work. They pulled a very dazed and disoriented Ava to her feet first and started toward the stairs.

I reached for Xavier.

“No!” he said, shaking his head as I touched him. “No! Get the others out first.”

I hesitated, biting my lip, but figured there wasn’t time to argue. I reached for Lola and pulled her to her feet. Just as I dragged her to the stairs, Vander leapt down the stairs past her, headed to grab someone else.

When I got Lola to the top, she turned to look at me, her eyes wide.

“Jay!” she gasped.

I nodded as I let her go, then hurried back down. Vander was helping Aysel and Armin up the stairs. I tried to give them an encouraging smile, but it came out feeling more like a grimace.

I hurried over to Greyson, but when I went to help him to his feet, I realized he was so much bigger than I was, I could barely hold him up.

“Come on,” I encouraged. “Try to stand, Greyson.”

He tried, and we made it to the stairs. Behind us, the creature was still moving, and starting to crawl free of the hole in the ground.

“Fuck,” I breathed, shooting a look over my shoulder.

Greyson grabbed onto the wall near the stairs. “I can make it from here,” he said, though he looked pale. “Get the others.”

Vander leapt past us again.

I looked at Greyson and was about to nod in agreement and go back for Xavier when suddenly the ground began to rock beneath my feet. Above us, cracks began to race across the stone ceiling, and large chunks began to fall all around.

“Stairs! Now!” Greyson yelled, grabbing my hand.

He pulled me up the stairs just as everything began to collapse around us.

We were halfway up before I managed to turn around, and when I did, I screamed in horror.

“Xaver’s still down there!” I shrieked.

Another set of hands grabbed hold of both of us, and we were pulled the rest of the way up the stairs, to the ground floor.

“I have to go back!” I said frantically.

But I hadn’t even taken a step when the stairway—the stairway leading to the basement, the one I had been standing on not two seconds before—began to crumble, then collapsed completely.

“Xavier!” I screamed. “I have to get Xavier!”

There was a disturbance in the rubble, and I held my breath.

After an excruciating moment, Vander emerged from the debris, covered in dust from head to toe.

“Where’s Xavier?!” I demanded. Then, without waiting for an answer, I rushed past them and dove into the dust.

I crawled through it, the dust stinging my eyes and making my throat burn like fire. I looked around, but I couldn’t see a thing—it was too dark.

But, somewhere, I could hear the creature hissing. The thing was still raging, and my heart thudded with fear.

The collapsed staircase created a strange and dangerous ramp, and I felt my way down it. When I reached what I could only assume was the floor of the basement, I had to crawl around among the fallen beams and rocks. The ground kept shaking, making the debris unstable, but I tried to concentrate.

*XAVIER!* I called out through the mind link. *Can you hear me?!*

There was no answer.

I could hear voices shouting my name, telling me to come back, but I couldn’t think about that. I wasn’t going to go back without my mate.

Somewhere ahead of me, I could sense something moving. My heart sped up, hoping it might be Xavier, but when I reached out blindly in the dark, I was horrified to feel something coarse and terrifyingly rough.

It wasn’t Xavier—it was one of the creature’s claws.

The thing must have felt my hand because it swiped at me. It struck the wall hard enough to make a spark and sent more debris flying through the air all around me.

I closed my eyes and covered my head, trying to protect myself. When I opened them again, I looked ahead into clouds of dust. I couldn’t see the monster.

Encouraged, I pulled myself to my feet and had a proper look around. But when I did, I gasped with shock and fear—

The monster was gone—and so was Xavier.

**Episode 5742**

**Greyson**

I couldn’t breathe. There was air—I could feel it on my face—but I couldn’t get it into my lungs. Gasping, I reached for Cali, but my hand closed onto empty space.

Where the hell had she gone? She was *just* there. I was *just* with her. I forced my eyes open and looked around, but I couldn’t find her anywhere.

My head was throbbing with pain, and my ears were ringing. I tried to struggle to my feet, but my knees gave out and I collapsed again. I gritted my teeth with fury. What the hell was going on with me? Where the hell was Cali?

Something warm and comforting pushed against my forehead.

*Cali?*

I opened my eyes again. The air was thick with dust, but a purple light was shining on me, and it eased my heart a little.

“Where am I?” I rasped. I tried to get up again.

“Take it easy, Grey,” a familiar voice said.

I shook my head, though it made the pain worse. “I can’t take it easy. I need to find Cali. Now.”

As I struggled to my feet, my vision began to clear, and I realized that it was Kendall looking down at me. That was the purple light—her eyes. She was covered in dirt, and there was a gash on her cheek that was seeping blood.

“What happened?” I asked, rubbing my head.

“The sound,” she said. “Don’t you remember? We were all affected by it.”

And then I did remember. The sound that felt like it had been piercing my brain, echoing against my skull. The feeling of complete disorientation, and the ground falling beneath me. I had a flash of what felt like a memory—or a nightmare. It was a creature—I had seen it rising up out of the ground behind Cali.

Putting all my strength behind it, I staggered to my feet. I looked wildly around. “Where is she? Where’s Cali?”

“I’m honestly not sure,” Kendall said.

I whirled around. “Shit. What happened to the stairs?!”

“They collapsed,” she said. “This whole place is a mess.”

My blood ran cold at the sight of the complete chaos leading to the basement, but I raced toward the dusty drop, jumping into it. I had just started to claw my way through the rubble when I heard a sound that made me stop in my tracks—

“Greyson!”

It was Cali! She was calling for me and climbing toward me.

Reaching for her, I pulled her the last few feet and wrapped her in my arms.

She looked up at me. Her face was covered with dust and streaked with tears. “Greyson!” she gasped. “Xavier’s gone!”

Stunned, I stared at her. “Gone?” I repeated. “*What?*”

I looked past her, peering into the darkness, but there was nothing to see. I wasn’t even sure how it was that Cali had escaped.

“Greyson!” she sobbed, her head against my shoulder. “What are we going to do? Where is he?”  
 “He’s going to be okay,” I murmured, pulling her close. I was trying to comfort her, but I was rattled. What the hell *had* happened? Where *was* he?

“Where the hell is Xavier?!”

I looked over as Ava stormed toward us, her blue eyes blazing with fury and fear.

Cali looked up at her. Her mouth opened to answer, but no sound came out. She was clearly terrified and traumatized, and Ava’s anger wasn’t helping the situation.

“Just hold on, Ava,” I snapped. Then I turned to Cali. “What happened down there?” I asked her gently.

“I don’t even know,” she said, looking terrified all over again. “It was so dark and so dusty—” She started to cough.

I put my hands on her shoulders and bent so I was looking right into her eyes. I tried to make my expression as calm as I could, like we weren’t standing in the middle of Lucian’s basement that had just been destroyed by a monster from a fucking nightmare. “Listen to me, love. We’re going to need to know everything you remember if there’s a chance of finding Xavier and getting him out of there.”

Ava fumed but kept her mouth shut as Cali nodded.

“I came back down here—I had to try to find Xavier. And then everything fell apart,” she said, tears starting to leak from her eyes again. She shook her head. “I never should have left him—”

“That’s the first thing we can all agree on,” Ava snapped angrily.

I shot her a sharp look, then turned back to Cali. “Go on.”

Cali took a shaking breath. “I tried to get him out right away, but he told me to leave him. He told me to get everyone else first. He wouldn’t let me help him until I got everyone else out.”

Gritting my teeth, I nodded. I wasn’t surprised to hear it. It was exactly what I would have done if I’d had my sense about me when Cali had grabbed hold of me and dragged me toward the stairs. But I had been completely delirious. I hadn’t even been aware of where I was—I could barely move. I didn’t even remember walking toward the stairs. The first thing I remembered was coming to on the first floor, just as the stairs collapsed.

“Fuck this,” Ava hissed. She started into the rubble. “I’m going after him.”

“Stop!” I growled, grabbing her arm. “It’s not safe.”

“Does it look like I care?” she snarled back, shaking her arm free. “You’re not my Alpha, you don’t tell me what to do.”

“He’s not there!” Cali said, her voice shaking. “I looked.”

“*What?*” Ava and I snapped, both turning to Cali.

Cali shook her head. “Xavier and the creature—both of them—they’re gone…”

And she collapsed into the rubble, sobbing.

“Oh my god,” Ava breathed, her face going pale.

I put my hand on Cali’s shoulder. “Cali, love, it’s… Don’t worry. We’ll find my brother.”

It felt strange to say the words. I was trying to comfort Cali as she sobbed, but I had panic trying to claw its way up my chest. Xavier was gone? And the creature? What the hell had that thing been, anyway?

I tried to remember, tried to think back, but I had only seen it briefly before the sound it had made had completely leveled me.

But I had seen it, and I knew the others had to. Whatever it was, it was a fucking monster.

Pulling Cali to my side, I scrambled back through the rubble to the first floor of the Vanguard palace, where the others were waiting.

“What did you do?” I demanded, rounding on Lucian.

Lucian looked shocked—and offended. “I didn’t do anything!”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Like anyone would believe you, Lucian,” she scoffed.

“And why wouldn’t they?” he asked, looking at her. “When have ever been less than forthright when asked—”

“Are you kidding me?” Aysel snapped.  
 “Lucian, get real—”

“How *dare* you speak to him like that!” Armin bellowed.

“ENOUGH!” Ava snarled, silencing the heated argument. She glared around. “The last place I saw my mate was down there,” she said, pointing to the basement, which looked like a war zone. “So I’m going down there.”

“Hang on,” Kendall cautioned, “the only thing we know about that place is that it’s surging with dark magic. You can’t go down there. It’s too dangerous.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “You are out of your mind if you think I’m just going to sit back and let some outsider tell me what I can and cannot do—”

“I think everyone should stay here,” I broke in, not wanting anymore fights. “Xavier is my brother. There’s no reason everyone should keep exposing themselves further.”

“Greyson, no!” Cali said, grabbing hold of my arm. Her eyes were wide and scared. “There has to be a better way.”

“What?” I asked. I was open to it, but I honestly couldn’t think of one.

Cali’s eyes darted around for a moment, then she turned to Vander. “Can’t you find Xavier?” she asked desperately.

Vander shrugged. “I really wish that I could, but there’s not much I can do against dark magic.”

“Fuck that,” Ava hissed. She jerked her chin toward Kendall. “What that purple-eyed bitch said is right. We don’t know anything about that thing down there. We don’t know if that creature has anything to do with dark magic. And I’m willing to take the risk. We’re wasting time,” she said, starting for the bombed-out basement door.

“I should go too,” Cali said. “Since I’m the only one who’s not affected by the magic.”

Well, that wasn’t going to fucking work. Dark magic or not, there was a big, scary fucking monster in that basement, and I wasn’t going to just let Cali head down there unprotected.

I stepped in front of the two women before they could drop into the dark, dusty depths below. “Hang on.”

“*What?*” Ava growled.

“Greyson, we have to,” Cali insisted.

“We need something—we need a witch.”

Cali frowned. “A witch?”

I nodded. “I’m calling Big Mac.”

**Episode 5743**

**Xavier**

My skin hurt. Everything hurt—it felt as though every nerve in my nervous system had turned on me and was attacking. My head was pounding—the pain blinding—and my ears rang.

I shivered in the sudden cold. Which somewhere in the back of my head I knew was strange. Wasn’t I just feeling like I was going to roast? But why? Where had I been feeling so hot? It had been like a furnace, but where had that been? Where was that? *When* was that?

My eyes felt like sandpaper when I finally blinked them open, and I squinted, expecting them to be flooded with light—but no light came. It was dark.

Was it nighttime?

I remembered daylight—had I been out for that long?

I tried to sit up and felt a surging pain so intense I nearly threw up. I swallowed back a growl and fell back onto a cold, hard surface as the pain throbbed through me.

I didn’t want to pass out, so I took a moment and tried to steady my breathing. The air around me was cold, dank, and had an awful smell. Awful, but familiar.

Forcing my eyes open again, I took a look around, peering into the darkness as my eyes adjusted. Was I in a cave? How the fuck had I ended up in a cave?

Looking around, I realized that one of my arms was bleeding. All things considered, that didn’t seem that bad, so, gritting my teeth against the pain, I pushed myself to sitting, then to my feet. I staggered a little but stayed standing.

That was when I noticed a cold breeze. I looked up. There was night sky just above me. I wasn’t in a cave—I was in a pit. But that didn’t explain much. How the hell had I gotten into a pit? And why?

I tried to remember what had happened just before, and slowly, fragments of memories began to fall into place. Lucian’s palace, dark magic, the basement, the tunnel, and the sound. The horrific, all-consuming sound. And then…the creature. The monster that rose up out of the seam in the ground, scary as a fucking nightmare.

I remembered the ground shaking under my feet and rocks falling around me. I remembered dust filling the air, making it impossible to see, I remembered Cali appearing at my side, trying to grab hold of me, and I remembered my pleas to get her the hell out of there.

Fear gripped me as I looked around. I was completely alone. I could feel panic setting in, but I tried not to let it overwhelm me. She wasn’t with me, and I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Had she been able to escape? Had Ava?

“*Fuck*,” I hissed, turning in a circle. There was nothing here, which only made the feeling of crushing anxiety even worse. I had to get out of this place. I had to find my mates, make sure they were okay. I couldn’t just stand here, wondering.

But other than the hole over my head, there didn’t seem to be a way out.

I looked up into the night sky, trying to gauge the distance. It was too dark to be truly accurate, but I’d guess about fifteen to twenty feet, and the sides of the pit were sheer.

I considered my options. If I shifted, I wondered if I could make the jump. Maybe even if I couldn’t make it all the way, I might be able to grab the sheer sides of the pit and claw my way up the sides.

It had to be worth a try, anyway. Better than standing here thinking about it. I’d always been action-oriented, so I crouched, prepared to shift. But just as I was about to, the ground beneath my feet began to shake—just as it had in the Vanguard basement.

Heart racing, I steadied myself, then readied myself to try again. But before I could, I heard a low, deadly hiss.

My blood ran cold, and even without looking around, I knew what it was that had made that sound—the creature. The one I’d seen in the basement. Was the creature responsible for putting me here in this pit? But how? And *why*?

Curious as I was about those answers, I had no intention of sticking around to find out. I was about to shift when I heard an earsplitting sound that drove me to my knees. It was the same sound I’d heard in the basement, and my hands went to my ears. The movement was automatic, but it did no good. Nothing I did could block out the sound that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside my skull. I tried to fight through the pain. I had to shift—I had to get the fuck out of this place if I was going to survive, but then a strange, low voice reached into my head. It was an ominous voice and it spoke inside of me, the sound rumbling through me:

*I AM DEATH, AND I WILL COME FOR WHAT IS MINE.*

My heart raced as I tried to draw breath, tried to think through the panic coursing through me. I could barely focus, but I knew I had heard that before—it was just before the creature had risen from the ground, from that cracked seam in the floor of the basement of the Vanguard palace.

Fear like something I’d never felt before pumped through me, feeling like poison. What did the voice mean? Why did it feel so damn close? Did that mean it was coming back for me?

I tried not to panic, but I had to fight to keep breathing. If only I could shift, then I could stand a chance. I could fight—I could survive. I fought my way back to my feet, but then the screeching in my head seemed to only grow louder. It was as though every time I tried, the screeching sound overwhelmed me.

“Fucking hell,” I swore as I stumbled backward. I tripped and fell back on my ass. I was angry, but what I saw just over me made the curse die on my lips. There was something blocking out the faint starlight at the top of the pit.

It was the creature. It was looming over me. And—as I watched—it began to climb down toward me.

Staring over me, I couldn’t feel my arms or my legs. Everything in me had frozen. All I could feel was the creature’s hot breath as it drew closer and closer. I blinked as the thing’s hideous maw opened and shut, like it was practicing what it was going to do when it reached me.

I snarled back at it. I wasn’t going to just lie back and let myself become this creature’s midnight snack—not without a fight, anyway.

The sound echoing through my head was nearly incapacitating, but I struggled to raise a hand to strike the thing down. I hit at it but caught nothing but air. The creature snapped at me, then raised its massive head. It tipped back what I could only assume was its head and opened its jaws. The sound in my head intensified as the thing roared a thunderous howl that echoed off the walls of the pit.

My eyes streaming with pain, I looked at the thing’s rows of lethally sharp teeth, then—thinking better of a direct attack—rolled out of its path.

I crawled to my knees and peered over my shoulder. The creature looked back down at me, and seemed to be confused for a moment, like it couldn’t understand how I’d moved so quickly.

I grunted as my knee jammed into a rock. That was a mistake. The creature turned toward the sound and before I had a chance to move out of the way, it had snapped me up in its claw.

“*Dammit!*” I hissed.

I struggled to get free as it lifted me and started to climb up, out of the pit, but I couldn’t get free. I couldn’t shift—I could only flail. The creature paused on its journey up to emit another earsplitting sound—and then everything went black.

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When I woke up again, I heard a soft, purring sound. I lay still for a moment, thinking that I was no longer cold. That made a nice change. When I opened my eyes, I realized I was lying on a smooth, warm rock that seemed to curve gently.

I looked around in confusion. All I could tell for sure was that I was not dead, and I was in a different place. The creature must have brought me here—but why?

I took a deep breath and staggered to my feet, slipping on the smooth rock. The purring sound stopped. I looked around, trying to identify where it came from. It seemed like it was coming from the smooth rocks. I leaned down and ran my hand along the surface. It was warm…which was weird.

Then, as I watched, a crack appeared in the rock.

I jumped back in shock. Then horror as yet another crack spread across the surface.

My eyes went wide as I looked around. These weren’t rocks at all. They were *eggs*. And they were hatching.

**Episode 5744**

I stood, bouncing impatiently on the balls of my feet, until there was the rush of air I had come to recognize and—a moment later—Big Mac blipped onto the first floor of the Vanguard palace.

Immediately everyone started to shout at once.

“Big Mac! Look what Lucian did!”

“How dare you! I did *nothing*!”

“This is a disaster! We need your help!”

Big Mac gave us her trademark scowl and held up her hand to silence the crowd. When that worked, she turned to Greyson. “Tell me what happened.”

Greyson looked over at me. “You tell her, you were there.”

I took a shaking breath and tried to tell her the story as quickly as I could—the sound that made everyone collapse, the floor splitting, the monster rising, the basement collapsing, and Xavier disappearing.

When I was done, Big Mac rubbed her head, looking annoyed.

“This why I aways tell you idiots not to fuck around with dark magic,” she muttered to herself as she walked over toward the collapsed staircase. She peered into the basement, which was still filled with dust.

I crossed my fingers, pleading silently that Big Mac would come through for us and know what to do. That she would know what we could do to find Xavier. All I could think about was the hideous creature coming toward Xavier and me—and how it had almost ripped me with its claws. I shivered at the memory.

Big Mac turned back to us, a worried frown on her face.

“I used my magic against the creature, and it seemed to work,” I told her.

“*Did* it?” Ava scoffed. “Because Xavier’s missing, and no one knows what happened to him, so how well could it have worked?”

I glared at her but kept my mouth shut. I wasn’t going to get into anything with Ava at the moment. We just didn’t have time.

“What did *you* see?” Big Mac asked Vander.

Vander tipped their head. “Well, whatever it was, it was clearly ancient, which explains its association with really dark magic.”

“Yes, but *what is it*?” Big Mac pushed. I need to know what I’m dealing with.

“I don’t know,” Vander admitted. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

I felt my hopes sink. Vander had been around since—well, since forever. And if they really had no idea what it was—who could?

I turned to Big Mac. “Is there anything you could do?”

Big Mac considered this. “I could try a location spell,” she said. She pulled a map from seemingly nowhere and crouched down, spreading it on the ground.

Interested, we all began to assemble around her.

She glanced up, irritated. “Stand back.”

We all did as she said, and she looked back down at the map. Then up again, still annoyed.

“*Further back*,” she snapped.

As I stepped further back, I noticed that Ava was glaring at me. Which wasn’t unusual, but given that she and I were both supposed to be worried about Xavier, it felt strange. It was like she had something to say. I was about to turn back to Big Mac when Ava stepped over to me and grabbed my arm, pulling me away from the group.

Already on edge, I yanked my arm away from her grasp. “God, Ava, what? Going to tell me how you’ve somehow figured out that this creature crawling from the ground is somehow my fucking fault?” I snapped.

“It *is*,” Ava hissed back, her eyes blazing.

“*How?*” I gasped.

“Because you always have to drag him into your stupid shit.” She leaned in closer. “And don’t think I don’t know what you two were up to.”

“He’s my mate,” I shot back, flustered.

Ava narrowed her eyes. “He’s mine too, and *I* wouldn’t have left him.”

“H-He told me to get the others out,” I stammered. “What was I supposed to do?”

“You always protect your mate. *Werewolves* do, anyway,” she said, her voice dripping with acid.

I felt a twinge of guilt. Shit.

She shook her head. “You wouldn’t understand that.”

I wanted to blast her with my magic, but I restrained myself. “I left him, yes, but I did what my mate wanted. I guess *you’re* too selfish to understand.”

Ava looked surprised instead of offended. And then, to my surprise, she smiled, like I had said something funny.

“The bitch with two mates is calling *me* selfish.” She shook her head. “Will wonders never cease?”

“So you’re blaming me for the *due destini* too?” I snarled.

Ava shrugged one shoulder. “If the shoe fits…”

I ground my teeth. Maybe I *should* blast her.

But before I could do anything, Greyson stepped between us. He looked at me, then at Ava. “Hey, I’m sure we’re all worried about Xavier, but the best thing we can do is pay attention to whatever Big Mac is telling us so that we can do what we need to do to get him back safely. Right?” he asked, looking pointedly at Ava.

She stared back at him. “Fine,” she said, just as coldly.

“Great,” I said.

I stepped next to Greyson, but as he led me away, I could still picture the anger and contempt I had seen in her eyes. I had a sinking feeling the bad blood between us had gotten even worse, and though I wasn’t concerned about my relationship with Ava, I just knew it wasn’t going to make things any easier.

Maybe he could sense my anxiety, but Greyson stopped and turned to look at me. He crooked a finger under my chin and lifted it, so he met my eyes. “Hey, I know things look dark right now, but try not to worry. We won’t give up, love. I promise you.”

“I know,” I said as I wrapped my arms around Greyson. It felt good to hold him tightly. As much as I didn’t want to let them, I felt rattled by Ava’s accusations.

But as I pressed my face against Greyson’s chest, I felt someone staring at me, and I opened my eyes to see Kendall watching us.

My stomach sank. It felt like no matter where I went, I couldn’t escape my mates’ mates. Was *everyone* blaming me for what happened?! It wasn’t like *I* had invited this monster. I wasn’t the one who had unlocked the door to unleash the dark magic that had started this whole thing.

Ava’s accusations had gotten to me. I had slept with Xavier just before all hell had broken loose, and that weirdly didn’t feel like a coincidence. It felt strange to even think it, but could this be some kind of dark magic punishment? Was what happened here somehow tied to the curse of the *due destini*?

I was starting to really spiral but was pulled out of my thoughts as Big Mac began to chant. I looked over at her and saw that she was waving her hands over the map she’d spread on the ground, casting her spell.

The crowd she’d driven back was drawing closer again, creeping in for a better look as the map began to tremble. Big Mac had found a lock of Xavier’s hair somewhere while I was being yelled at by Ava and had placed it in the center of the map. For a moment I wondered where she’d come up with it, but then I remembered—Big Mac had a collection of everyone’s hair.

It was kind of creepy, but I suppose in situations like this one, I had to admit it actually saved a hell of a lot of trouble.

As we watched, a light from an unseen source began to blow over the lock of hair.

I remembered suddenly that when Big Mac had done a spell just like this one to locate the orb all those months ago, a similar light had appeared then too.

“Hey,” Lola whispered, stepping over to me and leaning in. “Isn’t this the second time Big Mac has had to use magic to find Xavier?”

“What?” I asked, looking over at her.

Lola shrugged. “Just seems like he’s always getting lost.”

I rubbed my head. I wished I could forget, but Lola was right. I remembered the moment when Big Mac had told me that Xavier was in the demon realm. That had been the shock of my lifetime.

But then I had a terrible thought—could the demon realm be where the creature we’d seen come from?

I shot a suspicious look at Lucian.

The light over the map grew brighter and brighter, then it began to spread in outward rings. I had to squint against the brightness before it suddenly seemed to burst—and then died out completely.

I gasped and looked around. “What happened?” I asked, baffled. “Did it work? Did you find Xavier? Where is he?”

Big Mac looked up at me. Her face was pale and worried. “No.”

“What?” I asked. “What does that mean, no? Where is he?”

She shook her head. “It means he’s nowhere. He’s just…gone.”

**Episode 5745**

**Xavier**

I stared in shock as the giant eggs beneath my feet. The cracks were growing, racing across their surfaces. I stepped back, and when I looked around, I realized that there were several eggs surrounding me. As panicked as I felt, my brain was still working, and I knew this meant I was in some kind of a nest. And I doubted that the creature had brought me here to be some kind of a babysitter.

As I stepped back, something hard cracked under my foot. I looked down to see the shards of something white broken beneath my shoe. Bending down, I grabbed it, and when I looked closer, I realized I had just stepped on a bone. And looking around, I saw that it wasn’t the only one. There were more—a lot more.

Then I saw something that made my stomach contract with fear and disgust—a skull.

I wasn’t exactly a member of a CSI crime unit, but I didn’t have to be to identify what I was seeing—I recognized a werewolf skull when I saw one. And there was more than one. There were dozens—too many to count. I just hadn’t noticed them right away. I’d been too distracted by the cracking eggs.

I wasn’t the first werewolf the monster had brought back to the nest. Not to protect or to babysit the eggs, but as meals for its young after they hatched.

“*Fucking hell*,” I breathed, shaking my head.

Carefully stepping around the eggs, I counted them. Five. Three of them already showing cracks. That wasn’t great. How long before they emerged, hungry for werewolf meat?

I looked at the size of the eggs and ran the math in my head. I might be able to take on one of the newly hatched monsters—but *three* of them? I wasn’t sure it was possible, and I sure as hell didn’t want to stick around to find out.

I turned, running my hands along the stony wall behind me. It stood to reason that if the monster had brought me to this place, then there had to be a way out.

Continuing along the wall, I came upon a pile of smaller rocks, all jammed up against the wall. That had to be it. The creature had to have closed up the entrance after it threw me inside.

Concentrating, I tried to shift my hand into a claw, and was surprised to find that I could do it. Using my stronger werewolf claw, I attacked the wall where the creature had sealed the exit. As I worked to clear the rock, I wondered how much there was to get through, and how long I had to manage it.

Just as I was considering those odds, I heard a sound that made my blood run cold. It was a low, cracking sound, and I turned to see a large crack spreading slowly but inexorably along one of the monster’s eggs.

“You have to be fucking kidding me,” I swore, my eyes growing wide.

I hadn’t realized what I was doing, but as I’d been clearing the exit, I’d been carelessly tossing the rocks over my shoulder, and right onto the egg in the middle. It already had a crack in it, and the rocks I’d thrown had weakened it further.

“Dammit.” Gritting my teeth, I kept digging. I had to. I didn’t have a choice, but I was more careful now, doing all I could to send the rocks away from the eggs. It wasn’t exactly easy, though. The eggs were huge, and the walled cavern was small, so the eggs took up most of the space. Which was good for a nest, but really sucked for my excavation project.

I forced myself to slow down, but I refused to panic. Not even as the sound continued and more and more cracks started to appear.

As I continued to work clearing the rocks, a small jet of cool air hit my sweaty face. That spurred me on, and when I cleared a few more handfuls of rock, I noticed a small opening in the stone.

“*Yes*,” I breathed. I’d done it. I fucking done it. I’d made it. I just needed to clear a little more space—just enough to climb out of this fucking monster nest. But just as I extended my arm for one big sweep of rock, I heard a loud cracking sound that sent a thrill of fear up my spine.

I paused, and I heard another crack.

I turned back and saw the egg with the largest crack was starting to move. It was ever so slight, but it was *definitely* moving.

The purring sound grew louder, and I heard something shifting, shuffling. Something was trying to break through the shell.

“Oh no,” I said, backing up against the rock opening as a claw appeared through the seam of the cracked egg. “Dammit!” I turned back to the wall, frantic now as I tried to clear the last of the stones away.

I heard a hiss, and when I shot a look over my shoulder, I saw the creature finally breaking through the egg.

It was disgusting; a small, nastier version of its parent, covered in gluey mucus.

I felt bile rising up in my throat, but when I turned back to clear more stones, something sharp grabbed for my hand through the opening I’d just created. Before I could react, I was jerked against the remaining rock. The rock broke free, opening the exit, but the creature must have been waiting outside, and I was held in its claw.

I strained against the creature’s hold, trying to pull my own clawed hand free. The creature didn’t like the feel of my squirming, apparently, and shoved me. It released me, and I slammed against the opposite wall and crumpled to the ground.

This brief fight had given the hatchling the time it needed, and it emerged, its jaw snapping, spewing saliva as I loomed over me. It rose over me as the other eggs began to crack and move.

I took a deep breath and—gathering all my concentration and strength—shifted to my full werewolf form. The sound of cracking bones echoed against the stone walls just as the mother monster emitted her horrific sound outside the nest.

Instantly I dropped to the ground in pain as the entire nest began to shake. The hatchling reacted to my howl of agony and turned toward me. I had to roll to avoid its snapping jaws, which were freakishly strong for something that was just born.

Pulling myself up as the sound from the mother monster stopped, I circled the hatchling. I noticed right away the baby monster didn’t seem to be able to track me with its eyes. It was only able to use the sound of me. Maybe it couldn’t see yet.

Quietly, I made my way back to the cleared rock—my only way out of this nightmare. I could see the mother monster through the opening I’d made—she was blocking my way out. I weighed my choices—I could try to fight the monster outside. I knew it wouldn’t be easy, that even as a wolf, the thing could incapacitate me with that sound.

But…I watched the hatchling, which was still searching for me. Maybe I had more leverage here.

I picked up one of the bones from the ground and threw it against the far wall. The creature spun toward the sound, and when it did, I made my move. I leapt onto its back, grabbing it around the neck with my strong jaws. The hatchling began to scream, which made its mother growl with anger.

That was what I wanted.

I dragged the flailing hatchling back toward the cleared rock and slowly emerged, keeping the hatchling firmly in my mouth. The hatchling screamed, and the mother snarled at me but didn’t attack, rightly assuming that I would kill the baby.

My hostage plan was working so far, and I moved slowly into the open air. Then, when I had fully emerged out of the nest’s passageway and onto what appeared to be a mountain’s face, I flung the baby monster into its mother.

The mother monster turned its head to catch the hatchling—and I took off. This was my chance, and I wasn’t going to miss it.

As I raced past the monster, one of its claws flashed out, catching me in the back. It drew me back, and I swiped with my paw, my own claws extended. I snarled, foaming at the mouth as the monster made its terrible shrieking sound.

I knew I couldn’t beat the thing—but I knew I could make it bleed. So I reared back and sank my teeth into its disgusting flesh. The taste was awful—hot and bitter—but the creature screamed in pain, making the sound that sent jolts of agony down my spine.

I faltered as the pain in my head intensified and the creature slashed at me. I could feel the hot, wet sensation on my back that I knew meant the creature had drawn blood. Another blow sent me flying, tumbling down the side of the steep mountain.

Pain jolted through me as my body crashed again and again, and then, finally, my head slammed into a rock, and everything went black.

**Episode 5746**

**Artemis**

We were moving at a fast, steady pace in the direction the tree, Othello, had recommended, and I could tell by the exhausted looks on everyone’s faces that it was time to stop and set up camp.

A few days ago, I might have been so hungry to find some trace of Kadmos that stopping would never have occurred to me, but now I was feeling better about everything and more than willing to stop and catch our breath.

We chose a spot in a small clearing under a circle of towering trees and lit a fire, and then settled down into the soft ground. It wasn’t until I sat down that I realized I was way overdue for a break.

Other than feeling a little sore and exhausted from trekking through the thick woods and climbing slopes and descending hills, I was feeling pretty good. For once, it was starting to feel like we were making progress in my search for my father, not spinning our wheels and taking a bunch of steps backward like it had felt for most of this journey.

Seeing my mother earlier had given me a renewed sense of purpose. Now that I knew we were good and that in her way she supported my journey to find Kadmos, I felt a peace I hadn’t quite known before.

I joined the others around the fire as Marius roasted a rabbit and a few wild birds he’d caught. I was impressed by how quickly and efficiently he’d hunted, how fast he’d sparked a fire using brush and flint. Marius was the type of guy who always surprised me, proving that he was capable of so much more than cracking jokes and being a little full of himself.

“Thanks for feeding us,” I said once he was done roasting and handing out skewers. “I hadn’t even thought about what we’d eat.”

“My pleasure. Guess I’m good to have around,” he said with a wink.

“Agreed,” Rishika said, her mouth full. “And you’re not a bad cook at all.”

The three of us shared a meaningful look as we ate. The food was gamey, but good. I wasn’t complaining at all. Of all the people I could have brought along with me on this journey, I felt like I was with the right group.

Zale was still a wild card, but I was hoping he’d prove himself useful again in no time.

Rishika nudged me with her shoulder, her skin hot against mine—that werewolf heat of hers that always surprised and comforted me. She smiled.

“This isn’t so bad, right?” she said.

“Not at all,” I replied.

Adair was sitting across from us with Tabitha perched in his lap. He’d already finished eating, and I could tell he had something on his mind.

“So, what’s next?” he said. “Orla told you what this place looks like—and that’s great—but there’s still the issue of finding it. The Ceruvela Mountain range is vast. It could take us forever to search.”

“He’s right,” Marius said, “but there must be some other trees or, I don’t know, someone who knows exactly where this place is so they can pinpoint a location for us.” He glanced at Zale, who was eating his meal apart from the rest of the group.

“What?” I said, my voice low. “Something to say about our newest travel partner?”

“Well, if he’s supposed to know this area, shouldn’t he know where a waterfall meets a small river?”

“You’d think so,” I said. I looked at Zale, who seemed to be enjoying his meal. I still didn’t know what to make of the Fae, but I’d purposely withheld my mother’s information from him. The information was so specific that I thought he could use it to pretend he was more useful than he was—stones that shined purple weren’t the type of thing you saw just anywhere.

*I don’t know what it is, but I still feel like I need to play my cards close to the vest when it comes to him.*

Rishika yawned as she plucked another skewer from the fire and blew on the meat to cool it. “I agree with Marius. Someone will know. It’s only a matter of time.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said. “I need something to happen, something to get us close enough that I feel like all this isn’t just some long waste of time.”

We kept eating, chatting about what the next days might bring. We decided as a group to sleep soon and rise at dawn so that we had enough time to travel and then secure another place to camp for the next night.

Not long after and with everyone full and satisfied, we retired to our little tents. Adair and Tabitha in theirs, and Marius, Rishika, and me in another.

“Are you going to be all right?” I asked Zale as he laid out his mat by the fire. He grinned up at me as he stretched out on his back. “So kind of you to ask. Yes, I’m used to sleeping out under the stars.”

“All right. Well…if you’re sure….”

He closed his eyes. “I’m sure. See you in the morning.”

I went into our tent to find Marius shirtless. I sucked in a breath as he turned to face me, stretching his arms out to show how his hands butted up against the canvas.

“We should invest in bigger tents if we’re really doing all this camping stuff,” he said.

“We should. You’re so tall you look like you’re stuffed in here,” I said.

Rishika was lying back on the blankets, looking at ease. From the looks of it, she was a little more comfortable with this arrangement than I was right now. It felt a little strange, the three of us being together like this…but it felt good, too.

Rishika smiled up at me. “We should rest, don’t you think?”

I swallowed. “Yeah, definitely.”

I slipped in between Rishika and Marius. I felt warm between them, and safe, too. It was really nice after all of the crap we went through today.

“That was a really big win today,” Rishika said softly.

I grinned at her, happy that she felt as positive as I did. “It was, right?”

“Now all we have to do is search a massive mountain range that stretches for miles and miles,” Marius said in the darkness with only a hint of sarcasm. “I’m not even sure anyone’s explored the entire range before.”

Rishika’s hand flashed in the darkness as she smacked Marius on the bicep.

Marius jumped up. “Ow! What gives?”

“Quit being a Negative Nancy!” Rishika snapped.

“Who is *that*?” Marius asked.

“No, Rishika, he’s right,” I said. “It *is* going to be difficult, but I’m not giving up hope. If I lose hope, then my motivation will go with it, and then we’re really in trouble.”

Rishika leaned in to plant a kiss on my cheek. “Don’t worry, that won’t happen.”

I turned my head to face Rishika, touched to have her on this journey with me. In the short time I’d lived in the Redwood pack house, Rishika had come to mean so much to me—she was like having home in a person, and I needed that feeling right now.

“We’re seeing this through to the end,” Marius said. “No matter what.”

I shifted around to face him, and he rested his forehead against mine.

“I mean that, Ari. Until the end. I’ll be here—to cook, to make suggestions on tent expansion, fight off horrible creatures, anything you need.”

Our giggles filled the darkness, and I was surprised by the warm feeling that spread through me. I would never have pictured Marius and me growing this close when I arrived, and I was pleased at the turn things had taken.

Marius kissed me, sending a wave of warm tingles through my body. I slid one hand up his chest to his face and caressed his cheek as I deepened the kiss.

Before I knew it, Rishika was peeling me out of my clothes while my mouth remained connected to Marius’s. I moaned against his lips when I felt Rishika’s lips dragging along my thigh before reaching my center where her tongue explored me.

And then, as if we’d been doing this for months or years instead of just a few blissful days, Marius moved into place between my legs while I touched and pleased Rishika, and together we searched and found our pleasure in the darkness before falling into a deep, satisfying sleep.

I awoke some time later feeling a little disoriented. I blinked, turning at the sound of strange noises coming from outside. Marius and Rishika were still asleep, naked, and it took a bit of work to untangle myself from their limbs.

I did my best not to wake them as I dressed in the cramped tent and then slipped out into the night. I stretched, wondering at the time since the moon was still high in the dark sky.

At first glance, nothing seemed amiss. The fire was still going…but Zale was nowhere to be found, and neither was his mat. He was gone.

**Episode 5747**

**Greyson**

I stared at Big Mac’s map just as the light flashed before going out altogether. Big Mac had said that Xavier was gone, and it took me a few agonizing seconds to realize that she meant she couldn’t find him—not that he was dead.

“Try again,” Ava said. She had a tortured look in her eyes like she’d drawn the same awful conclusion as I had and was still worried that things were more dire than Big Mac was letting on. “You must not be trying hard enough.”

Big Mac scowled at her. “Don’t tell me what to do, wolf. You have no idea how hard I tried.” She waved a hand at us, motioning for us to step away.

I linked an arm around Cali as we stepped back. I glanced at Ava and then at Kendall. This was all so fucked up. Ava was getting on my nerves, but I knew she was worried about Xavier…and likely pissed that Cali had recently slept with him. This was one of those rare times when I could relate to how Ava felt.

It was never pleasant to find out that Xavier and Cali had been intimate. It had happened countless times by now, and still, I still hadn’t gotten used to the flare of jealousy that spiked in me every single time.

But unlike Ava, I could reel my feelings in and see things from Cali’s perspective more often than not. While Ava’s anger was driving her to blame Cali for the monster and Ava’s disappearance, I didn’t feel the need to displace and project my anger like her.

As it did so often lately, my thoughts shifted to Kendall. She’d been unusually quiet for a while. I could see that out of the corner of her eye, she was watching me with Cali.

*I hope she doesn’t end up like Ava, driven by jealousy and making my life a living hell.*

I scoffed at that idea even as it formed. Kendall was nothing like Ava. In fact, sometimes I thought I felt more of the pull of our mate bond than she did. Half the time it didn’t even seem like she wanted to be around me, and we’d both agreed that we weren’t going to explore our mate bond.

*I doubt very seriously that Kendall would get jealous about me and Cali, but that doesn’t mean her wolf isn’t.*

I could feel my mine stirring even now as I watched her.

*Nope, not gonna happen. Calm down, big fella.*

Big Mac was lost in casting another spell, and the light appeared again. It began to glow brighter and brighter as Big Mac seemed to strain to keep control of it, her features taut as she stared right at it. The light glowed brighter than ever for a few beats before it flashed out again.

“Any luck?” Cali gasped, her eyes searching the area as if she hoped that Xavier might appear out of thin air.

Big Mac jabbed a finger on the map. “It doesn’t make any sense to me, but apparently, Xavier is here.”

Everyone peered down at the map, examining the area that Big Mac was pointing to. I recognized it instantly.

“That’s the North Sister mountain,” I said.

I knew why it didn’t make much sense to Big Mac for Xavier to be there. It wasn’t that it was all that far away because it wasn’t…but how the hell did Xavier get there of all places? And why?

Cali looked as confused as I was. “Are you sure, Big Mac?” she asked. “I mean…why would he—”

“I’m not sure about anything when it comes to dark magic,” Big Mac snapped. “But this is all I got, and it’s a hell of a lot more than any of you would have without me.”

“She’s got a point there,” Ava grumbled.

Cali nodded. “Fine, got it. I don’t mean to question your methods, Big Mac, I guess I’m just confused, and wondering if he’s there by himself or…”

“Or is the monster there with him?” I finished for her. A chill raced down my spine at the thought. My brother was tough, but up against that thing? I wasn’t so sure that he would be able to hold his own.

“That, I have no idea about. The creature is far beyond my ability to track it,” Big Mac said.

“Monster or no monster, that’s where we’re going,” Ava said. She was already heading for the door, only stopping when Kendall spoke up.

“It’s quite a drive to get there,” Kendall said.

I noticed that Cali was already staring at Big Mac, and Big Mac rolled her eyes because she knew that look.

She sighed. “Sure, I’ll blip you there…because that’s why I exist, to make all your lives a lot easier even though you barely do a thing for me. Ever.”

“Big Mac, we promise we—”

Big Mac put up a hand to cut Cali off. “Save it. I’ve already made peace with the fact that I’ll be doing favors for you lot until I die.”

I was about to assure her that that wasn’t the case, but she gave me a look that stopped me cold.

“I’ll blip some of you,” Big Mac said. “But obviously, I can’t transport you all.”

“I’m going no matter what,” Ava said.

“Me too,” Cali said, winning a cutting look from Ava.

I made a quick decision. “It’ll be me, Cali, Ava, and Kendall. We need Kendall in case things go south.”

Big Mac sighed. “That’s still too many.”

“I can take two of them,” Vander volunteered.

“Great,” I said. “But let’s make sure that we all meet in the same spot.” I placed a finger on the map. “We’ll meet here, at the western base of the North Sister. We don’t want to pop in right where Xavier is.”

“Why not?” Ava said.

“Because if the monster *is* with him, we don’t want to get attacked by it.”

“I’m not worried about the monster. I just want to get to Xavier,” Ava said.

“Trust me on this,” I said. “We’ll be of more use to Xavier if we don’t get shredded to ribbons moments after arriving.”

Ava looked like she wanted to argue but stayed quiet. I couldn’t blame her for pushing back. If Cali had been taken away like this I would want to land as close as possible, too, but I would hope that someone would be clearheaded enough to suggest the same thing I was suggesting right now.

“Ready?” Big Mac said.

“We’re ready,” I replied.

Big Mac blipped us to the base of the mountain, and a few moments later, Vander appeared with Kendall and Ava.

As was always the case after using Big Mac’s fast mode of travel, it took me a few minutes to clear my head.

“Where the hell is he?” Ava shouted at Big Mac.

“Ask a little nicer or I’ll blip your ass into oblivion,” Big Mac said.

Ava sucked her teeth but managed to smile. “Please, Big Mac, can you tell me where Xavier is?”

“That’s much better.” Big Mac forced a fake smile as she pointed at the summit of the mountain. “He’s up there.”

We all craned our necks to take in the pinnacle of the mountain. Ava took off, immediately hiking up the mountain.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s follow her lead.”

We all fell behind Ava, and all the while I was hoping that this wasn’t a big mistake. I wanted to save Xavier as much as Cali and Ava, but I didn’t want to put Cali in danger to do it, and I knew that Xavier wouldn’t want that, either.

Big Mac was cursing and complaining the whole way, but she was keeping up with the rest of us as we navigated the steep slope.

My heart jumped in excitement when I picked up a trace of Xavier’s scent.

“I got him,” I said.

“Me too,” Ava called out. “But I smell something else, too,” she said, her voice tinged with worry.

“What is it? The monster?” Cali asked.

“No,” I said. “It’s Xavier’s blood. I smell it, too, on the breeze.” I hated to tell her such dark news, but it wasn’t like I could keep it from her. If Xavier was injured, she would see the proof of it herself soon enough…and at least this way she wouldn’t be surprised if we found Xavier injured.

“Shit. He’s hurt!” Ava said. She picked up speed, charging up the mountain with Cali struggling to keep up.

Kendall and I locked eyes.

“This can’t be good,” she said.

“Nope,” I replied.

We hurried after Ava and Cal with Big Mac and Vander close behind. By the time I caught up with Ava, she was standing just outside a thick copse of trees.

Ava snarled. “Who the hell is that?”

I followed Ava’s gaze and saw a woman standing over Xavier’s bloody, naked body.

“Xavier!” Cali shouted.

Cali and Ava rushed over to him, slipping outside my reach. The woman finally looked up, and I was surprised to see the wolf researcher from LIPS.

*Rhonda? What the hell is she doing here?*

“A human?” Ava snarled before. “What the hell is she doing here?!”

**Episode 5748**

**Maya**

I felt relief as I made my way to the Redwood pack house. It had been a wild journey, and I was happy to be back.

The earthquake had been a complete shock, and I was still weirded out by it. We’d been running at top speed, so fast it had taken us a second more than it should have to realize that the ground was shaking under our feet.

We were lucky that we’d been nearly halfway through our journey and didn’t encounter any other surprises other than that as we ran the last few miles.

I’d lived in the Pacific Northwest for a long time and had never felt an earthquake that strong. I hoped that no one had suffered any damage, though I wouldn’t be surprised to find the pack house with a few broken windows or beams.

I glanced behind me, pleased to see that the five wolves who’d followed me from Washington—Bennett, Genji, Davina, Hawke, and Nash—were still close behind. This was what was left of the new and improved Grimcrest pack other than me and Colton. These were the wolves who had made a conscious decision to follow me.

It would have been nice to bring a lot more wolves with me, and it had taken some convincing even for the ones who had, but it was what it was. It was time to turn over a new leaf and fully turn my back on what my grandfather had created.

*The others can turn into a roaming band of Rogues for all I care. I’m going to be the kind of Alpha I always wanted to be despite them.*

Still, it was an intimidating thought—especially since I’d been thrown into it already and was trying to find my footing. It was going to be one of those situations where I would make it up as I went along. Anyway, if Xavier and Greyson could run a pack, I most certainly could. I was much better equipped than they were, and I didn’t have the distraction of the *due destini* hanging over my head.

*I’m more qualified than Nolan ever was, too. I’m going to be better than all of them put together. I just have to believe in myself.*

I let out a howl for the others to stay close as we neared the house. I broke into a run when I saw Colton come out onto the porch with a twin in each arm. My heart squeezed, and the depth of how much I’d missed them hit me like a wave.

Gabriel and Mikah came out, too, and I was happy to see more friendly faces, even if I was so tired that all I wanted was to curl up in bed with my mate and my babies and not talk to anyone but them.

I shifted to human form and hurried over to Colton. I greeted Lyra and Orion first, scooping each one up in my arms and hugging them while they cooed happily.

“Mommy missed you both so much! Have you been good for Daddy?”

They smiled at me, their little fingers going for my hair and gently touching my face. The love in their eyes gave me all the encouragement I needed.

I looked up at Colton, who grinned at me. “Hey, stranger. Long time no see.”

Colton leaned down to kiss me with a passion that I didn’t usually like displaying in front of everyone, but this was one of those times where I didn’t care. I was back where I belonged—with my family.

Someone cleared their throat, and Colton and I broke apart.

“Touching reunion, really,” Gabriel said. “But who are they?” He pointed to the Grimcrest wolves. They’d shifted back to human form also and were standing awkwardly on the lawn watching us.

I felt a twinge of nervousness. “They’re the wolves that left the old Grimcrest pack lands with me. The only wolves who decided to follow me.”

I went quiet as the babies began to fuss, Orion pulling at my hair while Lyra stretched toward Colton, begging to be held by him.

I felt a shock of pride when Colton took Lyra and then, without missing a beat, greeted the new wolves.

“Good to see you all again,” Colton said. “Thank you for your loyalty.”

I couldn’t help but notice that none of them looked particularly pleased. I didn’t know if it was just a matter of nerves or if there was something else at play.

*Don’t tell me they already regret coming with me. I don’t need this.*

Davina scrunched her nose. “It smells like other wolves here.”

“And a vampire,” Nash added with disgust. He lifted his nose to the air, and a second later, his eyes fell on Mikah. “Is that what you all do here? Allow bloodsuckers into your pack houses?”

I cleared my throat as I saw the telltale signs of Gabriel’s temper flaring at the mention of his mate. Mikah on the other hand looked unaffected.

“I’ll show you a bloodsucker,” Gabriel said, cracking his knuckles.

“These are good friends of ours,” I said loudly before anyone could make another move. “Mikah is a vampire, yes, but he’s proven himself an ally to werewolves many times over. He and Gabriel are mates.”

Nash was nodding slowly as if trying to process what I’d just told him.

“We are mates,” Gabriel said, cocking his head. “And as long as that’s cool with all of you, we can be friends too.”

Mikah said nothing. It was enough that he wasn’t jumping off the porch to put them in their place. I couldn’t ask him for much more than that.

Genji threw Colton a nod before saying, “Fine. He’s a Rogue, he’s a vampire, but that’s not all I’m smelling. There are a *lot* of different werewolf scents hanging in the air here. It smells like an entire *pack.”*

I froze, wondering if this was going to be the dealbreaker for them after they’d already come all this way.

“You smell other wolves because this used to be the Redwood pack’s pack house. They’re my mate’s former pack. They’re friends of ours, too.”

Hawke was watching me closely, and I knew he was going to be next to offer his opinion. “Seems like you have a lot of *friends*, Alpha. Are you sure you’re being discerning?”

I felt Colton bristle behind me, but I stepped in front of him, daring Hawke to challenge me. Any one of these Grimcrest wolves could decide they weren’t happy with their decision and turn on me at any moment. I was hoping they wouldn’t, but I wasn’t about to let my guard down.

Before I could say a word, Hawke put his hands up.

“Not challenging you, Alpha. Not complaining, either. Just not something I’m used to. The Grimcrest were a solitary pack. You remember how it was,” he said.

I softened at his words. “Yeah, I remember. But just like I said, I’m trying to do things differently.”

“And you should be feeling pretty lucky to live in a house as nice as this one after the shithole you were in before. This is a new start, right, Maya?” Colton said.

“Right. And this place is only temporary. Ideally, we’ll find a place of our own.” I gave Davina a pointed look. “A place that doesn’t smell like other wolves. But for now, I hope you understand that this is our home until we take a new territory.”

“Good enough for me,” Bennett said, his hard expression breaking into a smile.

I relaxed a little, hoping that her positivity would spread to the others. I hated that I was so on edge about this, hoping that it would work when I knew I had an uphill battle ahead.

*I’m used to doing the hard shit, and I’ve been fighting since I was a child to get the respect I deserve as one of the few female Alphas. I can do this. I don’t have any other choice.*

“Now go inside, make yourself at home,” I said. “Find a room for yourself that isn’t already taken. Shower, take a tour, grab something to eat, whatever. This is your home for the time being, and you should treat it as such.”

The five wolves nodded and started to head in. Once they were gone, I turned to Colton, who was looking at me with that expression he got whenever he was in awe of me.

“Look at you. You did it. You’re *doing* it,” he said.

“I don’t know about that. It took some convincing,” I said.

“I see that…and I see that not a lot of them took you up on your offer, huh?”

“No…but honestly anyone who thought my grandfather was the model Alpha doesn’t belong in my world,” I said.

“And you never know. Some could change their mind one day, baby.”

I shrugged. “How are you? Did you feel the earthquake?”

“About that,” Gabriel cut in. “Did you see that text from Jay?”

Colton’s face twisted. “What? No.” He pulled out his phone to check it.

“What does it say?” I asked as Orion snuggled against my shoulder.

Colton went pale. He turned the phone around to show me images of the Vanguard palace with fissures in the ground and hunks of rock and plaster everywhere. It was a mess.

“And there’s more. Some kind of…monster emerged from the caves below the palace and took Xavier,” Colton said. “I just got a text from Greyson. It’s not looking good.”

I felt for Xavier, but I was stressed out. I couldn’t believe I’d just brought these wolves here for a new start and was already being faced with some crazy sci-fi storyline.

“I don’t need this right now,” I grumbled.

“I know. And whatever the fuck is going on, we should rethink not joining the Alpha alliance,” Colton said.

*Fuck*, I thought as reality kept smacking me in the face. *He’s right.*

**Episode 5749**

Rhonda was here, and I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why. If there was some connection between the wolf researcher and whatever had happened to Xavier, I didn’t have time to care. All I wanted was to make sure that Xavier was okay.

Ava and I fought to be the first to get to Xavier, whose bloody body was bruised and partially covered in snow. Rhonda unfurled a foil emergency blanket from her backpack, and Ava snatched it, and together—shockingly—she and I wrapped Xavier in it as he moaned.

“What did you do to him?” Ava said, looking at Rhonda.

Rhonda stepped back in shock. “What did *I* do—”

“He’s waking up!” I shouted when I saw Xavier’s eyes flutter open.

“It’s about time,” he said in a low, hoarse voice. Despite the obvious pain he was in, he even had a slight smile on his lips.

“You’re alive,” Greyson said.

“Yeah…and you don’t sound too happy about it,” Xavier replied.

I looked up at Rhonda. “What happened here?”

Rhonda shrugged. “I was camping out here, hiking my daily ten-mile route and doing my wolf research when I found him lying out here in the snow.”

“Did you notice anything else?” Kendall asked, shifting easily into MIB mode.

Rhonda looked confused. “What do you mean? You’re not about to accuse me of hurting him like she did, are you?” She aimed a finger at Ava.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have accused you. Xavier’s way too strong and powerful to let someone like you get the jump on him.”

Rhonda frowned. “Okay…?”

Xavier moaned something that none of us understood, and then his eyes fluttered closed.

“Xavier, we’re here,” I said, gently stroking his cheek. Ava’s glare was boring into the side of my face, but I didn’t care. Xavier was my mate too, and I was just as concerned as she was and had just as much of a right to tend to him as she did. I only wished I knew what was going on.

*It’s so weird that Rhonda found him out of all the people it could have been…*

I recalled that after Rhonda discovered werewolves through the video footage she’d taken of Greyson and Xavier, I’d wiped her memory. I’d hated to do it, but I hadn’t had much of a choice. When it came down to preserving her memory or protecting my mates, I’d made the only choice I could have.

I didn’t want to have to wipe Rhonda’s memory again—and I’d basically gotten lucky that time anyway—so we were all going to have to be careful here.

Following up on Kendall’s question, I said, “What Kendall wants to know is if you came across anything…unusual.”

I couldn’t very well describe the horrifying creature that was likely responsible for Xavier’s injuries.

Rhonda arched an eyebrow at me. “You mean other than a naked man lying in the woods?”

“Yes…other than that.”

“No. He’s it,” Rhonda said.

I breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that meant the monster wasn’t here. But if the monster wasn’t responsible for Xavier’s injuries, then who or what was?

“We’re going to get you out of here,” Greyson said. The tenderness in his voice shocked me. It was rare to witness him speak to Xavier that way.

Xavier’s eyes fluttered open, and his panicked gaze landed right on Greyson. He grabbed him and stammered out a sharp, “No!” He looked up at Rhonda, and I immediately understood. He needed to tell us something, but he couldn’t do it with Rhonda standing there.

“Rhonda, could you come with me?” I said.

Rhonda tore her eyes away from Xavier and nodded. “Sure, I guess.”

I led Rhonda over to where Big Mac was observing the scene with narrowed eyes, likely on the lookout for any manifestations of dark magic.

“Big Mac, would you mind telling Rhonda about your research?” I said.

Big Mac scowled.

“Um…maybe one of you can just tell me what the heck is going on? Do any of *you* know what happened to Xavier? Why is he all beat up? If there’s something out here in these woods capable of hurting him, then I think I deserve to know what it is.” She turned around to look at him. “And where are his clothes?”

Big Mac’s scowl dropped and we exchanged a look.

“Um…Xavier’s into extreme sports. Extreme survival sports,” I stammered. “We weren’t sure at first, but that’s likely what happened.”

“Extreme survival sports?” Rhonda said. “I’m sorry, but why does it feel like you’re bullshitting me?”

I looked pleadingly at Big Mac, who took pity on me and covered. “It’s a thing with the Evers brothers. They like doing stupid shit. It excited them. Most any time you see them, they’re doing stupid shit. Have you ever met Colton? He’s their other brother and the dumbest of the bunch…”

While Big Mac laid it on, I hurried back to Xavier who was now resting on Ava’s lap…of course.

*I bet she didn’t wait a second once I was gone to make her move. This isn’t about proving which one of us Xavier likes or needs the most. This is about helping him. Too bad she doesn’t seem to get that.*

Xavier’s eyes met mine, and he tried to get up.

Ava tightened her hold around him. “Rest, Xavier. You’ve been through a lot.”

Greyson nodded. “She’s right, Xavier. Take it easy.”

Xavier responded, but his words were broken and muffled. I saw frustration on his face when he saw that we didn’t understand.

I reached out to him via mind link.

*What is it, Xavier? What are you trying to say?*

I waited for Xavier’s reply, and when it came, his words were so jumbled I couldn’t make out a word of it.

*That’s strange. He can’t even speak to me through mind link? What’s going on here?*

I tried to hide my worry, and I didn’t want to give into the panic I felt circling in my stomach, but just how hurt was he?

I was about to suggest that we take him back to the Redwood pack house so that Torin could look him over and heal him when Kendall cut in.

“Xavier, tell me exactly what happened.”

“How can he do that? He can’t even speak!” Ava snapped.

“He’s not even responding to mind link!” I said.

Ava gave me a harsh look. “I already tried that. Stay out of his head!”

I was about to reply when I saw that Kendall wasn’t paying either of us any attention. “Xavier, I need you to do your best to tell me what happened. It’s important.”

Ava swiped at her. “Back the fuck off! He needs to recover.”

Kendall still wasn’t paying anyone but Xavier any mind. “Xavier, I need to know about the monster.”

It was obvious that Kendall’s interest was driven by her obligations to the MIB, but right now, I didn’t care about any of that. Ava and I weren’t on the page about much of anything ever, but I was sure that either of us would fight anyone off to protect Xavier and let him heal—and right now, it felt like Kendall was actively getting in the way of that.

“Don’t you think he would have told you already if he could?” I snapped at Kendall.

Kendall stood up straight and stepped right in my face. “I wasn’t talking to you. This isn’t about you and your relationship. It’s about something bigger than you and your sister wife here playing tug-of-war.”

Kendall had her fists balled at her sides, and the look in her eyes told me that she wouldn’t have minded taking a swing at me, but Greyson stepped in.

A flash of jealousy hit me when he took Kendall’s hand and led her away. I hated watching them together. There was something a little too intimate about seeing them quietly talking together, their heads leaned toward each other.

I knew that he’d only stepped in to keep us from coming to blows, but that didn’t really make me feel any better.

“So you and I agree,” I said.

Ava cut her eyes at me. “What are you talking about?”

“We need to get Xavier out of here. The monster may not be around now, but for how long?” I said.

I could tell that Ava didn’t want to agree with me about anything, but she nodded. “Yes. We should get him out of here as soon as we can.”

I waved Vander over. “Could you blip us to the Redwood pack house?”

“Why would Xavier go to *your* pack house? What part of Xavier’s the Samara Alpha don’t you understand?” Ava demanded.

“This isn’t about trying to ‘steal’ Xavier away from you and the Samaras, Ava. Torin’s at the Redwood pack house and can heal him. Besides, wouldn’t it be more comfortable for Xavier to recover at home?”

“I don’t need you or the Redwood pack. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of Xavier myself at *his* home. It’s clear that you forgot, but let me remind you of something. Xavier doesn’t live with you anymore. He lives with me. His home is with the Samaras, and it always will be.”

**Episode 5750**

**Xavier**

I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t think straight or speak clearly, but Cali and Ava were arguing over me. I could feel their anger, and the tone of their voices told me everything I needed to know. I knew they both meant well, but now wasn’t the time for them to be playing tug-of-war.

I’d attempted to reach out to Cali via mind link and tell her that they all had to get out of here as soon as they could. I had no idea if the beast was already tracking me down to feed me to her hatchlings, but I knew in my heart that the creature wasn’t done with me yet.

If the thing found me now, everyone here would be in danger. I had to let them know. I would never forgive myself if something happened to them and I didn’t warn them.

Not for the first time, I tried to sit up and give them a warning, but then Vander came walking over.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with?” Vander said to Cali. “I can easily handle all three of you.”

“Sweet of you, Vander, but this is a trip for just two, thanks,” Ava said. “Cali’s going to stay behind with her mate and do…whatever it is she does.”

I hated that Ava and Cali were at each other’s throats, but I understood it more than I wanted to. I was all too familiar with the emotions that rose to the surface when it came to sharing a mate. Even in this state, I remembered all the times Greyson and I had fought over who would be with Cali in her times of need.

Cali leaned down and kissed me gently on the forehead. The touch of her lips flooded me with so much longing that I couldn’t stand it. Once again, I tried to talk, but I just couldn’t communicate the way I wanted to.

“It’s okay, Xavier. Don’t try to talk. Relax. I’ll check on you later, okay?” Cali said. And then she stepped back, right into Greyson’s arms.

*Of course. There it is again. The torture of watching the woman you love with someone else.*

And then everything went white, and I felt like I was floating. When I opened my eyes again, I was lying in my bed at the Samara pack house. The familiar sights and sounds were comforting.

“I’ll check in on you all later,” Vander said, and then they were gone in a flash of light.

Once Ava and I were alone, I tried again to sit up.

“Xavier, please, just relax. I’m going to take care of you, okay? Just let me,” Ava said,

Even though I wanted to argue and push the issue, I let her unwrap me from the foil blanket. She helped me under the bed covers and kissed me softly, then went to draw a bath.

I must have drifted off to sleep again, because the next thing I knew, Ava was leading me into the bathroom.

I settled into the bathwater, realizing that it did feel good to be back home. Far better than being trapped in a monster’s lair waiting to be eaten alive.

I was healing, but my body was still sore. The water felt good, but not as good as Ava’s hands, which she smoothed across my skin as she washed me with a soft sponge.

I watched her hands gently working my muscles. No matter how angry Ava got, in the end, she was always there for me no matter what. I had no idea how they’d found me, but I knew without a single doubt that Ava had been the driving force behind it.

I grabbed her wet arm, and she paused to look at me with a question in her eyes.

“Thank you,”’ I said with a smile.

I kissed her arm, and she reacted with a sharp intake of breath. After all this time, it was intriguing that I still had that kind of effect on her. I trailed a line of soft kisses up her arm before finally pulling her head down to mine.

She placed a hand on my chest to stop me. “What did I say before, Xavier? You have to take it easy. You’re really hurt.”

I grinned. “Then help me heal,” I said.

She shuddered and tucked her hair behind her ear. “You didn’t see what I saw. You lying there, half frozen, half *dead*.”

She leaned forward to kiss my neck. When she pulled away, her eyes were shining.

“You scared the shit out of me today, X.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, meaning it. “I’ll make it up to you.”

Ava shrieked in surprise when I pulled her into the water. She gave me a few playful slaps.

“What are you doing?!” she said. “I have clothes on!”

“Then take them off,” I said, nuzzling her.

I helped her out of her shirt and her panties and then kissed her.

“It feels good to have your hands all over me like this,” she said. “Even though I know you don’t deserve any of this.”

I kissed her again, deeper, and I could feel her giving into me. Things could get so complicated between us, but at moments like this it was like we knew just what to do.

I let Ava take the lead. Not because I was still sore—though I was—but because it was important for her to set the pace. Things had been so chilly between us that I didn’t want to make any mistakes, and more than that, I knew she wouldn’t enjoy herself if she thought she was hurting me, and I wanted her to enjoy herself.

Ava lifted up out of the water, her beautiful skin glistening, her hair plastered over her breasts and stomach. She looked so good that it took my breath away.

“Is this okay?” she said as she lowered herself down onto my shaft, taking me into her hot, fluttering warmth.

“It’s perfect,” I said, happy that I could speak again, that the fog in my brain was starting to clear.

I wrapped my arms around Ava as she moved against me, rising out of the water and coming down in one fluid motion, rocking her hips, leaning back so that I could use my bruised hands to squeeze her impossibly soft breasts.

A gasp slipped out of my lips, and then a moan as Ava increased her speed. She touched me, but gingerly, as if she didn’t want to hurt me. It was a far cry from the way we usually made love, with passion and heat and fire, but it was still good, still full of that furtive want and desire and longing that always tinged our lovemaking.

“You feel so good, Ava,” I whispered, lying my head back against the back of the tub and just taking in the view.

“You too,” Ava said. She moved with ease, throwing her hair back over her shoulders as she closed her eyes and bit her lip.

I pulled her in close when I felt the first hint of my orgasm, and then it hit me out of nowhere, caught me by surprise, and I held Ava close as we rocked together in the water, sending some of it sloshing over the sides.

She glanced her teeth along my shoulder blades, and I felt her tighten around me as she reached her own climax, and then we went slack and held each other until the water cooled.

We got out and dried off and fell into bed. It felt nice being with her this way, my head cradled on her breasts. I was enjoying the sensation of her chest rising and falling with her breath, and I closed my eyes and drew in her scent.

I was just starting to drift off when I heard the creature’s piercing cry once again. I opened my mouth to scream, but when I opened my eyes, I wasn’t writhing in pain in the creature’s jaws. Instead, I was filled with another wave of dread as images of the creature flooded my mind.

I saw darkness, blood, and the horrible screeching was deafening. In the next moment, a pack of wolves descended on the creature, attacking it, bringing it down to the ground.

But the tide turned quickly, and soon the monster was picking them off, devouring them whole, one by one. When she was done, she moved back to continue guarding her nest while another wave of werewolves thundered toward her, lunging for the eggs she was trying to protect.

“You come from me, and now you want to kill me?” the monster said. “I’ll never let you. I will *destroy* you all!”

I was gasping for breath and trembling when Ava stirred, alarmed.

“Xavier, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

My heart pounding and sweat running down my temples, I pulled her close and looked her in the eye. “It’s not going to stop, Ava. Not until it kills every single one of us.”

**Episode 5751**

**Artemis**

As I looked into the quiet night, every nerve in my body felt like it was on high alert. The fire burned brightly, the stars shone in the sky, and Zale was nowhere to be seen. He was most definitely gone. But…why?

After all he had gone through to convince us to let him come along, why the hell would he just leave like that? After he had made such a big deal about wanting to go with us? His insistence was why I had been so on edge about him in the first place, but for him to just take off like that out of nowhere was just…suspicious.

I got to my feet and grabbed hold of my dagger. As I moved, Marius and Rishika stirred.

“What are you doing?” Marius asked blearily.

“*Shhh*. Nothing.” I shook my head. “Zale is gone.”

Rishika sat up. “What did you say?”

“He’s gone,” I confirmed. “I’m going to track him.”

“Track him?” Rishika repeated.

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s weird that he just took off like that.”

Marius thought for a moment. “Yeah, it’s weird.”

“What about Tabitha and Adair?” Rishika asked.

“What about them? It’s the middle of the night. They’re better off asleep for now,” I told her. “I don’t even know if there’s anything to know. If it’s nothing, I don’t want to have worried them for nothing.”

“Okay,” Marius said, getting to his feet, “I’m coming, too.”

“Me too,” Rishika said.

I didn’t argue, and we all pulled on clothes and grabbed our weapons. We tried to be quiet as we headed out toward the fire. Everything just felt…off. Suspicious, but I wasn’t sure how.

“Do you smell him?” I asked, looking over at Rishika.

Rishika took a breath, then nodded. “Yeah, his scent is still here, but it’s growing more faint. He must have left a while ago.”

Marius frowned. “How long were we asleep?”

“That doesn’t even matter, does it? We were otherwise occupied before we fell asleep. He could have left then, too.”

“I guess,” Marius admitted. He walked around the fire, his eyes on the ground. “Look—footprints. He went north.” He looked back at us. “Ladies?”

Nodding, I started north. I kept my eyes wide, looking around for anything that might look out of place in the darkness. The night was still heavy around us, and it was the Fae world after all, so there was no way of knowing what exactly could be lurking around.

“Stay alert,” I muttered over my shoulder.

We walked for a few quiet moments, the only sounds our footsteps in the underbrush. I couldn’t see Rishika or Marius, but I could tell from the tense silence that they were peering into the darkness as closely as I was.

“I wonder what made him leave,” Marius finally said, his voice breaking through the darkness.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I wonder if we were all a little too chummy for Zale,” he went on.

“Maybe he decided he just wasn’t needed after all,” Rishika said. “Since we saw the tree and whatnot. We have a path of sorts without him, so maybe he just read the room and left.”

I thought this over. “I guess both of those are possible…” I said. And they were, but my mind went to a darker explanation.

Maybe he could sense this in my silence. “What do you think it was?” Marius asked.

“Maybe he didn’t like that I didn’t tell him everything my mother said to me,” I said. “I mean, if it’s clear that we didn’t trust him—and I think that it was—then maybe he left just out of spite. Or maybe Zale is the type to hold a grudge.”

“Fae *are* good at holding grudges,” Marius admitted.

We kept walking, each of us thinking our own thoughts.

Suddenly, Marius whistled. Rishika and I turned to him, and when he pointed, we looked down. The footprints we’d been following appeared to stop at the base of one of the freakishly large Fae trees.

I looked at them, then up. I peered into the tree. “Is it possible he’s up there? Like he wanted to be up on higher ground?” I frowned. “But we’re so far from camp—that’s pretty strange.”

I looked over at Rishika, and she nodded in agreement.

“Give me a boost, will you?” I asked Marius.

He threaded his hands together, and, stepping into them, I pulled myself up. As I shimmed up the tree, I was hyperaware of every sound. But all I heard was the rasp of my feet on the bark, the wind in the leaves, and the bird song from neighboring trees. I didn’t hear any snoring, or even any breathing. Though the absence of that wasn’t always the indication of anything.

I reached the first big branch, but when I looked, I saw that it was empty. I wanted to call this information down to the other two, but I kept quiet, just in case Zale was nearby. I didn’t want to draw more attention to myself than was necessary.

Biting my lip, I took another look around, but there was nothing to see. So I was just about to start climbing down when I heard a crack above me that sounded deafening in the darkness.

I looked up just as a branch fell onto me. I shielded myself from the blow, and when it passed and I looked back up, a face emerged from the darkness. I recognized it immediately, and I gasped, my hand going for my dagger, and my spirit calling for my magic.

Zale’s pale face looked horrifying as it loomed above me. “Always so curious, aren’t you, Artemis Wrenthorn?” His face stretched into a smile. “Or is it Mauvais? You seem to have so many identities, it’s difficult to keep track.”

I narrowed my eyes, trying to ignore my pounding heart. “What the fuck do you want?”

His smile grew into a wicked grin. “*You.*” And he descended quickly, falling onto me.

“Marius! Rishika!” I screamed. “He’s here!”

I heard them start to scramble up, but Zale had a dagger in his hand so that required all my attention. He lunged at me and grasping the trunk, I swung around the branch and attacked from the back. I wrapped my arm around his neck, cutting off his oxygen.

He gurgled and clawed at my arm, then slashed me with his dagger. Hissing, I pulled my arm back, and he spun around, ready to attack again.

“Artemis! I’m coming up!” Marius called, his voice growing closer. “Rishika’s shifted!”

As if to confirm this, she growled menacingly from the ground below.

Apparently, Zale suddenly sensed the danger he faced, because he paused, his eyes darting around.

“What are you really after?” I snapped, holding my hand over my bleeding arm. Luckily Zale hadn’t cut deep, and the bleeding was superficial. “You’re not going to win this fight—it’s three of us and one of you.”

Zale smiled again, looking wild. “That’s where you’re wrong,” he said. “I *will* win!”

Marius reached the top of the tree. “Artemis! Duck! I’m going in!” he yelled and started sprinting along the length of the wide Fae tree branch.

But just as he leapt at Zale, Marius stopped in midair.

I stared in shock, then watched in horror as Zale twitched his hand and flung Marius to the ground.

My brain buzzed with panic at the sight, but I managed to call up my magic bow and arrow, and I readied to shoot at Zale, but when I released the arrow, he held up his hand, stopping it in mid-flight. There was a popping sound, and my magic blasted back, backfiring on me.

Fae trees were huge, but I still had to scramble to stay on the tree as I flew backward on the branch. But as I tried to reach out to stop myself from falling, I realized that I couldn’t move my limbs. Zale had immobilized me.

He smiled as he walked toward me. He pulled out a net—a net not unlike the one I had once used to capture Cali and Greyson when I was still working on the wrong side of the law here in the Fae world. That really wasn’t so long ago, but it felt as though it had happened lifetimes before. I thought of it now as I watched Zale walking slowly toward me. It was not a happy thought, but maybe it was better than the blind, screaming panic that was threatening to overwhelm my brain.

He crouched down so he was eye to eye with me. “You’re coming with me, heiress.”

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t speak. I wanted to struggle against him, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even scream—I couldn’t get my mouth to move. So I just lay, motionless, as he slipped the net over me. Then he lifted up his dagger and used the butt end of it to hit me on the back of the head, knocking me out.

**Episode 5752**

After Big Mac blipped everyone back to the pack house, Lola ushered me over to the couch in the living room, where I sat, still in shock.

All around me, there was anxious chatter from the pack. Everyone was nervous, trying to figure out what the hell had happened, and the pack members who had been at the Vanguard palace tried to tell the pack members who hadn’t been there what was going on.

“I don’t understand,” Violet said. “What happened to Xavier?”

“Where is he now?” Sage asked.

“He’s safe,” Jay said, shooting a look at me. Then he turned back to the others and tried to explain to them about the monster.

“So, this thing is like a dinosaur-kind of thing?” Ravi asked.

“Um…*kind of*?” Jay said. “I don’t know. I didn’t really get a great look at it. I was pretty out of it.”

“It is possible it came from the Fae world?” Torin asked. He looked over at me. “Cali? Do you think so? Just from the sound of it, it has Fae world vibes.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so, but who knows?” My lips felt numb as I spoke. I didn’t think the monster I had seen in the Vanguard basement—the monster that had stolen Xavier—was from the Fae world, but I really didn’t know for sure. To me, it felt more elemental than that. Like it had come up from somewhere beneath the Vanguard palace. Like it had been there for a long time and had just woken up.

I rubbed my head as the conversation went on. As terrifying as it was to hear the questions and to have to think about it all again, it felt better to be here—at the Redwood house—with the rest of the pack. It felt good to be with people. But I was scared, too. After seeing that hideous monster, and after hearing that ominous voice in my head, how did we know that it wasn’t coming for us?

Maybe some of this fear was showing on my face, because Greyson came and sat down beside me.

“Hey,” he said softly. “The important thing is that we all made it back, right? As bad as that thing was, nobody got seriously hurt.”

I nodded, appreciating his positive take on the situation. And he was right. “Have you ever seen anything like that before?” I asked. “Has anyone?”

Greyson looked grim. “I haven’t. But Vander and Big Mac sure thought that the thing was ancient. They were certain it had something to do with all that dark magic that was surrounding it down there.”

“Yeah,” I said softly.

Greyson took my hand and gave it a squeeze. “We should talk to Xavier tomorrow. Find out what happened to him. He was with the thing for a lot longer than the rest of us. He might know more than we do.”

I nodded, then shuddered when I thought about how we’d found him—before Ava had insisted on taking him back to the Samara house. I wondered what he would have said if he had been well enough. Would he have come back with Greyson and me? It was hard to know. Xavier hadn’t been in any shape to argue one way or another, but I couldn’t stop thinking that he would have preferred to come back to the Redwood, even though the Samara was his pack.

Xavier had no choice. It still stung, even if Ava had been right.

“Hey!” Big Mac yelled, her voice booming over the frenzied conversation and speculation of the pack. “That’s enough! None of this is going to be solved tonight, and certainly not by any of you.” She scowled around at everyone. “I’m exhausted, and I’m going to bed. I think the rest of you should do the same.”

Then, with a rush of air, she blipped away. The room was silent for a moment, then the chatter resumed.

With a sigh, Greyson got to his feet.

“Big Mac is right,” he said, looking around. “We’re all exhausted. We have to get some rest. We need to be able to think clearly tomorrow.”

Greyson certainly looked exhausted. Looking just past him, I saw Kendall sitting on a chair in the corner, legs tucked up, curled intently over her phone.

My stomach clenched, and I stood up beside Greyson. “Is she staying here again?” I asked tentatively, nodding toward Kendall.

Greyson rubbed his head. “Given everything that’s happened, I think it’s for the best that she does.”

I clenched my jaw. I didn’t want her to stay, but I reminded myself not to be like Ava, and that Greyson was right.

But I couldn’t help but think that, as much as Kendall and her ties to the MIB might be useful, it was still unsettling that my mate’s mate would be sleeping under the same roof…again.

“Okay, everyone, let’s pack it in for the night,” Greyson announced. “Get some rest and we’ll talk about next steps in the morning.”

No one objected to this, and everyone started to filter upstairs. Greyson put an arm around me, and we started toward the door.

Lola was near the stairs, looking exhausted, and I stopped and gave her a hug before Greyson and I headed upstairs.

When we got to Greyson’s room, I paused outside the door.

Greyson eyed me. “What’s up? Aren’t you tired?”

I *was* tired, but I was also feeling guilty about what had happened between Xavier and me in his car before the monster had appeared. The memory of our encounter nagged at me as I looked guiltily up at Greyson.

“Are you sure you want me to stay with you tonight?” I asked quietly.

Greyson’s eyes suddenly flashed with understanding, and I knew in a moment that he got why I was asking. That only made me feel worse.

But he stepped toward me and, tucking a finger beneath my chin, lifted it so my eyes met his.

“Everything that happened today only makes me want to be with you more, love.”

That was all I needed to hear, and I melted into his arms.

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

I rose up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his. “I love you too.”

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. I followed him in, feeling better and more secure than I had in a while. I took a warm shower and pulled on one of his T-shirts, then slid into bed, feeling tired and comfortable.

As he pulled me close against his chest, I felt surprisingly okay. There was a lot to think about, but Greyson was right—we would think about next steps in the morning. We would work as a pack and make a plan, and whatever lay ahead of us, Greyson and I would face it together.

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When I woke up the next morning, it was to the feeling of Greyson kissing me softly.

“Good morning,” he murmured against my lips.

“Hi,” I whispered back, smiling.

“Sorry for waking you,” he said quietly as he pulled me against his warm body. “You looked so peaceful and beautiful, I hated to do it, but I couldn’t resist.”

“I can’t think of a better way to wake up,” I told him.

He grinned back at me as he slipped a hand beneath the T-shirt I wore, sliding it up my stomach, up my ribs, and cupping my breast. “Oh, I can think of a few better ways,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “How about this way?” he asked, pinching my nipple.

Maybe it was because I was still only half-conscious, but when he moved his hand down again and slipped his fingers inside of me, I was already wet. I dropped my head back, and he made me come faster than I could ever remember.

Still drowsy and still panting, I pulled him up and into the shower and returned the favor, giving him a hand job as he pushed me hard against the wall of the shower.

When we’d finished showering and gotten dressed, we held hands as we descended the stairs down to the kitchen. It felt like we were back in a good place after yesterday, and I smiled as we walked into the kitchen. I had worked up an appetite, and my stomach rumbled as we walked in.

The air was filled with warm, buttery smells, and I could smell coffee brewing. Torin was standing at the stove, which didn’t surprise me. That was usually where Torin could be found most days. What *did* surprise me was that Mrs. Smith was at his side, making cups of her white chocolate mocha.

What surprised me even more was the sight of Big Mac sitting at the long kitchen table. No one else was in the kitchen, and when Big Mac glared at Greyson and me, it felt as though the temperature in the room dropped. I forgot all about being hungry, and her expression wiped the post-sex smile off my face in an instant.

“Well,” she said darkly, setting her mug down on the table, “are you two ready to talk about what the fuck that was yesterday?”

**Episode 5753**

**Kendall**

I tapped my fingers on the sides of my phone. I could smell breakfast wafting through the air, and it made my stomach growl. After a rough night of restless sleep, I was starving—I couldn’t remember the last time I had eaten—but I was hesitant to go downstairs.

I’d spent a few hours the night before texting back and forth with Agent Imamu about everything that had happened. I’d told him everything, as far as I knew. But there was so much that I wasn’t sure about and didn’t have any explanation for. It had been unsatisfying…for both of us. He hadn’t come right out and said it, but it was clear that he had been frustrated that I hadn’t been able to give him more answers.

Biting my lip, I stared blankly at the wall across the room. I wondered if he was concerned that—whatever this thing with Vanguard basement and the monster was—it involved Greyson again, and he recognized the pattern. Just like the London incident where I’d asked the agency to intervene on Greyson’s behalf. I didn’t like that I had started to look like a liability to the agency.

My stomach growled again. I couldn’t just lay in bed all day, stewing at the Redwood pack house, so I pulled myself to my feet and got dressed. As I headed down the stairs, I heard the rumbling growl of Greyson’s voice, which made my stomach clench in a way that instantly annoyed me. There was no reason his voice should do that to me.

Squaring my jaw, I kept going. What the hell was up with Greyson anyway? He had pulled me aside when I had tried to question Xavier after we’d found him. Why hadn’t he just left me alone and let me do my damn job? He’d told me I should bring in MIB. When I’d pointed out that I was MIB, he wondered why I was still acting like I wasn’t.

*This is bigger than you—than all of us*, he had said.

I gritted my teeth, remembering his words. Maybe I was mad because there was a part of me that knew he was right. But I also was not ready to draw in more resources from the MIB. Not yet. Not until I had more answers to report back. The first of which being what the fuck was that thing in the Vanguard basement?

I hated that I still didn’t have the answer to that question. I was mad as hell that Ava had left with Xavier before I could get any answer from him. He had been with the monster for the longest amount of time and would have the most information about it. Yeah, he had been in a state of shock and mumbling incoherently when I’d tried to talk to him about it. But he was also a damn Alpha. He had probably been fine again by the time Ava had gotten him back to the Samara pack house.

I gave my head a hard shake. Regardless of what anyone said or did, I was determined to get answers from him *today*. I didn’t give a shit what state he was in. He could be half dead for all I cared. I was going to find out what the hell was going on.

When I walked into the kitchen, Cali smiled at me.

“Good morning, Kendall,” she said. She pressed a mug into my hands. “Here you go.”

I looked down at the mug. I had no idea what the hell it was, but whatever it was, it smelled so sickly sweet it turned my stomach. I couldn’t handle sweets in the morning, especially not coffee. I always took my coffee black.

“Thanks,” I murmured, then put the cup onto the counter, untouched.

Across the kitchen, Greyson nodded at me.

I turned away and found the coffee maker, which thankfully had a full pot. I poured some into another mug, and when I turned around, Greyson had crossed the room and was standing in front of me.

I flinched. Even over the god-awful mocha Cali had handed me, even over the coffee in my hand and the mound of pancakes Torin was dishing up, I could smell Cali on Greyson. He had clearly taken a shower, but I could still sense her on him, and it turned my stomach.

The reaction was instinct, driving my wolf rabid with jealousy. And I hated it. Why couldn’t my wolf just fucking chill and react with indifference the way I did? As far as I was concerned, Greyson could sleep with Cali, with Ava, with Lola—hell, he could fuck every woman in Oregon for all I cared. And if it wasn’t for the fucking mate bond, my wolf would understand that, too.

“We didn’t finish talking yesterday,” he said.

I took a drink of my coffee, letting the dark bitterness sear my throat. “I wouldn’t say that.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“As far as I’m concerned, we’re finished,” I said, meeting his eyes.

He held my gaze for a moment, then sighed. “We’re going to need some help on this, Kendall.”

I didn’t like how my wolf reacted when he said my name, and I took a step back. I needed some air. I took another drink of the worst coffee I’d ever had and set the mug down. “I’m going for a run.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Now?”

“Yeah, now. Don’t try to stop me, Greyson. I’m not in the mood.” I could feel Cali’s eyes following me as I pushed past him and headed out of the back door.

Once outside I stopped for a moment and took a big breath of cold, fresh air, letting the expanse of sky calm my nerves. It had felt so fucking claustrophobic in the kitchen. There were just too many damn people, all crammed in there, everyone up in everyone else’s business all the time. I had never understood the appeal of living in a pack. It wasn’t as if I was a Rogue, but I just preferred to do things on my own. I didn’t like the idea of some Alpha dictating my every move. I liked to set my own course and figure things out on my own—and that included working out what the hell that creature in the Vanguard basement had been.

I didn’t need pressure from Greyson or Agent Imamu breathing down my neck—I just needed some space to do my fucking job.

Taking another deep breath, I pulled off my clothes, dropped them on the porch, and shifted to my wolf form. I took off across the dead grass of the lawn into the dimness of the woods.

As soon as I hit the trees, I felt better. I could feel the immediate peace running always provided, and my wolf calmed down after feeling so jealous toward Cali.

I ran for a long time—past the point of exhaustion—before I turned back toward the pack house. When I got back, I shifted and pulled my clothes back on, but when I pulled out my phone, I realized that I’d missed a call from Agent Imamu.

But it wasn’t the missed call that bothered me. It was the text that had followed it:

*Call me immediately.*

My stomach dropped.

Great.

With a sigh I stepped off the porch—away from the keen ears of any pack members who might be sitting at the kitchen table, eating breakfast—and onto the dry winter grass to return the call.

Imamu picked up after the first ring. “What did you find out since we spoke last night?”

I had to bite my tongue. It had been mere hours since we’d last communicated, and I’d spent those hours trying to get a few minutes of sleep. But I didn’t say any of that. I just took a deep breath. “I’m still working on it.”

“Are you doing all you can?” he asked.

My eyes widened with shock at this question. “*All I can*?” I repeated. I felt anger welling up in my chest but fought it back down. “Like the other werewolves, Imamu, I was affected by the creature’s appearance last night. It took everyone out. It was chaos. But after getting a minimum amount of sleep, I’m fully recovered and I’m going to continue to do my job. *If* you let me,” I added coldly.

Imamu was silent for a beat. I had tried to keep my response respectful, but even someone who read a room as badly as Agent Imamu did would have been able to tell I was pissed. I could almost hear him thinking in the silence.

“I’m going to give you a short leash to figure this one out,” he finally said. “You’re smart and a good agent, but if I don’t get some solid answers on this one, then maybe you’re not the agent I need on this one.”

**Episode 5754**

**Xavier**

I stretched in the freezing cold air, taking stock of my body. My joints still felt stiff from the tumble I’d taken down the mountain the day before. I supposed it was a small price to pay for my freedom, but I didn’t like the aching feeling. It felt too mortal. But at least most of my injuries had healed, so that was something.

Hearing the door open, I looked over to see Ava walking out of the pack house. I watched her as she walked out of the door and down the steps in the bright winter sun. She looked beautiful in the morning light. Her lips and cheeks were puffy with sleep, and her hair was mussed. It was piled into a messy bun on top of her head. She rough and tumbled, like she had just rolled out of bed, which put me in mind of other things.

As she walked toward me, she smiled, her face lighting up like a sunrise after a night of rain. It was kind of amazing to see, actually. After she had found out about Cali and me, she’d been so upset, I wasn’t sure I would ever see her smile at me like that again.

But after the night before, when she’d found me half dead and brought me back to the pack house and taken care of me, I had just known that things were going to be alright between us again.

As she neared me, I reached for her and grabbed hold of her hand. It felt warm as I pulled her to me. “You look beautiful this morning,” I said, my voice a sleepy growl.

She rolled her eyes. “God, how hard did you hit your head when you fell down that mountain, Xavier? I’m a mess.”

I shook my head as I pulled her toward me and kissed her forehead. “You’re perfect, that’s what you are. Just like this.”

She bent and kissed me, pressing her lips lightly against mine. “You want to go for a run?”

I hesitated. I *was* interested. The thought of running through the woods with Ava on this cold clear morning felt exactly like what I needed to feel better, but given everything that had just happened, I knew I shouldn’t. It didn’t feel like the responsible thing to do. “I think I should head over to talk to Greyson.”

Ava leaned back and her mouth twitched at the mention of my brother’s name.

I sighed. “I was almost baby food for a fucking monster, Ava. I didn’t have a chance to tell everyone what happened. I need to warn the others.”

She crossed her arms across her chest. “I know what you’re saying, Xavier, but maybe it’s time you think about your own pack.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I mean that they have a lot of questions and concerns too,” she said, nodding toward the Samara pack house. “And—believe it or not—they were worried about you too.”

Her statement gave me pause, and it made me wonder why I hadn’t thought about that first. She had a point. My pack should come first. That pack used to be the Redwood, but I was Alpha of the Samara pack now.

I nodded. “Let’s call a pack meeting.”

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Ava was able to gather the pack quickly and as I stood before them in the large living room of the Samara pack house, it felt really good to see all their familiar faces. They looked at me, every face expectant.

Ava stood beside me as I told the pack everything that had happened. Or, rather, everything I remembered happening. There was a lot that was still a blur.

“And you’re feeling okay, after all of that?” Josephine asked, a worried look on her face.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I assured her.

“If you’re not, that would be totally understandable. And I could act as temporary Alpha while you recovered,” Knox offered.

I wasn’t even surprised to hear him say it. It was completely expected for the shrimp.

“I said I’m fine,” I snarled. “I don’t need a substitute teacher. *I’m* your permanent Alpha.”

I looked around, gauging who else might think otherwise, but I didn’t see any other dissenters.

I sighed as I pushed a hand through my hair. “Listen, I’m not going to lie to you. I don’t know what this thing was—the monster from the Vanguard basement. What those *things* were,” I corrected myself, since I knew that there were at least three baby creatures in addition to the mother monster that had taken me back to her nest for her hatchlings to feed on. “And I don’t know what they’re capable of. But what I can tell you is that they are a danger to werewolves. Possibly to other paranormals and to humans.”

Knox rolled his eyes at this. “*Humans*,” he scoffed. “I’d like to see the look on a human’s face if they ever saw what you had to face.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’d like to see the look on *your* face in that same situation, Knox,” I snapped back.

Knox’s smug expression flickered, then faded.

“I’ll be the first to admit that creature was terrifying,” I said candidly. “It had me scared. I would have been stupid not to be. The creature had dark thoughts—I could hear some of them. It wanted to kill me—to kill all of us.”

“But why?” Zipper asked, frowning. “We don’t even know it. What did we do to piss it off?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea. So far, the only thing I can figure out is that it’s because we’re werewolves. Which means that not only are the Samaras in danger, but all the Oregon packs are targets. The Redwoods, the Vanguards, the Blue Bloods—all of us.”

A few people started to look nervous, and I saw a few darting looks.

“You don’t need to worry,” I assured them. “I’m your Alpha, and I’m going to do everything I can to stop these monsters from hurting any of us.”

The pack was quiet for a moment, then Josephine nodded.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re with you, Xavier.”

This served as a signal for the rest of the pack, and everyone else nodded as well.

“We’re with you,” Geraint said.

“You can count on us,” Cresta added.

“Just let us know what you need us to do,” Donovan said with a nod.

I nodded. “Stay close. I’ll give you more instructions soon.”

People got to their feet, and the pack began to disperse.

Marissa walked over, looking proud. “That was great, Xavier,” she said. “You did the right thing with the pack.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Being honest about what you saw, and being scared,” she said. She nodded. “Talking candidly like that only strengthens the pack’s trust in you.”

“Yeah,” I said. She was right, I knew she was. I had been able to see it in the faces of the pack as they’d watched me. I was proud of the way I’d handled things. I wanted my pack to trust me, that was the only way they’d be willing to follow me.

But it was one thing to give a pep talk. Now I had to deliver.

Which meant that I had to talk to Greyson. I needed to fill him in on what I knew and discuss what our next steps should be.

When I told Ava this, she nodded.

“Yeah, I agree,” she said. “You should tell him to come over here this afternoon.”

“I’m going there,” I told her.

She paused and her blue eyes narrowed. “Of course you are,” she said, the warmth draining from her voice.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

Marissa looked between us nervously. “Oh, um…I think I left the teakettle on in the kitchen. I should probably go…check on it…” And she scuttled quickly away.

“Are you ashamed of the pack house?” Ava asked acidly.

“Of course not,” I said.

“Are you ashamed of the pack?”

“No.”

“Then why are you always running off to the Redwood? Don’t you think it makes you look weak to always want to meet another Alpha only in *his* pack house? In *his* territory?”

I gritted my teeth. “I get that you’re still angry at Cali, but now is not the time.”

“Are you *listening* to me?” she asked incredulously.

“Going to the Redwood house has nothing to do with Cali,” I added.

“Then make them come here,” she said bluntly.

“If I do that, they’ll think I’m still recovering from being attacked. I need to show strength right now,” I explained.

“And you think you can show strength by going to *Greyson’s* territory?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

I took a breath. “It’s more than that, Ava. If we’re going to defeat the monsters, we are going to need all the packs to be united. We need to be an alliance again.” I took a step toward her and cupped her check with my hand. I looked into her bright blue eyes, which buzzed with light and life. “And I’m going to need my Luna beside me for that. Will you come with me?”

**Episode 5755**

**Maya**

As I looked around the large primary bedroom I shared with Colton, I wondered how long it was going to take for me to get used to the lake house. It wasn’t a bad place, so it would probably happen eventually. By the time it did, it would probably be time for us to move to our own pack house.

But for the time being, I really couldn’t complain.

Awake and seeing me looking around, Colton grinned at me.

“You have to admit that this place is nicer than the old pack house,” he said.

I shuddered involuntarily. I knew he didn’t mean the Redwood pack house but the Grimcrest. I hated that place. No matter how much we changed or decorated it—painted the walls, moved the furniture around—it always reminded me of my grandfather. His cruel, nasty spirit seemed to permeate the walls.

I pushed the covers off and started to step out of bed, but Colton put his hand on my arm.

“Where are you going?”

“I want to check on the twins.”

He shook his head. “I already took care of them. And Gabe’s watching them this morning.”

I frowned. “You’re sure?”

He nodded. “Yep. I wanted to give you a chance to sleep in. Plus, Gabriel is obsessed with trying to make them laugh. Have you seen it?”

“No. Why does he want to make them laugh?”

Colton laughed. “Because apparently Mikah can get them to giggle all the time, and Gabe is jealous and wants to make them laugh too. I think it’s turned into a vendetta at this point. So you’re good, baby. They’re getting their own comedy show as we speak.”

I lay back down with a sigh. “Okay. I could probably use a little extra sleep.”

Colton rolled onto his elbow, his eyes twinkling. “You sure you want to use this time to sleep?”

He ran his hand up my leg and into my shorts. My breath hitched as he skimmed over my skin. It didn’t matter—I couldn’t help but respond to his touch. Colton drove me *crazy*, but I was glad to be back with him, and it felt good to straddle him as we pulled off each other’s clothes. I’d been stressed as hell bringing the pack back here, and as I lowered myself onto him, I knew this was a surefire way to unwind.

He grasped my ass and pulled me down onto his cock, but I set the rhythm, slow and steady at first. I could see him concentrating, working to slow himself down to match me.

“Fucking hell, Maya,” he moaned. “What are you doing to me?”

I smiled. I liked to make him work for me. When I had teased him enough, and when I was close enough, I sped up and he let loose, pushing me over the edge so I climaxed hard, screaming so loudly he had to cover my mouth to keep from waking up the whole pack.

When he’d finished too, he pulled me close, grinning wickedly. “How about a round two?”

My whole body was still tingling, so the offer was tempting, but I was too anxious to see the babies. I pulled myself out of bed. “I’m going to check on the babies.”

Colton pretended to pout, but he laughed and nodded. I took a quick shower and headed downstairs.

I found my babies with Gabriel in the living room with Orion and Lyra set in their bouncing chairs. Gabriel did appear to be trying to make them laugh, and I stood for a moment in the doorway, observing his technique. As I watched, he made a series of wild faces. When that didn’t work, he reached into their basket of toys and proceeded to pretend to hit himself on the head with each of them. That didn’t work either. Gabriel was sweating like a comic bombing onstage, but the twins didn’t even crack a smile. They just looked confused, like they couldn’t figure out what the hell he was trying to do.

I figured I had an obligation to save all of them, so I stepped into the room. “Hello, sweethearts,” I cooed to the babies.

Immediately Orion and Lyra looked at me and burst into laughter, their gummy smiles wide as they reached their chubby arms toward me.

“Are you *kidding* me?” Gabriel muttered, dropping the squeaky block he was holding back into the basket.

“Come on, man, you don’t stand a chance against their mom,” Bennett said, trying to comfort Gabriel.

Mikah, who’d been sitting on the couch nearby, smirked at Gabriel. “I don’t know, babe, maybe you’re just not cut out for a comedy career.”

“And you are?” Gabriel snapped back, looking legitimately offended.

I ignored them and reached out for the twins. I kissed them both, moving between them again and again. I pulled them from their bouncy chairs and cuddled them close. I had missed them both so much it brought tears to my eyes to have them back in my arms. I was never going to leave them for that long again. It was just too hard.

My stomach rumbled, and I got to my feet and headed into the kitchen. When I got there, I found Genji and Davina standing at the counter, in the middle of an argument.

“What’s going on?” I asked, stopping in the doorway.

Davina looked over at me. “Genji’s been snoring so loudly I can’t sleep.”

Genji shook his head. “She’s got that turned around. Davina’s the one who’s been snoring. I didn’t sleep all night.”

They both looked mad, but I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. If this was the worst of our pack’s problems, then things were probably going to be fine around here.

Davina opened her mouth to say something else, then stopped and her face flushed. “Sorry, Maya. This is dumb. You don’t need to hear about this.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Genji said. He smiled at the twins. “I’ll bet those kids are glad to have their mom back.”

“I think so,” I said as Orion and Lyra snuggled into my neck.

“Hey.”

I looked over to see Hawke shuffling into the kitchen. He had his usual brooding expression as he headed toward the fridge.

“Starving,” he muttered, pulling it open.

“Hey, Maya, nice to see you!” Nash said as he stepped in after Hawke. “And there are those babies.” He made a funny, cross-eyed face at the babies, which made them giggle.

“Are you fucking *kidding* me?” Gabriel demanded. He had just walked into the kitchen, and he glared at Nash, who just laughed.

I looked around at the full kitchen, and my heart warmed. This was my pack—*my* pack. *I* brought them here. They were *my* responsibility. This realization both made me happy and reminded me of my duty.

“There are my babies,” Colton said, walking into the kitchen. He gave the babies a kiss and tried to pull them from my arms, but I turned away.

“They need mommy time,” I snapped at him.

Colton raised his hands in mock surrender.

“But we need to talk about the pack,” I said in a low tone.

His smile faded. “Okay. Are you going to tell me what I did wrong?”

I tipped my head. “Let’s talk outside.”

Colton nodded and opened the door. When we’d stepped outside, he turned to me.

“Just tell me what I did wrong, and I won’t do it again.”

I rolled my eyes. “You didn’t do anything wrong. At least not that I know of yet. This has to do with the Grimcrest.”

Colton smiled. “It’s pretty cool you managed to convince them to come. They really respect you, Maya.”

“I know,” I said, nodding. “Which is why I wanted to know how you would feel if I started referring to you as my Lunae.”

“Lunae?” Colton repeated, like he was testing it out. “I guess I’m not sure.”

“I just wondered if it would feel…emasculating or something.”

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t give a fuck about that.”

“*Language*,” I snapped. “Our children can hear you.”

“Sorry,” Colton said to Orion and Lyra, who didn’t look the least bit bothered by it. “Don’t listen to your daddy when he says the bad words.”

“No chance of that,” I muttered.

“Maya, you can call me anything you want. The Grimcrest are your pack. You’re the Alpha. Is you leading normal in terms of what werewolves have done for centuries? No. But who cares? Maybe we’ve all been doing it fucking wrong? I’m proud to be your Lunae.”

He stepped toward me and kissed me, then pulled back, a worried look on his face.

“What?”

“I was just thinking that Xavier’s going to give me a really hard time about this,” he said. He looked down as his phone buzzed. “Speaking of which.”

“What does it say?” I asked as he read the text.

Colton raised his eyebrows. “I guess we’re going to find out. Xavier’s asking us to come to the Redwood pack house to talk about the monster.”

I nodded, but my thoughts started to spiral. I wondered if talk of the alliance were going to come up again—and if they did, would the other packs be willing to let me join after I’d already walked away once?

**Episode 5756**

I was running around in a frenzy, making sure the pack house was in a proper state to receive guests. Greyson had insisted that it didn’t matter and that due to the gravity of the meeting, no one was going to care, but I still wanted to make sure the place was presentable.

I was straightening the furniture when Greyson stopped me with a gentle touch on the arm.

“Cali, relax. Why are you so nervous about this, love?”

I sighed and bit my lip, hesitant to explain. Greyson looked off as if the reason had already come to him and he didn’t like it.

“Are you doing all this because Xavier will be here? Or because of Ava?” Greyson asked.

I winced. “Um…both? Things are always so darn tense when we’re all together, so I guess that having everything in its right place will eliminate any other distractions from the important stuff we have to deal with.”

Greyson pulled me close and kissed me. “You know it’s not going to be a problem…unless you make it one. We’re used to dealing with tough…and awkward situations. Why should today be any different?”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and laid my head against his chest, thinking. Maybe I was overdoing it just a little…overthinking things. But I couldn’t shake the memory of just how prickly Ava had been about the prospect of Xavier coming back here to heal up. It just didn’t sit right with me.

*So am I trying to make the pack house perfect to prove a point? To Ava of all people? Who cares what she thinks. Our pack house is home to Xavier. It always will be. I don’t need to impress him, and I certainly don’t care about impressing Ava.*

I took a deep breath and let it out. “Okay, I’m going to let it go. No big deal, right?”

Greyson pecked a kiss on my forehead. “Right.”

A few minutes later, I was thrilled to see Maya, Colton, the twins, Gabriel, and Mikah, and people who Maya introduced as her Grimcrest pack members as they arrived. Greyson greeted them warmly, and I rushed over to see the twins.

“They’re getting so big, Maya!” I said as I scooped them from Maya’s arms. “When did you two cuties get so cute and big, huh?”

The babies giggled and cooed, and I noticed Gabriel looking annoyed off to the side.

“What’s with him?” I said to Maya.

“He’s mad that everyone but him seems to make the twins laugh. I told him to be patient,” Maya said. “Or…maybe the twins just don’t like his sense of humor.”

Gabriel scoffed. “Everyone loves my sense of humor!”

“Not everyone,” Maya teased, pointing to the twins and making Gabriel pout even more.

“I still can’t get over how big they are, Maya. I swear they must have grown like a foot since I last saw them only a few days ago,” I said.

“It’s not some strange phenomenon, Cali. They’re werewolf babies. They grow faster than humans, and human babies grow fast, too,” Maya said.

“Oh… Yeah, that makes sense,” I said distractedly. I’d spotted something out of the corner of my eye. My heart sank as I spotted a naked Xavier and Ava emerging from the woods. They were smiling and laughing as they helped each other dress, and their obvious connection and intimacy was a kick in the gut.

*It’s not like it’s so scandalous that they were naked. They’re werewolves and probably shifted and ran here.*

Even so, the sting of seeing them arrive together remained. They looked so at ease, and it reminded me that Ava had the one thing I didn’t, her wolf. She and Xavier would always have that in common, and we never would.

The two of them came walking over, hand in hand. They were still laughing, still enjoying a private moment that I knew I wouldn’t be welcome to share. I had to look away.

“Glad you two are here,” Greyson said to his brothers.

“And I’m glad you get to meet the newest members of the Grimcrest pack,” Maya interrupted. “Well, they’re not exactly new, but new to this version of the pack, I guess.”

Maya went around telling everyone their names, and I noticed that a few of the wolves seemed shy and nervous while two she introduced as Hawke and Davina seemed bored. From the looks of it, Maya was going to have her hands full, but if anyone could pull a pack together, Maya could.

Greyson draped an arm around my waist as he addressed everyone. “Xavier is the one who called this meeting, so I think he should explain what exactly happened to him yesterday.”

Just before Xavier began, Kendall came strolling out onto the porch and leaned against the railing. There was something about her effortless confidence that always struck me. Maybe it was the purple eyes, or the way she really didn’t care what anyone thought of her that made her so appealing.

*And that’s why I hate it when she and Greyson spend any time together. How can he resist a woman like that?*

I pushed that thought away. Greyson had made it clear that he didn’t feel that way about Kendall, but she was his mate. There was something there whether he wanted to admit it to himself or not.

“I’m eager to hear what happened, Xavier,” Kendall said. “It’s all I’ve thought about since we found you.”

I looked between Kendall, Greyson, Xavier, and Ava. What a fucking mess, all these mates and relationships intertwined and complicated. I wondered if the *due destini* curse had anything to do with this tangled web we’d found ourselves in. It was starting to feel like I was being punished more than usual.

*Greyson said none of this will be a problem unless I make it one…and that’s exactly what I’m doing. Everyone is just here to discuss the monster; I shouldn’t get wrapped up in our complicated relationship dynamics. At least not right now.*

I wrapped my arm around Greyson’s waist and leaned into him, doing all I could to concentrate on how good it felt to have my mate by my side while avoiding looking at Ava.

“I don’t know how the hell I ended up in this…*thing’s*…lair, but I did. I think it brought me there after it knocked me unconscious. It was the scariest thing I’ve ever been through, and I’m sure so many of you know how many other fearsome creatures and situations I’ve faced,” Xavier said.

I shuddered as Xavier recounted his harrowing experience with the creature’s eggs, the creature itself, and its babies. I only wished that I could have been there, that I could have somehow protected Xavier from what he’d gone through.

I’d tried to defend everyone when the monster first attacked, but it was way too powerful for me. And the fact that there were apparently more of them—even if they were babies—was terrifying.

“I’m thankful that all of you came for me,” Xavier finished with a wistful smile. “For a minute there, I actually thought it was the end.”

Ava whispered something in Xavier’s ear, and he smiled at her. I gritted my teeth and looked away.

“The good news is that I’ve been checking around on the internet, and there’ve been no monster reports,” Lola said.

“And even if there were, no one would believe it,” a Grimcrest, Nash, pointed out. “Look what happens when people spot Bigfoot. Everyone thinks the person is a kook and no one does anything about it.”

Genji, another Grimcrest, scoffed at that. “That’s because Bigfoot isn’t real.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” Nash said.

“Here you go again with this ‘they’ stuff. Who are *they*?” Genji snapped.

“This thing isn’t Bigfoot,” Maya said. “Not by a longshot. This thing would tear Bigfoot’s head off, from the sounds of it.”

Xavier nodded solemnly but said nothing.

“Maybe it’s not going to be a problem,” Lola said.

“What do you mean? It already is a problem,” I said. “I heard it.” I looked at Xavier. “We both did. I think it’s angry. And while Xavier escaping is a great thing, it probably only made this thing even angrier, and that means we have to be ready in case it attacks again.”

There were murmurs of agreement. Being ready was common sense, but I was happy that everyone was on the same page.

“I think that the first thing we need to do, before even worrying about going into protection mode, is figure out exactly what this thing is,” I said.

Xavier nodded. “Cali’s right. We need to know our enemy a hell of a lot better than we do right now.”

“I’ll do more research,” Lola offered. “I’ll go see Steinar and see what he knows. If anyone can give us every dirty detail about this beast, he can.”

A rumbling sound cut Lola short, and we all turned as a caravan of luxurious RVs drove up to the pack house and rolled to the stop.

Greyson narrowed his eyes and stepped off the porch to get a better look. “Now who the fuck is this?”

**Episode 5757**

**Greyson**

I approached the RVs with the others close behind, deciding to address whoever was in the first—and largest—RV first. My mind was reeling with all the possibilities for who might be in the RVs—MIB agents? LIPS? A touring rock band who’d lost their way?

Just before I could rap on the tinted glass and find out, the door opened and Lucian hopped out. I was shocked only for an instant before I realized that this strange spectacle was all par for the course with Lucian.

“What the hell are you doing?” I said. “And what are all these fucking RVs doing here?”

“What does it look like?” Lucian said.

I gave him a dumbfounded look. “I have no idea, which is why I’m asking.”

“We’re making lemonade out of lemons. That creature did so much damage to our place that the Vanguards have decided to find temporary lodgings until the palace is restored to its former glory.”

“So sorry about the palace,” Cali said. “Where are you going to stay? Is it far?”

I chuckled under my breath, thinking how much we would all love to hear that they were moving a thousand miles away, which would explain the RVs. I was dealing with a lot right now and getting rid of Lucian would be an unexpected lucky break.

“Not far at all,” Lucian said, gesturing with his arms. “In fact, we’re going to be neighbors.”

I narrowed my eyes at that. “Neighbors?” Cali and I exchanged a worried glance. “What the hell do you mean, ‘neighbors?’”

Lucian strolled over and threw an arm over my and Cali’s shoulders. “Look how much land the Redwoods have here! You won’t even notice us, I promise. We’ll make ourselves at home and keep out of your way.”

Xavier snorted, but Lucian ignored him.

“It makes perfect sense to me! I mean, we’re not just fellow Alphas and members of the same alliance, we’re best friends!” Lucian had a huge smile on his face like he really believed his own bullshit. In fact, I knew that he did believe it with all his heart.

“Um…no, we’re not,” I snapped.

“Having the Vanguards here will only bring these two dominant packs together,” Lucian continued, ignoring me. “We will form a brick wall of protection for anyone or anything that might try to come and hurt us. I’ll look out for you, and you’ll look out for me, just like best friends should.”

I stared at the line of RVs clogging up the driveway and lawn. “I’m sorry, Lucian, but this is only going to make things worse.”

“How so? I think you’re failing to see the big picture. This is perfect! And out of consideration, we won’t be staying in the house like last time.” He motioned proudly to his RVs. “We’ll be living on the land and sleeping under the stars.”

*Would it be so bad for them to stay?* Cali mind linked.

*I think it will be worse than you or I can even imagine. Having Lucian here twenty-four seven? I’d rather have that deadly creature living on our lawn.*

Cali frowned. *I know you don’t like him, but where else are they going to go? And Lucian’s right…he’s part of our alliance. We can’t just leave him out in the cold.*

*Have you forgotten how Lucian almost killed you in the process of resurrecting a demon?* I said.

*That’s old news*, Cali said with a smirk. *You should do this. I think it’s the right thing even if you’re not very excited about it. And like he said, he won’t be in the house, he’ll be out on the land.*

I groaned and turned my attention back to Lucian, who was looking between me and Cali like he knew that we’d just had a private conversation and was hoping for a favorable outcome.

I sighed hard and rolled my eyes. “Just how long is it going to take to repair the pack house, Lucian?”

Lucian sniffed and jutted his chin upward. “Pack house?” he said, scrunching his face up like the word tasted bad on his tongue. “It’s a *palace*, Greyson. There’s quite a difference.” He motioned to the Redwood pack house. “This is a pack house. The Vanguard is an institution, a sprawling jewel of the forest.”

I gritted my teeth, holding back from tossing his ass right back into the RV. “Whatever, I’m sure you understand what I mean. How long is it going to take?”

Lucian turned to Elle. “Sweetness, what did that man with the van say?”

“You mean Phil?” Elle said. “He said he isn’t sure yet.”

*That’s hardly an answer. It could be months. A year…that would be a fucking nightmare.*

“However long it takes, I refuse to return there until the monster who destroyed my ancestral home is killed,” Lucian said.

*He has a point*, Cali mind linked. *And however we feel about Lucian, I don’t like the idea of Elle living in constant danger.*

I couldn’t help but notice the smirk on Xavier’s face as he said, “I for one think it’s a wonderful idea.” He clapped me on the back. “You and Lucian living so close together? You say you’re not best friends now, but you certainly will be in no time.”

“If it’s so wonderful, why don’t you offer up the Samara land for his little convoy of horror?” I said.

Xavier shrugged. “They didn’t come to me, they came to you.”

I glared at him, hating that everyone was watching this play out. I felt like I was on the spot. Cali was right, I wanted to help protect Elle, but I didn’t want to do it at the expense of my sanity.

“We should let them stay,” Cali whispered.

I chewed my lip as I turned my attention back to Lucian, who was watching us expectantly. If it weren’t for the murderous monster on the loose, I would throw Lucian off our land without a second thought. But…given the circumstances, I would rather keep the packs close together so that we could team up to kill the creature when the time came.

*And Cali thinks it’s a good idea, and her opinion matters, so she should have a say.*

“Fine,” I finally ground out. “Lucian, you and your pack can stay here, for now. But if you stir up any bullshit…”

Lucian looked taken back. “Bullshit? Me?”

A derisive snort drew my attention, and I turned to see Kendall shaking her head. “You guys are a riot,” she said under her breath. “As if there aren’t already enough ragtag wolves running around this place.”

I was about to respond when Cali and Elle ran toward each other and embraced.

“This is going to be so much fun!” Cali said. “We’re roomies again.” Cali gave me a look. “Well, kind of…since you all will be living outside.”

*Exactly…let’s keep that boundary in place*, I mind linked to Cali.

*I’ll keep the boundary, but there’s no way Elle and I aren’t going to have a few sleepovers*, Cali replied.

I sighed, feeling deep down like it would only be a matter of time before Lucian would find his way inside the house. I already had plans to do everything in my power to make sure that never happened.

I went over to Kendall, who took a deep sip from her coffee cup before wincing and spitting it onto the ground.

“This has to be the worst cup of coffee I’ve ever had in my life,” she said.

Lola glared fiercely at her. “Oh stop, it’s not that bad.”

“If you hate the coffee so much, you’re welcome to brew the next pot,” I said.

“Oh…so you *can* act like an Alpha. I was starting to wonder,” Kendall snapped.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I shot back.

“You obviously don’t want Lucian to stay here, but you folded like a card table and let him. Is that because of Cali?”

I stepped closer to Kendall, a move that sent my wolf into a frenzy, but I ignored it. “I’m going to make something very clear to you, Kendall. I am the Alpha of the Redwood pack, and whatever I decide to do is wholly my decision. So, leave Cali out of it and don’t question my role here ever again.”

Kendall showed an icy smile. “Yes, Alpha Grey.” She bowed and curtsied, then fluttered her eyelashes. “I will never doubt you again, oh perfect one.”

I growled in frustration and then headed back over toward the RVs where Lucian, Armin, and Aysel were busy directing the RVs onto the lawn.

*What a fucking mess this is turning out to be. And we haven’t even discussed the monster half as much as we need to. This isn’t how this day was supposed to go.*

“So now that Lucian’s living arrangements are decided, can we get this meeting back on track?” Xavier said, as if reading my mind.

“I’m more than ready to do that,” I said. “Only I think we should limit discussions to the Alphas. It’s time for an alliance meeting.”

**Episode 5758**

**Xavier**

As we waited for Mace to arrive, I studied my brother. Greyson was obviously pissed off about his Lucian problem, and even though I’d poked fun at the situation, I could see how it had put Greyson in a difficult spot. I wasn’t sure I would have done differently. It was far more complicated than just washing our hands of Lucian because he was annoying. There was power in numbers, and I knew as well as Greyson did that we needed the Vanguards more than we wanted to admit.

Ava sidled up to me, and I thought about how she’d remained within arm’s reach since we arrived. Maybe it was because she was still upset about the creature and what it had done to me, or more than likely, she was staying close because of Cali. Staking her claim.

“Did you notice that Greyson seemed even more pissed after he chatted with Kendall?” Ava said. “I wonder what they talked about. Maybe their mate bond is causing them trouble?”

“Stop,” I said. “The last thing I want to talk about is mate bonds, and I think you know why.”

She frowned at me. “Don’t be an asshole. Everything isn’t about Cali, even though you and Greyson seem to not get that.”

I wasn’t in the mood to argue, especially about Cali, so I went over to where Colton was holding the twins with a serene smile on his face.

“Want some help?” I asked, holding out my arms.

As Colton handed the twins over, he said, “Maya’s still pretty pissed about what happened back when she was considering joining the alliance. It left a bad taste in her mouth.”

“Why’s she pissed when she’s the one who stormed out without listening to reason?” I said.

“Because everyone was being a dick,” Colton said. “Or are you so used to that that you didn’t notice?”

“Oh stop,” I said, smiling down at the babies as they both smacked their cute, warm little hands against my cheeks. They were pretty fucking cute. “Not everyone was on their worst behavior.”

We both turned to watch Lucian admonish someone for parking their RV in his sunning spot.

“That guy,” Colton grumbled, “is a huge dick.”

“Such a dick,” I said.

We laughed, and then Colton leaned close and lowered his voice. “When you guys get to talking about the alliance, make sure you stand up for Maya, okay?”

I frowned. “Really? Sorry, but have you met Maya? You don’t need to worry about her, dude. I’m pretty sure she has things under control.”

“Thanks, Xavier…but still. Make sure you have her back. She’s strong, but even strong people need supporters.”

“You got it,” I said, smiling as I thought about how Colton, despite his flaws, always stood up for his mate. I liked to think that I stood up for my mates, too, though it was a hell of a lot more difficult for me since I had two.

*And right now, I’m walking a fine line trying to not only keep them happy, but to keep them from going for each other’s throats. I could cut the tension between Cali and Ava right now with a knife.*

One misstep with either of them and I knew everything could turn to shit again. I had to be careful, and I couldn’t go through what Adéluce had done to me again. I wouldn’t make it out with my mind intact.

Mace arrived with his second, Spencer, in tow. She nodded her greeting, and I welcomed Porter and Rowena when they arrived a few minutes later.

Once all the greetings were out of the way, Greyson suggested that we all go inside.

“This talk is way overdue,” Greyson said. “Hopefully with a smaller group we can phase out the noise and focus.”

I spotted Cali standing off to the side looking pissed off. I felt bad. If I’d called this meeting, would I have excluded Cali? Ava? I doubted that I would have, but when it came down to the alliance, technically only the Alphas had the power to decide who was included.

Greyson was just trying to keep things as uncomplicated as he could. Having Ava and Cali even in the same room would have made things even tenser, and we had bigger fish to fry than their feud over me.

I joined the rest of the Alphas in the study, noting that Maya didn’t look the least bit shaken or intimidated as she looked around the room. Maya was a force to be reckoned with, but if she needed me, I would speak up for her to keep my word to Colton.

“I want to thank everyone for making the time to come here today,” Greyson began. He took a moment to get everyone up to speed on what had happened over the past few days, making sure to include his theories when applicable.

“We haven’t yet confirmed the Grimcrest Alpha,” Lucian said, interrupting Greyson. “I think that’s necessary before we continue with present company included.”

Maya sucked her teeth. “You haven’t even asked if I *want* to be admitted.”

*Great. Here we go again.*

“You’re here, aren’t you? I think that means you want to be included.” Lucian looked around. “Or am I wrong?”

“Yes, you’re wrong,” Maya snapped. “But I think this alliance needs all the help it can get—my help included. And if you want me to join, you need to apologize about what happened last time,” she said.

Lucian’s face went red as he sputtered. “Apologize? For what? I was only doing my job and looking out for the benefit of the alliance. I have no regrets.”

“Please,” Maya hissed. “That’s total bullshit, and you know it. Tell me, little prince, are you threatened by me? Because it’s certainly starting to feel that way.”

Lucian scoffed. “Intimidated? By you? Of course not.”

Maya took a step toward him. “Then that’s your mistake, because you should be.”

I quickly stepped between them, realizing that this had a lot of potential to go very wrong.

“We’re facing an unknown threat,” Greyson said. “The more packs we have working together, the better and stronger we are. If we’re going to defeat this thing, we need all the strength we can get.”

He looked around the room and connected eyes with each Alpha, including Lucian, before continuing.

“Maya is Grimcrest Alpha and, as our brother’s mate, we trust her. She’s family—”

“I don’t need your introduction, Greyson,” Maya snapped. “Everyone here knows who I am, and I don’t need to prove anything to anyone, either.”

“Fine,” Lucian said in his patented bored voice. “You’re the Alpha. You can join.”

“Apologize first,” Maya said.

Lucian hesitated. “Surely you don’t—”

“*Apologize*,” Maya said, baring her teeth.

Lucian swallowed. “If I offended you in any way—”

“You did,” Maya said.

“Then I…um…I should…”

I glared at Lucian as he sputtered, as if the thought of uttering the words “I’m sorry” were literally causing him pain.

Lucian sighed. “Then I should tell you that I’m…sorry.”

I sighed, impressed that Maya had gotten Lucian to apologize. To date, I wasn’t sure if the princeling had ever apologized for anything.

“Now ask me if I want to join the alliance,” Maya pressed.

Lucian looked around for help, and finding none, he sighed. “Does the Grimcrest pack wish to join the alliance?”

Maya flashed a mean smile. “Sure. We would be honored, and the pleasure is yours.”

“Great, then maybe we can move on,” Lucian grumbled.

The tension in the room had subsided, to my relief, and Greyson formally confirmed the Grimcrests as part of the alliance.

“Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way,” I said, “What are we going to do about the creature?”

Lucian raised his hand like he was in school but didn’t wait for anyone to call on him before speaking. “Since it destroyed my property, I should lead the strategy against this menace.”

“Right,” Maya snorted.

*The last person in the universe who should be in charge is Lucian. That’s not happening.*

“Lucian, I don’t think you’re the right person to lead this one, no offense,” I said.

“What? Why not? I’m perfectly capable of—”

“There are too many unknowns,” Mace interrupted. “And I’m worried about the role dark magic is playing in all of this.”

“Same,” Porter said. “My wife has told me enough about dark magic to know that we must tread lightly. We don’t want to fall into a trap or come out of this thing worse than when we started.”

“Everyone, quiet down,” Greyson said. “The alliance has just become whole and stronger with the addition of Maya and the Grimcrest pack, and that’s a good start. But I think this is much bigger than all of us.”

There were murmurs of confusion, and I quieted everyone down so that Greyson could continue.

Greyson looked pained, as if whatever he was about to say was troubling. “I think it’s time for us to talk to the council.”

**Episode 5759**

I was outside with the others while the Alphas were locked away in their study having their little chat. I didn’t get it. All the Alphas had powerful, intelligent mates who should have been consulted about whatever they were discussing, and yet here we were, left outside while the Alphas decided our fates without our input.

“I’m pissed,” I said to Rowena. “We shouldn’t have been excluded. Doesn’t it bother you?”

Rowena shrugged. “Maybe this kind of thing bothered me at first, but Porter and I share everything, talk about everything, and sometimes, too many chefs spoil the soup.”

I sighed as Rowena’s calm insights sunk in. “Maybe so, and I get that, I guess, but I wish Greyson would have at least considered opening up the meeting.”

“I’m sure he did,” Rowena said. “But he also had to deal with Maya and the Grimcrest pack joining the alliance. Maybe he thought it best to keep the group small for that decision.”

I glanced back at the house, hoping that they were doing the right thing on that account and were making Maya feel welcome. I smiled to myself, thinking that Maya would give them hell if they didn’t.

“Honestly, I’m happy to not have to be involved,” Rowena said. “It’s not like we won’t have a part to play. And, it gives us a chance to catch up. How’ve you been?”

“Other than fielding monster attacks, things have been great.”

“Cool, glad to hear it. You and Greyson should come visit the Cobalt pack lands sometime,” Rowena said. “We always come to your place, but we’ve never had the chance to host you.”

I perked up at that. “Wow, yes, thanks for the invite. That sounds like fun.”

I snuck a glance at Ava where she stood brooding a few feet away. She probably felt left out like I did—one of the few things we had in common. A trip to the Cobalt pack house would give me a break from the drama with Ava and Xavier, and I was ready for that.

*But that would mean I’d be away from Xavier. I feel like I’d be thinking about him and wondering what he was doing the entire time.*

“Anyway, the invitation stands, so come whenever you like,” Rowena said. She glanced at the pack house. “And even if you wanted to come without Greyson, that would be cool, too. We can make it a girl’s hang.”

I smiled, trying to figure out the last time Lola and I had enjoyed some girl’s time all to ourselves. It seemed like an eternity ago.

The front door opened, and the Alphas came walking out onto the porch.

“Maya and the Grimcrests are now part of the alliance,” Greyson announced while Maya stood by looking like she didn’t care very much. “And our first move is to talk to the council about the monster.”

There was a wealth of different reactions to this news. Some of the Grimcrests, obviously still getting their footing in this new dynamic, looked pleased, while others seemed uneasy. It had to be a lot to deal with.

As far as I was concerned, going to the council wasn’t my first choice. Nothing good ever seemed to come out of going to them for help, and it wasn’t like they ever *did* help. They were more in the business of upholding outdated ideals and punishing any wolf or pack that stepped out of line.

*I wouldn’t be surprised if the council somehow found a way to blame us for the monster being unleashed in the first place.*

I watched Colton go over to Maya and hug her. It was a sweet sight, the two of them hugging with the twins squished between them. It was the first time since Greyson’s announcement that Maya seemed moved.

“Hey, you good?” Greyson asked me.

“Yes, why wouldn’t I be?” I said tightly.

“Sorry I didn’t bring you in. I did what I thought was best,” he said.

“No big deal.”

“Come on, Cali. I know you, and I know it bothered you. I just wanted everyone to agree, which is never easy, and I thought that in this case with fewer voices, it would be better. Easier. And it was.”

“Good,” I said. “I’m glad your plan worked out.”

“It was less of a plan, more of a decision. Anyway, I hope you understand just how important you are to me, and to the pack.”

I took Greyson’s hand and kissed it. “I do, but it never hurts to have you remind me.” I looked around at the RVs parked haphazardly across the lawn. “It’s because of me that our yard has officially turned into an RV park.”

Greyson groaned, and I laughed. “Thank you for doing the right thing, even if that means having Lucian right outside our door for the foreseeable future,” I said.

“And for that, you owe me one, Caliana Hart.”

“So you did the right thing bringing my mate into the fold,” Colton said as he and Maya came walking over. “Does she get an alliance insignia or anything? Some jackets or something to show that we’re official members?”

Greyson knitted his brow and shook his head. “What? No.”

Colton grinned. “Well, you can’t fault a guy for trying.”

Xavier and Ava came walking over, and I did my best to ignore Ava, even as I felt her eyes boring into the side of my face.

“So, when do you think we should reach out to the council?” Xavier asked.

“I already have. I sent Samson Cesaries an urgent message, but I’m not going to wait for him to respond. We don’t have time for that, and we need to act before that thing comes for us again. I think everyone should plan on leaving to go see him in person in a few minutes.”

Greyson stopped Maya just before she and Colton could head off to prepare. “Just so you know, I’m really glad that you and the Grimcrests are part of this. We need you, and I know that you’re going to be a big part of making sure we come out of this latest mess unscathed.”

Maya looked surprised. “Yeah, sure, thanks,” she mumbled before she and Colton hurried off.

“You know that’s Maya’s version of being overjoyed,” Xavier said. “Good call on bringing her in. I feel better knowing that she has our back officially now. I’d rather have things that way.”

A short while later, we were figuring out travel arrangements for getting to the council, and Lucian was busy shouting his opinion.

“I don’t see why everyone doesn’t just pile into the RV! It’s got plenty of room, and you’ll flip at all the amenities on board.”

“No!” everyone said in unison.

“I think it’s best for us to get there in a less…over-the-top fashion,” Greyson said. “Everyone here is an adult. They can get there the way they choose.”

He shifted, and I climbed onto his back as he led everyone though the woods toward the council. Clinging to Greyson for dear life—which was a requirement when he was running this fast—I hazarded a glance over my shoulder.

Xavier and Ava were running shoulder to shoulder. I caught Xavier’s eye, noting how powerful he looked in wolf form. It always took my breath away no matter how many times I saw it.

Right beside him, Colton and Maya were keeping pace. Like his brothers, Colton was large, much larger than Maya. Even so, Maya was just as fierce as the others and could hold her own.

The purpose of this meeting was serious, and I knew that, but it felt good to see everyone united, working together…though it would be so much nicer without Ava.

*I spoke to Rowena*, I mind linked. *I think spending a few days with the Cobalts could be a nice little break.*

I hugged my mate tighter as he leapt over a fallen tree and landed swiftly so that I barely felt a jolt when he hit the ground.

*But*, I added, *only after we take care of the monster. I don’t think I’d be able to enjoy myself with that threat hanging over our heads.*

*Agreed*, Greyson said. *And don’t worry, love, that monster will be history soon. Trust me.*

I smiled, loving Greyson’s confidence. It was contagious, and just what I needed to hear at a time like this.

As we approached the council grounds, I was already thinking about how it would go if I got another opportunity to blast the beast with my magic. I’d take it out in one shot. I just needed a chance. I was Greyson’s Luna, albeit not quite officially, but still. I could fight, too.

As we approached the council grounds, Cesaries and several other council members came out to greet us. Greyson slowed to a stop, and I climbed off his back. All the wolves shifted back to human form as Cesaries looked everyone over with a dour expression.

“You didn’t respond to my text,” he said.

“I know. I thought it was more important to get here and speak face-to-face,” Greyson said. “I didn’t exactly have time to check my phone.”

“Well, you should have,” Cesaries said. “Because the council discussed your problem, and we’re not going to help you.”

**Episode 5760**

**Greyson**

I tried to keep calm, but I was having a hard time doing that when Cesaries was looking at me like something he’d scraped off the bottom of his shoe. I clenched my hands into fists and took a purposeful step toward him.

“What do you mean the council won’t help?” I asked evenly. “It’s your fucking job to protect werewolf kind from this kind of threat, or has the power rotted your brain so much that you’ve forgotten that?”

“Our job is to oversee the traditions and rules regarding werewolves and their packs,” Cesaries replied flatly. “We’re not involving ourselves in every hiccup that you lot bring on yourselves.”

“Bring on ourselves?!” Lucian shouted. “That monster destroyed my home—which is a pack house—er—pack palace.”

Cesaries eyed Lucian with that unaffected stare of his. “And? We’re not in the construction business.”

“Then what use are you?” Lucian snapped. For once, everyone including me agreed with him. I could feel everyone’s restlessness, their annoyance at being let down by the council yet again.

*I tried to give the council the benefit of the doubt, tried to believe that maybe, for once, they would have our best interest at heart, but obviously I was wrong.*

Lucian was getting dangerously close to getting in a face-off with Cesaries, and Elle pulled Lucian back, smoothing a hand down his back to calm him. “It’s okay, my beautiful forest rose. He’s just an asshole,” she said in a loud whisper.

“I knew this was a waste of time,” Xavier said. “Fuck these guys. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“No!” I said. “I’m not leaving until the council agrees to at least hear us out. You do understand that this monster is not only a threat to our packs, but to all packs, right? I’ve already explained my theories about what this monster wants…and I think it’s to wipe us off the face of the earth. Isn’t that something the council should be concerned about?”

Cesaries chuckled, shaking his head. “All I’m concerned about is how the Redwood pack always seems to be at the center of trouble. It never ends. No other packs come to me with these fantastic problems, are never quite in the number of binds you all repeatedly find yourselves in. So, whatever this latest problem is, we want no part of it.”

Cali stepped forward, her voice rising in anger. “You are all nothing but a bunch of useless, self-centered blowhards! You want to seem important and powerful, but you’re not.”

Maya clapped slowly. “Well said, Cali. Let them have it.”

Cesaries’s face reddened as he yelled at Cali. “How dare you! You impetuous little—”

I stepped between Cesaries and Cali with a growl. “Watch it!” I snarled.

Cesaries was stunned into silence.

I stepped into his face, making sure he understood exactly what I was willing to do to protect my mate. “You can insult me all you want, but don’t you dare denigrate my Luna or my pack.”

“Are you threatening me?” Cesaries said.

“Take it however you want. Makes no fucking difference to me. Just show us the respect we deserve.” Then I stepped even closer, close enough to see what was maybe a spark of fear in Cesaries’s eyes. “You won’t hold this seat forever,” I said in a low tone. “You’d do well to remember that when you need our help.”

Cesaries took a step back, but I stepped forward just enough to stay in his face. I wasn’t about to let up. I wanted him to know that he’d crossed a line, and that he’d officially made an enemy out of me.

“You never know when that monster might appear right here, and if it does, I’ll remember your inaction and respond in kind,” I said.

I turned back to address the others. “As of today, the council no longer has any say in alliance matters. Let’s go back to the Redwood.”

“Don’t be rash, Alpha Greyson,” Cesaries cut in.

I turned back to face him. “Rash? Me? No. Not at all. Rash is denying us help without even hearing us out. Rash is speaking to us like we’re beneath you when you should treat us as the equals we are.”

Cesaries forced a smile. “You’re right. I was a little…quick to react. Maybe we can reach some kind of accommodation?”

I snorted. “Accommodation? Is that legalese for you and your ‘brave’ minions doing absolutely nothing? Because if it is—”

Cesaries placed a hand on my shoulder, and it took everything in me not to slap it off. “Surely, we can start over? Speak like civilized people?” He motioned behind him. “Let’s you and me retire to one of the council rooms to discuss this in private.”

I couldn’t take it any longer. I slapped his hand away, annoyed by his tone, by his obvious cowardice that I’d triggered and now had him scrambling to keep him and his useless council safe.

“We don’t need to go anywhere,” I said. “Whatever you have to say to me, you can say to everyone here.”

Cesaries went silent.

*What should we do?* Cali mind linked.

*Not sure*, I replied. *I’m just shocked that the council would turn their back on us at a time like this. It’s like they don’t understand the gravity of this, that this monster has all werewolves in its crosshairs—and it’s got offspring that likely have the same motive—wiping us out.*

*Maybe they need to hear that?*

*I already told them that—multiple times*, I said.

*Then maybe I should give it a go.*

“Can I say something?” Cali said.

Everyone went quiet, watching Cesaries and Cali standing in what looked a little too much like a face-off for my comfort. I respected Cali, and I didn’t mind her speaking on my behalf, but I didn’t want this to go sideways. I was ready to renounce the council and Cesaries, but if he touched Cali, I’d have to kill him, and that would set off a bad chain of events.

*What are you doing, Cali?* I mind linked, but she didn’t answer.

“Does the council not understand the peril this creature brings to all werewolves? It appeared from under the Vanguard palace. Who the hell knows how long it’s been down there lying in wait, but it’s here, and it’s wrapped in dark magic.”

“And it’s not my fault!” Lucian interjected.

“Shut up!” Ava hissed at him.

“That creature is vicious, and it’s out to get us. It tried to feed Xavier to its children!” Cali said. “And it could have been any one of you on the council.”

“If we’re lucky, one of you will be next,” Xavier said dryly.

Cesaries inhaled loudly, his eyes narrowing as he looked from Xavier, to me, and back to Cali.

“The creature is going to try to kill all werewolves and who knows what else. There’s no doubt about that. It uses dark magic and emits a sound that brings even the most powerful werewolves to their knees. It’s not just going to go away. We have to stop it,” Cali said.

The council members turned away and began speaking amongst themselves. Most of them had been silent through the entire confrontation but were finally giving voice to their opinions. I could only hope that Cali’s words were going to make them reconsider.

“Everything she said is true,” I said. “And if you choose to turn your back on us, we will turn our backs on you. We will reject your authority completely.”

“That’s blasphemy!” one of the council members shouted.

“Call it what you want. It’s a promise from where I’m standing,” I said.

I paused, thinking about how everyone here was depending on me. Coming to speak to the council was my idea. If I failed to get the council’s support, it would mean that I failed the alliance and my pack.

The council was still discussing in low tones. I couldn’t tell whether it was going in our favor or not, and I was tired of waiting.

I turned back to the others. “Let’s go. I’m sorry, this was a waste of time.”

“Wait,” Cesaries said. “Give us time to consult. Like you said, this is a big issue, and there are lots of things to consider. Give us a chance to thoroughly address this.”

I watched as they huddled together and smiled at Cali. “We gave it our best shot,” I said. “Thank you for your help. Once again, you’ve shown why you’re the best Luna.”

Cali beamed at me. “And you showed why you’re the best Alpha.”

I wanted nothing more than to kiss Cali right here and now, forget all this council shit and tell Porter and Rowena that we were ready to go with them now…forget about the monster. Forget about all of this bullshit for a little while.

But I would never abandon our pack like that. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.

After what seemed like an eternity, Cesaries finally turned back to address us. “After much deliberation, we’ve decided that it is in the best interest of the council and of werewolves as a whole to offer assistance to your cause.”

Xavier scoffed. “And that means what, exactly?”

“You say this creature uses dark magic?” Cesaries said.

“Yes, it does,” I confirmed.

Cesaries nodded. “Then we actually may have something that will help.”

**Episode 5761**

**Xavier**

I looked at Cesaries skeptically, my mind going a million miles an hour. “Hang on—if you had something that could help stop the monster in the first place, then why didn’t you say something before?” I shook my head. Something about this just felt off. “You’re fucking lying. Let’s go,” I snapped at Greyson.

“Wait!” Cesaries called just as we all turned to leave.

“What?” I shot back, narrowing my eyes as I turned to face him.

He took a step toward us. “I believe—as do the rest of the council members—that this monster is a serious threat. And could be a threat to all werewolves everywhere.”

“Yeah, we know,” Cali said, sounding annoyed. “We told you it was.”

Cesaries gave her a narrow look, then cleared his throat as he looked back at me. “Do you wish to stop this creature or not?”

“Just tell us what it is,” I demanded. “We don’t have all day here.”

Cesaries was quiet for a moment, considering. Finally he spoke: “We have a weapon—”

“Yeah, and? What is it? Where is it?” I snapped.

Cesaries glared at me. “If you will let me finish, perhaps you’ll learn all you wish to.”

I shot a look at Ava. *This is bullshit. This asshole is nothing but hot air. He loves to hear himself talk*, I mind linked to her.

She raised a dark eyebrow. *He’s not the only one*, she said pointedly.

I nearly smiled. Ava was talking about me, and while I maybe disagreed, her giving me shit was a good thing for us.

“The weapon to which I was referring is an ancient device that was last used centuries ago,” Cesaries continued. “While it was developed and utilized for a different purpose, we believe it can defeat the creature you all have described.”

There was silence as our party took this information in.

“Can this weapon kill the creature?” Mace asked.

“Not…exactly,” Cesaries said cryptically. “I don’t think, anyway.”

“What the hell does that mean?” someone muttered behind me.

“Then what’s the point?”

“What are we even doing here?” another voice asked.

“Enough!” Greyson said in a quelling tone. He shot a dark look around. “Everyone quiet down.”

Everyone did quiet down, but when all eyes turned to Cesaries, he shifted uncomfortably.

“*Explain*,” Greyson said.

“The weapon I’m describing can *neutralize* the creature’s dark magic,” he explained.

“Neutralize?” I repeated. “What does that mean?”

“It will prevent the creature from being able to use its shrieking voice to stop you,” Cesaries went on.

“Okay, once we do that, how do we kill it?” Cali wondered aloud.

“You have a short period of time during which the creature will be fully vulnerable. You can kill it as you would kill any living thing. But you must be quick,” he said darkly. “If you take too long, the creature’s dark magic will return, and then you will be the vulnerable ones.”

“Well that sounds *great*,” Mace muttered behind my shoulder.

“I don’t know,” someone else said quietly. “This sounds like this could be more dangerous than the monster itself.”

“What do you mean by a short period of time?” Greyson asked. “What are we talking about here? A minute? Five minutes? An hour? How much time do we have to kill it?”

Cesaries shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. Every creature is different. It really depends on how much dark magic each of them has.”

“Fucking hell,” I swore, pushing a hand through my hair. I shook my head, annoyed. The last thing I needed was more vague answers from the council, but that was all we were getting. There was a weapon—that he wouldn’t describe—that could maybe do something about the monster—but not kill him—and we had to dispatch him quickly—but no one could tell us how quickly. I felt like I was about to lose my mind.

But when I looked back at Cesaries, I realized something. “Hang on, why do you keep talking about when *we* do this and when *we* do that? Why are *you* going to be helping kill this thing?”

Cesaries looked offended and puffed up his chest. “That is not my role.”

“Your *role*?” I repeated incredulously. “What is your role?”

He narrowed his eyes. “To guide and assist you.”

I snorted a laugh I didn’t bother to swallow. “So, in other words, you’ll do nothing. Like you always do.”

Cesaries puffed up even more. “You are grossly misstating the council’s role. We are here to aid and assist the greater werewolf community in all things good and beneficial—”

“Okay, okay,” Greyson said, holding up a hand to stop the speech. “This weapon. Do you actually have it?”

“Of course we do,” Cesaries said automatically.

I stared at him for a moment, then looked around. “Okay—where? Is it invisible? Where the hell is it?”

He snorted. “You don’t think we just keep it hanging around, do you? Good god, man, we keep it in storage, like civilized people. We haven’t needed it in literal centuries, but we hung onto it, just in case we needed it again. And it appears that we do.” He looked around. “Would you like to come see it?”

“Yes,” Greyson said, answering for the group.

I, however, remained skeptical as Cesaries waved us forward. He was joined by two additional council members, and we walked out into the raw winter air. We walked past the main council headquarters and toward a squat stone building. It looked like a regular storage building, except for the very serious-looking gate surrounding it. The fencing and gate made the storage building look like it might hold nuclear codes or evidence of aliens…or maybe a weapon strong enough to defeat a monster.

When we got close, I could see that someone had been expecting our arrival, because the gate was open, and when we reached the building, the locks had been removed. The door was open, but before we walked in, Cesaries stopped and turned to look at all of us.

“Before we enter, I must ask that no one touches anything, and that you do not discuss anything you see contained within this storage facility with anyone.” He stared around, then looked at Greyson. “Can I assume that I have your word?”

Greyson’s jaw was tight. “Whatever. Fine. Let’s just see what you’ve got.”

We stepped inside and were hit by a blast of stale, musty air. I coughed as I took a breath and pulled the dust into my lungs.

“This way,” Cesaries said, leading us down a set of stairs.

My eyes had adjusted to the dimness by the time we got down the long, sloping ramp, and I looked around to see that we were in a huge, underground storage space. It was massive, stretching into the darkness, so I couldn’t even guess at the size.

On all sides, there were rows of storage units with steel doors, as well as shelves and bookcases, all holding a range of strange, dusty objects. Curiosity stirred in me as I looked around, but there wasn’t time to explore.

“Come,” Cesaries snapped, waving us forward.

We walked on until we came to a large object in the center of the hallway, covered by a large, dusty tarp.

He pulled it back, and when the dust settled, I found myself staring at something that looked like an ancient crossbow on wheels.

I looked at the weapon, then at Greyson. “Seriously?”

Greyson looked back at me, and I could see my own skepticism reflected in his eyes.

“Got any other useless weapons down here, Cesaries?” I asked, looking around the cavernous space. “This is less a storage facility and more like a museum of useless crap. Your big secret weapon is nothing more than a big bow and arrows. Except”—I looked at the thing again—“no arrows. So a BYOA situation? Great. Really helpful.”

Cesaries didn’t appear to appreciate my attitude. “We keep the arrows separate.” He gestured to one of the council members who had followed us down, and that person opened another large storage container, which revealed a clutch of wooden arrows.

Greyson eyed the arrows. “And how are those supposed to neutralize magic?”

Cesaries gave an irritated sigh. “The tip of each of the five arrows was crafted from ancient stone and infused with magic of its own.”

Reluctantly, I stepped over to the storage container to look at the arrows. I pulled one out, then ran my finger over the tip. “So we just aim one of these at the creature?”

“Well, it isn’t quite like that,” Cesaries said.

“How is it then?” I asked.

“The arrow must strike the creature in one of its most vulnerable spots,” he explained.

“And where are those?” I asked. I was starting to get impatient.

Cesaries hesitated. “We don’t know.”

I tossed the arrow back down in disgust. “This is so fucking typical.”

Cali stepped over to look at the arrows. “How do we know the magic is still active? You said this weapon hasn’t been used in centuries. Doesn’t magic dissipate over time?”

“Well, I’m afraid we don’t know,” Cesaries said with a shrug. “You won’t know until you try them.”

**Episode 5762**

**Greyson**

I was annoyed but not surprised by the vague responses we were getting from Cesaries. I could tell Xavier was growing more agitated, and I couldn’t say that I blamed him, but this was completely typical of Cesaries, and the whole werewolf council.

“Okay, just so I’m sure I’ve got this straight,” I started, not bothering to hide the annoyance in my voice, “you’re telling me that that you’re giving us a weapon that you’re not even sure will work, to go after a monster you won’t help us fight. Do I have that right?”

Cesaries looked uncomfortable. “Well…I wouldn’t put it like that.”

“No? How would you put it?” I shot back.

The guy shifted on his feet, casting a look around the group, like he was looking for an ally, but all he was met with were the steely looks from the pack members and friends I’d brought with me.

He turned back to me. “Well, do you have something better?”

I sighed. “Not at the moment,” I had to admit. Because we sure as hell didn’t. However shitty this option was, it was the only option we had. I looked at the large crossbow. “So, can we take it?”

“Yes, but you will have to sign it out,” Cesaries said officiously.

I laughed. I thought he was joking, but when I looked at the guy, it was clear he was not.

“We must keep track of all the artifacts,” he said pompously.

I shook my head. “Forget it. I’m not signing anything. You’ll get this thing back. *If* it works,” I added. “And if it doesn’t, you won’t see it again. Come on, everyone, let’s get this out of here.”

Luckily, the crossbow was mounted on a wagon-type thing, so everyone took hold, and we started pushing it back up the ramp. Ava grabbed the arrows, handed them to Cali, then stepped up to help push the weapon.

When we got outside, I looked around. I knew there was no way we were going to be able to wheel this thing back to the pack house. Even if we could do it, seeing the rickety condition the thing was in, there was no way the weapon would survive the trip.

Colton looked at the weapon, clearly identifying the same problem. “Maybe we could disassemble it and bring it back in pieces.”

Xavier laughed. “Are you kidding me? This thing would crumble faster than an Ikea bookshelf. I don’t think we can risk it.”

Porter looked at Rowena. “Can you blip this thing?”

“I guess so, yeah,” she said.

“That’s probably our best bet,” I reasoned. Cesaries had followed us outside, and I looked over at him. “Is there anything else we should know about this thing? Or about the creature? *Anything* you’ve told us?”

Cesaries drew a deep breath, looking grave. “What I can tell you is that ancient magic is unpredictable. And it poses a grave threat. Not just to you, but to all the supernaturals who call this place home. We only have those five arrows,” he said, tipping his ching toward the arrows in Cali’s arms. “Use them wisely. And please be careful with this,” he added, giving the crossbow a pained look. “The council takes great pride in its collection.”

I snorted. “Yeah, I bet you do.” I turned to Rowena. “Okay, if you could blip back, the rest of us will take care of ourselves.”

Rowena nodded, then concentrated. With a rush of wind, she and the strange weapon suddenly disappeared, blipping away.

I looked around. “Okay, everyone else, back to the Redwood.”

Everyone nodded and began to shift. I did the same, then crouched low, waiting for Cali to climb on. She did, and I started to run back toward the pack house.

We were well into the trees before she spoke.

*What do you think?*

*Not much*, I had to admit. *It’s not like Cesaries filled any of us with confidence that this stupid-ass crossbow is actually going to work. But we have no other options, so stupid-ass crossbow it is.*

*I wish we could test it out on something less dangerous than the creature*, Cali said. *To see if it works. We should at least have Big Mac look at the arrows to see if they still hold magic.*

*Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. But my bigger concern is finding out where this creature’s vulnerable spots actually are. I mean, we only have five arrows. Even if they are magic, we can’t just hope we get lucky and hit one. We only have so many chances to get it right.*

*Maybe Lola learned something about the creature from Steinar*, Cali offered.

*I wouldn’t bet on it*, I said darkly. *It seems like nobody we talk to seems to know where this creature came from, how it got here, or what to do about it. Even Vander doesn’t seem to know anything about it.*

*We’ll figure it out*, Cali said, firmly optimistic.

She held my neck a little tighter, and I ran faster. Though I wasn’t in a hurry to get back to the pack house. I could run with her on my back all day. I just never got tired of spending time with her.

But we did finally make it back, and when we did, we found Rowena standing outside next to the crossbow, holding the arrows in her arms.

The other Redwood pack members were gathered around, looking curious. They all seemed to be asking Rowena questions, and she was starting to look a little overwhelmed.

Cali slid to the ground, and I shifted back to my human form, then walked over to the group.

“Thank god you’re here,” Rowena said, looking relieved when she saw me. “I’m being fielded way too many questions about this thing.”

Maya emerged from the woods and shifted back before she walked over. “I’m surprised the thing made it back in one piece,” she said, shaking her head at the crossbow.

Ravi joined us. He picked up a rope. “This thing is frayed,” he noted, and when he pulled gently on it, the rope snapped.

“That’s great,” Jay said sourly.

“No one touch it,” I warned.

“Yeah, it might crumble,” Jay agreed.

I turned to Cali as Xavier walked over. “We need to fix this thing so it can at least fire one of those arrows without breaking the whole machine in half.”

“Who can fix it?” Cali asked.

I turned to look at Ravi, who was examining the crossbow closely. Lucian was next to him, breathing down his neck.

Ravi looked up and caught my eye. “What? You want *me* to try to fix this thing?”

I nodded. “Yeah, whatever you can do. Anything that would make it more secure.” I looked back at Xavier and Cali. “Whatever he does shouldn’t affect the magic, since the arrows are supposed to hold that part of it. The crossbow just fires them.”

Ravi ran a thoughtful hand through his hair as he eyed the crossbow. “How soon do you need it?”

“Yesterday,” I said without hesitation. “I want to neutralize this creature as soon as possible.”

“But we have to find out where to aim the arrows first,” Cali reminded me. She looked around and saw Lola milling around. She waved her over. “Did you have any luck with Steinar while we were gone?”

“I did, actually,” Lola said with a wide grin. “Steinar and I identified a creature that looks like it might be a match. It’s called a Night Stalker.”

We stared at her.

“Are you serious?” Colton asked.

“*I* didn’t name the thing,” Lola said defensively.

“You say it looked like the same creature, but it might not actually be the same,” I clarified. “Did your research tell you anything about the creature?”

Lola shook her head. “No. Only its name.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said absently. I shook my head. I appreciated that Lola had tried, but just having the name of a creature that *kind* of looked like the creature we were trying to fight was not particularly helpful.

“We should try to get Big Mac here to check on the arrows,” Cali reminded me. “I mean, I want to get the weapon fixed too, but none of this will actually matter if the arrows are blanks.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. I took a deep breath, trying not to feel overwhelmed. “The sooner we take care of all this, the better.” And that was true. Not only was this thing walking around, trying to make a meal of anything it could find completely dangerous, but if it started to attack humans, then we were going to have a much bigger problem on our hands.

I pulled out my phone to call Big Mac to ask her about checking the magic, but before I could dial her number, I got a call myself.

Rhonda’s name appeared, and I looked at it, curiously. Why was she calling?

“Hello…?” I answered.

“Greyson, hey! Did you see the video?” she asked excitedly.

“Uh, what video?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s all over social media! Somebody posted a video of a monster roaming the woods near where I found your brother, Xavier.”

**Episode 5763**

I had seen Rhonda’s name pop up on Greyson’s phone, and as he listened to whatever she was saying, I could see that he wasn’t pleased. His face darkened and his eyes began to flash with worry.

“You can’t believe everything you see on social media, Rhonda,” he said shortly, then ended the call.

“What was that about?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “That’s what I’m trying to find out,” he muttered, looking down at his phone.

I stepped next to him and looked down at the phone as he brought up a video. It must have been what Rhonda had been calling about. I could see by the number of likes and reshares that it was trending, but I forgot all about that as I looked down at the screen. It was a shaky, blurry image of something large and dark moving away from the camera. It was barely visible through the trees, but I knew what I was looking at, and my stomach clenched with fear.

It was the creature.

I swallowed hard. “Maybe people won’t believe it’s real, Greyson. Like Bigfoot or something.”

“Yeah, let’s hope so,” he said grimly. He looked up at the crossbow and the arrows. “I just wish I knew for sure how to take this thing down.”

Apparently unable to answer the question for himself, Greyson stepped away to call Big Mac, and I stood for a moment, thinking. I wondered if Vander could be any help to us. They might not know much about the monster or dark magic, but they might know something about this old weapon. Vander was super old, but even still, I knew it was a shot in the dark.

Still though, it was worth a try.

I took a deep breath, preparing to summon them, but before I could, Vander appeared before me, suddenly, and out of thin air.

“Vander!” I gasped, surprised.

Vander did not look pleased. “Humans have learned of this creature, Cali.”

I sighed. “I know, but I saw the video, and I really doubt anyone’s going to believe it’s real.”

“I certainly hope you’re right. Because if they do start to believe this is real, the divide between the supernatural and the human worlds will be rent. Broken. The balance will be destroyed.” They gave me a dark look. “Imagine what would happen if humans learned about everything we seek to shield from them. Werewolves, witches, Fae…”

“Yeah,” I said, my stomach dropping.

Vander shook their head. “I can’t even begin to imagine the havoc that would create.”

I could feel my heart pounding, and I tried to fight back the panic that was climbing up my chest. “So what do we do?”

Vander narrowed their eyes. “You make sure you don’t have any more contact with it.” Their eyes shifted toward the weapon. “What the hell is that?”

My stomach sank. “Don’t you know?”

Vander gave the thing a long look. “I know that it’s an ancient weapon of some kind. What are you doing with it?”

“We’re going to use it to try to neutralize the creature so that we can have a chance to kill it. I was actually just about to summon you when you showed up,” I explained. “I was hoping that you might be able to tell me where the creature’s vulnerable regions are.”

Vander’s eyebrows shot up. “Vulnerable regions? Caliana, believe me when I tell you that I have never seen a creature like that in my long life and that’s saying something.”

“Right, okay.” I nodded. “Listen, we’re going to do everything we can to defeat this thing.”

“I’ll keep looking for information, but I don’t know,” Vander said. And then, a second later, they were gone.

But just as Vander disappeared, Big Mac and Mrs. Smith appeared, blipping onto the lawn. I walked over and arrived just in time to hear Greyson walk over to Big Mac and ask:

“Can you sense any magic in those arrows?”

Big Mac looked at the arrows Greyson was pointing to, frowned, and picked one up. She looked at it closely. “The stone used for the arrowhead is unusual.”

“But is it magic?” Greyson asked again.

“Not sure…” The witch put the arrow on the ground. “Everyone stand back.”

She moved her hands over the arrow, muttering a spell under her breath. There was a buzzing sound, and a few sparks burst from the tip of the arrowhead.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

She nodded, looking satisfied. “It means the arrowheads do possess magic. What are they supposed to do?”

“Neutralize the monster,” Greyson told her.

She looked startled. “Well, if it’s enough magic to do that is anyone’s guess. Who gave these to you?”

“The werewolf council.”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “How well do you trust your council?”

Xavier had joined us by this time, and he snorted a laugh at the question.

Big Mac glared at him.

“The council hasn’t been exactly helpful in the past,” I explained hastily.

“Or in the present,” Ava added, stepping next to Xavier. She nodded at the weapon. “Look at this thing. It’s on its last legs. Did they find it on *Antiques Roadshow* or something? Or Craigslist?”

“I know it’s not ideal, but it’s all we have at the moment,” Greyson said heavily. “Whether we trust the council or not, this is it.”

Big Mac scowled. “Well, it’s not much.”

“Ravi is going to fix it,” I told her.

Now Big Mac snorted. “Yeah, well, good luck with that.” She stepped around, examining the weapon closely.

“Greyson,” Mrs. Smith said quietly, leaning close to her son, “I’m worried about you. I don’t want you putting yourself or any of the others in danger using this unknown weapon against an unknown monster. There are just too many things that could go wrong.”

She was exactly right, but I kept my mouth shut. I didn’t want to make Greyson’s mother worry even more than she already was.

“We’ll be careful,” Greyson assured his mom. “But I have to do this. I have to protect the pack.”

I looked at the weapon again, trying not to feel the fear clawing its way up my chest. I would feel a lot better about this whole thing if the weapon was just in better shape. But—even if it was—the person who would have the best chance of using it would be Artemis, and she wasn’t even here. She was the best archer among us by far. And a skilled hunter, tracker, and fighter. After all her years spent as a bounty hunter in the Fae world, at least we’d have a chance.

Biting my lip, I stepped away from the others, who were still talking and debating. I wondered if Artemis would agree to come back here to help us. But even if she would, the only way to contact her would be to go to the Fae world and track her down myself. Which I wasn’t about to attempt. I supposed I could ask my mom to try to get in touch with my sister.

But I hesitated at the thought of asking my mom for help. I was worried that if I explained the situation, it would just make my mom worry. I hated to do that, but when I looked at the weapon again, and the tense look on Greyson’s face, I knew it was important enough to ask.

I pulled out my phone and was surprised when my dad answered on the first ring.

“Hello, pumpkin,” he said warmly.

“Hey, Dad. Where’s Mom?”

“She’s outside gardening,” he explained. “How are you, sweetheart?”

I smiled. It was great to hear his voice. I felt better already. “I’m okay, thanks, Dad. But I really need to talk to Mom. Can you grab her for me?”

“Sure thing. Hang on.”

I listened as he walked out of the house. I could picture him pulling open the sliding door.

“Orla!” he called.

“What?” she shouted back from a distance.

I rolled my eyes. “Dad, can you just hand her the phone? This is kind of important.”

My dad laughed, then a moment later I heard my mom’s voice:

“Cali? Is everything okay? Have you heard from your sister?”

I ignored the first question for the moment. “That’s why I called, actually. Have *you* heard from my sister?”

“Caliana Rose Hart, you tell me what is going on right this minute,” my mom said, her voice stern.

I sighed. “I need to talk to Artemis. The pack needs her help.”

“Help? What kind of help?” my mom demanded.

“Um…” I glanced at the monster weapon. “It has to do with weaponry, and I think Artemis could help.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“I can only leave a message,” my mom finally said, and I could hear the worry in her voice. “I’m not sure when she’ll get it, though.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I get that. That’s fine.”  
 “Okay. I’ll do it,” my mom agreed. “But in the meantime, have you thought about other options?”

“What other options?” I asked.

“Contacting your grandfather, Innes?” she suggested. “Artemis is a good option, but your grandfather was a general, Cali. If anyone knows about weapons, it would be him.”

**Episode 5764**

The kettle boiled, and I reached over to flip off the burner. Torin already had the tea leaves in the diffuser, and he watched as I poured the hot water in. We were preparing the tea I drank to fall into the trance that allowed me to speak to my grandfather in Fae limbo, and as it steeped, I could feel my nerves taking over.

As Torin and I stood quietly in the kitchen, a group walked by, headed toward the living room.

Ava was in the group, and she paused at the kitchen door. “Do you really think *now* is the right moment for a cup of tea?”

I glared at her, but Greyson paused at the door. He looked at me, then at the mug in my hand and the herbs strewn across the counter.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

I grasped the mug tightly, letting its warmth sink into my hands. “I’m going into Fae limbo to see if my grandfather knows anything about the crossbow weapon.”

Kendall had stopped next to Greyson, and she raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Hang on, *Fae limbo*? What’s that?”

I shook my head. “I don’t have time to get into all of that right now,” I said. Which was true. It was also true that I wasn’t about to explain it to an MIB agent. There were some things she probably didn’t need to know.

“Maybe you can stay there while we figure all of this out,” Maya suggested.

“Or maybe you can just stay there permanently,” Ava muttered.

Maya shot Ava a look, but I ignored both of them. The tea was ready, and I couldn’t think about any of that right now. We had limited time.

“Do you want honey?” Torin asked anxiously.

I shook my head. “I’m good, thanks.” Grasping the mug, I moved toward the porch, where I could be alone and drink my tea undisturbed. But as I passed him, Xavier reached out and put a hand on my arm.

“Be careful, Cali,” he said quietly.

I liked the feel of his hand and the low tone of his voice, but I knew that I had to do this. I smiled at him, not caring that Ava was staring daggers at me. “It’s not like I’m actually going to the Fae world. It’s just a state of mind, more than anything. And Grandpa Innes isn’t dangerous.”

Stepping away from Xavier’s hand, I walked out onto the porch. The tea steamed in the cold air, and I took a deep breath. Then I raised the mug to my lips and took a drink of the bitter tea.

It took a moment before I felt anything, but soon enough the effects were upon me. I hurried to sit down as a wave of sleep pulled me under.

When I opened my eyes again, I was standing in a beautiful forest, just next to a path. The path looked promising, so I started down it. I followed it through the trees to a clearing, hoping that I would find Grandpa Innes. But when I reached the clearing, it was empty.

“Grandpa?” I called, looking around.

No response.

“Grandpa?!” I called again, this time a little louder.

Still he didn’t respond, and I started to worry. Had I done something wrong?

“Caliana!”

I spun around when I heard my name shouted through the trees and flew into the arms of my grandfather as he emerged.

He hugged me for a moment, then pulled back to look at me, his eyes wide with surprise. “Caliana! It’s so wonderful to see you, but why are you here?” His canny eyes narrowed. “I sense that this is something more than just a friendly visit.”

“I wish it was just that,” I said, “but I need your help.”

“With what?”

I gestured to a log, and my grandfather and I sat down. I explained to him about the creature that had appeared in Lucian’s basement, and the effect it had on the werewolves. I explained how it had captured Xavier, and the havoc it had wreaked on all of us with its ancient, dark magic. Then I told him about the weapon.

Grandpa Innes was quiet for a long moment. He shook his head. “I thought we destroyed that creature years ago.”

My jaw dropped. “Wait—*what*? You’ve seen the creature? A Night Stalker?”

My grandfather laughed. “Oh, Caliana, I’m old, but I’m not that old. No, I’ve never seen it myself, but I’ve heard stories of a creature that terrorized the Fae world.” He waved his hands and conjured up an image that hung before us in the warm, sweet air.

I stared in wonder at the image of the creature I recognized.

“That’s it. It’s from the Fae world?” I asked, stunned. “Then how did it end up in the human world?”

He took a deep breath. “Long before the war, the Dark and Light Fae worked together to blast the creature after it attacked a village and killed many innocent Fae. They got rid of it, but they must have inadvertently forced it through a portal into the human world.”

“But what about the dark magic?” I pressed.

He shook his head, his brows drawn. “I don’t know. That part baffles me. The creature the Fae tell of did not have dark magic when it appeared all those years ago. It must have acquired it sometime later. Perhaps someone in the human world tried to use witchcraft on it and it caused some kind of backspill.”

I frowned, thinking this over. It made sense, to a point. That the creature had been forced through a portal and had been hanging out, trapped beneath the Vanguard palace, might account for its incredibly bad mood. But there were a lot of questions that just didn’t quite fit.

“But why does the creature’s dark magic only seem to affect werewolves?” I wondered aloud. “I can hear it when it shrieks, and it’s not pleasant, but it doesn’t incapacitate me the way it does the werewolves.”

My grandfather gestured to the creature’s image, which still hung in the air before us. “It looks less Fae than werewolf.”

“Yes,” I agreed warily.

He shrugged. “Perhaps that is why.”

I wondered if he was right. Without another explanation, I suppose I was willing to believe it.

“Do you know how we can kill it?” I asked. “Since the Fae attacked it before, maybe you know what the creature’s vulnerable regions are? That’s what we need to know before we attack.”

My grandfather frowned and looked down at the ground at his feet. His gaze drifted away, like he was thinking hard. “I’m trying to remember what the old legends said…”

I crossed my fingers, hoping against hope he might have some information. Because after this conversation, I was out of ideas of where to look.

“Below the rib cage and the back of its throat,” he said, nodding. “I’m almost certain.”

I blew out a relieved breath. “Really? Thank you. That’s really helpful, Grandfather.”

He smiled at me, his eyes shining. “I wish I could go with you, Caliana. I wish I could fight alongside my brave granddaughter. But you are well prepared, are you not? You have your shield, your sword, your magic.” His eyes twinkled. “And that Wrenthorn blood in your veins. That’s really all you need.”

I returned his smile. “Thank you, Grandfather. For everything.”

I shook my head. I could feel the tea beginning to wear off.

Grandpa Innes was still smiling at me, but he was starting to fade, along with the shady forest glen. The warmth of the air began to dissipate, and I could feel the cool winter air of Oregon once again.

“Thank you!” I said hurriedly. “I miss you!”

He waved at me, and I waved back, my spirits buoyed by my grandfather’s faith in me—as opposed to Ava’s disparaging comment. I did have my sword, and my shield, and my family’s blood coursing through my veins. I also had knowledge that no one else had—I knew how to kill the monster. Take *that*, Ava.

I blinked and found myself sitting on the porch step. The winter wind blew cold around me, but I was warm, and when I looked up, I found myself nestled against Greyson.

He smiled down at me. “Welcome back, love.”

“Hi,” I said sleepily, smiling back.

“How’d you make out?” he asked. “Learn anything useful?”

My head still felt like cotton wool, but I gave it a shake to try to clear it as I turned to him. “I did! I learned how we can kill the thing! My grandfather knew about the creature, and he told me where we could find the vulnerable spots.”

Greyson’s grey eyes were wide. “*What?* Seriously?”

I nodded. “Below the rib cage and the back of its throat,” I recited.

Greyson pulled me to my feet and wrapped me in a bear hug. “I knew you could do it!” he said, holding me tight. “I knew you could.”

My heart swelled at the pride in Greyson’s voice. “I can’t believe it.”

He pulled back to look at me. “I can. I knew you would find something, love. And you did. The rib cage and…”

“The back of its throat,” I reminded him.

He nodded. “We can do that.”

“Yeah, we can, but before we try…” I cast a dark look out at the ancient weapon still parked on the lawn. “We need to start practicing with that crossbow.”

**Episode 5765**

Greyson followed my gaze to the crossbow. “You’re right,” he said with a nod, “but I don’t know that there’s much we can do at the moment. Not until Ravi has a chance to repair it.”

“How long do you think that will take?” I asked, chewing my lip. I was starting to get nervous. We were going to need all the time we could get.

“I don’t know. As much time as he needs, I guess.” He thought for a moment. “I’m going to see if Ravi could make some dummy arrows for us to practice with. We need to perfect the shot. We clearly don’t have any wiggle room when it comes to hitting the creature’s vulnerable spots, so we need to make sure we’re going to hit what we aim at.”

“That’s a good idea,” I agreed.

He bent and kissed me. “Thank you, love. I’m going to go talk to the other Alphas.”

He headed into the house, but I stayed on the porch, still thinking. Something Greyson had said was troubling me. Behind me, the door opened.

“Hey,” Torin said, poking his head out. “I heard the tea was a success.” He frowned when he saw my face. “It was, wasn’t it?”

I forced myself to smile. “It was, thanks. And thanks for your help, Torin.”

He dropped down to sit beside me. “Of course, but something’s going on, Cali, so tell me.”

I sighed. “It’s nothing…it’s just that whenever Greyson talks about attacking the creature, he says *we*. *We’re* going to do this, and *we* can do that. And that makes sense, because he’s the Alpha. But just like everyone else around here, he’s a werewolf, and we all know what that creature does to werewolves.”

“Yeah,” Torin said uneasily.

“So, in order to stop it, we need to hit it with an arrow—and one of the spots we’re supposed to aim for is the back of its throat,” I went on.

“Okay,” Torin said slowly. His brows drew down and I could see he was confused. “I guess I’m not totally sure what you’re upset about, Cali. I’ve seen you practicing archery with Artemis. I know she’s supposed to be the expert, but you’ve gotten pretty good too.”

“Not nearly as good as Artemis is,” I said hastily. “But that’s not what’s bothering me.”

“So what *is* bothering you?”

I twisted my fingers in my lap. “In order to hit the creature’s throat, we need to get it to open its mouth, right? But the only way I can see it doing that is shrieking, and if it does that, the werewolves are going to drop like flies.”

“Ah,” Torin said as understanding dawning on his pale face. He was quiet for a moment, taking in what I had just said. “Do you think you should fire the arrows, then?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I do,” I said, knowing exactly how well that plan was going to fly with my two mates.

Maybe he could see the worry on my face, because Torin said, “What if I help you?”

I gasped as I turned to him. “Would you?”

He nodded. “Of course I would. I don’t just make cookies, you know. I had to fight alongside Astrid to survive during the Fae war, too.” He took my hand and gave it a squeeze. “You can count me in. I’m on your team, Caliana. We’ll kill that thing.”

My anxiety felt slightly less overwhelming after talking to Torin, and I smiled back at him. I stood up and walked inside, thinking fast about how I was going to frame my argument to Greyson. I wanted to make sure I said it in a way that would convince him that I was right, and my way was the only rational way forward.

I stepped inside and stood outside the living room, listening to the conversation between the Alphas. Except that it was more argument than conversation.

They were arguing about the council and its inaction, about the weapon, about the creature, about the Vanguards and why they should have known they had an ancient evil below their grounds.

My palms started to sweat. Maybe now wasn’t the best time, so I headed back outside. I found Ravi, Jay, Donovan, and Zainab gathered around the weapon. They seemed to be in an argument too. There was something in the air, and everyone seemed on edge.

“You need to rebuild it from the ground up!” Donovan was saying, gesturing to the crossbow.

Ravi shook his head. “Are you kidding me? We don’t have time for that!”

“What’s the alternative?” Zainab asked heatedly.

“Hey! Greyson didn’t ask you clowns to do this,” Ravi shot back, looking stressed. “You all need to get off my back—”

“Hey, Ravi,” I interrupted, stepping into the discussion.

Ravi pushed his dark hair out of his eyes and looked over at me. “Oh, hey, Cali. What’s up?”

“I wondered if you could make some practice arrows for this thing. So we can start training.”

He nodded. “Yeah, sure thing. As soon as we repair this thing. Jay, help me with this rope,” he said, nodding to a rope holding down one of the levers.

Jay grasped it, but as soon as they started to untie it, the whole rope snapped. Worse—a piece of the actual crossbow fell to the ground.

I sighed as Donovan groaned. None of this was boding well.

“Can I help with anything?” I asked. “Maybe Lola and I can work on the practice arrows.”

“Yeah, that would be a big help,” Ravi said. He looked really stressed.

I nodded. “Great.” Then I bit my lip. But how was I supposed to make arrows? Artemis would know, of course. And if she didn’t, maybe her friend Marius might.

I wondered if my mom had heard from my sister yet. I felt for my phone, but I stopped myself. She probably hadn’t heard from her yet, otherwise my mom would have called to let me know.

The door opened, and Kendall walked outside. She walked over to where we were all standing, eyeing the crossbow warily.

Then she looked at me. “Someone want to explain this to me?”

“Greyson didn’t tell you?” I asked, unable to stop myself from needling her.

Her purple eyes flashed. “If he had, I wouldn’t be asking you about it, would I?” she shot back.

I bit my lip to stop the smile that threatened to spread across my face. “The werewolf council loaned us this. It’s an ancient weapon of some kind that can be used to help defeat the monster.”

Kendall eyed the crossbow, looking less than impressed. “How?”

“There are arrows that are infused with magic that will incapacitate it if we hit the creature in its most vulnerable spots. Then we can take it down.”

“That seems like there’s a pretty small margin for error,” Kendall murmured.

She was right, and though I agreed, it rankled me that she pointed it out.

“We’re going to practice first,” I said defensively.

She nodded. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Fucking hell!” Donovan swore.

I looked over to see him holding a frayed rope in his hand.

“I told you not to pull it!” Jay snapped at him.

“You told me not to pull it too hard, man,” Donovan shot back. “I barely touched the thing. It practically exploded in my hand.”

Kendall raised an eyebrow. “I hope you all know what you’re doing.”

“I trust Ravi,” I said stoutly. “And so does Greyson. He’s good with stuff like this. He even fixed a car.”

“Wow, *a car*,” Kendall said under her breath.

It was clearly sarcastic, but she’d said it so quietly I barely heard it, so I ignored it.

“Well, I hope you figure it out soon,” she said darkly.

I gave her a close look. There was something about the way she’d just spoken that made it sound like she was implying something.

“What?” I asked.

She looked at me, her purple eyes betraying nothing, and didn’t explain further. Of course.

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever. I need to find Lola. We have to figure out how to make practice arrows. It can’t be that hard, right?”

Kendall didn’t answer that either, but before I could take a step away, her eyes shifted to look at something over my shoulder and they narrowed.

“Dammit,” she said quietly.

I turned to see a black SUV rolling up the driveway. It was followed by two more.

Everyone by the crossbow turned to look at the SUVs as they came to an abrupt stop in front of the pack house.

As if on cue, all the doors flew open at once and men and women in identical black suits stepped out.

He stepped forward, face grave as he spoke in a loud, commanding voice. “Everyone stop where you are. My name is Agent Imamu, and I’m with the MIB. We are here to take over.”

“*What?*” Ravi gasped behind me.

Imamu looked right at the group. “This is now an MIB operation.”

**Episode 5766**

**Kendall**

*Fuck.*

As I watched the MIB agents pour out of the SUVs, I could feel the anger rising in my chest. I couldn’t believe this. Imamu hadn’t even given me a fucking chance.

Next to me, Cali scurried away, hurrying into the house, calling for Greyson.

Jay separated from the group near the crossbow and walked over to Agent Imamu. “What do you mean this is an MIB operation, man? Look around—this is the Redwood pack house.”

Imamu shot a look at me, then looked back at Jay. “I need to speak to the Redwood Alpha.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. I wondered if anyone else had caught that look Imamu had given me, or if he was going to out me as an agent. Obviously, that would make for a very awkward situation with the rest of the werewolves around here. Was that what this was all about? Was this Imamu’s tactic for throwing me out of the MIB?

The other agents from the SUVs gathered, and as I scanned their faces, I realized I recognized a lot of them. None of them betrayed knowing me, though. We were all trained better than that.

Imamu turned to me, his face blank. “Ma’am, I’m going to need you and the others to step away.”

Fury flared. I hated being treated like I was a nobody civilian like that, but I didn’t argue. How could I?

The front door of the pack house swung open, and Greyson and the others came striding out. They all looked startled when they saw the SUVs, and Greyson shot me a sideways look.

*Why the hell did you call in the MIB, Kendall? You didn’t even give us a chance to fix this on our own.*

*I didn’t have anything to do with this*, I shot back, annoyed. *I was trying to buy us more time.*

*Yeah? How hard did you try?*

My ears started to ring with anger as I realized that he didn’t believe me.

Greyson and his brother walked down the porch steps, followed by Maya, Porter, and Mace.

“What the hell is going on?” Greyson boomed out.

“Because of the danger involved in this operation, the MIB is taking over this case,” Imamu explained shortly.

“*Case?*” Greyson shot me a hard look, then turned back to Imamu. “I didn’t realize there was a case.”

“It seems you’ve covered up some dangerous ancient magic that could have a widespread effect. We’ll take it from here,” Imamu said in a businesslike way.

“The hell you will,” Xavier snapped. “Who do you think you are?”

“The Mysterious Incidents Bureau,” Imamu said, peering narrowly at Xavier. “And I believe you already know that.” He looked past Xavier over to where Charlie and Violet stood looking on. “And they know me too.”

Greyson turned to look at Charlie and Violet. “Did you contact them?”

“No!” Violet exclaimed, while Charlie shook his head.

“Don’t go after your own pack, man,” Xavier cautioned his brother. “Just relax.”

Since no one had ever calmed down after being told to calm down, Greyson just became more enraged at his brother’s words.

“Don’t tell me what to do with my pack,” Greyson snarled, his grey eyes flashing dangerously.

I knew he was acting like an asshole, but I couldn’t help but feel my own wolf stir at his aggressive behavior. I took a calming breath. I couldn’t let our stupid mate bond make things worse right now, so my wolf could go fuck herself. This was not the time to get all hot and bothered for Greyson, no matter how broad his chest looked or how sharp his jaw appeared when he turned back to glare at Agent Imamu.

I couldn’t blame Greyson for his anger, but as he tried to stare down a whole flank of MIB agents, I knew that it wouldn’t help anything if he lost his shit now.

I stepped toward him and put a hand on his arm. He looked over at me, his eyes still raging like a winter storm, but didn’t pull away.

*Don’t lose control*, I warned him. *Not now.*

Despite my best attempts to ignore it, my wolf stirred, feeling Greyson so close. I tried not to notice.

Greyson made a low growling noise in the back of his throat, but he said nothing. Not to me, or to the MIB agents.

Imamu looked around, taking in the grounds, the pack house, and the gathered werewolves. I saw him clock the ancient crossbow as well, his eyebrows twitching with almost imperceptible curiosity.

“I want to inspect that weapon,” he said, nodding toward it.

“Okay, but don’t touch it,” Ravi warned. “It’s fragile.”

Imamu paused, and for a moment I wondered what he was going to do—and if he was going to use force. He stepped toward it, peered at it, then stood straight. “I think perhaps it would be best if we took this with us, so that our experts can analyze it at a lab at MIB headquarters.”

“I don’t think so,” Xavier said, stepping between Imamu and the crossbow. “You’re not taking this anywhere.”

Agent Imamu’s thin eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me?”

Greyson stepped next to Xavier. “You heard my brother. The weapon stays here. It belongs to us.”

For a moment no one moved. Then the Redwood pack—along with the Samara wolves—began to gather behind Xavier and Greyson. The MIB agents fell into position behind Agent Imamu. The wind blew up, and there was a long, tense standoff between the two factions. I stood off to the side—on neither side, watching as my heart nearly beat out of my chest.

This was *exactly* what I had wanted to avoid. This was why I had wanted to buy more time for the packs to work this out for themselves, and why I hadn’t wanted to involve the MIB yet. No one needed this, and no one wanted this.

Finally, unable to deal with this anymore, I took a step toward them all. I wanted to de-escalate this before it went any further and things got out of hand. But how was I supposed to do that without taking sides?

Part of me understood why Imamu was here, and why the MIB needed to get involved. This Night Stalker creature had the potential to hurt a lot of wolves—and maybe humans. But there was another part of me that was fiercely loyal to the werewolves. And it had nothing to do with the mate bond with Greyson. I might be an MIB agent, but long before that, I had been a werewolf.

I looked at the MIB agents, who were moving their hands toward their weapons.

Cali stepped toward me and grasped my arm. “Can’t you do something?”

I looked at her, confused. “Me? Why?”

“Because you…I mean…you can *do* something,” she said, her face flushing with embarrassment.

I stared at Cali, who was imploring me, and felt jarred. She knew. I looked over at Greyson, who looked about a second away from shifting.

Fuck, fuck fuck. Did he tell Cali that I was an MIB agent?!

I felt my blood begin to boil with fury. He had sworn to me he wouldn’t tell a soul, and yet here Cali stood, clearly knowing what she was asking me. He had betrayed me. He had betrayed one mate for another.

“Please, Kendall,” Cali said. “*Do something*.”

I yanked my arm free. I was confused and furious, but I could read the situation as well as anyone else, and I knew that if I didn’t do something, this was going to turn violent very quickly. And that wasn’t going to do anything to stop the monster.

So I stepped between Greyson and Imamu. “There’s no need to fight about this.”

Imamu looked at me, his eyes narrowing. “May I speak to you privately, ma’am?”

I nodded and followed him to the SUV. We climbed in, and Agent Imamu slammed the door behind us.

“You need to stay out of this, Agent King,” he snapped, rounding on me.

“Well, it’s a little hard to do that when you show up like this,” I snapped back. “If you had given me a heads-up, I might have been able to work things out.”

“I might have, but I haven’t heard a word from you,” he shot at me. “I had to find out about this weapon on my own.”

“We literally just brought it here!” I exploded.

Imamu drew slightly back. “*We?*” His eyes narrowed. “Whose side are you on, Agent King?”

I swallowed hard. “I wasn’t aware there were sides. I’m just trying to do what you told me to do. Gather information so that we can stop this threat.”

“Yes, I know,” Imamu said, nodding. “Which is why I think there’s a way out of this for everyone.”

Now it was my turn to get wary. “What do you mean?”

“If we have the cooperation of the Redwood Alpha, everything else goes away.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I want you to use your *influence* over the Redwood Alpha to get him to cooperate with us,” Agent Imamu said without hesitation.

I felt myself bristle. “My *influence*? Greyson Evers isn’t going to change his mind.”

“He might.” Agent Imamu raised an eyebrow. “For you.”

**Episode 5767**

**Greyson**

I looked at the SUV the MIB agent and Kendall had disappeared into. It was a massive, hulking thing, and the windows were tinted so dark it was impossible to even see their outline, so there was no way to know what was happening. I knew Kendall was probably fine—she could take care of herself—but still, I couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy. But I was uneasy about everything at the moment, being that I was so fucking on edge.

I had a creature I wasn’t sure how to kill on the loose, a weapon I wasn’t sure how to work, and now a shadowy supernatural agency had just descended on my pack house. The whole situation was a mess, and I felt like I was about a second away from blowing my fucking top.

At least no one else had noticed that Kendall and that agent had disappeared into the SUV together. Which was good. I didn’t want any uncomfortable questions. Everyone else was too keyed up to notice anything. Almost everyone was eyeing the agents, ready to shift at the slightest provocation.

Gritting my teeth, I looked at the agents. There were a few that I was certain were werewolves, but most of them were human. It was them I was most concerned about. They obviously wouldn’t be here if they weren’t trained to handle werewolves—and that was what made me nervous.

Whatever they had in their pockets were probably hi-tech equalizers. There was a part of me—the most chaotic part—that wanted to find out. But the other part of me—the responsible part—knew that I needed to cool it and put the safety of my pack first.

“Greyson Evers,” came an imperious voice, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I looked over to see Lucian striding over, looking annoyed. “What?”

“Yes, precisely what *I* was going to ask you. What are we going to do about the MIB?” he asked, looking outraged. “How dare they just arrive like this and take our only weapon away. I mean, if they can take that, who’s to say they couldn’t just take anything they wanted? Maybe your little pack house will be next,” he said, gesturing toward the massive house.

“Just cool it,” I snapped. I was already annoyed, and I didn’t want to add to it by having to deal with Lucian. “Just stay calm and make sure your pack doesn’t fire the first shot.”

Lucian huffed, looking offended. “The Vanguards are too highly trained to be so foolish.”

I groaned. “Come on, Lucian. Are we going to compare dick sizes, now?”

“W-What?” Lucian sputtered. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“I’m sure you don’t. Just keep your pack in check and let me sort this out,” I snapped.

I looked over as the SUV door opened and Kendall stepped out, followed by the tall, dark-haired agent. They both looked stony-faced. I tried to read Kendall’s expression, but it was impossible. Was she pissed? Frightened? Though I couldn’t imagine Kendall ever being frightened. I didn’t think anything scared her.

As the agent stepped away from Kendall and huddled with his agents, Kendall walked toward me.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I’m telling you right now that it would be idiotic to pick a fight with MIB,” she said coolly, her voice betraying nothing. “I can only imagine that you’ve figured out that they’re armed.”

“I’d just like to point out that I didn’t *pick* anything,” I said coldly. “I didn’t invite anyone here for a visit. That agent you were talking to showed up with all his friends, completely unannounced, in case you didn’t notice.”

“I noticed,” she said, still giving away nothing.

“This is *my* territory,” I said firmly.

Kendall said nothing, but I watched as her violet eyes flashed in a way that made my stomach tighten and my blood begin to reroute southward. It was as though I could sense her wolf responding, and my wolf howled in return.

I ground my teeth. The complication of lust was the last thing this situation needed.

Kendall looked at me for a moment, and her expression softened slightly. She tipped her head. “Wouldn’t it be best for the Redwoods if you cooperated with the MIB?”

I stared back at her, then narrowed my eyes incredulously. “Do you seriously believe that it would be best for the Redwoods for me to cower in front of this gang of agents and give them whatever they want? Even if that didn’t make me look weak as hell in front of my pack, what is going to happen if I give away what might be the only thing we have to possibly defeat this monster?”

She took a breath, and I saw a muscle in her jaw twitch. “Okay, listen—my job is at stake here.”

“What?”

She nodded. “That agent who yanked me into the car—Imamu—he’s going to hold this whole mess against me if this goes south. He could demote me. Or worse.”

“Why would he do that?” I wondered. “How is any of this your fault? How can Imamu blame you for what’s happened here?”

She shook her head. “You’re not asking the right questions. That’s just how the MIB operates.”

I pushed a hand through my hair, feeling stressed. “Listen, Kendall, I get what you’re saying—”

She shook her head, like she didn’t believe me, but the fact was that I did get it. And I was sympathetic. But what was I supposed to do?

“I do,” I insisted. “I know you’re between a rock and a hard place here, but come on. You know I’m not going to let them take over.”

Kendall looked up at me. The angle was such that her lashes looked about a mile long, and her transfixing eyes looked nearly liquid. “Greyson,” she said, her voice a low purr, “*please*.”

For a moment I didn’t speak. I couldn’t. I was nearly lost looking into her hypnotic purple eyes. But then the word she’d just said repeated in my head—

*Please.*

An alarm bell began to ring.

Kendall didn’t say please. Not to me, not to anyone.

Shaken from her spell, I frowned. “*Please?*” A thought occurred to me. “He sent you to say this to me, didn’t he? Imamu. He thought he could get you to play me.”

Kendall’s eyes lost their liquid look as they hardened into something closer to amethyst iron, but she didn’t answer the question.

She dropped her head, but I slid my finger beneath her chin, lifting it gently so she looked at me again. Like before, I could sense her wolf reacting to my touch, which distracted the hell out of me, but I shook my head.

“Nice try,” I said, dropping my hand and taking a step back.

Narrowing her eyes, she stepped toward me. “Okay, maybe he did. But look around, Greyson. Open your damn eyes. I don’t want to see anyone here hurt—”

“You think I do?” I snapped. “I want to kill this fucking monster now. Before it has a chance to kill us. It tried to take my brother, Kendall. And I don’t have time for the MIB to haul my only weapon away, take it back to their stupid little nerd labs, and have a bunch of experts flown in to examine it. I want to arm the fucking thing and send an arrow into that beast’s neck so that we can fucking kill it. *Now*,” I growled, feeling all the anger and frustration I’d been feeling welling up in my chest. “Fucking *now*. Not next week, not when the MIB is ready to let me, or decides to do something. I’m sick of all this fucking interference. The MIB, the werewolf council—it’s enough. We have to do something now. As soon as we can.”

Kendall stared at me for a long, quiet moment. “I understand,” she finally said. “But I’m not sure I can make Imamu understand.”

I shook my head. “It’s not your job to make him understand,” I scoffed.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she snapped back. “It is my job. *You’re* my job.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. It made is sound like she was my fucking babysitter, and my anger flared up again. “Well, that sounds like your problem, not mine.” I turned and started to walk back toward where Cali stood, talking to Lola.

But before I could take a step, Kendall grabbed my arm, holding it in a firm grasp.

“Don’t you fucking walk away from me,” she hissed, and when I turned, I could see her own anger written across her face. She’d clearly been holding back, and now it was clear as day. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Yeah. I’m protecting my pack,” I shot back.

She glowered at me. “Is that what you call it?”

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked.

Her eyes flashed. “Were you protecting your pack when you told Cali that I’m MIB?”

**Episode 5768**

**Greyson**

I stopped and stared back at Kendall. “What do you mean?”

She narrowed her eyes. “God, Grey, don’t even try. She knows, and that can only mean one thing—you betrayed me,” she said, snatching her hand back like my skin had burned her.

My mind raced as I stared at her. How had she found out? I glanced over at Cali, who was standing with Lola. They were holding sticks and watching a YouTube video on how to make an arrow.

Kendall followed my gaze, the look in her eyes bitter. “That’s right—ask her. See what she says.”

“She told you she knows?” I asked, surprised.

Kendall gave me a disgusted look. “She didn’t have to. She asked me to do something about the standoff. Because she knew I could.”

She folded her arms across her chest. I tried not to notice how that made her boobs look.

“And why would she think that *I* could do something? Why ask me? Why not ask Maya or Lola? Someone she knows better? Why ask *me*?” Kendall looked at me, giving me a look of pure, unmasked fury. “Are you going to stand there and lie to my face? Are you going to deny you told her?”

“I’m not going to lie,” I said gruffly. “I told her because I couldn’t lie to her.”

Kendall’s jaw tightened, and her eyes grew dangerously dark. “You couldn’t lie to her, but you lied to me.”

My stomach dropped. “I did what I had to do.”

Kendall’s look grew disgusted. She glanced around. “Who else knows?”

“Xavier.”

She was still for a moment, like she was absorbing a blow. “Anyone else?”

“No,” I said quietly. “Just the two of them.”

She didn’t speak for a moment. “You not only put them in a dangerous position, Greyson, but you put me in one too. I don’t know if you thought of that when you did what you *had to do*, but there’s a reason that undercover agents need to remain undercover. Maybe this comes as a shock to you, but it’s not just for shits and giggles. We have a lot of enemies. *I* have a lot of enemies. There are people who wish me a lot of harm, and who would like very much to know where I am and what I’m doing.”

When she finally looked back at me, her purple eyes glinted with something that I hadn’t ever seen in them before. I had seen anger and fury. Hell—I’d even seen lust. But now they looked sad. They looked hurt, and even lost, and it shocked the hell out of me.

“Anyway,” she said, trying to mask the slight shake of her voice, “thanks for making it easier for my enemies to find me.”

There was a strange ache in my heart as I looked at her, and I had a wild desire to reach out and pull her close. Not to kiss her or to make love to her, but to comfort her. It was a strange feeling, but my wolf felt it too. I could feel him stirring, affected by the sight of my wounded mate.

I didn’t pull her close, but I reached out to take her hand. “Cali and Xavier would never tell anyone.”

She dodged my touch and took a step back. When she looked at me, the pain in her eyes was gone, and they were icy again. “I hope you’re right, Greyson.”

As I watched her walk away, I felt like shit, but I just had to remember that I had only done what I had to do.

I shook my head and turned. I needed to talk to Cali, but first I needed to get Imamu off my fucking back. So I headed to him first.

“Hey,” I snapped, on edge from my conversation with Kendall and the whole fucking ordeal.

The agent turned to look at me. “Yes?”

“Here’s the deal—we’re keeping the weapon. You can have it when we’re done. Then you can take it apart, piece by piece, if you want to. You can study it, test it, whatever you want. But not until after I kill that fucking monster. And when you do—when you finish examining it with your little microscopes—you can explain to the werewolf council why you’re giving it back to them in pieces.”

Imamu gave me a steely look. “Greyson Evers, you don’t want to threaten the MIB.”

“I’m not threatening anyone,” I said shortly. “I’m just letting you know the way it’s going to be. Ultimately, we both want the same thing. Maybe we just disagree on how to get there.”

Imamu gave me a long look. Then he sighed. “We’re going to keep an eye on you.”

I had to fight to stop myself from glancing over at Kendall, who I’d been clocking since she walked away from me. “I always assumed you had been.”

Imamu’s eyes narrowed. Then he nodded. “Fine.” He turned to his agents. “Pack it in. We’re leaving.”

There was an audible reaction from the packs as the agents moved silently toward the SUVs. A few people cheered, which I could have done without.

Xavier stepped next to me. “Do I want to know how you pulled that off?”

I glanced over at Cali. “No. You don’t.”

The doors of the SUVs slammed shut, and the engines roared to life. As they roared down the driveway, the one or two cheers turned into everyone cheering. I didn’t blame them, but I wasn’t feeling particularly cheerful.

Now that Imamu had been dealt with, I walked over to Cali.

She smiled when she saw me and held up a target arrow proudly. “What do you think?” But when she saw my face, her smile faded. “What’s wrong?”

Lola was looking at me, so I pulled Cali slightly away.

“You told Kendall you knew she was MIB?” I asked, barely able to keep the frustration out of my voice.

Cali gaped at me. “Greyson, I—I know you told me not to—”

“Yeah, I did, and you told her,” I said.

Cali nodded, her eyes on her feet. “I didn’t say it out loud, but Greyson…I had to say something.”

I sighed and pushed a frustrated hand through my hair. “But I told you *not* to. You said you wouldn’t, Cali.”

She looked up at me, her eyes wide. “I had to do something to stop both sides from attacking. And the only one I knew who had any chance of doing that was Kendall—one of the MIB’s own.”

“But *I* stopped the fight,” I pointed out. “I didn’t need Kendall to do it.”

Cali’s eyes widened even more. “I didn’t mean to say anything, but I was scared,” she said in a small voice. “That monster could destroy all werewolves. I can’t allow that to happen. So I did what I could do to get her to try to stop it. I’m never going to forget how terrified I was when I saw my mates brought to their knees by that creature, Greyson. And the thing tried to serve Xavier to its young.”

I rubbed my head, which had started to ache.

Cali glanced over her shoulder. “I could talk to Kendall, try to explain—”

“No!” I said hastily. “No.” I knew deep in my bones that Cali was the last person Kendall was going to want to talk to. “I’ll talk to Kendall. “You’ve done enough.”

“I’m sorry, Greyson, but I did what I thought was best,” she said, a stubbornness creeping into her voice.

I thought about that for a moment, wondering how true that was. Could it have been what she thought was best, or could Cali have been motivated by something else? Could her mixed feelings about Kendall being my mate have something to do with it?

I shook my head, trying to snap myself out of that dark spiral. “Listen, before I talk to her, there’s something else I need to know—and you have to tell me the truth.”

“What?”

“Did you tell anyone else?”

Cali’s mouth dropped open in shock. “I can’t believe you just asked me that!” she exclaimed.

It was clear she was upset, but I withstood it. I thought about what Kendall had told me, about how there were people who wanted to find her—people who wanted to hurt her. I thought about how I would feel if I did something that made Kendall vulnerable. I glanced up at Lola, who was laughing with Jay, and thought about just how fast information could spread in a pack.

“I’m just trying to make sure—” I started, but the damage was done.

Cali’s face flushed, and her eyes filled with tears. She turned away, too upset to say anything else, and started back toward Lola.

Well, shit. I’d fucked that up majorly.

“Let’s fucking go!”

I turned around to see an arrow flying across the yard. Ravi was standing at the crossbow, beaming as he whooped and hollered.

He looked over at me and pumped his fist. “Let the practicing begin!”

**Episode 5769**

**Xavier**

As Colton and I scoured the woods closest to the Redwood pack house, looking for wood for Cali and Lola to use to make target arrows, we heard a cheer go up from the wolves. That was followed immediately by the sound of breaking glass.

I stood straight and looked over at Colton. “What the hell was that?”

Colton looked at me, his arms filled with wood, and shrugged. “Hell if I know.”

I dropped the sticks I was holding and started toward the front of the house.

“Xavier, hang on,” Colton called after me.

I turned. “What?”

“I just want to get this straight—you hooked up with Cali—”

“Don’t say it like that,” I snapped.

“Sorry,” Colton said. “So you banged Cali? In your car?”

“It was *her* car,” I growled back at him. “And I don’t see *banged* as a big improvement.”

“Whatever. So you shagged Cali in her car and then—what? You went straight home and nailed Ava?”

“I was *kidnapped*,” I shot back, starting to get really annoyed “By a fucking monster. You left that part out, I noticed.”

“Okay, sorry. But the point is that you went home and got pity-fucked by Ava?”

I glowered at my brother. “I’m not telling you anything anymore. You’re supposed to be my goddamn brother, Colton.”

He looked offended. “I *am* being supportive, Xavier. But what the hell? That timeline is garbage and I think we both know it. You’re making me look like the moral compass of our family by comparison. How fucked up is that?”

I didn’t need Colton to tell me I was a piece of shit, so I turned away. “This conversation is over.”

“Xavier, seriously, I’m trying to understand,” Colton called after me.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. My head was starting to hurt, but I turned back. “I’m mated to both Cali and Ava. What’s so hard to understand about that?”

Colton raised an eyebrow. “Your dick, apparently.”

I shook my head. “I’m going to go find out what all that noise was. There’s no way you’re going to understand what I’m going through.”

“I’m trying, bro,” Colton said.

“You’re trying to be an asshole, and you’re getting really good at it,” I scoffed.

Colton grinned at me. “Hey, you’re starting to sound like Maya.”

I shook my head, and Colton followed me as I headed toward the pack house. “Yeah, I wonder why she would ever say such things about you—*what the hell?!*”

I stopped suddenly, Colton still next to me.

His eyes went wide. “Whoa, Xavier. Isn’t that your car?”

I stared at my car—or, more to the point, at the arrow jutting through my shattered windshield.

I ran toward it, shaking my head. “*Really?!*” I turned to the rest of the wolves, who were standing near the crossbow, looking sheepish. “Does this *look* like a target to any of you?!”

No one answered.

I pulled the arrow from the windshield and the glass shattered completely. “Fucking hell!”

“Sorry!” Ravi called. “We’re still adjusting it. I think it’s a tension issue.”

Colton snorted a laugh, and I threw the arrow at him.

“Shut up.”

I headed over to the crossbow. The damage was already done, but I needed to make sure they were going to aim the next shot away from my car. I wondered if Colton would still be laughing if those clowns had just shot an arrow through *his* windshield. Why the hell did this shit always happen to me?

“Okay, okay,” I growled when I reached the crossbow, “everyone grab hold. I want you to push this thing so it’s pointing in another direction.”

“Out of the way,” Cali snapped. She and Torin cut through the crowd, and she began to load a new arrow into the bow.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“What does it look like?” she shot back, her voice tight.

She continued to load the arrow, but I put my hand over hers.

“Hey, slow down,” I told her.

She shook her hand free. “I can’t. Torin and I have to learn to use this thing.”

I frowned at her. “What do you mean, you and Torin have to?” I was about to press her for more information, but I stepped around to look at her and saw that her eyes were glistening. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

I could feel the eyes of the pack watching me, so I leaned close. “Hey, before you blast someone’s windshield—”

“Ravi did that, not me,” she snapped angrily.

“*Hey!*” Ravi complained, looking hurt. “That was an accident.”

I held up my hands to Cali. “Okay, but before you fire another arrow, will you please talk to me?”

She opened her mouth to respond, but her eyes welled up with tears before she could speak. She shut her mouth and nodded.

I looked around, seeing the group still staring at us curiously. I tipped my head in the direction of the trees. “Let’s just go for a little walk.”

Cali followed me away from the others. When we’d gotten a few dozen yards away, conversation amongst the group started again, with Donovan insisting that he knew the proper way to aim the crossbow.

“Let me take over,” he declared.

“Over my dead body!” Ravi growled back.

Ignoring them, I turned to Cali. A tear was tracking down her cheek, and I wiped it away without thinking.

“So, what’s up?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

Cali took a shaking breath. “Nothing.”

I shook my head. “It’s clearly not nothing.”

She shot a look over at the crossbow. “I’ve just been thinking about this whole attack plan, and I realized that Torin and I are the only ones who can attack the creature.”

I frowned. “Is that why you’re upset? Are you worried? You don’t have to—I don’t even want you to have to attack the monster.”

“But you can’t,” she said quickly.

“What?”

“No werewolf can,” she said, shaking her head. “And you know that.”

I took a breath. I figured I had time to convince her otherwise. It was clearly going to be a minute before the brain trust behind me figured out how to aim the thing. “Alright, so if it’s not that—why are you so upset?”

She shook her head, but I suddenly remembered seeing Greyson and Kendall having some kind of intense conversation earlier. I couldn’t help but wonder if Kendall had anything to do with whatever was upsetting Cali.

I asked her about that, but she shook her head.

“No, it was actually Greyson who said something that upset me,” she said quietly, her voice barely a whisper.

“What did he say?” I growled, thinking of how happy I would be to give my boneheaded brother an ass-kicking for making Cali cry.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m fine. We were just both upset about something.”

I balled my hands into fists. I hated to see Cali like this, and especially when there was nothing I could do, but I tried to keep my voice steady and reassuring. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

She gave me a sad smile. “I know that. Now let’s get back to target practice.”

I nodded, and we headed back. As we reached the crossbow, Greyson turned toward us, a stormy look on his face.

“What is Torin talking about?” he asked Cali.

“What?” she asked.

“He said that you two were going to learn to use the weapon to stop the creature,” Greyson growled.

Cali nodded. “Yeah, that’s right.”

I crossed my arms. I was glad Greyson was bringing it up. I wasn’t thrilled about whatever crazy plan Cali and Torin had come up with, and I wanted to talk about it, too.

“What are you talking about?” Greyson asked.

“Torin and I are Fae,” she pointed out. “And the creature’s dark magic doesn’t affect us like it does the rest of you.”

“It can still kill you with its claws,” I noted. “Or eat you like a fucking snack.”

Ava cast a glance over her shoulder at us. “Hey, if she wants to die, who are we to stand in her way?”

I glowered at Ava, but she just smiled back at me.

Greyson shook his head. “I’m not going to allow you and Torin to face that thing alone.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do,” Cali snapped at him. “You think I’m not capable of that too?”

Frowning, I looked between them. I suddenly had the feeling they weren’t talking about the weapon anymore.

Cali shook her head, looking frustrated. “Stop, okay? I don’t have time to argue about this.” She turned to Torin. “Crank it up, baby!”

Torin gave her a confused look, but seemed ready, and he nodded enthusiastically. As he wound the rusted iron crank on the ancient machine, increasing the tension of the bow’s string, the ground began to rumble beneath our feet.

It was subtle at first, but the rumbling increased quickly, and there was a deafening shriek from overhead.

The sound was immediately overwhelming, and my heart sank. I knew exactly what it was.

“Fuck.”

**Episode 5770**

As the deafening screech continued, it felt like the world was shifting around me. I lost my balance and fell to the ground. As I looked around, I could see the werewolves tipping over like bowling pins, one after the other. They covered their ears and writhed in pain, so I knew it must be the monster.

Gritting my teeth, I started to struggle to my feet when the voice exploded into my head. The sound was harsh and shill, and it drowned out all the noise around me.

*The werewolves tried to stop me last time, and they failed! They will fail again. You will all fail!*

Fear gripped me, and my heart beat so hard I nearly threw up.

“STOP!” I screamed. “I’m not going to fail!”

Something grabbed hold of my arm, but I swatted it away, terrified. Thinking it had to be the monster, I readied my magic to blast, but I stopped myself and opened my eyes just in time to see Torin’s petrified face in front of mine.

“Cali?!” he gasped. He pulled me to my feet. “Are you okay?”

I took a moment to breathe, then looked around, seeing the werewolves still on the ground, scattered like leaves. Greyson, Xavier, Lola, Ava—all of them were starting to move again. They were recovering, but before anyone could get to their feet, there was another rumble and they dropped again, screaming in pain.

I started toward Greyson.

“*Ravi!*” Torin shouted, his voice filled with fear.

I whipped around to see Ravi on his knees next to Xavier’s car. He had walked over there to examine the damage done to the car, but now, coming toward him, was the monster.

Fear gripped me. “*Ravi!*” I screamed. “Ravi! Move! You have to move!”

But Ravi wasn’t listening. He was out of it, barely conscious with the pain.

I summoned my magic and tried to blast the monster, but my hands were shaking, and I only managed to graze it. The creature kept coming forward. It reached Xavier’s car and stomped on it, crushing the roof like a soda can. It turned its monstrous head and caught sight of Ravi on the ground nearby.

“Ravi!” I turned to Torin. “We have to stop it!”

Torin was pale as a ghost, but he grabbed one of the arrows from the council—the real ones—and nodded. “It’s time to try this out.”

We needed more time, so I took another shot at the monster with my magic. My aim was better this time, and I was able to knock it back, but only slightly.

“Let’s do this,” I muttered. Whipping around, Torin and I loaded the arrow into the crossbow. Luckily Torin had prepped it before the monster appeared, so it was just about ready to go.

As I pushed the thing to aim it toward the monster, I thought about how fitting it was that Ravi had been the one to fix the weapon, and now we were using it to save his life. It felt right.

But first we were going to need to push the weapon into position—a much harder job than I had expected.

“Torin! Help me!” I called.

Torin put his hands on the wagon part of the weapon and pushed, and together we struggled to shove the thing into position.

“*Hurry!*” Torin urged, but I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or to himself.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ravi moving. He had managed to shake himself alert and was looking up at the creature. He was backing away, but since he was still on the ground, he could only push himself back along the ground. He just wasn’t moving fast enough.

But he did manage to shift, though only partially. His hand became a paw, and only had time to swipe at the creature as it reached down and grabbed him up. Then the thing dropped a squirming Ravi right into its mouth.

Ravi screamed, I screamed, Torin screamed. We finally got the crossbow into position, then Torin and I both finished turning the crank, though my hands shook.

I knew that we had to try to hit it below the rib or in its mouth, but—as it had Ravi in its jaws at the moment—the back of the throat wasn’t an option.

So I angled the crossbow to hit it below the rib cage and, my heart pounding, I let the arrow fly. But just as I shot the arrow, the monster turned its back.

“*NO!*” I screamed, but it was too late. It was no use. The arrow hit the monster in the back.

The creature howled in shock and pain as the arrow landed. It reared back, tossing Ravi into the air like a ball. It stumbled, crashing onto Xavier’s car with a sickening thud.

But it wasn’t going down. It flailed, and managed to reach the arrow, ripping it free from its back. It snapped it in half and hurled it away.

“Another arrow!” Torin screamed.

He scrambled to grab and load another one, but before he could, the creature let out a deafening howl and thundered away, into the woods.

The silence that was left behind rang in my ears. I was breathing hard and sweating, and my hands were raw from turning the crank and pushing the weapon into position.

As the werewolves began to stir around us, Torin and I sprinted over to where Ravi lay. He was still, and his eyes were closed. There was blood running from a gash on his forehead, but—worse—he was feverish.

Torin tried to feel for a pulse in his wrist, but his hand was still shifted, so Torin couldn’t find it.

“The fever, it’s from the dark magic,” I told him.

“*Oh no*,” Torin moaned.

“I need to get the moss.”

Torin bit his lip and nodded. “I’ll try to heal him as best I can.”

“I’ll hurry,” I promised, and raced toward the house to get the moss juice.

As I ran toward the porch steps, I passed by Lucian and Elle, who were lying on the ground but looked awake and alert. I caught sight of Lola, who was helping Jay to his feet. Mikah was with Gabriel; Rowena was tending to Porter. Farther away, I caught sight of Colton, who was sitting up next to Maya. They held hands as they staggered to their feet again. Around them, others were doing the same. Donovan, Sage, Zainab, Mace…I looked around as I hurried, making sure that everyone looked uninjured.

When I got to the house, I burst inside. There was movement in the living room, and I saw Big Mac helping Mrs. Smith onto the couch, who must have been inside when the monster began to shriek. I felt terrible about that—that it had happened with no warning at all—but it was clear that Big Mac had it covered, so I raced upstairs.

In my room, I yanked open the desk drawer where I’d stowed the moss, but when I looked inside, a knot formed in the pit of my stomach. The moss was there, but it was completely dried up, shriveled up like a raisin.

I stared at it, unsure what to do. Then I grabbed it and ran it to the bathroom. I flipped on the faucet and shoved the moss into the running water, trying to revive it. But—to my horror—it crumbled into mush and slipped through my fingers. An instant later, it was down the drain.

I stared in shock at the running water. Without that moss, Ravi could die. And what about the other werewolves? The monster’s strong aura of dark magic could kill them all.

But I couldn’t just stand here any longer. I rushed back downstairs and was relieved to find that Mrs. Smith was back on her feet again. Outside, I hurried toward where I’d left Ravi and Torin. But as I moved across the lawn, I caught sight of Xavier. He crouched next to Ava, speaking quietly to her. Greyson was with Kendall, and though he wasn’t touching her, he looked concerned. They all looked better, though shaken. My heart hurt to see them, but I knew that now was not the time for drama.

Torin looked up as I drew near.

“Cali, my healing powers aren’t doing much against whatever is wrong with him.” Torin shook his head. “I can heal his bite wound, but I can’t do anything about the fever. Or the delirium. Or the chills. He’s shaking.” Torin looked around. “All of them just being in the presence of the creature could be detrimental now.”

I followed Torin’s gaze around the wide landscape of the pack house grounds. Wolves were everywhere. They were starting to get to their feet, but these strong, brave pack members looked like newborn deer—unsteady and shaken.

Gritting my teeth, I nodded to myself. I knew what I needed to do. “I’m going back to the Vanguard palace,” I told Torin. “I’m going back to the underground well at the palace to collect more moss.”

**Episode 5771**

“There’s no way in hell I’m letting you go back down there, Cali,” Xavier snapped, clearly having heard what I’d told Torin. “That place is damn near condemned, which is why Lucian and his clowns are camped out on Redwood property. It would be dangerous to go back to a cave buried beneath a place that unstable.”

“But Xavier, it’s the only way we’ll be able to save Ravi,” I insisted, hoping he would see reason. It wasn’t like I wanted to go there—in fact I would rather do anything else. But Ravi needed us.

“Cali, no. I almost died there, and that’s exactly where the monster took me when it captured me. It could do the same to you,” Xavier said.

“He’s right. It’s way too dangerous,” Greyson said.

“So, what’s the alternative?” I said, unable to keep the annoyance out of my voice. “We just stand around and let Ravi die?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Maya and Colton were busy tending to a couple of Grimcrest pack werewolves who’d been hit hard by the creature’s dark magic aura. They hadn’t suffered the severity of wounds that Ravi had, but still looked to be in almost as bad of shape as he was.

Every werewolf around looked like hell, but would they get sick? It was possible…but I didn’t think that death was out of the question, either.

“I know it’s risky, but I don’t know what other choice we have. Even if everyone survives this attack, there’s no telling whether they’ll survive the next. And if they get sick, we won’t have anything to treat them with,” I said.

“But the moss juice isn’t even a permanent cure,” Xavier said.

“No, but it helped last time and it’s all we have. So, unless you want your fellow werewolves to die—for Ravi to die—I’m going to get that moss juice.”

“As much as I admire my palace, and I can’t believe I’m going to admit this, I don’t think it’s safe in its current state. Your mates are right. My precious home is little more than a death trap right now. Perhaps it would be best for you to wait until the construction crews have finished stabilizing it,” Lucian said.

“And if I wait, Ravi will be dead.” I let my words land with all the heaviness they deserved. I didn’t get why they were trying to argue with me about this. Yes, it was dangerous, yes, Lucian’s palace was even more of a hazard right now than usual, but I didn’t think we had much of a choice. Why couldn’t they see that?

Ava heaved a loud sigh and said, “I think Cali’s right. She should go.”

Everyone swung their attention to Ava, obviously as shocked as I was that she was agreeing with me. And this time, she wasn’t smirking like she had when she suggested that I should fight the monster alongside Torin. Though I would be stupid to think she would care if the cave collapsed on top of me.

“If you insist on doing this, I’m going with you,” Greyson said. He grimaced, rubbing his temple. The pain from the monster’s dark magic was still too intense for him to hide his reaction.

“And so am I,” Xavier said, and he was obviously still in pain, too.

“You’re so predictable,” Ava grumbled. “Do either of you ever get tired of having the same arguments, saying the same things to Cali? Forbidding her from doing something, insisting on going with her, only for her to do it anyway or drag you into a life-or-death situation?”

I scowled at Ava. “That’s not always how it goes.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Sure, whatever you say.”

Torin jumped in. “Cali and I are going to go. It makes the most sense. We’re immune to whatever sickness all the werewolves are getting, and we’re perfectly capable of getting in and out of there without reaching the brink of death.”

This should have been the last word—it made perfect sense. Torin and I were both capable of protecting ourselves with our Fae powers, but Xavier and Greyson argued anyway.

“No. If you’re going down there, I need to be there to keep an eye on you,” Xavier said. Ava looked like she was seconds from exploding.

Just before Ava could make what I knew would be another snide remark, Big Mac and Rowena appeared with Mikah in tow. “We’ll go with Cali, okay?” Big Mac said, already exasperated. “None of us will be affected by this ancient thing’s magic, so it stands to reason that we’re the best option.”

Xavier opened his mouth to argue, but Big Mac put up a hand to stop him cold.

“Use your head, wolf. Look around you, too. Every werewolf in this place was laid out flat by that thing’s screech and here we are, unharmed. How can you argue with that?” Big Mac said, daring anyone to respond.

I was relieved. Big Mac had made them see reason. With two witches, a vampire, and two Fae, the odds would be stacked in our favor. We couldn’t be stopped. Sure, the creature could physically attack us, but we wouldn’t let it get close enough. I was confident about that…even as the creature’s dire warning reverberated through my head.

“Besides, I have as much reason to stop that thing as any of you. It hurt Sabine, and there’s no way I’m going to let that happen again,” Big Mac said.

Ravi’s pained moans drew our attention. His skin was pale and clammy, and his eyes were red-rimmed and watery. He was getting worse by the second. There was no more time to stand around arguing over logistics. We needed action.

“Help Ravi into the house,” I told Greyson. “Make him comfortable.” I looked at Ravi. “We’re going to get something to help you, don’t worry.”

Greyson and Jay lifted Ravi up from the ground and carried him into the house as he babbled incoherently. I followed them as they carried Ravi to his bedroom.

“Jay and I will stay by his side,” Lola said. “We won’t let him out of our sight. Just be quick about getting that moss, okay?”

I nodded at my friend as it dawned on me that as confident as I felt about going back into the cave, I was still afraid.

Greyson and I walked back downstairs together, and it was still a little tense between us. On one hand, he’d had a right to confront me about letting it slip to Kendall that I knew about her MIB identity, but I hated the way he’d gone about it.

“I need to talk to you about what I said,” Greyson whispered.

“Not now,” I interrupted. “I can’t.”

The sting of Greyson’s accusation was still too raw, even though Greyson was obviously remorseful.

I softened a bit. “We’ll talk about it when I get back, okay?” I rose to my tiptoes to plant a kiss on his lips, and when I pulled away, I saw the relief in Greyson’s eyes.

“Okay,” he said. “Be careful, love.”

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It wasn’t until we arrived at the Vanguard palace that I was reminded of just how bad of shape it was in. No wonder Lucian had warned us against coming—for once, he hadn’t exaggerated. The palace itself was in near ruin, and stacks of building supplies were strewn all over the formerly well-maintained grounds.

*At least Lucian would be happy to know that his construction crews are here and hard at work. Even if they’re probably in a whole lot of danger if the Night Stalker comes back…*

“Be careful,” I warned everyone as we worked our way through the wreckage to what was left of the basement door.

“You don’t need to tell me twice,” Rowena said.

Debris crumbled down around us as we made our way down the cracked basement stairs. We paused at the bottom, unable to see in the thick darkness.

“Just a sec,” Big Mac said before creating an orb of mage light to illuminate our path. It kind of reminded me of a Fae wisp.

“I’ll lead the way,” I said. “I think I remember how to get to the well.”

Torin, Rowena, Big Mac, and Mikah stuck close behind as I began walking through the winding tunnels. As we approached the locked door, I realized that I didn’t have the key anymore.

“Shoot. I don’t have the key. Don’t know how to get this thing open.” I stood back and examined the door, trying to come up with a solution. “I could blast it with my magic,” I said.

“And bring what’s left of the palace crumbling down on our heads? I don’t think so,” Big Mac said.

I reached out to touch the door, and it fell backward. Like everything else in the palace, it had been shaken loose from the very foundations—a bit of luck that allowed us into the tunnel.

“There’s a lot of danger ahead,” I warned everyone. “There are cavernous openings in the ground, bat caves, and probably more awful things that I didn’t see the last time. Stay vigilant.”

I was relieved when we went through the bat cave and found it empty. All the bats were gone, but we had to crawl through a narrow passage to reach the other side due to the collapse.

I pushed through a pile of debris at the other end of the tight passage and tumbled out to the other side. Big Mac’s flickering light threw strange shadows on the drawings that covered the cave walls, but I was more concerned with what I didn’t see.

I gasped. “Shit! The well is gone!”

**Episode 5772**

**Artemis**

I groaned as I came to. My head was throbbing in time with the fast beat of my heart, and my senses told me that I was on the move. I tried to open my eyes, but the sunlight was too bright and hurt them. In fact, everything hurt.

I reached my hand up to feel my forehead and felt dried blood and a deep gash.

*Fuck. I really took a beating. What the hell happened?*

It was difficult, but I worked hard to clear the fuzziness from my head so I could really wake up and get alert. It was then that I realized I was still wrapped in a floating net, and then I spotted Zale walking in front of me as if he didn’t have a care in the world as he led me along.

Anger boiled up inside of me, and it was a welcome distraction from the pain. “What the fuck are you doing?” I shouted at him. “Let me out of this thing!”

I reached for one of my daggers, but it wasn’t there. It didn’t take long to realize that I didn’t have a single weapon on me. My stomach dropped. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt this naked.

Zale turned around, walking backward as he said, “Well, look who decided to wake up. Thought you’d be asleep for our entire journey.”

I tried to jab an arm through the netting to swipe at him, but I met a blaze of magical resistance that made me draw my arm back in close to my body.

*Fuck. It’s been a long time since I found myself on the wrong side of one of these nets. I forgot how well they work. I’m not going to be able to breach it…*

“Oh, and if you’re looking for your weapons, don’t,” Zale said proudly. “I disarmed you.” He shook his head. “You should really learn to be more careful about who you bring into the fold.”

I shuddered at the confidence in his voice, hating the idea of him getting close enough to touch me.

“What did you do with my friends?” I demanded in a cracked, hoarse voice. There was no way in hell Rishika or Marius would have stopped fighting and let Zale take me, so he must have done something to them.

Cold, icy fear slipped into my stomach at the thought, and his silence wasn’t helping. Had he beaten them? Knocked them out? Worse?

“I said what the fuck did you do to my friends?!” I gritted my teeth in anger, mad that I’d let him best me. I prided myself on having good instincts, but obviously they’d failed me this time around.

Zale smirked, looking at me over his shoulder as he waved a hand. “What did I do to your friends? Nothing much. Don’t worry, you were my target, not your little lovers. Rather popular, aren’t you?” he said with a sneer. “But what should I expect of a Wrenthorn mixed with Mauvais? Never satisfied with being normal, always striving to be the center of attention any way they can.”

He snorted and yanked the net with a wave of his hand, making every wound on my body ache.

“Not surprising at all that not only are you banging two people at once, but that one of them is a werewolf of all things. You see something new every day.”

I didn’t agree with him one bit. I didn’t consider the Wrenthorns or the Mauvaises to be particularly attention-seeking, but that wasn’t important right now. The only bright spot was that there was a chance—if Zale were telling the truth—that Marius and Rishika were safe.

I twisted around, trying to look behind me, hoping to catch some glimpse of them, some sign that they were in pursuit, but there was nothing. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, wondering if they were in any condition to come after me, because I knew they would if they could.

“They’re not following us, so no use getting your hopes up,” Zale said. “I’ve got you all to myself, Artemis. And I’ll admit, it was a lot easier than I thought it would be, especially after how you’ve given every other assassin before me a hard time. If you want a job done right, you have to do it yourself, I guess.”

I tensed.

*Fuck. So that’s what this is. He’s just another in a long line of assassins from the Order of the Winding Thorn trying to take me out.*

“To be honest, I’m a little disappointed by how easy it was. Thought you’d put up more of a fight. But I’ll take the win, don’t worry.”

“How long have you been one of them? The Winding Thorn?”

“Long enough to know that you’re top priority.” He chuckled. “I’m a little surprised you didn’t figure me out sooner, but that worked in my favor, too.”

I couldn’t stop my mind from racing. After all this time, all the pains I’d taken to stay one step ahead of them, I’d made an awful mistake and, in doing so, put everyone I cared about in danger.

*How could I have been so naive? Why would I trust that anyone in this godforsaken kingdom wanted to help me out of the goodness of their heart?*

One misstep had landed me right in the hands of the Order of the Winding Thorn, the same Fae organization that had tried to kill my father and had been trying their damnedest to kill me, too. What was going to happen to me? How was I going to get out of this?

I didn’t want to accept that my luck had finally run out, that I’d reached the end of the road after staying one step ahead of my enemies for so long.

*Fuck that. I’m not giving up yet.*

As slyly as I could, I reached down into my left boot and felt around for what I hoped was still there. I always kept a wealth of knives on me, stashed in different spots. There was no way that Zale had found them all unless he’d stripped me naked and then re-dressed me.

“If you’re an assassin, why didn’t you kill me?” I asked. “Isn’t that what a good assassin does? Otherwise, you’re just a kidnapper or bounty hunter.”

Zale made a sharp turn and then after a few more steps, came to an abrupt stop. He seemed to be ignoring me as he started unloading his things, leaving me bound up in the net.

I was searching my other boot now, trying to be as secretive as I could, but I was beginning to lose hope. I stopped searching long enough to watch him building his little campsite. Now that I really got a good look at him, I felt even more frustrated with myself for missing all the signs.

His eyes weren’t kind, and he had more scars than any normal Fae would. Not only that, but he had an air of dark mystery about him that I should have been more attuned to from the beginning.

My heart began slamming in my chest when he started spreading his knives on the ground and running fingers along each one as if he were concentrating on selecting just the right tool for the job.

*I have to get out of this net, or I’m done for.*

I jammed a hand into my boot again, and almost cried out in glee when my fingers grazed the handle of one of my favorite daggers.

*I have a weapon. I might make it out of this alive.*

I had my magic, too, but it wasn’t going to work inside this net…and Zale likely had other methods at his disposal to keep me from using it. I had to give it to him—it seemed like he’d thought of everything.

I was going to have to strike when he least expected it, but first, I needed to get out of this fucking net.

Despite how much I wanted to take my dagger out and get to work, I waited. I didn’t want him to have any idea of what I was up to. I’d underestimated him before; I wasn’t going to do that again.

“You still haven’t answered me,” I said. “What do you want from me? Why didn’t you kill me when you had the chance?”

Zale was silent for a few beats, still looking over his impressive knife collection—which now included some of mine—before he finally gave me his attention.

“I haven’t killed you yet because you’re hiding something from me,” he sneered. He picked up and brandished one of the knives, and I knew blades well enough to realize it was the sharpest of the bunch.

“What, so now you think I’m going to let you use that to do the job?” I said with bravado I didn’t feel.

“Yes, but not in the way you think.” he said with a cold smile. He grabbed me through the magical net, his nails digging into my flesh. “I’m going to make you talk, one way or another.”

**Episode 5773**

**Greyson**

I was drowning in worry as I paced outside Ravi’s room, and he wasn’t the only thing on my mind. I couldn’t stop worrying about Cali, either. I wished we could have worked out the tension between us before she left, but I understood better than anybody that saving Ravi was top priority.

At least she’d kissed me before she left. It gave me hope that things weren’t as bad as they might seem.

I turned at the sound of someone coming up the stairs and tensed a little when I saw that it was Xavier. I wasn’t in the mood to spar with him, and hoped he came in peace.

“How’s Ravi?” he said.

“Same,” I replied. “Still delirious with fever. I hate that this happened to him. We should have done more to protect him.”

Xavier winced. “I know. Lot of good that weapon did us when it came down to it. But like all of us, we know the risks of this life. The fact that at any moment, a werewolf killing machine can emerge and kick our asses is just our reality.”

I watched as Xavier went in to check on Ravi. He shared a quick chat with Jay and Lola before coming back out to join me.

“Do you think we made a mistake in letting Cali go to the Vanguard palace without us?” Xavier asked after a heavy silence.

I sighed. “I hate that she went, but she’s not alone. She has some major firepower with her. And she was right. Last time we found out just how vulnerable we are in this case. Dark magic is too much for us to go up against. We’re not as equipped as she and the others, as much as I hate to admit it.”

Xavier’s pained expression deepened. “I still feel like crap even now. My head hurts, my balance is off. It’s like the worst hangover after a long night of drinking—times ten. But compared to some of the others, I got off easy.”

“Same,” I admitted. “Sometimes being an Alpha has its perks.”

Xavier opened his mouth to say something but then shut it quickly as if he’d decided against it.

“What is it?” I pressed. “There’s obviously something else on your mind.”

“There is something else,” he admitted.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. “Yeah? What?”

“When I was on the ground with that monster shrieking and carrying on, I heard the voice again. It said we would all fail.”

I stared at Xavier, wondering if there was any chance the pain and confusion had made him hear things that weren’t there. But I knew better. If Xavier was telling me about this, he’d already exhausted every other possibility.

“Why didn’t you mention this before Cali left?” I said.

“What good would it have done if I had? We both know that Cali was right and that she would have gone no matter what warnings there were.”

I growled in annoyance. “Shit. You really should have said something.”

“Save it. What I heard doesn’t change anything about this. We both knew it was a dangerous undertaking either way.”

He was probably right, but that didn’t help me worry any less. In fact, now I was more worried than ever before. What if whatever was behind that voice knew that Cali was going to be away from us and used that as a chance to strike? There were so many ways for Cali to get hurt in this.

Xavier dragged a hand down his face, and I noticed, not for the first time, how stressed he looked. “Ravi doesn’t look good,” he said.

I moved past Xavier to take a peek at him. Lola was holding a cold compress to his head, a sign that his fever was worsening.

“How’s he doing?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“Not good,” Lola said. “He’s getting worse by the second. Let’s hope our girl gets the moss and gets back here fast. He’s hanging on by a thread.”

That wasn’t the news I wanted to hear, even though I expected it.

“Let us know if there’s any change,” I said to Lola.

“You got it.”

Xavier and I went downstairs where the others were in various states of recovery. I hated that this—thing—had this strong of an effect on us. And if what Xavier had heard was any indication, things weren’t going to get any better for us.

“I’m going to check on Ava,” Xavier said. “Keep me posted about Ravi.”

Xavier headed off, and I made my rounds to check on everyone, paying special attention to Maya and the Grimcrest pack. They’d been hurt on our turf, and I wanted to make sure they knew I took that seriously and would do everything I could to make these woods safe for us again.

Colton joined me as I spoke to Maya and wasted no time pulling me aside.

“We have to do something about this. I’m worried about the Grimcrests,” he said. “Two of them are in almost as bad of shape as Ravi. Maya’s pissed, and I can’t blame her. She brought her pack here for a fresh start, and now they’re smack in the middle of a fresh shitstorm.”

“I know. I told them the same as I’m telling you now: we’re going to kill that monster. We don’t have a choice but to. That thing could easily wipe us out if we don’t stop it—and soon.”

Colton nodded, looking deep in thought.

I was lost in my own thoughts. I was thinking about Cali and wondering if she’d heard the same voice Xavier had. I’d given Xavier a hard time for not telling Cali about the voice when there was a good chance she’d heard the warning herself and ignored it. It would be just like Cali to keep it from me for fear of me forbidding her to go—and she was too worried about Ravi and the others to have let that happen.

We had a lot to work out once she was back. I only hoped that she would be ready to talk once we’d tended to the injured.

I went out onto the porch and spotted Kendall standing beside the crumpled remains of Xavier’s car. She was looking down into her phone, holding it with one hand while the other was busy massaging her temples. Like the rest of us, she was still recovering from the attack.

My phone rang—Rhonda. I considered letting it go to voicemail before muttering, “Fuck it,” and answering.

“Hey Greyson, I’m so disappointed,” she said. “Turns out that video of the monster was fake.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

“An expert debunked it.”

“And you’re disappointed by that?”

“Of course I am! It would be way more exciting to have a monster running loose. I was hoping to get more footage of it.”

“Maybe next time,” I said before quickly ending the call.

I caught Kendall looking at me and headed toward her, my wolf growing more agitated the closer I got.

“Turns out that trending monster video was a fake. Don’t suppose you know anything about that?” I said.

Kendall shrugged as she slid her phone into her pocket. “If I did, I certainly wouldn’t tell a blabbermouth like you.” She gave me a fake smile.

I lowered my voice. “Come on…was it Imamu?”

“Even if he and I were on good terms, I wouldn’t tell you shit. Once again, you can’t hold water,” she snapped. “Anyway, don’t worry about who, what, or why. Just be happy it’s not a problem anymore.”

“At least MIB did something right,” I grumbled. Even if she didn’t want to admit that MIB had their hands in this, I knew it was true. “That’ll buy us some time.”

Kendall’s purple eyes flashed. “You don’t get it, do you?”

I faced her head-on. “What don’t I get?”

She stepped close. “They’ll let you try, but if you fail just once, it’ll all be out of your hands.”

“Then I guess we better not fail.”

“What do you mean ‘we’? I’m not in this with you. You’ve already compromised my identity with Cali; I don’t trust you even a little now.”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I made a call to tell my mate. You may not like it, but it’s done.”

“I don’t like it,” she snapped. “But I know that none of this has been easy for either of us.”

I paused, at first surprised that she wasn’t tearing me apart right now, and wondering what she was getting at. “What do you mean?”

“I mean our fucking mate bond! What else?”

“Oh…yes. That has made things more difficult for sure.”

“I’d hoped rejecting the bond outright would help, but you need to know something. Despite what our wolves are telling us, nothing will ever happen.”

“I know that,” I said, bristling. “I have a mate who I love.”

“Lucky you. That’s something I’ll never have because every single person in my family is cursed.”

**Episode 5774**

My heart felt like it was lodged in my throat as we approached the ruined hole where the well used to be. “It’s completely collapsed in on itself!” I wailed as my panic rose. If the well was sealed, then where would I be able to get the moss to save Ravi?

“We should have expected this,” Rowena said. “This entire place is in ruins. It’s a wonder we even made it this deep into the cavern.”

“Maybe we can blast it open?” I said.

“What is it with you and trying to blast an unstable structure? No. We’re not blasting it. Stop suggesting it,” Big Mac snapped.

“Fine, sheesh,” I said.

“This is just great,” Torin grumbled. “We risk our lives coming into this death dungeon, and we’re going to have to leave with nothing to show for it.”

“We could try to dig it out, no blasting required,” Mikah suggested, looking to Big Mac to see what she thought.

“Or I could use some magic,” Big Mac said. “That seems the safest way and requires the least amount of manual labor, which I am *not* a fan of.”

We all stood back, and I remained hopeful as Big Mac and Rowena circled the ruins of the well, discussing what might be the best spell to use. After what seemed like an eternity, they finally agreed.

I watched with bated breath as both women took their time drawing a series of symbols around where the well used to be and then stood back. They held hands, their eyes closed and their expressions blank as they murmured words that only they could hear.

The ground began to vibrate ever so slightly under our feet, and seconds later, the bricks and stones that blocked the passage began to lift out of the depression and slide away from the well, revealing the dark hole in the ground that held the key to Ravi’s recovery.

Once all the stones and debris were cleared, I crept toward the edge and peered into the darkness, taking care not to fall inside like Xavier had.

“Can you bring the light over this way?” I asked Big Mac.

With a flick of her wrist, she brought the light closer and then we all looked down into the darkness.

“I see something,” I said.

“What?” Big Mac said. “All I see is dark, dark, and more dark.”

Mikah picked up a rock and tossed it inside. Instead of a splash, a sharp crack reverberated up to us when it landed. “Shit. Sounds like it’s dried up,” Mikah said.

“So we really did risk coming down here for nothing?” Rowena remarked.

“There’s only one way to find out,” I said. I’d only gotten one leg over the ledge before Big Mac’s strong hands were dragging me away from the edge.

“Hell no!” she hissed. “If you fall in there—and since this is you we’re talking about, you’re almost guaranteed to—Greyson will never forgive me, and by default, neither will Sabine.”

“I know, I know, it’s dangerous and all that, but we need that moss.”

“Then let me go,” Mikah said.

We all turned to look at him.

“Um…I know you’re a vampire and all, but plunging who knows how many feet to the bottom could be deadly for you too, right?” Torin said.

Mikah gave him a look. “Thankfully, it would take more than a little fall to kill me.”

That didn’t comfort me as much as Mikah likely thought it did, but I moved aside as Mikah jumped over the edge like he was plunging into a pool for a leisurely dip.

Torin, Rowena, and I gasped, and Big Mac chuckled.

“That was pretty badass,” she said.

We all waited, listening for the sound of Mikah landing at the bottom, but there was only silence. My heart was pounding like crazy as we waited. It felt like an eternity passed before Mikah’s voice echoed up to us.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it’s all dried up. No water, no moss, nothing but rocks.”

My heart sank. We tried and we’d failed.

*What are we going to do? Ravi won’t survive without that moss. This is not what I expected. I thought that if I just stayed positive and did what I could, I’d be able to save him.*

Mikah climbed up over the edge, shaking his head. “I can’t believe Xavier survived a fall like that. He must have a head as hard as Gabriel’s,” he said as he brushed himself off. Mikah immediately winced. “Sorry, probably not a good time for jokes.”

I shook my head, holding back tears. “There really wasn’t anything down there? Is there a chance there was, and you just missed it?”

Mikah shook his head. “No. I pride myself on my attention to detail, and there’s nothing there. Not moss, not water, not anything that suggests this well was ever anything other than a big hole in the ground.”

“You didn’t see moss anywhere else?” Rowena asked me.

“No, but I learned about the moss in the well from these cave drawings,” I said. “Maybe there’s something else we can learn.”

I rushed over to the walls with Big Mac’s light orb right beside me. I examined each drawing, leaning so close that my nose nearly scraped along the jagged stone as I moved. I stopped when I noticed a wavy line on the ground in one of the drawings. It seemed to indicate an underground stream.

“I think this means there’s water down here,” I said, pointing to the drawing. “But where could it be?”

“And is it still accessible even if it is here?” Big Mac said.

I started rushing around, looking for any sign of water when Mikah called out for me to stop.

“I have the best hearing out of everyone here,” he said. “Be still so I can listen.”

We all went quiet and watched Mikah walk slowly around the cavern until he came to stop at the far end. “I hear it. Water nearby.”

I raced over to join him, and I could only just make out a faint trickling sound. “Okay, it must be close, but how do we get to it?”

Mikah shrugged. “There’s probably a cavern adjacent to this one.”

“Then step back; I’ll blast our way in.”

Big Mac’s warning stopped me just as the magic crackled to life at the tips of my fingers.

“Cali, you can’t be serious. No blasting! You’ll kill us all, or is that your secret mission!?” she shouted.

“This is the only way, Big Mac. Maybe it’s worth the risk?” I asked.

Big Mac cursed under her breath before motioning to Rowena. “Fine. You can blast, and Rowena and I will create a shield in case of a cave-in. But we can’t hold it for long, and if this entire place comes down, our shield will mean fuck all.”

I nodded, happy that she was willing to try.

I waited until they’d summoned the shield, and then I blasted the wall. It took a good three hard tries before a hole appeared. Mikah stuck his hand through.

“I think you did it,” he said. “I feel the water dripping onto my hand.”

“Teamwork for the win!” Torin cheered.

We all maneuvered our way through the tight hole and into the smaller cavern. Big Mac brought her light along with us and it reflected off the water.

“There—the moss!” I said, excited that our plan had worked. It was growing all along the banks of the stream, and we rushed over to gather as much as we could.

With our hands dirty, our clothes soaked, and the bags I’d brought filled with moss, we headed back through the cavern, following the same path we’d taken before. Once we were out of the palace, Rowena and Big Mac blipped us back to the Redwood pack house.

In my haste to take the moss to Ravi, I didn’t wait for the effects of the blipping to wear off and tripped and almost fell flat on my face. Torin caught me and smoothed a comforting hand down my back.

“Relax, Cali. We made it. Take a breath,” he said.

“I’m okay,” I said. “I just have to get this to Ravi before it’s too late!”

I hurried into the house with Torin hot on my heels.

“Cali, you’re back!” Greyson said as soon as I entered, and then he and Xavier joined me in my mad dash to Ravi’s room. We burst in, startling Marissa, Jay, and Lola. I was surprised to see Ava there, too, leaning against a wall and watching the others. She didn’t flinch when we came in.

Lola looked upset. “He’s doing really badly, Cali. Thank god you’re back.”

Marissa was holding Ravi’s hand, her face streaked with tears. The tortured look on her face broke my heart.

Torin and I opened the bag, and I wasted no time scooping out a handful of the moss. Torin opened Ravi’s mouth, and I squeezed the moss, releasing a stream of the juice onto Ravi’s tongue.

Then we all stood back and waited.

“How long will it take?” Marissa asked me after a couple seconds had passed, her eyes wet with tears and shining with panic. My heart ached for her. I knew she cared about Ravi so much.

I tried to remember. “I think the effects are almost immediate,” I said.

Lola was shaking her head, her lip quivering as she said, “Then why isn’t it working?”

**Episode 5775**

**Xavier**

“Fuck!” I shouted, not caring that I’d startled everyone. I’d let Cali go through all of that, put her life at risk to get that moss, and now it wasn’t making any difference? “Why isn’t this shit working? It did last time!”

Cali shook her head, her eyes puddling with tears. “I—I don’t understand.” She glanced down at the moss piled in her hand. “Maybe I should give him some more?”

We were all quiet, waiting expectantly as Torin and Cali administered another dose, but there was still no change. Ravi was still suffering.

Marissa looked like she was going to be sick. “Why isn’t it working?! You said it would work!” she said to Cali.

She was falling apart at the seams, and I hated to see my packmate in so much pain. I’d known for a while that she and Ravi were having a fling, but it was obviously a bit more serious than I’d realized, judging from Marissa’s reaction.

“Well?” Big Mac said as she came strolling in.

Cali looked up at her and shook her head. “It’s not working.”

Big Mac scowled, mumbling something under her breath about dark magic.

I pulled Greyson out into the hallway. “Doesn’t look good for Ravi,” I said. “We both recovered quickly after taking the moss juice. Seems the same can’t be said for him.”

“But why?” Greyson said, his eyes riveted to where Ravi was lying in bed.

“Maybe it only works on Alphas?” I said, not feeling confident about that answer.

“Could be…but didn’t Jay and Colton also recover after taking it? Neither of them are Alphas.”

We both looked at Cali as she came out of Ravi’s room. She looked exhausted. Her clothes were streaked with dirt, and she had a cut on her forehead. I wanted to pull her into my arms and comfort her, make her feel better.

Greyson threw an arm over her shoulder before I could even move toward her. He had a knack for always getting in my way.

“We’ll keep looking after Ravi,” he said. “I’m not about to give up yet. In the meantime, let’s see if the moss works on the Grimcrest pack. They’re in pretty bad shape, too.”

As we made our way downstairs to where the Grimcrests were resting, I noticed the way Cali shrugged out from under Greyson’s arm. I thought back to what Cali had told me about Greyson saying something that upset her and figured they hadn’t resolved things yet.

Whatever my brother had done, I was sure he deserved the cold shoulder he was getting, and I didn’t care a bit about how he felt, but I felt bad that Cali was hurt. I hated to see her upset.

*What could my brother have said to make her react that way? It must be something big.*

As usual, Cali had tried to play down whatever was going on, but Cali tended to wear her feelings on her sleeve, and I could easily pick up on how bothered she was. She was way more upset than she’d let on.

Torin came walking out of Ravi’s room. “I can take care of the Grimcrests if you want, Cali.”

Cali hesitated, and I took the plastic bag of moss from her and handed it to Torin. “He can handle it, Cali. It’s just squeezing moss. He’s a healer, remember?”

Cali nodded slowly, and I could tell that she was so invested in making sure everyone was okay that it was hard to let go of the responsibility she felt to treat everyone.

“Yo, Greyson! We need you,” Mace said.

“Are you going to be okay?” Greyson asked Cali as Mace started leading him downstairs.

She nodded. “I’m fine.”

Greyson hesitated and looked like he wanted to say more, then he gave me a look and disappeared with Mace. The tension between them was palpable.

I gently led Cali toward the room that used to be mine when I lived in the Redwood pack house. It felt weird to be back here with her. It brought up a lot of old memories—and most of them were the kind that made my wolf stir with longing.

We were in the thick of a crisis, and still, my wolf couldn’t help but respond to Cali. And not only my wolf. My entire being was champing at the bit just because I was near her. Under different circumstances, I would have given into my urges, locked the door and showed Cali just how much I wanted her, but now wasn’t the time, and it definitely wasn’t the place.

Cali slumped down onto the bed, and I sat beside her…close but not too close.

“It was really brave of you to go back to the Vanguard palace,” I said. “Even though the moss didn’t do exactly what we expected, I still feel like you’re the reason any of the injured have even a fighting chance.”

“I just did what I had to do,” she said.

“There’s still a possibility that it may take some time for the moss juice to work. Don’t give up just yet.” I thought back to Ravi and his wounds. He was in way worse shape than any of us had been during our early encounter with the monster. “Ravi was wounded pretty badly, so maybe that has something to do with it.”

Cali nodded but said nothing. She was lost in her thoughts, probably feeling guilty even though she shouldn’t.

“So…what’s really going on between you and Greyson?” I pressed.

Cali looked away with a sigh. “It’s nothing, really.”

I took her hand in mine and smoothed a thumb across her knuckles. Just touching her skin was enough to drive me to the brink.

“I can tell it’s a lot more than nothing,” I said. “And I hate to see you unhappy. Why are you so upset with him? And this time, tell me the truth.”

Cali looked up at me, her eyes searching mine. I almost thought she was about to tell me when she looked away. “I can’t. It’s between me and Greyson.”

“You know you can tell me anything,” I said. “No matter what it is, you know I won’t judge, and you know it stays between us.”

“Xavier, I can’t—”

“Is it about Kendall?” I interrupted.

Cali reacted and turned back to look at me. “What?”

I’d hit a nerve. “Is their mate bond—the one between Kendall and Greyson—still causing problems?”

Cali went quiet before dropping her face into her hands. “It certainly doesn’t help.”

I waited for more, hoping she realized that I understood what that felt like. I’d been dealing with my end of the *due destini* for a long time, and that was way before Ava returned from the spirit world.

*I wonder if Greyson acted on his bond with Kendall. That would hurt Cali to the core…and it would explain how torn up and troubled she seems.*

“I don’t know…it’s just I thought that Greyson and I trusted each other,” she said softly.

I arched an eyebrow, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t think I can keep a secret.”

I was more confused now than I had been coming into the conversation. The only secret I could think of was that he’d hooked up with Kendall, and if Cali already knew about it, it couldn’t be a secret, right?

I was tempted to ask if Greyson had crossed the point of no return and slept with Kendall, but I knew that even posing that question was a risky move. If it was true, Cali would have to relive the hurt, and if it wasn’t, Cali would be hurt and angry at me, probably, for suggesting it.

Cali looked up at me and it almost seemed like she was going to say something else when commotion rose up from downstairs. We both bolted out of the room and went downstairs to find Greyson engaged in a heated argument with the other Alphas.

“You don’t know what the hell you’re doing! Just admit it, and then we can figure out a way to actually solve this monster problem,” Mace was saying to Greyson.

“We should probably be trying to hunt it down,” Porter said. “It doesn’t feel right being sitting ducks, waiting for it to decide to rear its ugly head again. I’m not saying you don’t know what you’re doing, Greyson, but maybe you should take some of our advice and actually act on it.”

I stepped between Greyson and the others.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” I said. “We can’t hunt it down. Look at the size of that crossbow. It’s not like we can drag that thing through the woods. It’s not the most mobile weapon anyone’s ever seen.”

There were murmurs of agreement.

“Okay, so what do you suggest we do, Xavier?” Mace said.

“We lure the monster here,” I responded.

Mace snorted. “More crazy ideas. How the hell do you think we’re going to do that?”

“With bait,” I said. “And lucky for everyone, I’m happy to be exactly that.”

**Episode 5776**

**Artemis**

The second I was out of Zale’s net, I felt the overwhelming urge to puke. Whatever enchantment he’d used on this net was something I’d never subjected my quarry to when using them to bring in my bounty. I’d had more decency than that, and it was becoming very obvious that Zale didn’t have a decent bone in his body.

I braced myself against the forest floor and dry heaved, my head swimming and my body still aching.

“Ahh, still feeling the aftereffects of that bang on the head, eh, Artemis?” Zale said in a mocking tone.

I was too nauseous to respond, expending every bit of my energy on not puking all over the place. I felt shaky, weak, and all around miserable. My head was throbbing as Zale squatted next to me and tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear. I quickly jerked away from his touch, wishing I felt strong enough to pop him one.

*This isn’t good. I didn’t realize how bad I was doing inside the net, but now…now I’m not sure I can stand let alone try to fight Zale off. Fuck. I’m screwed if I can’t get myself together.*

Zale was eyeing me like he knew I realized he had me right where he wanted me. I hated how smug and pleased with himself he looked. “I had to make sure I used strong enchantments on that net. I can’t have you using your manipulation magic on me—I know that you take after your father in that regard,” he said. “I had to make sure you were in no state to retaliate.”

I tried to get to my feet, but it wasn’t happening, and I crumpled back down to the ground, forced to use every bit of my strength I had left to keep from splaying out flat on the ground.

“You don’t look so good, Artemis,” Zale said with a smile. “In fact, you look downright destroyed. Stay with me, okay? Don’t go passing out on me. I want you awake and able to process what I’m saying and doing. I’d be a fool if I let my guard down and allowed you to get the jump on me and flex that powerful magic of yours, wouldn’t I?”

I didn’t respond—and I doubted he even wanted me to. He was too busy basking in how he had the upper hand and was going to use it to bend me to his will. Or at least that was his plan.

When I no longer felt like the slightest movement would make me throw up, I slowly shifted into a seated position and found solace in a tree that I dragged myself over to lean against.

“Wow. If your family could see you now. Big bad bounty hunter Artemis Wrenthorn down for the count and at my mercy.”

I wanted to lash out. I wanted to blast him to the moon and get the hell out of here to find Rishika and Marius, but any hope I had of using my magic was out the door right now. My gaze fell back to the knives that Zale had spread out, and I focused on mine.

*I hate that he’s touching my knives. The fucker.*

Zale reached out with a rough hand and tipped my chin up so that I was looking him in the eye. “So, are you going to cooperate, or am I going to have to do this the hard way?”

I built up every bit of strength I had to spit at him. It hit the collar of his shirt, and Zale looked pissed as he wiped it off. He let go of my face roughly, almost causing me to strike the back of my head on the tree.

“Fine. You want it the hard way. Remember, it was your choice.” He smiled. “But I don’t mind showing you my methods. I always make our subjects talk, one way or another.”

He returned to his knife collection to pick up one of my blades—a larger dagger that I’d had for years. He ran the blade along my cheek before moving it to the other.

I held his gaze even though I was starting to get scared. I didn’t know exactly what he wanted from me, and I doubted he was above torturing me to get whatever it is that he’d been sent for.

He dragged the tip of the dagger down to rest at my throat. “What did your mother, that little Wrenthorn bitch, tell you about where Kadmos is?”

I went stock-still and tried to regulate my breathing so that I wouldn’t lean forward at all. If I moved even an inch in the wrong direction, the dagger would puncture my flesh like it was butter.

“Is that what you’re after?” I said softly.

Zale pressed the tip in harder until it pierced my skin, and a second later, a warm trail of blood dripped down my neck.

“The thing is, Artemis, I know you’re keeping something from me. You think I don’t know almost everything that you do? I have to admit, it was a well-thought-out plan on your part, but you don’t know a thing about me. Why would you share your deepest darkest secrets?”

“I *wouldn’t*,” I sneered, wishing he would get on with whatever he was about to do. I didn’t have the energy to play his games, or to give him the satisfaction of knowing he was getting under my skin in a real way.

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’re going to spill every last thing.” He brought the blade down to my chest and pivoted it over to my right arm.

Despite everything in me that wanted to keep quiet, I cried out in pain and squeezed my eyes shut, wondering if this was really it. Was he going to kill me after he was done toying with me? What did he want? And would I be able to hold up to his torture long enough to keep him from getting it?

“It only gets worse from here, Artemis…unless….”

“Unless what?” I spat.

He dug the knife into my arm until another bead of blood popped free. “Unless you tell me where Kadmos is hiding.”

I gritted my teeth, trying to ride out the pain. “Why are you asking me that? I thought the Winding Thorn knew where he was—that he’s alive—isn’t that the whole point?”

Zale snarled and stabbed the dagger into my left leg without warning. My screams lit up the air, but even so I didn’t wallow in the pain. I clamped my mouth shut, realizing that if I didn’t calm down, I would pass out. There was no way in hell I was going to let myself go unconscious again around this creep.

“If we knew where he was, Artemis, I wouldn’t have wasted my time chasing you down and catching you, would I? Get a clue. I thought you were supposed to be smart.”

I stared up at him with all the hate I could muster. If looks could kill, he’d be a charred smear on the ground right now.

“So why did the other assassins only want to kill me?” I bit out. “Wouldn’t that have disrupted your grand plans?”

Zale began pulling the dagger out of my leg slowly, and the pain made me gnash my teeth and swear.

“You’re too big of a symbol, Artemis. Kadmos Mauvais and even his brother Adair mean too much to too many people. You living as the little bastard of the Wrenthorn and Mauvais houses grants *you* too much power.”

He twisted the blade in my thigh for good measure.

“That has to be taken care of.”

I hissed in pain as the look I was giving him grew even more hateful. “What, so that the Winding Thorn can have the power it thinks I possess?” I laughed. “You’re such a cliché. You know that, right?”

Zale seemed unperturbed as he pulled the dagger out of my thigh. I grunted at blood pouring from my wounds—so much that I was getting dizzy just looking at it. Zale had missed my main artery on purpose, but I was bleeding so badly that it didn’t make much of a difference.

I still felt sick and woozy, but I couldn’t just sit here and let him cut me to ribbons. I knew what info he wanted—the purple stones. That would narrow down my father’s potential location considerably in these mountains. But there was no chance I was giving that up.

I winced and bit down hard as I tried to lift my leg—the one Zale stabbed me in was the same one with the dagger in the boot.

Zale had returned to his knife collection. “Now…which blade should I use next? Something that’ll open you up just enough to really get you talking.”

He picked up one I didn’t recognize, and just as he was turning around, I said, “You really should’ve checked my boots.” Then I flung the knife, piercing him right through the throat.

**Episode 5777**

**Ava**

Having caught only the tail end of Xavier’s stupid idea, I was the first to react as soon as he and Cali made it downstairs.

“I didn’t hear what I just thought I heard, did I?” I said. “Something about you serving as bait for the creature?” I raked a hand through my hair, struggling to keep my temper in check when what I wanted to do was lash out.

Xavier did a double take as if he’d been caught, and he had. Why did he find it necessary to look like the hero in front of Cali? To put up this front that he was the only one who could truly protect her? And more than that, why would he ever even suggest doing something like that without consulting me first?

*We’ve been running a pack together for ages and he still doesn’t respect me enough to consult me about things like this. It drives me nuts.*

“I’m just trying to come up with a way to end this problem once and for all,” Xavier said. “This needs to end, and if we do this right, we can end it and move on with our lives.”

“If you escape this absurd plan with your life, you mean? Becoming bait for something that immobilizes any werewolf just by making a sound is maybe the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” I grabbed his arm and yanked him away from Cali. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting my mate be monster bait.”

“It’s not up to you,” Xavier said, pulling away. “I’m doing what needs to be done to stop that thing.”

I shifted my attention to Cali, who was standing near the stairs, and then I aimed my gaze right back at Xavier. “Who are you trying to impress right now?”

Xavier scowled at me. “What kind of question is that? I’m not trying to impress anyone. I’m trying to save our lives.”

Cali looked away.

*Good. I’m in no mood to even hear her voice, her excuses. She’d better stay out of this.*

“You know being the bait never works, right? Not in the movies, not in real life. No one needs to be the bait, so why even suggest it?” I said.

“We can’t chase the monster around the territory, dragging the council’s huge, awkward ancient weapon around with us. Have you tried to move it? It weighs a ton,” Xavier said.

“So your big idea is to be *bait*? Why you?” I hissed, tired of going back and forth over this. “Why not Greyson?”

Greyson cut in. “Actually, I was wondering that, too. We all are. Why you?”

I rolled my eyes at Greyson, wishing he would butt out so that I could handle this myself. I was the only one who truly cared about Xavier. The rest of them had their own agendas…which I supposed was my agenda too—not getting killed by this Night Stalker thing. Still, I hated that Xavier was positioning himself as the sacrificial lamb. Why couldn’t he let one of the other pack’s Alphas do it?

There had to be a better way to deal with this than dangling werewolf bait in front of a monster that nearly killed one of the Redwoods. Ravi was still upstairs clinging to life. Hadn’t he been bait, more or less? The monster had certainly treated him like that…or more like a snack he didn’t finish.

“Listen, I should be the one to do it because I’ve already been kidnapped by the monster,” Xavier said. “Likely, it’ll remember me by scent or sight and be drawn to me.”

“And that’s just another reason why this is a dumb idea. I almost lost you to that thing already. Let someone else have a go at it, or better yet none of us.”

“I’m not asking anyone else to do it,” Xavier said evenly. “And besides, we already know the monster wants me.”

I rolled my eyes at that. “Haven’t we determined that the monster wants *every* werewolf? What makes you think you’re so special?”

Xavier let out an exasperated sigh, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to let up. “Ava—”

“I want you, X,” I said. “Doesn’t that matter at all?” Once again, I glared at Cali, tempted to ask him a question I didn’t really want the answer to.

*If Cali asked him not to go, would he be so quick to dismiss her?*

But that was a response I didn’t want aired out to every pack in the region.

“It’s also personal,” Xavier said. “Maybe you can understand that? That fucking thing tried to *feed me* to its babies. I am going to kill it.”

I could tell he wasn’t going to change his mind, but I took comfort in believing that his choice didn’t have anything to do with Cali. If I’d been in that creature’s nest being served up to its children for dinner, I would want to kill it too.

Part of me…a small part…was proud of Xavier for agreeing to do this, but I wasn’t about to feed his ego.

“Even if we do use Xavier as bait, it would be too risky to have the monster come back here,” Greyson said.

“Can’t we come up with a word other than bait?” I mumbled.

“It is what it is, Ava,” Xavier said to me.

“We don’t want that thing anywhere near the pack house…again,” Greyson continued. “Too risky.”

Commotion rose as the packs began discussing the logistics. People were wondering how they could move the crossbow, where to take it, why they couldn’t just task a group of werewolves with moving it around since with our strength it couldn’t be all that hard.

“I can move the damn crossbow anywhere you want,” Rowena shouted, silencing the noise. “Just tell me where you want it and it’s done. Let’s not make a mountain out of a…crossbow.”

That only sparked another heated series of arguments before Xavier said, “Why not do it near the creature’s nest? We know it’s there, we know it will attack anyone who threatens those horrible babies.”

The others announced their agreement—everyone except me. I still wasn’t sold on this whole thing and didn’t think I ever would be. I was starting to feel like no one cared what I thought, anyway.

*Xavier’s made up his mind, so I guess that’s that. The other packs seem to think it’s a great idea and are falling in place behind him. I lost.*

I pushed past Xavier, needing to get out of there.

Xavier grabbed my arm. “Where are you going?”

“I need some air,” I said before pushing his hand away and heading outside. I wasn’t sure if I was more angry or more hurt. When it came to Xavier, it always seemed to be a combination of the two.

I was about to head out to the yard, considering shifting and going for a run to clear my head, but I was surprised to see Marissa sitting on the steps.

I regarded my friend with a heavy heart. She looked like she’d been crying. “Hey,” I said gently, “any change in Ravi’s condition?”

“No. I had to step away. I couldn’t take seeing him like that. Is that bad of me?” she asked.

I sat down beside her and took Marissa’s hand in mine. “No, it’s not bad of you. It’s hard to watch someone you care about suffering.”

“And it’s so hard because Ravi…” Marissa choked on his name and cleared her throat. “He’s always so strong, so full of life. Always saying something stupid to make me laugh.” Marissa’s eyes were bloodshot. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen her so upset. “What if he doesn’t make it?”

I hugged Marissa to me, wishing I could say the right thing to make her feel better, but I could only tell her the truth. “It was a bad attack, but Ravi is strong. And if anyone can pull through this, he can.”

I thought about how I would feel right now if it were Xavier upstairs lying in that bed instead of Ravi.

*And if he goes through with this bait thing, that might be his future.*

My stomach twisted at the thought, and I quickly pushed it away. I couldn’t fall apart. Not right now.

Marissa laid her head on my shoulder, and we sat in silence while inside, I could hear the packs talking about Xavier’s plan.

“You’re lucky,” I said to Marissa. “He’s a good man. He’ll fight for you, Marissa.”

Meanwhile, being in love with an Alpha was the absolute worst. They always had to prove themselves, put themselves in harm’s way before anybody else. It was so tiring, and it was torture to have to sit back and watch that day in and day out.

She sniffed. “I know, you’re right.”

“So go fight for him too.”

Just as Marissa got up, the door opened, and I was primed to tell Xavier to go away—that I wasn’t ready to talk—but it was Torin.

“Marissa?” he said. “Ravi’s awake, and he’s asking for you.”

Marissa jumped up and ran inside. As the door opened, I spotted Xavier talking to Greyson. We locked eyes, and he started to call out to me, but I turned and walked away.

**Episode 5778**

**Xavier**

“We can work out all the details about how to lure the monster later,” I said to Greyson. “I need to deal with something.”

I didn’t wait for Greyson to reply and stepped outside to see Ava standing with the shrimp and Zipper. I realized with no small amount of guilt that I hadn’t checked in on my pack in a while. We’d just been attacked, and here I was, doing everything but making sure no one in my pack had been harmed.

*Leave it to Ava to be a true Luna and do what I should have done.*

As I approached, Knox visibly puffed out his chest as best he could and spoke louder to make sure I could hear. “It was nothing. That overgrown cricket of a monster barely affected me. I must be stronger than the rest of you, which is no surprise to me, of course.”

Zipper chuckled. “Please, man. You were on your knees screaming loudest of all. I couldn’t even hear anyone else.”

Knox glared. “I was screaming for everyone to relax while I checked on Geraint. That’s what you heard.”

Zipper snorted. “Right.”

Ava sighed. “I’ve heard enough. I’m just glad that overall, no one in the Samara pack is seriously injured.” Then she noticed me standing back, watching.

I smiled. I knew her so well. I noticed the way every muscle in her body responded once she knew I was there, and I was amused by the pains she was taking to ignore me—which was exactly what she did. She walked farther into the yard, putting some distance between us.

*So she’s going to make this more difficult than it already is. What else is new? I have to tread lightly if I want to calm her down.*

I started toward her, but the shrimp jumped into my path.

“Is it true that you’re planning to offer yourself up to the monster?” he said.

“Not now, Knox,” I snapped.

As I moved past the crossbow, I took in the sight of my trashed car and was immediately reminded of the conversation I’d had with Colton about sleeping with Cali in her car…and then hooking up with Ava not long after.

*Could that be what has Ava so upset and on edge? Is she mad that I’m bouncing between her and Cali again? Doesn’t she understand that this is hard for me too?*

“Ava, wait!” I called out.

She stopped near the shed, crossed her arms over her chest and barked, “What?!” as she turned to face me.

I sighed, knowing this was going to be like navigating a minefield. “I know you’re pissed off.”

“Correction, I’m pissed *at you.* Why do you always have to prove that you’ll take bigger risks than anyone else? You’re in an alliance with plenty of other Alphas who are just as capable of taking the lead on this. Why do you always have to play the hero?”

“I’m not playing anything, Ava. I just want that monster dead more than anyone. We barely know what it’s capable of, but it clearly has something out for all of us. I would love to be the one to kill it. You know me, so you should understand that.”

“It almost killed you, X! I just sat on the steps talking to Marissa, who’s beside herself about the state Ravi’s in. He almost died—he still could. And you were there, you saw what that thing did to him. That’s how you could end up if—if—”

“Ava, *please*—”

“Do you know how scared and worried I was when that thing took you? I thought you were dead! And when we found you, it looked like you *were* dead.”

I was secretly relieved. This had nothing to do with Cali for once.

I smiled and quickly closed the space between us, grabbing her chin before she could skitter out of my reach. I lifted her face to look into her eyes. Even when she was sad and angry, her eyes drew me in like a moth to a flame.

“So you do care about me?”

Ava snatched out of my hold and glared at me. “What the hell kind of question is that? You’re an *idiot*, Xavier Evers. Of course I care about you.”

My smile grew, and she slapped me on the chest, hard enough to leave a lingering sting.

“Don’t tell me you doubted that,” she said softly.

“No, not for one second. I never question how much you care.”

“Oh…so you know, yet you still volunteer to be bait. Obviously, no matter how much I care, it doesn’t matter to you if you’d agree to something like that without even mentioning it to me first.”

I cocked my head to the side, taking in her words and thinking about how best to respond. I didn’t want to hurt her. I cared about her so much that I wanted to protect her feelings any way I could.

I loved her fire. The way she always gave it to me straight. She wasn’t easy, and I’d always liked a challenge. That, and she was fiercely loyal, an amazing Luna, and a vicious fighter. I respected her, and I wanted her to know that.

“Honestly, Ava, I think you have this idea that I do these things to get under your skin when that couldn’t be further from the truth. I thought you appreciated how brave I am. And what’s braver than volunteering to dangle yourself in front of a bone-chilling creature like that? Isn’t my fearlessness the reason you like me?”

“I don’t like you, I hate you!” she hissed. “And you’re not being brave. Not in this instance. You’re being foolish and selfish!”

“Selfish? Really? How is this selfish? It’s the exact opposite! I’m willing to sacrifice myself for all of you! You’re calling that selfish?”

Ava cursed under her breath. “You just don’t get it, do you? You didn’t think about me for one second when you dreamed up this little idea. You didn’t think about what would happen if…”

Ava looked away with an almost imperceptible quiver in her chin. She shook her head and quickly swiped her hands over her eyes as if she was about to cry. She tried again to finish her sentence but floundered.

I finally realized just how truly worried she was that I might die, and something about that stirred me and my wolf both. I grabbed Ava by the shoulders and pulled her in close.

“Look at me, Ava.”

She did, her eyes glittering, her lips trembling.

“Nothing is going to happen to me, okay?”

“You don’t know that. How can you know that?”

“I know that, and you know why?” I said, injecting all the confidence I felt into my voice so that Ava would be able to *feel* how ready I was to do this.

“Why?”

I smiled as I brushed my lips across hers. “Because I have a reason to come back. You.”

Ava’s breath hitched, and I moved closer, boxing her against the shed as captured her mouth with mine. I loved the feeling of Ava responding to me, wrapping her arms around me, whispering my name between kisses.

She raked her fingernails down my back and pulled me tightly against her as she arched her soft body against mine. The door behind us gave way, and we toppled inside of the shed. I wrapped my arms around Ava to shield her from the fall and kicked the door closed.

We both laughed and coughed as dirt and loose grass swirled around us, but then we locked eyes, breathing hard, and all the laughter dried up as the floodgates opened.

I went wild with passion, kissing her, licking her, peeling her out of her clothes so that I could touch the smooth warmth of her skin. We rolled around, giggling and kissing and touching each other everywhere, and then she slipped a hand around my shaft, and I hardened in her palm.

“You’d better come back to me,” she said, nuzzling me under my neck as I smoothed her hair out of her face.

“I will,” I said. “I promise. Nothing could keep me away.”

I groaned in pleasure as she gently slid me inside of her, our bodies tensing as we adjusted to the rush of pleasure that blossomed as we joined together.

She kissed me hard, her hands clenching the sides of my face, her hips pivoting up against me again and again, pulling me in deeper. I lost myself in Ava’s body, enjoying the way she was taking control.

She rolled me over onto my back and rode me, her long hair hanging around her face. I grabbed it and wound it in my hand so that I could see her just how much she was enjoying this.

I grabbed her hips, lifting her up and down until she was shuddering and shaking, and then she leaned down and kissed me gently. I lost myself in the sensation of her body, realizing that in this moment, there was nowhere else I would rather be.

**Episode 5779**

I made my way back downstairs after talking briefly to Ravi. He’d thanked me and the others for getting him the moss water. I’d made sure to play down the extent of the danger and was thrilled that he, like the others, was on the mend.

The look on Marissa’s face when she walked in to see Ravi was something I hoped to never forget. I was happy that things hadn’t taken a worse turn, and instead of saying goodbye to him, she’d seen him looking better than he had since the attack. Ravi had joked with her when she started to tear up, playing it off like the past few hours had been nothing but a chance for him to get a little rest.

Greyson looked up at me as he talked with Mace, then followed me into the kitchen.

“Ravi’s awake,” I told him. “He’s not entirely out of the woods and says he feels like he got hit by a truck and then run over by it a few times, but he’s definitely a lot better.” I couldn’t help but smile, especially when I saw the relief on Greyson’s face.

“Good. I didn’t want to admit in front of the others just how scared I was. Everyone’s morale and spirit would have taken a major hit if Ravi didn’t pull through, and I don’t know what I would do without him.”

“Now you don’t have to find out,” I said.

“No, and I think the pack owes you and the others big for the risk you took. You said you would fix this, and you did. I’m so proud of you.”

I blushed. I never got tired of hearing Greyson say things like that. “I didn’t really expect a thanks. I’ve learned what it means to be part of a pack, and any one of us would have done what I did without reservation.”

Greyson smiled. “That might be true, but that still doesn’t mean you deserve any less thanks.”

I felt that awkwardness start to settle in again, and I turned away from him. “I’m going to make some tea and try to wind down a little.”

I started to move past Greyson, but he blocked my way, filling up the doorway.

“I know you’re still upset about the whole Kendall thing.”

“I am,” I admitted.

Greyson moved closed. “I made a mistake. A stupid mistake. I wasn’t thinking. I was worried about the MIB, about the monster. I fucked up. I know I can trust you with anything, even my life. I’m sorry. I need you to…forgive me.”

I felt a lump form in my throat and my eyes stung with hot tears as Greyson moved even closer, his lips inches from mine.

“Tell me you forgive me. I must hear you say it.”

I was overwhelmed, and I was still hurt by how angry he’d seemed, but I believed Greyson wholeheartedly. There was a lot going on, and I knew that he trusted me. I just needed to make sure it never happened again.

“I forgive you…if you promise to never do that again. We’re supposed to be a team. We know each other. I hate to think that your trust in me could waver over someone else. Even if that someone else is your other mate.”

Even saying the words choked me up. I hated that the hurt I felt was amplified because of who Kendall was to Greyson. In that moment, it had almost felt as if he’d been taking account of Kendall’s feelings over mine.

Thinking about it now, I knew that couldn’t be true, but in the moment, I’d definitely thought it.

“I promise to never question your character again. Cali, I—”

I cut him off with a kiss. He wrapped me in his arms, practically lifting me from the floor as he deepened the kiss. It felt so good to be putting all that behind us. There was so much going on, so much danger hanging over us that it was hard to deal with the conflict hovering between us.

I completely forgot about everything—where we were, what we were up against, the challenges still ahead of us—until I heard Big Mac’s gruff voice.

“Excuse me? Some of us want to use the kitchen for its intended purpose. Doesn’t this place have like a million bedrooms?” she snapped. “Use one.”

Flustered, I extricated myself from Greyson’s hold and everything grew more awkward as Big Mac squeezed past us, mumbling to herself about being surrounded by horny, dramatic werewolves and their mates.

I took a breath, straightening my clothes and avoiding Greyson’s stare.

“Big Mac, Ravi’s okay,” I said.

“I know. While you two were busy making out like two horny teens, Rowena and I have been busy checking on the injured and affected werewolves. You know, concentrating on what’s important?”

Greyson looked like he was about to plead our case, but I silenced him with a look. There was no use arguing with Big Mac when she was like this, and we all had her to thank, too, for getting Ravi the medicine he needed.

Greyson and I sidled out of the kitchen. I didn’t know about Greyson, but I’d been holding a breath from the moment Big Mac burst in on us with her palpable annoyance and disapproval, and I was breathing a lot better now that we were away from her.

“So, are you on board with Xavier acting as bait?” I asked him.

“Doesn’t matter what I think. He’s determined to do it, and his argument makes sense. We have to do something, so why not that?”

“If Xavier’s willing to take such a big risk, Torin and I need to make sure that we can hit the damn thing with the arrow and in the right spot when the time comes. If we miss, it could cost Xavier…”

I didn’t finish the sentence, not wanting to admit that so much was riding on my and Torin’s aim.

“Torin!” I called out. “Time to practice!”

My lips were still tingling from my make-out session with Greyson, and I had a lingering smile on my lips as Torin and I made our way outside. I was glad that Greyson and I had talked it out…or rather kissed it out…so now we could move on with preparing.

“Wait, what is he doing?” Torin said, stopping short.

I followed his gaze to see Colton hunched over the crossbow. Torin and I rushed over to him.

“What are you doing?” I said. “Don’t mess with it!”

Colton scoffed. “Mess with it? Isn’t that what all of us are doing any time we touch it? Or are you two pretending like you’re the experts designated to handle this thing? This thing that neither of you have ever seen or used before just like me?”

“We just don’t want anything to go wrong,” I said.

“And you think I do? Anyway, I was just looking at it. Don’t forget, it’s my brother’s life depending on this antique,” Colton said.

“I’m well aware of how much is riding on this,” I said. “I get your concern, and I promise Torin and I will be thinking of that when we aim and shoot.”

“Is he bothering you?” Maya asked as she came walking over. “If so, just say the word and I’ll put him on diaper changing duty.”

Colton looked horrified. “What? I was only checking out this hunk of junk they’re calling a crossbow!”

“Let’s hope for everyone’s sake that it works better than it looks,” Torin said.

Together, Torin and I chose one of the practice arrows and were about to load it into the weapon when Colton pointed at it.

“Wait, that part is loose, isn’t it?” he said.

Torin went down on his hands and knees to look at the cog that Colton had pointed out. He touched it and it rattled and wiggled easily.

“He’s right,” Torin said. “We need a screwdriver and a wrench to tighten this.”

“Maybe it will hold?” Colton said, wiggling the cog again.

Both Maya and I swatted Colton’s hand away.

“No, we need to fix it. I’m not about to take a chance. The entire werewolf population is depending on this thing,” I said. I looked at Torin. “Wait a second, I’ll go get the tools.”

I started walking toward the shed, and Maya fell in step beside me. “I’ve been telling Colton to leave that damn crossbow alone since they brought it here,” she said. “But he’s like a little boy with a new toy. So aggravating.”

Maya was smiling despite her words, and I smirked, knowing how much she loved Colton. She ragged on him and complained, but it was clear as day that she loved every part of him—even the parts she would have us think she hated.

When we reached the shed, I tried to open the door, but it was stuck. I shoved it with my shoulder, and the door flew open.

A flurry of curses rose from the darkness, and I almost tripped over Xavier and Ava, who were lying on the floor half-naked.

**Episode 5780**

**Maya**

Cali was obviously surprised to catch Ava and Xavier in the act, but I certainly wasn’t. As we’d neared the shed, I thought I smelled the unmistakable scent of Ava and Xavier having sex and had hoped I was wrong.

My nose was rarely wrong, but then again, we were around so many wolves that I figured the sex aroma could just be mingling with Ava and Xavier’s scents and confusing me…but nope. I was right all along.

I should have stopped Cali, made up some excuse about how it wasn’t a good time to go into the shed, but now it was too late and the damage was done. Though I supposed it shouldn’t have been all that much damage, seeing as Xavier and Ava were living together at the Samara pack house as Alpha and Luna.

*It’s no secret that they sleep together…but it has to be rough witnessing it with your own eyes.*

Cali jumped back like the sight of them wrapped in each other’s arms was a live-wire strike to her eyes. Her expression was a tangled mix of horror, anger, and embarrassment. Xavier pulled up his pants and started to get up.

“Cali, wait! We should talk,” he said.

I stepped in front of him, putting an arm out to stop him. “Fuck no. You’re the last person she wants to talk to right now, trust me.”

I glanced at Ava, who didn’t seem the slightest bit bothered. In fact, she seemed to be relishing it.

“You two deserve each other,” I said, sneering.

Ava smiled. “Thanks. I think so, too.”

I slammed the door shut on them and hurried after Cali, who was already halfway across the yard.

“He may be your mate, but he’s a fuckboy,” I said. “And a tool.”

Cali sighed. “It’s complicated. Not that I don’t agree with you right now.”

“I know all about the *due destini* thing—I mean, how could I forget it since it’s all anyone in the Redwood pack talks about—but I still don’t get why he would be doing that with everything else going on. And in a fucking shed? I’m glad Colton doesn’t have another mate, or I’d have buried his ass a long time ago.”

I tried to imagine what I would have done if I’d walked in on Colton with another woman. *Due destini* or not, I would have lost my shit, probably shifted and tore everything and everyone apart in a fit of rage.

Cali stopped and looked over at the crossbow where Colton and Torin were arguing. “Xavier’s life depends on that thing working, so no matter what I’m feeling right now, I can’t let it affect me.”

I arched a brow at her. “So, is that how you deal with it?”

Cali grimaced. “I mean, seeing them like that in the shed was a shock, don’t get me wrong, but I can’t say I haven’t found myself in similar situations.”

“I can imagine,” I said, thinking about all the gossip I’d heard about Greyson and Cali and Xavier and Ava and their endless drama in their love square or whatever it was they had going on.

*And if I’m not mistaken, isn’t that Kendall chick Greyson’s other mate or something? What a mess. A love pentagon.*

Cali glanced back at the shed. “Don’t get me wrong. It’s not like I like the idea of Xavier and Ava hooking up mere feet away from me, but I can’t blame them any more than they can blame me for being with Greyson.”

“Yeah…I guess I get that in a way… But in a shed? First of all, ew. Second, show some respect. Some *restraint*.”

“It’ll be okay,” Cali said, giving me a thin smile. “No biggie.”

I didn’t believe her, but I wasn’t going to press. “Wow. You really are super zen about this. I don’t know how you do it.”

“We’re all a work in progress,” Cali said with a sigh. Then she cursed. “I forgot the tools.”

We both looked back at the shed and groaned.

“Listen, why don’t I get the tools?” I said.

“No, I’ll do it. If I’m going to face a monster soon, I can face seeing my mate and his Luna in the afterglow.”

I watched her go, wondering how in the world she was being so chill. She’d obviously grown a lot since I’d left. I was impressed by her resignation and her ability to be above it all…and kind of annoyed by it, too.

Colton barked one last thing at Torin and then came sauntering over to me. “I saw what happened. Wow.”

I turned on him. “I swear, if you ever get cursed by the *due destini* I will exorcize you with my claws. Got it?”

Colton gulped. “Wait, did I miss something? Is the *due destini* contagious?”

“What? No.”

“Okay, good.” Colton grinned. “Anyway, you know it gets me hot when you get all murderous and jealous. It’s one of the many reasons I love you. You’re so…ruthless.”

I glared at him. “You have no idea.”

“Of course I do,” Colton said.

Touché.

I spotted Xavier and Ava walking away from the shed and heard Cali banging around inside. She was searching for tools, and probably having a good time blowing off steam by throwing things around, by the sound of it.

“I should have warned her,” I said. “I smelled it on the breeze. I guess I’d hoped they were finished.”

“Yeah, I got a whiff, too, but it’s none of our business,” Colton said with a shrug. “We have bigger, and smaller fish to fry.”

Colton was right. We had too much going on to get involved in the soap opera of Cali and Xavier and Greyson’s life.

“We need to talk to our pack,” Colton said. “Rather, you need to.”

I bit my lip, nervous and filled with dread. “What happened now?”

“They’re a little rattled. And can you blame them? They followed you into the lion’s den, or the den of whatever that creature is called. I think they need a pep talk or two.”

“Fine,” I said.

First, I went into the pack house to check on the twins. They were cooing happily with Sabine and Mikah, and they both had that look in their eye like they would be falling asleep at any moment now.

I remembered the terror I felt when the monster screeched, bringing every werewolf to their knees. I’d rushed to check on the twins to make sure they were safe. No matter what, they were my priority, but as an Alpha, I’d failed.

“I fucked up,” I said, glancing over at where my wolves were resting. “I failed in a big way. The pack is always supposed to come first, no matter what.”

“Nobody’s going to blame you,” Colton said.

“I’m not so sure about that. We’re still building trust, and I’m not off to a good start.”

By the time we gathered the Grimcrests in one of the Redwood studies, I could feel everyone’s somber mood weighing on me. They were on edge, and so was I. I wanted to be the best Alpha they’d ever had, but here I was messing up from the start.

I checked in on Genji and Davina first. “How are you two feeling? Did the moss water help?”

They both nodded, and I studied them. I was their Alpha—the only one they had—the one they’d left the comfort of their pack and everything they knew to follow. I had to talk to them to make sure they were okay.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know that moving here with me was a huge decision. If I’d known how big of a shitstorm we were walking into, I never would have encouraged you to come with me.”

I paused, thinking that I should have known that being within a ten-mile radius of the Redwoods would, at some point, inevitably pull me into their drama, but I’d hoped it wouldn’t happen so quickly. There was always something bad happening to the Redwood pack. Nothing had changed in our absence.

This was nothing more than another screwup on my part, and that troubled me most of all. I wanted to do better. Be the Alpha my grandfather had never been. I didn’t want to saddle my pack with another pack’s problems. They didn’t deserve that.

“Does anyone have any reservations?” I asked.

Nobody spoke up, but I could see the answer in their eyes—or in everyone’s eyes except Bennett’s. The others looked like they were ready to head back to Washington at any moment now.

“As soon as this threat is over and done with, we’ll come together to discuss our future. Until then, let’s stay strong, and come to me if you need anything.”

With that, I hurried out of the room. I was overwhelmed and in way over my head.

*Fuck. I brought my kids here. I hated the old pack house—the memories and the bad vibes. I needed to get away, but was it worth the price?*

I watched my pack file out of the study, as gloomy as could be. Colton had encouraged me to give a pep talk, and I’d failed at that, too. There was nothing peppy about them. They looked like they were over me, over this, and over my promises.

*Shit. Is my pack going to leave even before we have a chance to get started?*

**Episode 5781**

“Cali, you okay? I asked you for the wrench twice,” Torin said, interrupting my thoughts. I snapped back to the present moment and gave Torin a half smile.

“Sorry about that, I drifted off for a second there.”

I handed Torin the wrench, still working overtime to push the image of Ava and Xavier rolling around on the floor of the shed out of my mind. It wasn’t working. Right about now, it was all I could think about.

Even the wrench was a reminder of what I’d stumbled in on only moments ago—Xavier and Ava locked in bliss surrounded by tools. I understood more than anyone that Xavier and Ava were together, but that didn’t mean I could handle seeing the proof of it up close and personal like that.

I forced myself to pay attention to the matter at hand and focused on Torin where he stood eyeing the crossbow.

“How’s that?” he said.

Colton pulled on the part that had been loose before, testing it out. “It feels tight. I think we’re good.”

“I wish Ravi were here,” I said. “He’d know for sure whether or not it’s fixed.”

My thoughts drifted to Ravi and his injuries. I could only hope that he was feeling better and wouldn’t suffer any lasting damage.

“See you guys in a bit,” I said to Colton and Torin. “I’m going to head in and check on Ravi.”

As soon as I turned around, I bumped right into Xavier. The fleeting contact with him made my head swim, and I kicked myself for reacting to him at all after what I’d seen happening between him and Ava.

“Cali, can we talk?” he said, his hands lingering on my shoulders just before I pulled away.

“Can’t right now. I’m going to check on Ravi.”

I pushed past him and headed for the house.

“Colton, don’t touch that!” I heard Torin shout.

“Cali, please. Just give me a moment of your time,” Xavier said, shouting a little to be heard over Torin and Colton’s bickering.

I pretended not to hear him and kept walking, but then he was right beside me with one hand on my arm.

“What?” I said, whipping around to face him. “What is there to talk about?”

“Cali—”

“The shed, really?” I said, unable to hide my anger. I’d had plans to act like I didn’t care, like seeing them together like that didn’t bother me, but I wasn’t a good liar, and Xavier knew me as well as I knew myself. If he didn’t think I was pissed about it, he wouldn’t have chased me down to talk it over.

“It just kind of…happened,” Xavier said.

I sucked my teeth and rolled my eyes. “It just happened?! Did you really just say that to me? What, did you slip and fall on top of her?” I shook my head at him, tempted to start walking away again. “That isn’t how it works, Xavier.”

He sighed and dragged hand down his face. “It was a mistake.”

I took that in, thinking about how my mates kept saying that they’d made mistakes, and every time they did, it hurt me.

“I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you. You know that, right?”

“Right. It was just another mistake. I get it.” I pushed his hand away and started toward the house again. I didn’t want to talk about Ava. I didn’t want to talk about how it was obvious that Xavier couldn’t keep his hands off her. We were in the middle of planning for what could end up being the fight of our lives, and he’d snuck off to bang his other mate only a few feet away from me.

Xavier ran out in front of me and blocked my escape. “I get it, Cali. You’re angry—and you have good reason to be.”

“It’s not for the reason you think,” I said. “I will never be happy about what’s going on. I know I have no right to point fingers…but…” I eyed the shed, choosing my words carefully. “But was this really the time for it? We’re dealing with a monster from the Fae world that wants to wipe werewolves off the face of the earth. I’m busy training myself so that when it attacks again, I can hit it.”

I paused because my voice was starting to shake. It was emotional—not only because Xavier had hurt me with his stunt with Ava, but because I was so damn scared that we wouldn’t be able to stop the creature.

“If I don’t hit that thing when we confront it again, you could be killed since you’re the bait. It feels like every werewolf’s life is in my hands. You might have thought about how that might be for me before…before you spent your time in other ways.”

“I’m so sorry, Cali,” Xavier said. “I get it, and it was wrong of me to take things so lightly.”

I threw up my hand to stop him. I didn’t want to hear his apologies. All I wanted was for him to recognize how high the stakes were and act accordingly. I was about to tell him as much when Torin called me back to the crossbow.

Xavier watched me go without a word, obviously realizing that I wasn’t in the mood to resolve this just yet.

“What is it?” I asked Colton when I joined them.

“I think it’s ready to try again,” Colton said. “Let’s hope it’s ready.”

As I stood there hoping that the council’s crossbow would come through for us when we needed it, my mind was on Xavier and what I’d just said to him. If I messed this up, he could die. Even though I was so pissed at him right now, I couldn’t bear the thought of any harm coming to him.

I helped Torin and Colton load a practice arrow, and a strange thought hit me. Ava would be devastated, too, if Xavier died.

*Both of us love him. But that still doesn’t excuse what he did, and it doesn't excuse Ava, either.*

“Colton, step away from the crossbow,” Ravi growled from behind me.

“Why is everyone telling me that? It’s not like any of you have ever seen me work a crossbow before,” Colton grumbled under his breath.

“What are you doing out of bed? You should be resting!” Torin said to Ravi.

“He’s right, Ravi. Don’t overdo it. That attack took a lot out of you,” I said.

“I’ve rested enough,” Ravi said. “That monster nearly killed me. I’m not going to be upstairs lying in bed while everyone else risks their lives to kill it.”

Marissa came running over. “I tried to talk Ravi into staying in bed, but he’s stubborn.”

“Like every other werewolf in existence,” Torin said.

Ravi was checking out our cache of tools. “What’s all this? What happened?”

“There was a loose part,” Colton explained. “But we fixed it.”

Ravi went over to give the crossbow a once over. “Let’s test it out.”

Torin and I exchanged a look before working together to aim that crossbow at a tree across the yard—far away from the cars, this time. I did a quick check to make sure there was no chance for friendly fire for any objects or living things in the vicinity, and then we fired it.

Torin and I squealed in delight as the arrow slammed into the tree, dead center.

“Nailed it!” I said, slapping hands with Torin.

“The creature isn’t going to just stand there and wait for you to shoot it like a tree,” Colton said. “It moves around in ways nobody can predict.”

My joy balloon popped.

“You’re right,” I said. “And there’s way too much riding on this for us to fail. What do we do?”

Rowena appeared beside us. She’d been watching from the porch. “I have an idea,” she said. “I’ll create magic targets that the arrows can home in on.”

“That’s a great idea,” Ravi said. “It’ll be like skeet shooting. You can give them about five seconds to hit it before it disappears—that’ll help them get an edge.”

“I can do that,” Rowena said. “You both just need to make sure you hit the target.”

I glanced at Torin. The pressure was building.

“I hope we can do that,” I said.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Torin said.

We loaded up another practice arrow, and Ravi counted down. Rowena cast the target spell, and a floating, magical rendering of the creature appeared to our right. Torin and I grunted with effort as we turned the crossbow to aim. I wasn’t breathing and neither was Torin as we shot the arrow…and missed.

“Try again,” Greyson said. “You can do it.”

Rowena conjured another target, and we missed that one, too. I was feeling like this whole thing was hopeless.

“Don’t give up,” Greyson said. “Try again.”

Together, we aimed the crossbow once more, fired, and…hit the target!

“I knew you could do it,” Greyson said.

Torin and I quickly nocked more arrows and continued going after Rowena’s targets until we’d hit it four out of five times.

By the time we were finished, I was gasping for breath with sweat pouring down my face. Torin was leaning on the crossbow, exhausted, but I wanted to go again. I wouldn’t be satisfied until we were one hundred percent accurate.

“Take a break,” Greyson said. “You need more practice arrows, and it won’t do you any good to be too exhausted for the real fight. Besides, it’s getting dark. We’ll go at it again tomorrow.”

Reluctantly, I gave in. Greyson was right. We’d done enough for today.

“Come inside and eat,” Greyson said, offering me his hand.

As we walked inside together, I spotted Xavier watching me. I looked away from him only to see Greyson watching me, too.

“Is everything okay?” he said.

“I guess so…I’m just a little…pissed because I caught Xavier and Ava having sex in the shed.”

“Of course. Seems like Xavier’s head isn’t in the game,” Greyson grumbled. “Seems like it’s time for him and me to have a little talk.”

**Episode 5782**

**Artemis**

I tried to pull myself up to my feet as Zale sputtered and blood started leaking from his wound. He looked shocked and angry all at the same time, and I couldn’t help but feel a little surprised by myself.

I’d had one shot, and I nailed it. I was proud of myself, but there was no time to stop and bask in the glow of my skills. My life was still on the line. Zale wasn’t fading as fast as I would have hoped, which meant I might still have to muster up enough strength to keep fighting.

I groaned in pain, realizing that I was losing a lot of blood, too. Zale wasn’t someone who I should underestimate again. He was quick, experienced, and had proven himself as deadly as anyone I’d ever faced—maybe deadlier. I needed to be careful, especially in my weakened state.

I grabbed onto the tree behind me as I nearly lost my footing again and used it to push off toward him. With a cry, or more like a loud whimper, I tackled him to the ground. My adrenaline kicked in, blotting out my pain as I pulled the knife out of his throat with a disgusting squelching sound.

I was preparing to stab him again—this time in the eye—when he reached up to stop me. His hands made a painful collision with my wrists. He wrapped his fingers around them tightly, then strong-armed the blade away from him.

We struggled, both of us gritting our teeth and grunting as we each fought to overcome the other’s strength. My eyes were wide open, and Zale’s were closed as he worked to brace himself against me. Once again, I was impressed by his strength, by how he was able to fight me off like this even though I’d weakened him considerably.

“Why won’t you just die?!” I shouted, throwing all my weight into pushing the blade closer and closer to his throat. I was almost there, I just had to push a little harder…but Zale wasn’t making it easy.

“I’ll die when you’re dead,” he spat, shoving me back with a sudden burst of energy while simultaneously taking one hand off the blade hovering between us to dig his fingers into my leg wound.

I cried out in pain, and my vision blurred for a second, clearing just in time to see Zale’s fist flying toward me. I didn’t have time to react, and the full force of his strike landed right in the center of my face. My nose made a sickening crunching sound.

*Shit. Did he just break my nose?*

I tumbled off him and rolled onto the ground, gripping my nose as blood poured out of it. I moaned as tears streaked out of my eyes. Gingerly as I could manage, I touched my nose to see if it was broken, moving my lips and wiggling it to determine the damage.

*Yup. Definitely broken.*

With a yelp of pain, I shifted my nose back in place and tried to regain my bearings.

I wished that my head felt clearer in general, but I was still feeling the effects of whatever Zale had drugged me with, and I was operating on limited mental capacity because of it. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, but when I opened them, Zale was looming over me.

I couldn’t believe my eyes when he suddenly smashed a small, glowing purple object between his hands and then pressed its contents against the wound in his throat. I let out a strained cry of shock as I scuttled away from him, forgetting the pain in my nose for the moment as I watched the purple liquid take on a life of its own as it spread across his throat, seeped into the gash and…healed him?

*What kind of magic is this, and where can I get some? Fuck.*

I went for the array of knives he’d set out earlier, searching for one of my own. I grabbed it as soon as I saw it, my sharpest dagger. Its familiar, heavy mahogany handle gave me a small boost of confidence before another wave of nausea overtook me.

Zale turned to face me, the wound on his neck now healed into a scar that looked like he’d suffered a horrible burn. “See? Not time for me to die just yet,” he said, before kicking me squarely in the gut.

I coughed and sputtered, trying to keep from puking all over the ground. If I let myself do that, I’d be too weak to fight back as his attacks kept coming.

“You fucking bitch, it’s over for you!” Zale hissed as he grabbed me and pulled me up by my hair.

I knew I needed to react, but it was so hard. I felt like death warmed over. Every attack Zale had leveled at my body was a spot of mind-numbing pain, and I was still dealing with the worst nausea I’d ever felt.

I scrambled as he dragged me toward him, trying to knee him in the groin, but he arched his body away from the attack with a sharp laugh.

“You’re not going to catch me by surprise again,” he said. He threw me back down to the ground, knocking the wind out of me.

Still coughing and sputtering, I tried to call my magic forth, but the drug was making it nearly impossible.

*Please. Please. I need my magic. I’m going to die without it!*

Zale wanted the information—he’d made that clear enough—but maybe he would cut his losses soon and leave me be once he decided that I was putting up too much of a fight. He nearly had all the information anyway. He could finally be the one to tell the Order of the Winding Thorn that he was the one who killed me.

“You couldn’t just work with me, could you?” Zale rasped in his voice which, despite his healed throat wound, proved that my attack had damaged his vocal cords. “You had to be stubborn and give it one last try! Now look where that got you.”

I tried to get up, but Zale was on me in a second. He pressed his boot into my chest and pinned me to the ground. With an almost sweet smile on his face, he dug his heel into my sternum, and with a flick of his wrists, another set of daggers appeared in his hands.

“Tell me now! Where is Kadmos? I’m getting tired of playing games with you, and I’m done being nice.”

*Ha! He calls this nice? Fuck.*

I closed my eyes, all too aware of the painful pressure he was applying to my chest, just shy of enough power to break my ribs and puncture any number of important organs in the process. My life was clearly in danger, but I wasn’t in any state to fight back. I couldn’t even open my eyes.

I thought of my father.

*Sorry I couldn’t find you, Dad. I really tried.*

Then I thought of Mom, and of Cali—my new family. I never thought I would find anyone to love me the way they did—even if Cali was a little too good at being the annoying little sister sometimes.

And then there was Rishika, the first person I’d ever truly fallen in love with, and Marius, the man who allowed me to open myself up to new experiences, and people.

I cracked my eyes open a sliver and was greeted with the double-vision image of Zale hovering over me, shouting something I couldn’t hear.

I didn’t want to give up. I wanted to fight. I wanted to open that wound up in his neck again and make it count this time so he couldn’t heal it, but my body was done. I simply couldn’t fight him anymore.

I was drugged. Beaten. Broken. Tired. I could feel my pulse pumping in the leg he’d stabbed me in. It was over. He’d won.

I parted my dry, cracked lips and said, “Just do it. Kill me.”

“Oh, don’t you worry,” he snarled. “I will.” He leaned down slowly and with a wince, as if he was sporting a few aches and pains of his own, and that warmed my heart just a little.

He lifted my chin and held his blade at the ready, and I braced myself, ready to meet my death without giving him the satisfaction of crying or begging.

We both started when a howl cut through the air followed by a vicious snarl. Zale barely had time to react before a wolf tackled him to the ground. I turned my head slowly as hope blossomed in my chest.

*It can’t be…but there’s only one werewolf in the Fae world right now…*

The wolf tore into Zale as he screamed and tried to fight it off. My heart leapt as my vision cleared and I got a good look. It wasn’t just any wolf who’d leapt in to save me, it was Rishika!

**Chapter 5783**

**Greyson**

As usual, I was furious with Xavier, but I had no desire to make a bad situation worse, and I knew that Cali felt the same.

“I appreciate that you would talk to him about what he did for my benefit, but I don’t want you to do that. It won’t help,” Cali said.

“Maybe not, but that was a shitty thing for Xavier to do,” I said. “He should show a little more class.”

“I’m sure Ava was the one who initiated that,” Cali grumbled.

I wasn’t about to defend my brother, especially not to Cali…but in the back of my mind, I understood what might have driven Xavier to do something so stupid.

“Playing devil’s advocate for a second here, I have to recognize how much stress everyone is under right now. Especially Xavier being that he volunteered to be bait.”

“I know,” Cali said. “And Xavier’s life may depend on how well Torin and I perform when it’s time to shoot that thing. His life is hanging in the balance. It has to be weighing on him.”

I nodded, thinking about how hard it was for a werewolf to give up control in a situation like this. I knew that Xavier trusted Cali as much as I did, and that he had no problem leaving his life in her hands, but that didn’t make the whole thing any less nerve-racking.

“But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t painful to see them like that,” Cali said with her eyes on the shed. “It always is.” She paused and turned her attention from the shed to me. “And I know that this is rich coming from me seeing as both you and Xavier have been hurt by the *due destini*. But it hurts more because Xavier, at least, has a choice in the matter.”

“I get it,” I said, smoothing a lock of hair out of her face and behind her ear. “But I don’t want you to take all of this onto your shoulders. No matter what happens, we’re going to do our best to kill this thing. Your arrow will give us the chance we need to try and wipe this thing out.”

Cali frowned and wrapped her arms around herself. “But if I miss…”

“If you miss, my brother could die.” I looked away. “And I wish there was some other way. I don’t want Xavier to die. I couldn’t handle it.”

It was true that I felt like kicking Xavier’s ass for hurting Cali—and I still might do that once this was all over—but I would never wish my brother dead. No matter how much we fought, no matter how easily he got on my bad side, I didn’t want anything bad to happen to him.

“I’ll be there with you as support, and so will the others. I saw the way you and Torin handled the weapon. You’ve got this,” I said.

Cali smiled. “It means a lot that you think that. But I guess we’d better practice some more to make sure we’re perfect when the time comes. It’s the only way you and the others will be able to land the killing blow.”

“Together, we’re going to exterminate it like the overgrown bug it is.”

I leaned over to kiss her, but Cali pressed a finger against my lips, stopping me.

“I’m too sweaty and gross to kiss right now,” Cali said.

“What? I’ve seen you in much worse shape than this.”

Cali scowled. “That’s not a compliment.” She gently pushed me away. “I’m going inside to clean up. I’ll catch you later.”

Once Cali was gone, I looked back at Xavier where he stood with his back to me, talking to Ava.

*Why did Xavier have to hurt Cali that way? He had to have known she would be gutted if she saw them.*

Kendall came walking by and paused just before she passed, giving me a look. I sighed, wondering what she’d meant earlier about being cursed. I supposed I could fill in the blanks well enough being that I was well acquainted with all manner of curses.

I hoped she’d been speaking metaphorically since I wasn’t in the mood to deal with any more curses. I’d dealt with enough of those to last me two lifetimes.

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After making my rounds to speak to everyone and get a temperature check on the general feeling about facing the monster, I went up to Cali’s room. She was just getting out of the shower as I entered.

“Hey,” she said, wincing as she started drying her hair. “I think I pulled something pushing and pulling that crossbow all over the place. It isn’t the easiest thing to maneuver. My shoulders and back are stiff as hell.”

I went up behind her and plied my body against hers. She was warm and damp from the shower, and her wet hair smelled amazing.

“Why don’t you lie down on the bed and I’ll work on your stiff muscles,” I said, showing her my hands. “These things are just as good at fighting as they are at making sure my girl is in fighting shape.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Cali said. She smirked at me as she removed her towel and lay face down on the bed.

My wolf reacted as I straddled her and began running my hands up and down her back and over her shoulders. My desire was building by the second, the tension from the day and what lay ahead of us ebbed as I focused only on the sensation of touching her body.

I hated that she was going through this. The Night Stalker was a werewolf problem…but then again…Cali was so entwined in our world that it was just as much her problem. And even if I’d asked her to stay clear of this mess, she wouldn’t have done it.

I only wished that the Night Stalker didn’t have the ability to put werewolves out of commission with a mere sound. If not for that, I could take on more and she could take on less.

It would be so easy to give in to Kendall and hand this whole mess over to her and the MIB. Even thinking about my other mate made me think about her weird plea. It troubled me, I could admit that. It was so unlike Kendall to be vulnerable, and she’d been exactly that as she exposed her feelings about this supposed curse.

Even if I trusted Kendall a little, I trusted MIB not at all. They weren’t equipped for this and I knew it. Right now, we had a means of killing the Night Stalker, but if we failed…well I didn’t care much what MIB did after that because it would be too late for us all.

Cali moaned, drawing me back into the now. I leaned down to kiss her neck.

“Better? Are you a little less sore and stiff? Did I miss any spots?”

Cali slowly turned over onto her back to look up at me. She nodded and then looped her arms around my neck and pulled herself up to kiss me. I was pleased that she seemed to be getting over what Xavier had done—at least enough to focus on us.

I threaded my fingers through her hair as I leaned into the kiss, slowly slipping my tongue between her lips to taste her.

I was grateful that she finally seemed to be over my mess up with Kendall and the whole exposing her MIB background thing. There was nothing like Cali’s forgiveness…although I wished there wasn’t always cause for me to apologize for things.

I wrapped my arms around her and slowly flattened my body on top of hers, pressing her into the bed. Her wet hair fanned out on the bed around her, and I propped myself up on my elbow to take her in.

The soft peaks of her breasts begged to be kissed, and the hollow of her stomach was calling out for me to touch her, so I did. I caressed her warm, still damp skin and kissed her deeply.

When I pulled away, I was overcome with emotion. “I love you so much, Cali. I’m sorry about what I said before, making it seem like I don’t trust you when I obviously do. I’m so proud and grateful that you’re working so hard to fight for me and the pack, and every werewolf alive against this threat.”

She blushed all over, and it was sexy, seeing the proof of her emotion all over her skin.

“It’s the right thing to do,” she said. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“Not everyone would take the risk, Cali. And I know that.”

I kissed her again and let my hand travel from her stomach down to the warm cleft between her legs. My breath caught in my throat when she parted her knees, opening herself up to me. I took advantage, dipping my fingers into her tight, wet warmth.

As the heat built between us, I took one of her nipples into my mouth and then the other, building up anticipation for the moment when I’d slip myself inside of her to prove just how good I could make her feel…

**Episode 5784**

Greyson’s lips and tongue lit a fire down my body as his hands softly squeezed my breasts and caressed my nipples. Everything he did, like always, sent waves of chills all over my body and made my toes curl, my knees shake.

“Greyson,” I said, his name a breath on my lips as he shifted his attention to my fluttering center. “Yes, just like that. It feels so good…”

He spread my legs wider with a controlled roughness that suggested he was as worked up as I was. He moaned when his tongue slid inside of me, and he lapped at me for a few precious minutes before popping up to look me in the eye.

“I never get over how sweet you taste,” he said before diving back down.

I ran my fingers through his hair and gently pulled him tighter against me, overcome by the need to feel his tongue deep inside of me and running over the swollen bud my clit had become.

Even if I wanted to think of something, someone else, I couldn’t. Both my body and mind were lost in Greyson, and I was putty in his hands. I felt like he was devouring me whole, and he showed no signs of slowing down.

Just before the delicious buzz between my legs gave way to a full-blown climax, Greyson shifted his body on top of mine and kissed me. I moaned when I tasted myself on his tongue. He pinned my wrists to the bed while he dominated our kiss, capturing my mouth while his hips rotated against me.

I could feel his erection pressing against my sex, hard, insistent, and powerful. I spread my legs until my knees were nearly touching the bed, inviting him to slip inside of me as soon as he was ready.

But he was too busy teasing me.

He had a small smile on his lips as he licked my nipples, ran his tongue between my breasts, gently squeezed my neck, not quite choking me but asserting a bit of his control and dominance, which sent my desire to new heights.

“Please,” I panted. “Please. I want you inside of me now.”

Again, I enjoyed the blissful blankness of my mind as I watched Greyson heft his shaft in his hands. He played it along the soft skin of my inner thigh, and I watched it harden and extend and swell to its full length before he shifted position and notched himself at my opening.

I slid down toward him, trying to rush him inside of me, but Greyson pulled away and instead played the solid tip along my folds, opening me up and prompting another wave of arousal, ensuring that when he did decide to slip inside of me, he wouldn’t meet any resistance at all.

“You’re so wet,” he said when he finally returned his tip to my opening.

Before I could reply, he’d pushed inside, and my entire body melted at the quick pace and electrifying sensation of his penetration. I locked my legs around his back, drawing him in deeper as he began to pivot his hips, torturing me with long, languid thrusts.

All the while, Greyson lavished me with gentle kisses and spoke encouraging, sweet words in my ear. I couldn’t help but smile, arching my body to meet his every time he pushed into my depths.

I knew he was close when his pace increased, our flesh meeting with a titillating smack every time he advanced into my depths, a sound that came quicker and quicker as he rushed us both toward release.

When I came, I called out his name louder than I meant to. When I opened my eyes, I saw that Greyson was watching me, his eyes hazy, his face flushed, and then he bit his lip just as his body shivered from the force of his own orgasm.

When we were done, I draped a leg across Greyson’s thighs as he caressed my back and placed a few sweet kisses on the top of my head. This close, intimate moment after such an explosive session was just what I needed.

“Too bad we can’t just stay here like this forever,” I said as the glow began to wane. The cold creep of reality was returning full force, and once again, I felt the weight of what lay ahead.

Against every desire I had to do the opposite, I forced myself to get up. “I’m going to take your advice and get something to eat. I’m starving…especially after that cardio,” I said.

Greyson beamed at me. “Good. You need to keep your strength up for what’s ahead. We can’t have you hangry on the battlefield.”

*I love how he always looks out for me. I’m so lucky to have a mate like him.*

I threw on some sweats and then went down to the kitchen to search for a snack. I’d no sooner found it than I turned around and came face-to-face with Kendall. I was startled but tried not to show it.

“You should be out there with that crossbow,” Kendall said. “Instead of doing…whatever it is you are in here.”

“Maybe werewolves can see in the dark, but Fae can’t,” I said.

Kendall leaned against the doorframe, obviously in no rush to get anywhere. “Are you sure you’re up to this, Cali?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m one of the few non-werewolves around here, so yes, I have to be. Why are you questioning me?” I took a ferocious bite from the cereal bar in my hand, wishing that better timing had allowed me to miss this little chat with my mate’s other mate.

Kendall stepped into the kitchen and locked eyes with me. “Because your priorities are out of whack.”

“Out of whack? What the hell are you getting at?”

Her eyes flitted toward the stairs. “Was right now really the best time?”

I flushed and poured all my attention into looking at the cereal bar. I was examining it like I’d never seen it before—all to avoid Kendall’s judgmental stare.

*Of course Kendall knows what I just did. Werewolves always do. Can’t ever get anything like that past them. But I have nothing to be ashamed of.*

Greyson was my mate, and we’d taken our activities to the bedroom—not to a shed where literally anyone could just walk in and catch us in the act. The day was over, and I was letting off steam, and I wasn’t about to feel bad about that.

“I thought you rejected Greyson,” I said, swiftly changing the subject. I certainly wasn’t about to discuss my sex life with Kendall in any capacity.

“I did,” Kendall barked. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You’re kidding, right? It’s obvious you’re jealous,” I said, stepping closer to her.

Kendall glared at me. “Jealous? Please. Careful, your immaturity is showing. This has nothing to do with Greyson, and it’s telling that you think it does.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Kendall looked down at her nails, a move that perfectly complimented her bored tone as she said, “Just make sure that when the time comes, you have your priorities in order.”

“Don’t you worry about me,” I snapped. “Maybe you should quit with your obvious jealousy and focus on the task at hand yourself. Good night, Kendall.”

Kendall glared for a few long moments before turning to go. But then she stopped and turned back to face me. “You think you know me, but you don’t. This is so much bigger than you, me, all of us, though I’m sure it’s hard for you to think about anyone other than yourself and this Redwood pack universe you’re all so wrapped up in.”

“You think I don’t know how important this is?” I shot back. “The Night Stalker is from the Fae world. I know more about Fae creatures than you do.”

“Then why did the wolves have to go to the council for help? Shouldn’t you have known what to do from the beginning?” Kendall said. “Why didn’t you figure it all out for them if you ‘know more about Fae creatures’ than I do?”

“That’s not fair.” I didn’t have a better comeback, but how was I supposed to know that there were Fae creatures like the Night Stalker? It wasn’t like she knew every detail about every earthly creature that existed.

“Isn’t it? You’re the expert, right? Anyway, listen, I’m not trying to fight with you. I just—”

Kendall paused, and I wondered, for a brief moment, whether she was about to tell me the truth about her being an MIB agent. It would certainly make our conversations a hell of a lot less awkward.

“You have no idea what I know,” Kendall finished. “So be careful with all these grand statements about how much more knowledgeable you are than I am.”

“Fine…but I’ll tell you what I do know. My mate is risking his life for everyone. So if you think I’m going to let anything distract me from doing what I have to when the time comes, you don’t know me at all.”

Kendall’s purple eyes flashed for a moment before she walked away without another word.

I sighed. The last thing I needed was Kendall piling on. I was stressed enough, and I knew exactly what was at stake.

As I made my way back upstairs, I realized that my conversation with Kendall wasn’t all bad. It had lit a fire in me, and now I was confident that no matter what, my first arrow was going to hit its mark.

**Episode 5785**

**Greyson**

The next morning, I awoke from a strange dream about monsters, Kendall, Cali, and my brother. The details slipped away the moment I opened my eyes, but Cali’s head on my chest washed away any lingering bad feelings that dream had left behind.

Cali looked up at me with a sleepy smile playing on her lips. She yawned and closed her eyes again, dropping her head heavily onto my chest as if she were going to fall asleep again, but I jostled her until she giggled and then pulled her in for a kiss.

My breath caught when her soft hand journeyed from my cheek to where my cock lay trapped between us. She pulled away to look me in the eyes, and she wrapped her fingers around my shaft and gave it a gentle tug, sparking my erection to life.

“How about a little early morning treat?” she whispered in my ear.

“I wouldn’t mind that at all,” I replied huskily.

I closed my eyes and reveled in the feel of her kisses, as they traveled from my lips to my throat to my chest to my abdomen while her hand worked me into a heightened state of arousal. By the time I felt her soft, wet lips taking me into her mouth, I was already close to coming.

That was what Cali did to me. Her touch was the one thing I craved that I could never get enough of. The feeling of her hands working up and down my shaft while her lips lathered me from base to tip was out of this world.

I moaned, gently stroking her face while her head bobbed up and down my shaft. I leaned forward so that I could reach her breasts and squeezed them, eliciting a moan from her that sent delicious vibrations through my body.

I grabbed her hair, gently guiding her up and down until my hips pivoted up of their own volition, and my climax sent me spiraling into a state of enjoyment that I clung to until the last drop.

Cali watched me while biting her lips, enjoying the sight of my pleasure.

“So I guess that was a job well done,” she said once I’d finally calmed down and the last of my orgasm had pulsed away.

“You never cease to amaze me,” I said.

“I’m glad. I’ll never miss a chance to remind you of how good I am at bringing you enjoyment,” she said. “It’s one of my favorite things to do.”

I pulled her against me and wrapped my arms tightly around her. It felt good to have her so close, and my head was still swimming from the memory of feeling her mouth and tongue on me. There was nothing quite like it in the world.

I hated to break the mood by talking through today’s plan, but it couldn’t be helped.

“The sooner we go after the Night Stalker, the better,” I said. “It’s already come after us, and it abducted Xavier. We can’t let it have the element of surprise since it obviously knows where to find us. We need to go on the offensive.”

“Agreed, and I’ll focus on getting in more target practice. There’s no way we can use Xavier as bait if we don’t get our accuracy as close to perfect as we can.” Cali went silent, and I could tell by the look in her eyes that she was thinking about Xavier. “We already lost one arrow when that thing attacked Ravi, so now we only have four to work with.”

“That should be more than enough,” I said, wanting to ease her mind. “Even with fifty percent accuracy, you’ll give it two strikes. That should weaken it enough for us to take over.”

Cali nodded, but I could tell she wasn’t taking that to heart. She was hell-bent on improving her and Torin’s accuracy with the crossbow, and I couldn’t fault her for that.

“I’ve improved, and you’re right, two out of four would be good—if Xavier’s life wasn’t on the line. We’re getting better each time we shoot, but we can still improve.”

I kissed her and gave her butt a squeeze. She giggled and nuzzled her face into my neck.

“You’re right, and I know you’ll reach full accuracy if you put your mind to it. In the meantime, I’m going to go talk to the other Alphas to make sure everyone is on board with the plan. Like you, we don’t have any room for error.”

A cloud passed across Cali’s face, and I almost apologized, hoping that what I said hadn’t amped the pressure up too much. I knew how worried she was about this, and I didn’t want to make it any harder on her.

I was happy when I noticed that whatever feeling my words had evoked in her passed quickly, and her expression brightened. “If all goes well, we could be ready in just a few hours.”

“Good. And remember what I told you—don’t work yourself to death. You won’t be alone out there.”

Cali grinned and flexed her biceps. “I’ve got a lot of strength buzzing around in this Fae body of mine. I can handle it.”

I grinned at her. “I’m well aware.”

As I got dressed, Cali told me about the run-in she’d had with Kendall the night before.

“The nerve of her claiming that I’m not focused enough. I know what I’m doing, and I know what’s at stake. If she doesn’t see that, it’s not my problem.”

I shook my head, doing my best to contain my anger. Kendall had no right to do that to Cali. “First of all, there’s no question that you’re capable of doing this. The last thing you need is more pressure. Any idea why she would say that to you?”

Cali blushed and then hesitated. “I think she may be jealous…of you and me. I know she rejected you, but…her comments came because she knew that you and I had just…um…”

A deep blush spread across her cheeks, telling me everything that she was struggling to say.

*Wow. I can’t believe Kendall did that. It’s one thing for her to question me, and it’s quite another thing for her to go after Cali when she should be staying away from her.*

“I’m going to talk to her. She’s overstepping, and I’m going to let her know that it’s not okay.”

Cali shook her head and placed a calming hand on my arm. “No, don’t. I think that’s necessary. I think I made myself clear.” She bit her lip. “And, like with everyone else, the pressure’s probably getting to her.” She lowered her voice. “And then there’s the whole MIB thing.”

I was glad that Cali had stood up for herself, but knowing that Kendall had cornered Cali like that was troubling. Kendall had been acting weird lately. Could Cali be right? Was Kendall jealous?

*Fuck.*

“I think it’s best if I talk to her. We don’t need this drama at a time like this.”

“But Greyson, I told you not to say anything!”

“I know, but Kendall really needs to back off, so I’m going to talk to her.”

The plan was to act professional when I confronted her…though I had no idea what kind of profession involved telling one mate who happened to be an MIB agent to stop threatening my other mate…though “threatening” wasn’t really the right term.

Cali hadn’t mentioned that she felt afraid of Kendall or that she’d promised any harm, but it wasn’t like Kendall was incapable of threats. She’d threatened me plenty. She was normally so cool under pressure, so I had to wonder what this was really about.

*Jealousy. It has to be, and that’s troubling. Why the hell didn’t the rejection work? It would have made things so much easier if it had.*

I assured Cali that I would take it easy on Kendall, and then went looking for her. I found her in the backyard. She was sweating and had obviously just returned from an early morning run. My wolf stirred at the sight of her pulling clothes on over her nakedness.

It wasn’t until she pulled her shirt down over her head that she noticed me. Her expression didn’t change, and I was surprised that I felt a little unsure about broaching the subject, likely because calling her out always turned into a sparring match.

“You sure Cali’s going to be able to handle that thing?” she said, gesturing to the crossbow.

“You don’t need to question her,” I snarled.

*So much for being professional.*

Kendall scowled at me, but then a smile appeared on her lips. “Touchy, touchy.” She narrowed her eyes and took a step toward me. “But I don’t give a shit if you’re offended that I’m asking the questions I have a right to ask since this is *my* job. If she can’t do it—”

“I told you she can handle it.”

Kendall looked away, and I was surprised by the soft tone of her voice when she spoke again. “I can’t afford to see this botched on my watch, Grey.”

Her purple eyes caught a ray of the morning sunlight, and my wolf howled. She put a hand on my chest, and I was too surprised by the sudden contact to react.

“I need to know you understand, Grey.”

I finally came back to my senses and pulled her hand away, ignoring my wolf’s protests. “What the fuck is going on here, Kendall?”

She looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“You rejected me—at least you told me you did.”

“Um…that’s because I did. Where are you going with this?”

“You’re not acting like you rejected me, and you need to start. And stop pressuring Cali.”

“So you really are upset with me,” Kendall said.

“Don’t give me a reason to be,” I said. “Do I make myself clear?”

**Episode 5786**

**Xavier**

I was leading the Samara pack back toward the Redwood territory after a night of fitful, unsatisfying sleep. I hadn’t said anything to anyone, but I hoped to hell that Torin and Cali had gotten the chance to practice a lot more.

They had four arrows left, but realistically, they only had one shot—the first and only—and after that, the fucking Night Stalker would likely rip me to shreds if that arrow didn’t do the job.

Ava fell into step beside me, and a moment later, her voice filled my head.

*I’m still pissed at you, you know.*

*Why? You know why I had to be the bait. No use making a big deal about it since I’m not going to change my mind.*

*I know that. You’re too stubborn to reconsider, but I’m still pissed. Why did you have to volunteer so quickly? Why not give someone else a chance to step up?*

*Somebody had to, and there was no guarantee that anyone else would have agreed to it…and I don’t judge them for that. Besides, I’m an Alpha. We take the risks so our pack doesn’t have to.*

Ava didn’t say anything else on the subject, and I was happy for the silence—especially since I’d almost expected her to start griping about Cali walking in on us yesterday when we were in the shed. Ava had reacted as if she was pissed for the interruption, but I could swear that I’d spotted a hint of a smile on her lips. If I hadn’t known any better, I could have thought that Ava planned it all.

*But she couldn’t have planned it. It all happened so quickly, took us both by surprise.*

It wasn’t that I regretted stealing that moment with Ava—she was my mate and my beautiful Luna, and I’d been too turned on to, as Cali had put it, wait for better timing. The only thing I regretted was that Cali had seen it. Any way you looked at it, it sucked for her to walk in on us.

We all slowed as we neared the Redwood pack house. Everyone shifted to human form and began to dress.

I spotted the crossbow through the trees. My wolf reacted as soon as Cali appeared behind it with Torin standing beside her. They were in the middle of loading another practice arrow as they talked amongst themselves.

There was no doubt in my mind that Cali was giving this all she had, and because of that, I felt more confident that this might work out in the end.

“She’d better not fuck this up,” Ava said, interrupting my thoughts. “If you die, I’ll kill her.”

I turned to her sharply. “Stop it, Ava.”

“What? I’m just saying it. I don’t want to lose you, X. I can’t.”

I sighed and shook my head. Nothing about this was going to be easy, and as usual, I had the tension between Ava and Cali to deal with on top of everything else.

“I can’t wait to tear that fucking Night Stalker’s throat out and end this nightmare,” I growled.

Ava smoothed a hand down my back, and her touch was calming. “And you will. Because you fucking have to.”

Lucian, Mace, Porter, and Maya were already here, standing clustered with Greyson. Ava shook her head as we walked past the Vanguards’ RVs.

“I never thought I’d say this, but I do feel sorry for Greyson and the Redwoods,” she said under her breath. “Could you imagine hosting the Vanguards?”

I couldn’t help but smile, because Ava had a point. There were times when I missed living in the Redwood pack house…but since their new houseguests had arrived to crowd the lawn, I’d been feeling pretty good about getting to go back to the Samara pack house at night.

Lucian did a big stretch as Ava and I approached. “Good morning, Samaras. Beautiful morning isn’t it? So peaceful out here. I slept like a baby.”

Beyond us, the snap of the crossbow drew our attention—just in time for us to see the arrows whizz wide of Rowena’s targets.

Ava gave me a pointed look but was wise enough not to say anything about it.

*Just keep trying*, I mind linked to Cali. *Missing the target is part of the journey to perfect accuracy. I know you can do it.*

I waited for Cali’s reply, and when it didn’t come, I assumed she was still mad at me. Maybe she’d be able to channel that anger into nailing the Night Stalker.

“Thanks everyone for coming,” Greyson began, letting his gaze settle on each Alpha as he spoke. “First things first, I think we should take a minute to go over the plan.”

I was annoyed already. Greyson was the one leading the meeting when my ass was on the line. If there was a plan, I should have been the one to put it together seeing as I had the most to lose. I should be the one giving orders, not him, but of course he would take any chance to appear like he was the head Alpha in charge.

I was surprised when Greyson swung an arm around my shoulders. “My brother is so brave for volunteering himself as bait for the Night Stalker.”

I forced a smile, knowing that right now wasn’t the time to bicker with him.

“When Cali hits the mark,” I said, “it will negate the monster’s ancient dark magic protections. But I want to make one thing clear: when that happens, I get first dibs on that thing.”

The others agreed with grim nods.

I heard the telltale click and whistle of Torin and Cali shooting another arrow, and then a cheer rose up behind us. Cali and Torin had nailed the target. My hope grew.

“Rowena will blip the crossbow to the spot on the mountain where Rhonda found Xavier. Big Mac will blip the Alphas there, too, and the rest of the pack will join on foot. When we’re all together”—Greyson looked at me—“we’ll wait on the monster. Any questions?”

The Alphas were quiet and then another cheer rang out for Cali and Torin. They’d hit two in a row now.

Greyson squeezed my shoulder and slapped me on the back. “You ready, brother?”

I smiled with more confidence than I felt. “No, but let’s do it anyway.”

A few minutes later, I, along with the rest of the Alphas, was busy shaking off the effects of being blipped. It felt worse being transported to a higher altitude.

Big Mac looked at me with a hard expression. “You’re either really brave or incredibly stupid.”

“Thanks. I think I’ll go with the first option.”

“No, he’s definitely stupid,” Maya deadpanned.

I turned my attention to where Cali, Torin, and Ravi were loading one of the real arrows into the crossbow. I saw Cali notice me before turning back to the task at hand.

“I’ll be right back,” I told the others before starting toward Cali.

Maya grabbed me. “Are you sure about that? Don’t distract her right now.”

I ignored her and shook out of her hold. I didn’t care what anyone said, I had to clear the air.

“How we doing?” I said to Cali and the others, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“We’re—” Torin paused and then looked between me and Cali before motioning to Ravi. “Come on, we better check in with Greyson.” And then the both of them scurried off.

“What?” Cali said, not looking at me.

“You didn’t respond to my mind link.”

Cali thrust a hand at the crossbow. “As you can see, I’ve been kinda busy.” She turned the crossbow crank with a hard yank.

“Cali, will you just wait a second?” I said.

Cali hesitated, but didn’t say anything, didn’t even turn to look at me. She wasn’t making this easy on me.

“I need to make sure things are good between us. Clear the air. There’s a chance I may never get the chance to if…if…” I trailed off. I didn’t want to finish the sentence, and I didn’t want to be dramatic.

Cali finally looked at me, but only for a second before she averted her gaze. “I’m well aware of what could happen, which is why I need to focus.”

“Is there anything I can say or do to fix this?”

Cali paused and wiped the sweat from her brow before she finally caught my gaze and held it. My wolf stirred.

*I always get so turned on when she’s pissed.*

She gestured to the crossbow. “I’ve been practicing all morning. I want to kill that monster just as bad as everyone else does.”

“I know, and I saw how good you’ve gotten. Thank you.”

“I didn’t practice for you,” she snapped. “I practiced so that I can stop that thing from threatening everyone.”

“So you aren’t worried about me?”

Cali bit her lip. “I didn’t say that.”

I reached out and stroked her chin. “I’m sorry about what happened. I really am. Just know that no matter what happens today, I love you. Don’t ever forget that, even if you hate my guts.”

Cali gulped. “I don’t hate your guts.”

“Just a little?” I pressed.

Cali glared. “A lot.”

Just as Greyson made the call for everyone to gather, she put her hand on mine. “Promise me you’ll be careful? You can be the bait, but you don’t have to be the hero, too.”

**Episode 5787**

I wasn’t ready to forgive Xavier just yet, but I also hated that I was still so angry at him. We’d had our differences before, but of all the times to be cross with him, this wasn’t it. Arguing over him romping with his mate in a shed seemed trivial in light of what we were about to face.

Xavier stepped close and pressed his forehead to mine and I didn’t pull away. I wrapped my arms around him, guessing that even this simple gesture was making Ava feel what I’d felt when I walked in on them in the shed.

No matter how much Ava and I disliked each other, I didn’t want to do that to her. This wasn’t a tit-for-tat thing, and I knew, even if my less logical mind wanted to think differently, that Ava and Xavier hadn’t chosen the shed for their rendezvous to hurt me. It wasn’t lost on me that if things went wrong out here today, this would be the last time Ava saw Xavier.

“Be careful, okay?” I said as I took a step back. “I’m not about to let this thing take you away from me.”

Xavier nodded as he looked me right in the eye, his expression hard. “Then hit that fucker right in the back of the throat, and I’ll do the rest.”

He walked away and I watched with a lump forming in my throat.

*I hope I get to see him walk back to me when this is all over. That can’t be the last time I touch him, the last words we say to each other.*

Torin and Ravi returned, and I could tell that they were happy that whatever awkwardness was between Xavier and I had been sorted out so that we could get back to business. Ravi was giving the crossbow one last once over while Torin came to stand beside me.

“You ready?” he asked me.

I tore my eyes away from Xavier and nodded. “If we can hit Rowena’s targets, we can hit the Night Stalker. At least I hope so. Tensions will be running high, but we’ll do it. I know we will.”

Ravi was on his knees beside the crossbow, running his hands along the undercarriage to do one final check that the components were in top shape. He stood up straight with a grim smile on his face after he’d determined that everything was in order. “This is a great plan and all, but what if the Night Stalker is a no-show?”

“That thought has crossed my mind,” I admitted. “In some ways, I would be relieved. That way Xavier wouldn’t have to be the bait. But we have to try. If it does show up, we may have only one chance. We have to take it.”

“How awful was it when the Night Stalker bit you?” Torin asked Ravi.

Ravi shook his head with a far away look in his eyes. “You don’t want to know.”

Xavier made his way over to the spot where Rhonda had found him and shouted toward the woods. “I’m here, asshole. Come and get me.”

His voice echoed and tensions rose as we all waited. I was barely breathing, and my eyes were scanning the forest, waiting for the fight to begin.

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A few hours later, my jaw was aching. I’d been clenching it ever since Xavier took position and called out for the Night Stalker. So far, there’d been no sign of it. A cold breeze seemed to kick up out of nowhere, making me shiver. Greyson wrapped a warm arm around me and pulled me close to warm me up.

“Thanks,” I said. “But I should focus. The Stalker could appear at any minute so I don’t want to get too comfortable.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be ready,” Greyson said.

“Maybe. But I’m starting to wonder if this is even going to work,” I said. “Seems like it should have shown up by now.”

Greyson had just opened his mouth to reply when the ground started to shake under our feet. I nearly triggered the crossbow by mistake as I lost my balance, but Greyson was there in a flash to steady me.

Everyone looked toward the mountain peak. Someone whispered, “It’s coming.”

Greyson leaned close to whisper in my ear. “You got this, Cali. We’re counting on you because we know you can do this.” Then he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and moved off to join the other Alphas.

Torin placed his hands on the crossbow, preparing to push or pull it into position. Ravi did the same. I took a deep breath, working to slow my breathing and stop my hand from shaking. That was the one thing we hadn’t accounted for during training—the heightened nerves, the fear, the way thoughts tended to race when danger was close.

My eyes darted between Xavier and the dark woods that covered the mountainside. For a moment, I worried that the bait wouldn’t work as intended since we were all standing here, waiting. In a way, we were all the bait.

I wanted so much to scream, “Forget it! Don’t do it, Xavier. Let’s get out of here.” I bit my lip to keep the words inside where they belonged. We’d come too far, and now it was time to end this.

A cluster of trees began to sway in the distance and the ground shook again, rumbling angrily. Torin and I exchanged a glance and I put my hand on the trigger just as the Night Stalker appeared off to our right, not too far from where Xavier was standing.

It looked just as hideous and terrifying as I remembered, and it paused, taking in the sight of us all standing there before it zeroed in on Xavier.

Xavier started waving his arms. “I’m back!” he shouted, drawing its attention. “You want to try coming at me again? I’m ready for you this time.”

Ravi and Torin threw all their weight into turning the crossbow to aim the arrow right at the creature. I sighted it, aiming for its chest, and then fired.

Just as the crossbow snapped and released the arrow into the air, the Night Stalker suddenly moved as if it sensed the danger. The arrow sailed right past it, missing it by inches. It plunged into a tree, splitting the trunk down the middle.

I fought off despair so thick it felt like it was choking me.

*I can’t believe it. I missed. All that practice, all the confidence that everyone had in me, and I missed.*

Now we only had three arrows left. I didn’t have time to wallow. The Night Stalker roared as it set its sights on me, and then it was running right at us.

*Try again!* Xavier mind linked. *I know you can do it. Make this one count!*

Xavier picked up a handful of stones and started lobbing them at the creature, drawing its attention back to him. Buoyed by Xavier’s encouraging words and confidence, I went to work loading another arrow just as the ground began to shake again.

I lost my footing and fell. Torin rushed to help me up just as the Night Stalker unleashed its loud, screeching roar. Ravi cried out in pain and slapped his hands over his ears as he dropped to his knees. I looked around in horror as every other werewolf around me did the same.

The Night Stalker screeched again, using the dark magic laced sound to incapacitate every single werewolf in earshot.

I struggled to brace myself against the crossbow as the Night Stalker moved around, causing the ground to quake so hard the crossbow tipped on its legs. Torin and I threw our weight onto it to make sure it didn’t topple over.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Xavier on the ground with his hands over his ears. His face was drawn in pain and his eyes were wild with disorientation.

The Night Stalker bellowed again and then scooped Xavier up from the ground with its sharp claws. I screamed, panicking as I set about lifting the arrow and jamming it into the crossbow.

“Help me aim it!” I barked at Torin.

“On it!” Torin shouted.

Together, we shoved the crossbow around to face the Night Stalker as it bellowed in Xavier’s face, closing its claws tighter around him as if it meant to slash him open. I tried not to focus on the danger Xavier was in because it spiked my anxiety, and instead put all my focus into sighting the crossbow.

An eerie calm fell over me just before I realized that from this position, Xavier was in the way and I wouldn’t be able to shoot the creature without hitting Xavier, killing him.

I took my hand from the trigger and Torin looked at me with a panicked question in his eyes.

“I can’t do it!” I screamed, hot tears forming in my eyes.

Then Xavier’s voice lit up my mind.

*Do it, Cali! Take the shot!*

**Episode 5788**

While Xavier’s desperate command echoed in my mind, I took another opportunity to size up the situation in front of me—and there was no way I was going to take that shot.

“We need that bastard to turn,” I said to Torin. “Or drop Xavier. Then we can take the shot.”

Xavier was still shouting for me to do whatever necessary to take this thing out—including catching him in the crossfire, but there was no way in hell I was going to do that. There had to be another way and I was going to do it.

I summoned my magic and sent a bright blue blast right at the Stalker leg. The creature shrieked and staggered back, and Torin and I wasted no time adjusting our aim. The Stalker screeched as it faced us head on, and I was just about to fire the arrow right down its throat when it raised Xavier to its mouth like it was about to take a bite out of him.

“Shoot! The shot’s blocked again!” I said, frantic. I braced my feet on the ground and blasted it with my magic once more, a bigger burst this time that made me rock back on my heels.

And it missed…but at least it wasn’t trying to chew on Xavier for the time being.

The Night Stalker whipped around, lashing out with its deadly tail. I jumped out of the way just in time and the crossbow took the brunt of the blow.

“Torin, you good?” I said as I rolled out of reach of the Stalker’s thrashing tail.

“I’m good,” he grunted. “But I can’t say the same for the crossbow. The Stalker shattered one of the wheels.” I watched Torin yanking and pulling at the crossbow, trying to move it, but it stayed put. “We need help moving it!” he said.

I glanced around, but every werewolf was out of commission, still quaking from the Night Stalker’s screech. Any one of them could have used their strength to move this thing, but it seemed like Torin and I were on our own.

I nearly screamed with relief when Mikah came running over. He used his elevated strength to wrench the crossbow around to aim at the Night Stalker, and I wasted no time setting its sights on our target.

Xavier had partially shifted and was using his clawed hands to slash at the Night Stalker. He was landing just enough blows to keep the Stalker from trying to take another bite out of him, but it wouldn’t be nearly enough to take him out and his strength wasn’t what it usually was since he was still recovering from the Night Stalker’s shriek.

The Stalker kept moving, kept putting Xavier in harm’s way so that no matter where we aimed the weapon, it would hit him before it hit the Stalker. It was almost as if the monster was using Xavier as a shield.

Frustrated and with terror eating at my confidence, I took a desperate step in the Stalker’s direction.

“Hey, over here!” I shouted, trying to draw its attention. The creature swung around to look in my direction and I summoned my magic, channeling every bit of power I had into it. I was hoping that if I hit it hard enough, it would drop Xavier.

I looked over my shoulder at Torin. “Get ready to fire. As soon as you get anything resembling a clear shot, don’t hesitate, take it!”

I took one leaping step toward the Stalker and fired off a shot of magic stronger than I’d ever created in my entire life. It blew me back, the recoil nearly lifting me from the ground. I slammed into a tree and used it to steady myself as the last reverberations died away.

The Stalker took the shot right in the chest and howled in pain, and luckily it wasn’t the screech that had brought all the werewolves to their knees.

A second later I heard the familiar sound of the arrow launching and it sailed over my head…and missed the Night Stalker by a few inches. It was almost worse that Torin had come so close but didn’t hit it.

The Night Stalker roared at the sky with Xavier hanging limply in its grasp. He was bleeding from the claw cuts, and the pain he was in showed plainly on his face.

A sudden flash shocked me, followed by a loud, percussive sound. A bunch of trees fell as if an explosion had gone off. Confused, I squinted into the trees just in time to see Agent Imamu rushing toward the Night Stalker with several MIB agents trailing behind him.

They were aiming their weapon at the creature and my fear spun out of control as I looked at the charred trees around them. If they hit the Stalker with a blast from their weapon, they could easily kill Xavier in the process.

I’d made sure to aim my magic just so, and even then, my blasts had been a little too close to hitting Xavier. Imamu and his people weren’t shooting like they cared at all about collateral damage.

“Stop!” I screamed, but they either didn’t hear me or were ignoring me. It didn’t matter which, all l knew was that they were aiming the weapon again, primed to take another shot at the Stalker, and I had a sinking feeling that this would be the shot to take Xavier out, too.

I summoned my magic, a much less intense beam than I’d been using against the Stalker, and let it rip. It plowed into the agents, sending them to their knees and snapping the weapon in half.

Imamu jumped to his feet and sprinted over to me; his face screwed with anger. “What the hell are you doing?!”

“I’m trying to kill the Night Stalker!” I said. “You look like you’re trying to kill my mate!”

“You’re going to regret interfering,” Imamu snarled before turning to his agents, who were only just now starting to recover from my blast. “Get the other weapon out of the truck!”

I grabbed Imamu’s shoulder and whipped him around to face me. “I’m warning you, don’t get in my way!”

I turned back to Torin and Mikah. “Let’s try again.

“Do I have to remind you that you’re obstructing the business of government agents?” Imamu said evenly.

“Need I remind you that you’re interfering with me?” I said. I shoved past him to return to the crossbow, but Imamu threw himself into my path.

“If you fuck this up, I’m holding you responsible,” he said.

“So sue me!” I spat. “I don’t care!”

I pushed past him again to join Torin and Mikah at the crossbow where we made quick work of preparing another arrow. I took a deep breath, trying to get my nerves in check. I needed to think but it was hard. I didn’t have time to figure out what the exact right move was. Everything was happening so fast I could barely keep up.

*Did Kendall have anything to do with Imamu showing up? How the hell did he know we would be here?*

That didn’t matter, though. Nothing mattered but making sure this next arrow struck its target. I was just about to fire another shot, but then I held back just as my finger started bearing down on the trigger. The Night Stalker had shifted position again, and Xavier was clawing at it.

I couldn’t tell whose blood I saw all over the place. Was it Xavier’s? The Stalker’s? Both? The Stalker whipped its tail around, the spikes kicking up dirt and dust and leaves.

“Move the crossbow!” Mikah shouted. He was separated from us by the Night Stalker’s tail, unable to come help us move it, and we couldn’t do it on our own.

We strained and pushed, putting our all into it, but Torin and I were too weak to move it with the broken wheel. We both ducked as the creature took a step toward the weapon with Xavier still firmly in its grasp.

Mikah slid under the Stalker’s tail and together, he and Torin raised the crossbow, getting it ready and aiming it. I knelt as the creature loomed over us, my hands gripping the crossbow trigger. I waited a beat—until I saw the opening I’d been waiting for.

I pulled the trigger as the creature’s hot, nasty breath fell over us. The arrow went flying, and then there was a sickening thud.

The Stalker whimpered and staggered back, its strange, smoky body seeming to dissipate for a second before coming back together into the scary form we’d been fighting all night. It shifted its head around and that’s when I saw it—the arrow sticking out of its mouth. The Stalker erupted in a series of gurgling screams while it used its free hand to tug at the arrow, trying to remove it. My eyes went wide.

“We did it!” I shouted. “We hit the mark!” The dark magic was neutralized. All around me, the werewolves were recovering, but I didn’t know if they would recover fast enough to level their part of the attack.

The creature took another hard tug and the arrow slipped out of its mouth, sending a spray of foul-smelling blood all over me. I wiped my eyes clear just in time to see Xavier finally fully shift into wolf form before pouncing on the Night Stalker.

**Episode 5789**

Torin yanked me out of the way just as the creature made another deadly sweep of its tail that would have sent me to the next world. We both tumbled into the grass as Ravi leapt to his feet, finally recovered from the Stalker’s screech.

“Everyone, attack!” Greyson shouted.

Within seconds, a cascade of vicious howls and snarls filled the air. Torin, Mikah and I stood back and watched the werewolves join forces with Xavier in attacking the Night Stalker. The creature was quickly overwhelmed, and it gave me a huge burst of confidence to see phase two of our plan coming together.

It let out clipped wails of pain, staggering back as it tried to rip the attacking werewolves from its body. It slammed into a tree, and the jolt sent Lucian, who’d had his jaws locked on the creature’s back, flying. I was reminded of how fierce Lucian could be, since he didn’t hesitate for a second after hitting the tree and threw himself right back into the fight.

I began to worry that the tide was turning as the creature began to react faster, knocking the werewolves away from it and baring its teeth and claws. I saw Xavier where he stood about three feet away from the creature. He seemed to be waiting for something, and then before I knew it, he lunged, latching onto the creature’s neck and trying to tear out its throat.

It didn’t take long for the Stalker to pluck Xavier off him like he was little more than a bother. He held Xavier up almost proudly and licked its chops as it opened its bloody jaws. I screamed, almost closing my eyes to avoid seeing what I feared was Xavier’s last moments—and then Maya lashed out, swiping her claws right across the creature’s eyes.

It roared and stumbled, but not before it slapped Maya away. Greyson and Colton attacked together, taking turns tearing at the creature and backing off before it could fling either of them away or lash out with its claws.

I wished I could help, that I could do something more than just stand by and watch.

*Maybe I can use my magic sword?*

I started toward the fight but Torin grabbed me just before I reached the fray. “What are you doing?” he said. “We don’t know how long that arrow’s power lasts. He could replenish his dark magic reserves at any time.”

I was frustrated, but I knew Torin was right. We’d come this far, and there was no use throwing myself into danger when it wasn’t necessary. This was the plan. I’d shot the arrow, and the werewolves were going to finish it off. As much as I hated watching it all unfold from the sidelines, I knew I had to stay within reach in case we needed to hit the creature again with another arrow.

Mikah obviously wasn’t keen on waiting on the sidelines, either, because he hurled himself into the fight, driving a number of werewolves out of harm’s way as the Stalker thrashed its spiked tail.

Once again, its tail struck the crossbow and knocked it on its side, trapping the last remaining arrow underneath it.

“We have to get it upright!” Torin screamed. Mikah came running back in our direction and together, while trying to avoid being pummeled by the Night Stalker’s tail, we set the crossbow upright.

I immediately dove to retrieve the arrow, and smiled when I saw that it was intact. “It’s not broken!” I announced.

Something knocked my feet out from under me and I flipped onto the ground, sending the arrow flying. I looked up as the Stalker’s tail putted the arrow somewhere out of reach.

*I have to get it, no matter what.*

I ignored Mikah and Torin’s shouts for me to stay down on the ground with them and raced in the direction I’d seen the arrow go, only to see it get knocked further.

“Fuck this!” I shouted.

I summoned my sword and braced myself, waiting until the tail swept back in my direction. As soon as the time was right, I slashed it. The Night Stalker hissed and slapped me with the flat side of one of the spikes, knocking me into Torin.

I’d barely landed before I was shoving up off him. I jumped over the tail, scooped up the arrow, and did a duck roll out of the way of the tail’s blows.

I scrambled to my feet just as Mikah pulled me back behind the crossbow.

“You shouldn’t have done that—it was super risky—but I’m glad you did,” Torin said.

“Get the crossbow into position,” I said. “If we hit it once, we can damn sure hit it again.”

With Mikah doing the lion’s share due to the broken wheel, we forced the crossbow around to aim at the Stalker again, and then I heard Greyson’s growl.

I turned in time to see Greyson, Colton, and Xavier sail through the air and land on the ground in a heap. My heart dropped, but my concern was short lived since they were all back on their feet in a matter of seconds.

I watched them running shoulder to shoulder, making a beeline for the creature with their sharp teeth bared. It was something, seeing them fighting together, their power and grace shining through as they attacked the Stalker while avoiding the worst of its attacks and its raging tail.

But now wasn’t the time to admire their battle acumen. We still had to win this fight.

The Stalker whipped its tail and slammed it to the ground, causing a shockwave that made everyone stumble. Howls of pain filled the air as it began using its tail like a club, knocking aside a group of Vanguard werewolves aside like they weighed nothing.

The Stalker let out an ear-splitting shriek, but without its dark magic amplifier it was nothing but a loud noise that expressed its anger as it lifted one of the Vanguard wolves in the air and ripped it in half with its claws.

Blood sprayed across the howling wolves and Lucian broke apart from the rest and leapt at the Stalker, tearing into its side and sending more blood flying.

I was torn between staying with the crossbow and joining the fight. I searched for weak spots and lobbed magic at the monster where I could, but with so many werewolves crowded around I couldn’t let the full force of it fly, so it wasn’t enough to take the Stalker down.

“Help me move the crossbow to the left!” I shouted at Mikah. The creature was slowly making its way in that direction as it continued fighting off the onslaught of werewolves. They were implementing the very definition of *death by a thousand cuts* against the Stalker, but I could tell it was going to take a lot more to kill it.

“Torin!” I shouted. “It’s time for us to—”

I turned, expecting to see Torin by my side, but he was nowhere to be found. Alarm flooded through me when I saw him walking beyond the crossbow and heading right for the creature.

*What the hell is he doing? This isn’t the time for him to be a hero.*

“Torin!” I screamed. “Come back!”

Torin turned to look at me with a determined look on his face. “You’re not the only Fae here with magic,” he said.

With that, he paused a few feet away from the creature and raised his hands which suddenly took on a blue glow. I realized he was about to use his reverse wound magic, but I didn’t think that was the right move being that Torin suffered so much emotionally when he leveraged that skill.

Not only that, but there was no way to know if Torin’s brand of magic would even work against the Night Stalker. My magic had only served as a deterrent, and obviously wasn’t enough to destroy him outright. What if Torin’s magic did even less damage than that?

I watched and waited as the glow emanating from Torin’s hands intensified. The monster trembled, shuddered, hissed in pain. It staggered a bit, and its tail finally stopped thrashing about.

I was hopeful. Maybe it was going to work. Maybe this would be over soon. The werewolves were looking between Torin and the Stalker, obviously sensing that Torin was making it even more vulnerable to their attacks.

They went at the Stalker with renewed ferocity, tearing savagely at its strange, otherworldly flesh. The glow in Torin’s hands brightened to an almost blinding degree and then he started to shake. He fell to his knees and then flew back as if blasted by some unseen force, smacking into a tree so hard it splintered.

Torin crumbled to the ground, motionless. I raced to his side.

“Torin! Are you okay?” I said, breathless with shock.

Horrified, I watched Torin writhe in agony as deep red wounds began to form all over his body.

**Episode 5790**

I was horrified at the state Torin was in. He was in bad shape, and the sight of him made my heart race. He was bleeding all over and more scars were opening by the second. His screams of pain nearly drowned out the sounds of the battle raging behind us.

I wasn’t sure what to do, how to stop this, nor did I fully understand why it had happened. The only thing I could think was that it had to be the dark magic at play. Maybe him using his magic had somehow backfired, which meant that as we feared, the arrow’s effects were likely waning.

I turned to watch the fight, realizing that there was a good chance the werewolves would fall again if the Stalker let out its deafening screech.

I took Torin’s hand in mine. “I’m going to have to kill the creature. It’s the only way.”

I couldn’t tell if Torin was hearing me or not, but it didn’t matter. If we didn’t stop this thing, nothing I said would mean a thing. I hurried back to the crossbow. I stood back and let Mikah aim the crossbow, but the creature was moving too fast, was covered in wolves, and the ground was shaking, making it hard to maintain steady footing. There was no way I could shoot the arrow right now.

I gritted my teeth when the horrible shriek filled the air. Once again, the werewolves were incapacitated. They fell to the ground, many of them partially shifting back to human form against their will, as if the sound was short circuiting their abilities.

“This isn’t good,” Mikah said. “They’re down for the count again. Vulnerable.”

“Its magic is coming back,” I said. “We have to hurry.”

I searched the mass of writhing werewolf bodies for Greyson and Xavier. Greyson was trying his hardest to fight the effects of the screech and was still trying to attack, but he could barely stand on his feet. There was no way he’d be able to win this fight in his state.

Xavier didn’t look much better, even as he buried his teeth into the creature’s tail, hanging on for dear life as the creature flailed it. Before long, he started to lose his grip. With him weakened, it would mean the creature could use its tail to land the killing blow.

I couldn’t let that happen.

*They don’t have much time. None of us do. I may not be vulnerable to that sound, but that Stalker can easily kill me just the same as it can kill anything. I have to take it out.*

I was going to have to take that shot. Even if I had the moss juice, it wouldn’t be enough, and it didn’t act fast enough to do us any justice on the battlefield.

“Mikah, wait,” I said. “I have an idea.” I ran past the dangerous tail and found Big Mac and Rowena huddling a safe distance away from the fight.

“I need your help,” I said to them.

For once, Big Mac didn’t question me, and she and Rowena followed me, narrowly avoiding getting crushed by the tail when it slammed down right in our path. Big Mac barely flinched, and Rowena lifted her hands as if to conjure a spell, but quickly thought better of it and rushed to follow me as I ran out of the monster’s reach.

When we got back to Mikah I told them what I was thinking. “We need the crossbow to move quicker so that we can get our aim in line with the target.”

“So, essentially you need this thing on a swivel?” Rowena said. I saw that Big Mac was already speaking words under her breath, starting a spell to help.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I need,” I said.

I stepped back and watched as the witches worked together to make the crossbow more agile. Then they held it steady long enough for Mikah and I to load the final arrow.

“Are you ready?” I said to Mikah, Rowena and Big Mac.

I could feel tension in the air between us. We were the only people not affected by the creature’s screech and that meant all of this was riding on us. We were the only thing that stood between total ruin, and total victory.

“Do you want help firing the crossbow?” Mikah asked me.

Big Mac scoffed. “She’s been training, let her do it.”

I didn’t have time to think all that much about the fact that Big Mac had just complimented me, but I grinned as I looked along the arrow and narrowed my gaze at the creature. It was twisted so that its chest was aimed in the other direction. It wasn’t facing me, and I remembered what set this off.

Xavier had acted as bait, but he wasn’t the only one who could tempt this thing. Any loud sound would do, any attempt to steal its attention would do.

I took a deep cleansing breath and then summoned my magic once again. I hit the Stalker with a small blast, just big enough to get the creature’s attention so that it would turn toward me. It did, falling right into my trap, and growling as it watched me with its beady red eyes.

“Hey asshole!” I shouted. “Ready to die?”

The creature dropped the werewolf it was holding and stalked toward me, showing its bloodied teeth, looking at me like it was interested to see what I had in store.

I gulped, almost losing my nerve as I took a few steps back until I was aligned with the trigger. Once again, I taunted the creature. My voice was surprisingly steady under the circumstances, and I was proud that I wasn’t showing that it had me absolutely shaken.

The creature roared, rearing back and opening its mouth, and then I pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

“What the fuck!” I cried out, confused and angry and frightened all at once. I quickly scanned the machine and saw that the trigger was jammed. A rock was wedged into the mechanism. Relieved that I’d identified the problem quickly, I slapped the rock clear of the machine just as the creature roared again.

With Rowena and Big Mac pivoting the crossbow giving it the effect of floating on ball bearings, I was able to perfect my aim. I pulled the trigger and the arrow snapped forward and lodged itself in the creature’s throat with a hideous thud that was music to my ears. I’d done it again. The creature staggered back with the force of the strike, and the shrieking stopped.

I leaped over the crossbow and summoned my magic sword again. Letting out a cry, I launched myself at the Stalker and struck it with all the force I could muster. It skidded backwards and crumpled to the ground.

I was about to leap on it to land another blow—which I hoped would be its last—when Big Mac yanked me back.

“I think they’ve got it from here, Cali.”

I followed Big Mac’s gaze and saw that the werewolves were recovering and already bolting for the creature. Maya was leading the pack. She shifted into wolf form and snapped her jaws around one of the creature’s arms, preventing it from ripping the arrow out.

Greyson, Xavier, and Colton were a team again, attacking the creature with everything they had, sending chunks of its misty black flesh skidding across the ground along with disgusting spurts of blood.

The others joined in and I watched with horror and awe as Porter, Ava, Lucian, Gabriel, Lola, Knox, and all the rest converged on the creature, tearing it to shreds. They were fighting like they knew this was the last stand. Like they knew if they didn’t take it out this time, all would be lost.

I was proud of them, and then I remembered Torin.

I rushed over to his side. He was barely clinging to consciousness, and his eyes moved as he watched the last of the blood flying. I helped him up to sit against a tree. He looked like hell, but the wounds were starting to heal.

*Thank god. There was no way I was prepared to lose Torin in this fight.*

He smiled. “You did it, Cali.”

The air was thick with howls as the werewolves took their last strikes and the monster took its last breath.

I held Torin close as the werewolves began celebrating their victory, shifting back to human form and pumping fists into the air, high fiving, embracing.

Greyson shifted as he walked over to us, wiping blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes were fixed right on me, a smile forming on his lips as he swooped toward me.

Xavier approached, too. He was covered in claw marks, puncture wounds, bruises, and it was clear he was going to need moss juice.

I started to get up to find it. “We need to get you moss juice right now!” I said.

“That can wait,” Xavier said before he gathered me into a bear hug. “You fucking *saved* *us*, Cali.”

**Episode 5791**

**Artemis**

I could hardly believe it was really Rishika as I watched her leap in the air and sail over my head, but I would know that thick, luxurious fur anywhere, would always recognize that power that she always wielded with such grace. When she let out that ferocious growl, it erased all doubt. Rishika was here to save me.

*And just in time, too.*

Before I knew it, strong arms closed around my waist as Marius scooped me into his arms. “Tabitha, I’ve got her!” he shouted, quickly pulling me clear of the clash between Rishika and Zale.

Everything was a blur, and I couldn’t keep track of who was doing what, so I kept my eyes on Rishika as she clamped her jaws on Zale’s leg and dragged him across the ground. Zale’s shrieks lit up the air as his blood sprayed across the grass. It was an awful sight to behold—but it couldn’t have happened to a more deserving guy.

Adair appeared with his magical whip in hand, and he lashed at Zale over and over, covering his body with bloody red welts. He didn’t let up for a second, and I had never been prouder of my uncle than I was watching him defend me while Tabitha positioned herself between me and Zale so that he couldn’t get to me again.

I took a deep breath, happy that my friends had come to save me right when I needed them. Before I knew it, exhaustion took over and I closed my eyes*.* The last thing I heard before I drifted off were Tabitha and Marius’s voices as they tried to keep me awake.

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I opened my eyes again sometime later. I groaned, feeling groggy and disconnected from the world around me as I struggled to clear my head. It took me longer than it should have to realize that I was indoors, staring at a wood plank ceiling.

*Wait, what happened? Where am I?*

I could only remember bits and pieces of what I assumed were the last few hours—Zale kidnapping me, the fierce, cold look in his eyes as he asked me questions I couldn’t remember, and then…the image of Rishika bounding into the clearing to save me.

I grimaced as I tried to sit up. The pain was sharp enough to clear my senses a little. I looked down and saw that my legs were bandaged and my arms, too.

*How the hell did I get here? Wasn’t I in the forest?*

I looked around and realized that I was in a modest hunting cabin. It was sparsely decorated—various animal heads mounted on the walls, rustic, well-used furniture, a simple kitchenette and a sitting area situated next to a small woodburning stove.

“Marius? Rishika? Adair?” I called out, thinking that maybe they’d brought me here to heal. But there was no response. I swung my feet to the floor but didn’t get up just yet. I was still trying to get a sense of where I was, and who might be lurking somewhere out of sight. I had a pit in my stomach—something felt off about this place.

*My friends wouldn’t have just left me here, right?*

I would have expected Rishika, at the very least, to be by my side when I woke up, and she definitely would have answered me when I called out for her.

I started to stand but was shocked into stillness by a strange voice.

“No, no, no! Get back in bed!”

Startled, I tried to reach for a weapon, but I didn’t have a thing on me. Panic bloomed in my chest until the source of the voice appeared—an old woman with greenish skin and purple hair.

“Foolish youngling, you’re supposed to be resting!” She swatted at my legs until I swung them back up onto the bed. “Now rest!”

*She must be some kind of Light Fae…but how did I end up with her?*

“Who are you? What am I doing here?”

The woman huffed. “I saved your life, girl!”

“What? No you didn’t…” I looked around, worried now that this woman was crazy. “Where are my friends?” I glanced around the room for something I could use to fend this woman off if I needed to. I was feeling a bit weak and out of sorts and I hated it.

“Your friends?” the woman said with a strange smile. “I’m sure I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? What did you do to them?”

The woman cocked her head to the side. “I assure you I did nothing to your friends…and what friends are we talking about, exactly? You were alone. I found you in the forest passed out cold after what looked like some horrible fight.” She smirked. “A fight you won. You got the best of the other one.”

“What? I was alone?” I was hoping that I’d heard her wrong, that Zale’s drugs were still coursing through my veins, and I was missing something.

The woman took a seat on a wooden stool beside my bed. “I think we got off to a poor start. My name is Memphis. Pleasure to meet you.”

I nodded at her, still too shaken to show anything but confusion.

“And you have to believe me when I say I have no idea what friends you’re talking about. You were all by yourself like I said…well except for the dead body lying next to you on the forest floor,” Memphis explained. “I didn’t ask questions then and I won’t now. I simply had the trees take care of it.”

“The trees?” So now the trees were cleaning up crime scenes? Was that what she meant by the “trees taking care of it?” What was going on here?

“Yes, they’re quite helpful in situations like the one I found you in. Seems like you’ve been through quite the ordeal.”

I shook my head, still trying to understand. “You’re sure I was alone?”

The woman nodded. “I’m sure.”

I thought about that, wondering how that could have been possible. Did Rishika and Marius and the others come help me and then, what, just left me there afterwards? That didn’t make any sense.

*The dead body had to be Zale. But how? The last thing I remember is Zale going in for the kill and Rishika ripping him off me. Did that not happen?*

“Oh dear, you look like you’re about to throw up,” Memphis remarked. “Why don’t you relax, take some deep breaths.”

I didn’t want to relax. I couldn’t. I shot up out of the bed, ignoring Memphis’s protests. But she was right. I did feel like I was going to puke.

*What happened to me? None of this makes any sense!*

A shock of dizziness made me waver on my feet. I stumbled in place and Memphis moved quicker than I would have imagined to steady me. She curved an arm around my waist as she helped me sit back down on the bed.

“You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you, youngling?” She gave me some water and I gulped it down, only just realizing how thirsty I was. “I found you and tried to patch you up the best I could.”

I nodded. “Thank you.” I was trying to be calm, but my mind was racing. “The dead man, how did he look?”

Memphis grimaced. “He looked very dead. Pulverized. But I suspect you did what you had to do, didn’t you?” She looked like she was deep in thought for a few beats before she said, “maybe I should have thought twice about bringing you in here?”

I wasn’t sure how to take that as I sipped more of the water…which tasted a little off. I closed my eyes and tried to think back to what had happened…and then it came to me.

I saw Zale walking toward me slowly, and then I’d felt a huge surge of magic deep inside of me. I’d cried out and a giant magic blast had burst free of my body, tearing through the trees like a tornado. It was strong enough to blow Zale right off me and then I’d let the magic take over.

I remembered summoning my magic bow and aiming it…then the arrow exploding when it struck Zale in the chest. And then all the magic had drained out of my body, and I fell to the ground, thinking I was about to die.

*My magic has never behaved like that before. What the hell came over me?*

The old woman was right, I’d been alone. My friends hadn’t been there. I’d imagined it—or more likely, hallucinated.

“Drink some more,” Memphis said, motioning to the glass in my hands.

I did, and the off-tasting water reminded me of Zale drugging me. I put the cup down, my heart racing. “What is this? It doesn’t taste like water.”

“It’s not,” Memphis said, smiling darkly. “It’s just a little something to calm your nerves.”

**Episode 5792**

**Greyson**

I wasn’t about to argue with Xavier—Cali had saved us and I couldn’t have been prouder of my mate. She’d proven herself once again, and I was overcome by how lucky I felt to have her.

I looked at her and smiled. “Good job, Cali. You saved our asses.”

Cali ducked her head and smiled, but I saw her eyes drag across Xavier. “Thank you, Greyson. I’m glad we took care of the monster, but Xavier’s pretty banged up. Are you okay?”

I took another good look at my brother and realized that the blood that covered him from head to toe was not the Night Stalker’s like I first thought, but his. Alarm bells clanged in my head. “Are you okay, man? You’re really bleeding a lot.” Not only that, but his eyes were red rimmed and hazy, and it looked like he was unsteady on his feet. I couldn’t remember ever seeing him so beat up.

Xavier shrugged it off. “I’m fine—”

“Give me a break,” Ava interrupted. “Don’t play the big bad wolf who can’t be harmed right now. This is serious shit.” Her words were harsh, but the concern was evident in her voice. “We’ve all seen what dark magic can do to werewolves. Don’t take your injuries lightly, X.”

“Please. That thing would have to do a lot more than that to—” Xavier floundered and stumbled into Cali. Ava immediately jumped in and grabbed him before slowly lowering him down to the ground.

“Someone help!” she said. “He doesn’t look good.”

“The moss juice!” Cali said. “He needs more. I think there’s some back at the Redwood pack house.” Cali knelt at Xavier’s side and my heart broke at the sight of the tortured look on her face.

I knew the longer we waited to get Xavier the moss juice, the worse he would get. I could shift, run back to the pack house and get the medicine, but it would take time—the one thing Xavier didn’t have.

Then I remembered: Big Mac and Rowena were here. They could blip to the house, grab the moss juice, and then bring it back. I was about to tell them to do just that when Torin came walking over. He looked like he’d been to hell and back, but as usual he was putting on a brave face.

“Here, I brought some moss juice with me,” he said, his voice raw and hoarse. He held out a vial and Cali gasped.

“If you had it this whole time, why didn’t you take some yourself?” she said.

Ava snatched the vial from Torin and poured it down Xavier’s throat. There was a lot to hold against Ava, but her care for my brother was never in question.

“I didn’t want to waste it,” Torin said after giving Ava a weary look.

Cali glared. “But Torin, you could have died!”

“Maybe, but I didn’t want to take the chance. We never tested that moss juice on Fae. For all we know, it’s as bad as poison for us.”

I smirked. “You’re either really foolish, or really brave.”

Torin smiled. “I think we both know I’m not foolish. I didn’t miss the slight bite in his tone. He’d fought tooth and nail to help save us, so I could understand why he wasn’t in the mood to be patronized.

Kendall interrupted, pulling me away. The sight of her covered in blood struck something in me, stirred my wolf into uneasiness. I looked away and tried to calm myself.

“What do you want?” I said.

“I think there’s going to be trouble with the MIB,” Kendall whispered.

I gave her a double take. “Trouble? Why would there be trouble?” I gestured at the creature’s remains. “We killed that thing. Isn’t that what we all wanted?”

Kendall shifted her gaze to Cali who was standing nearby pretending not to be watching us while she celebrated with the others.

“Yes, but in the process, she assaulted a group of MIB agents, including my boss. That’s an arrestable offense.”

I scoffed and shook my head at her. “You can’t be serious. They were in the way.”

“Agent Imamu might not see it that way.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Imamu speaking to his people in hushed voices. They were huddled far away from the rest of us, and they didn’t look pleased. My stomach tightened when one of them pointed at Cali.

“Fuck this,” I hissed. “I’m going to put a stop to this right now.”

I started toward Imamu, but Kendall put a hand on my arm, jarring my wolf.

“You don’t want to get on Agent Imamu’s bad side,” she said.

“And he doesn’t want to get on mine.”

I shrugged away from Kendall’s touch and continued over to Imamu just as two agents approached Cali.

“Caliana Hart, you’re under arrest for assaulting an MIB agent,” one of the stone-faced men said.

Cali’s eyes went wide. “What? What do you mean? I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Xavier, who was already starting to recover, was on his feet in a second. “Either of you lay a hand on her, you’ll regret it.”

Agent Imamu pinned Xavier to the spot with an unbothered look. “Is that a threat?”

Xavier scowled at him. “You’re damn right it is. Leave her alone.”

Everyone clamored for the MIB agents to back off, some of them rushing to Cali’s side to protect her.

I jumped at the sound of Kendall’s voice in my head. *I warned you, didn’t I? Don’t get involved.*

I snarled, annoyed that she was crossing the line and communicating with me this way, pissed that she was taking MIB’s side even though I wasn’t stupid enough to think that there was any love lost between her and Cali. Still, she had to see that Cali wasn’t in the wrong here.

“You all need to stand down!” Imamu thundered. “And if you don’t, you’ll all be arrested for obstructing official business.”

I glanced at Xavier, Jay, and Lola who hadn’t taken one step away from Cali. All three looked like they were on the verge of shifting.

*If I don’t stop this, it could get really ugly really quickly.*

I saw a flash of handcuffs in one of the agents’ hands and I glanced at Kendall.

*Why are you just standing there?! Can’t you do something?* I mind linked.

*Not if you get in the middle of it and make it worse,* she replied. *This is awful, I know, but if you want to prevent a war between MIB and your packs, then you need to stand down. I’ll do what I can.*

“Are we about to stand here and let this happen?” Xavier barked, getting dangerously close to Imamu. “Or correction, I’m not about to stand here and LET this happen.” He gave me a pointed look before shifting his gaze to Kendall.

“Stay out of it,” I said to him. “Be cool.”

Cali was in shock. Her mouth was hanging open while she gazed at the cuffs hanging in the agent’s hands. “I can’t believe this is happening! You’re not serious, are you?”

“Back off!” Lola shouted at the agents. “You’re making a big mistake.” Her eyes flashed and I saw that her fangs were showing. I could guess that if I saw it, Imamu saw it, too, though the man didn’t look shaken in the least.

“If you want her, you’re going to have to go through us,” Torin said.

I watched with rising anger as the agent with the cuffs quickly turned Cali around and clapped them on her wrists.

I grabbed Imamu and the man shrugged away violently, rearing back as if he were going to strike me. “If you want to arrest someone,” I said, unshaken, “Arrest me. If it weren’t for Cali, we’d all be dead, including you.”

Imamu eyed me with disdain and took a step away to put some distance between us. “That’s not for you to decide. The facts are that Caliana used deadly magical force against my agents.”

“Because your agents were going to hurt Xavier!” Cali shouted.

I reached out to Cali through mind link. *There’s no way I’m going to let them take you. You know that, right?*

I took a step back as Xavier got in my face. “What are you waiting for, brother? Aren’t you going to handle this?” His gaze flickered to Kendall once again. “Or are you too busy protecting someone else?”

I gritted my teeth, holding back from popping him one. How could he even suggest that I would prioritize another woman over Cali? He was obviously just trying to stir the pot, but now wasn’t the time to set him straight.

“Trust me,” I said through clenched teeth.

I turned to Kendall and met her eyes. My wolf was still howling, restless with confusion and agitation as I reached out to Kendall through mind link.

*If you don’t stop this, Kendall, I’m going to tell everyone who you are.*

**Episode 5793**

**Kendall**

I couldn’t help it, and I couldn’t control it, my wolf stirred to life as I locked eyes with Greyson. I was reacting to him even though he was pissing me off.

*Are you threatening me?* I mind linked.

His reply came quickly and without hesitation. *Fuck, yes. Either you get Imamu to drop this ridiculous bullshit, or everybody here will know not only who you are, but that you did nothing to stop Cali from getting arrested.*

I almost told him I didn’t give a shit if he told them. I wasn’t about to let him control me. I wasn’t his mate, and I wasn’t about to let someone else’s mate back me into a corner. But I knew how deep pack loyalty went. I didn’t want to make enemies of the Redwood…not that they assumed I had any more power than them since they had no idea I was an MIB agent. Beyond that, I didn’t think Cali deserved to be arrested.

I turned away from Greyson, cursing under my breath. I hated being put in this position. I’d hoped that Greyson was bluffing, but I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was serious.

I looked at Imamu where he stood surrounded by a bunch of angry werewolves—and they showed no signs of letting up. They were pissed and Cali was arguing, too, going toe to toe with Agent Imamu with her hands cuffed behind her back.

*I can take or leave Cali, but this isn’t right. She did save our asses.*

But Agent Imamu could be a real stickler for the rules. Maybe I could convince him to look the other way this time. But it wasn’t going to be easy…and I wouldn’t even do it if Greyson weren’t holding my feet to the fire.

I approached Agent Imamu and I could tell by the set of his jaw that he was expecting trouble. The hard look in his eyes said it all.

“You don’t want to do this, Agent Imamu,” I said evenly.

Imamu hit me with the same bored, unaffected look he’d been giving the angry wolves a second ago.

“How would you know what I want to do?” he said. “Anyway, it’s procedure. She attacked them, she has to be taken in.”

“But do I really need to point out the obvious? You’re arresting Greyson’s mate.”

*It feels weird to say that out loud. Especially when my wolf acts out whenever I’m within a few feet of the man.*

“Yes, because she blasted my people with magic. She could have killed them, and she was obstructing our operation,” Imamu said.

“Yes, she used her magic, but everyone’s fine. No one got hurt, and she managed to neutralize the Night Stalker. Instead of arresting her…you should be giving her a medal.”

Imamu narrowed his eyes at me. “Do you really believe that?”

I held his gaze, hoping to communicate what I couldn’t say to him out loud without blowing my cover all on my own. I also made sure not to even glance Greyson’s way. Imamu was nothing if not perceptive and I didn’t want him to get any inkling that Greyson was blackmailing me, putting me up to this.

“Take the fucking cuffs off her,” I said.

“Or what?” he shot back.

“Or you’ll look like you’re angry that Cali managed to do what you couldn’t, neutralize a threat that could have wreaked havoc on the world.”

Imamu pressed his lips tightly together and for a second, I thought he was going to order his men to arrest me, but then he waved at the agent who’d cuffed Cali.

“Let her go. We have places to be,” he said.

The agents looked angry and confused, especially the ones who’d been on the receiving end of Cali’s blast.

“You heard your boss, let her go!” Greyson barked at the agents.

I gave Greyson a hard look that I hoped told him to shut his mouth. I didn’t need him intervening right now. He’d asked me to take care of it and I did, I didn’t need him jumping in at the eleventh hour. Imamu wasn’t one to be pushed around and could easily change his mind just to prove a point.

I was relieved when Imamu gave the agents another stern nod and they released Cali, slipping the cuffs from her wrists.

The werewolves all cheered…well everyone except for Ava who just rolled her eyes. Greyson rushed over to Cali and wrapped her in his arms. I looked away, bothered that I was bothered at seeing their displays of affection.

*Cali wants to be his mate. I don’t. Simple as that. Why should I care if they’re sharing a tender moment?*

Too bad my wolf didn’t seem to agree and stirred in obvious protest.

“Examine the creatures’ remains. See what you can find,” Imamu barked at the agents. “We’re not leaving here empty handed.” He paused for a second to make sure they were doing as he’d asked before turning his attention to me. “When you return to Seattle, be prepared to explain yourself.”

“Fine,” I grunted, tired of being pulled between Greyson and my boss.

Imamu left me and went to join the agents as they looked over the creature’s bloody carcass. Despite the tension between me and Imamu, I wished I could take part in the investigation. I loved my job, but getting involved any further would be a dead giveaway.

I was growing more pissed by the second. I hated this whole situation, and I was especially mad at Greyson for threatening me. I took my career seriously, but obviously he didn’t give a shit if it came down to outing me or protecting Cali. But I had to give it to him, it was a smart move on his part.

I would never tell him that, though.

What I hated most was that he had anything over me. I needed to get some of my leverage back to put us back on even ground.

*Maybe I can dig something up on Greyson. Something he wouldn’t want anyone, especially his precious Cali, to know.*

I’d done a little digging on him already, but I hadn’t found anything good enough to hold over his head. But I was convinced that there was something to be found, some deep dark secret lurking somewhere in his past.

Greyson came up to me and I considered shifting and leaving before he could say another word, but my wolf wasn’t exactly being cooperative, and it made it known it wanted to stay and see what else Greyson had to say.

“I’m glad we could reach an agreement,” Greyson said.

“Blackmail isn’t an agreement,” I snarled.

Greyson shrugged. “Call it what you want. You know as well as I do that arresting Cali was a stupid move.”

I smiled. “I don’t know. She kind of looked good in cuffs.”

Greyson glared at me, and it was my turn to act nonchalant. Before he could say another word, I turned my back on him and went to examine the creature. I walked around it, stepping over pieces of fast-rotting flesh, bones, and the spiked tail.

*Would MIB’s weapon have even worked against this thing? It seemed damn near invincible.*

Certainly, the werewolf council’s magic negating crossbow did what it was supposed to do. At least the council had come through for us, even if Greyson had had to pull teeth to get their help.

I sighed when I saw Cali heading my way.

*She’s the last person I feel like making nice with right now after the stunt her mate just pulled.*

Cali came to stand beside me and said nothing at first. We both stood there in silence that wasn’t as awkward as it could’ve been, staring down at the creature’s mangled body.

“I think I should thank you,” Cali finally said.

“Really? Why?”

“I saw you talking to Agent Imamu. It’s obvious that whatever you said convinced him to release me.”

I shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. I just told him what happened. No big deal.”

Cali rubbed her wrists. “I was scared,” she said. “The thought of being taken into custody…it was a lot to digest. It was the last thing I wanted.”

“I think that’s a common feeling when someone’s in trouble with the law,” I said. “Anyway, it’s over. We can leave it at that.”

Cali smiled. “Thanks again.” She turned and started to head back to the others, passing Xavier on the way. When Xavier got close, I saw that his wounds were already on the mend—thanks to his own healing powers and the moss juice working together.

I watched him eye the MIB agents as they took pictures of the corpse. I grew tense as he stood there, wondering what he was thinking.

*Thanks to Greyson, Xavier knows I work for MIB. Would he have threatened to blackmail me, too?*

Of course he would have. He had no loyalty to me and would have tossed me over the side for Cali in a blink of an eye…just like Greyson.

Xavier turned to wave Greyson over. “We kicked that thing’s ass,” Xavier said to Greyson as soon as they were standing shoulder to shoulder, both of them studying the creature’s crumpled form. “One down, three to go.”

“Three to go?” I said, confused.

Xavier pointed up the mountain. “You heard me right. There are three more up there.”

**Episode 5794**

**Xavier**

“Don’t tell me you both somehow forgot what happened to me,” I said. “Remember? This thing snatched me up, dragged me to the mountaintop and tried to feed me to its babies! There are three little versions of this abomination up there waiting to grow into this thing!” I kicked the Night Stalker carcass to drive my point home.

“Fuck. I remember all right. I think my brain just blocked it out,” Kendall said.

I watched Greyson steal a glance at Imamu and the agents before pulling Kendall and me aside.

“Keep your voice down,” Greyson said. “I don’t think we should tell MIB about the other monsters. We all saw how they nearly botched our plan to take down this one.”

Kendall rolled her eyes. “Why would I do anything you tell me to do? You’re not my Alpha.”

“That doesn’t matter! This is about protecting ourselves from your boss’s mistakes. He nearly fucked things up in a real way!” Greyson snapped at her.

I looked between them, confused. “Why are you telling Kendall this in front of me?” I said.

Kendall rolled her eyes and snorted. “Because I know your big-mouthed brother told you and Cali about me being an MIB agent. There’s no secrets between us anymore.”

*Is that why Cali seemed upset yesterday?*

I gave Greyson a look. “You could have mentioned that. What is it with you and keeping me in the dark?”

Greyson smirked. “Sometimes that’s where you belong. Anyway, none of that matters. What matters is figuring out what we’re going to do about the other three Stalkers.”

“What’s there to figure out?” I said. “We kill them just like we killed this one.”

Greyson nodded at the crossbow. “With what? We used the last arrow.”

Kendall bit her lip in thought. Obviously, she was leaning toward doing what Greyson had asked, though I couldn’t imagine why. Maybe she was smart enough to see that we were the better folks for the job.

“Maybe I could get my hands on the MIB weapon,” Kendall said.

We all peered at the strange weapon lying on the ground near the agents.

“What does it do?” I asked.

“It either neutralizes the dark magic or it kills. We didn’t really get a chance to learn what it was capable of seeing as Cali had the reins during the battle,” Kendall replied.

“So you don’t know?” I said.

“What, do you want me to go ask?” Kendall deadpanned.

“Can you make an excuse to borrow it?” Greyson asked.

“Seriously, Greyson? MIB isn’t like a library.”

“And why isn’t it?” Greyson snapped, frustrated. “Why do all these ineffective groups like the Council and MIB spend all their time gatekeeping? Seems like they’d *want* to supply people with what they need to protect themselves.”

“What, do you think just anyone should be able to get their hands on weaponry like that?” Kendall said with both eyebrows cocked high over her purple eyes.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Obviously I’m not saying that!”

They erupted into a full-blown argument—granted in hushed tones—and I couldn’t help but wonder if their mate bond was responsible for them arguing like an old married couple. The tension between them was almost thick enough to see.

*Whatever’s going on here isn’t my problem. They can jump on each other for all I care…though I know Cali wouldn’t be too happy about that.*

“Listen, get back on track!” I snapped, cutting them both off. “All I care about is killing those baby monsters by any means necessary, and that’s all we should be discussing.”

I eyed the arrow sticking out of the Night Stalker’s mouth. It was still intact…wasn’t it? I waited for the agents to move off and then when I was sure none of them were watching, I yanked the arrow free of the Night Stalker’s mouth, releasing a spray of the monster’s blood that got all over me—not that anyone would notice since I was already bloody.

I returned to Greyson and Kendall, keeping clear of the agents.

“Now we have an arrow,” I whispered.

Greyson smiled as I approached. “What are the odds of us recovering more of those?”

“Hide it,” Kendall hissed. “If Imamu sees it, it’ll disappear forever.”

Greyson nodded at her. “I’m glad you’re starting to see things my way.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Kendall said. “Sticking with you guys on this will get me closer to the action than I ever would with Imamu calling the shots, that’s all.”

“I’m sure there are more,” I said. “I’ll take care of it.”

I walked the arrow over to Ava and slyly passed it into her waiting hands. “Keep an eye on that and don’t let those MIB pricks know that you have it.”

I knew I could trust Ava. I also knew that she was a great liar and held up to pressure better than almost anyone I knew.

“Got it,” she said. “Are you feeling okay?”

I shrugged. “I’ll live.”

“Lucky me,” Ava said, smiling a little and meaning it.

“We need to find more arrows,” I said. “That way we can hunt down that thing’s babies so they don’t get another chance to munch on me.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Ugh. Do you have to?”

“No, but I want to.”

“Of course you do. Guess it means nothing that the thing almost killed you. Haven’t you sacrificed enough?” she said.

I softened at the real concern I saw in her eyes. “I’m not going to be the bait this time, don’t worry. I’m going to be the hunter.”

Ava beamed. “That’s the spirit. Then I’m hunting alongside you.”

I wasn’t crazy about that. I remembered how intense it was facing those three hatchlings. I didn’t want Ava in harm’s way and preferred that she stayed clear of those things, but I knew better. It was the same as it was with Cali. Pushing her to the side in favor of taking care of this all on my own would never fly.

“Fine, we’ll go together,” I said. I left Ava and went to find Knox and Zipper. “I want you two to find the other arrows. They’re the key to us making sure that this thing’s offspring don’t rip us apart.”

Knox and Zipper hurried off with less grumbling than usual, obviously excited and eager to be the heroes.

I went to speak to Greyson and the other Alphas and explained that our next target was the babies.

“Make sure to be discreet as we prepare,” I said, pleased when everyone agreed to join. We’d all made it this far together; it was time to finish it. Now it was time to get going.

“We’re heading out,” Greyson told Imamu.

“Great. I’m going to ask that you all make yourselves available in the event we call to question you about today’s events,” Imamu said.

We all agreed, and then I put as much distance between me and the agents as I could while I waited for Zipper and Knox to return.

“Any luck?” I asked when they finally appeared.

Knox held out a broken arrow shaft. “This was all we could find.”

I wasn’t happy about that, but at least we had the one.

I led the Samaras away from the agents, circling back toward the base of the mountain, the place all the packs had agreed to meet so we could start our climb. The mood was somber yet determined as we marched toward the nest.

“What about the crossbow?” Cali asked when she spotted me with the arrows. She threw a skeptical look at the mountain.

“Rowena or Big Mac can blip it up there,” Greyson suggested.

“That won’t work,” I said. “The crossbow is unwieldy at best. There’s no way we’ll be able to get it level on the steep slope. And how would we even get it inside the nest?”

“You have a point,” Cali said, looking defeated.

“Then why did we go to all that trouble looking for more arrows?” Knox complained.

I took the whole arrow from Ava and tested its weight in my hands. “Because I’m going to be the crossbow,” I said.

Cali looked at me with confusion. “How?”

I smiled as I demonstrated jabbing the arrow like a sword. I remembered the babies opening their mouths to eat me. “All I have to do is get close enough and then I’ll shred one of them with it, then we’ll use it on the other two in the same way.”

Everyone seemed to be on board with my plan…except for Cali and Ava.

“Why the fuck does it always have to be you?” Ava hissed.

“Who else would be better?” I replied, not wanting to get into it with Ava. “I’m the Samara Alpha and I’ve made my decision. It may not be the best plan, but it’s the only one we’ve got.”

Ava rolled her eyes and stormed past me to join the other Samara. I understood why she was afraid, but I didn’t have time to doubt this. I had to be confident, or it really wouldn’t work.

Before long, I spotted the nest entrance up ahead. My blood boiled with a thirst for vengeance. I paused just before we reached our destination.

“Only Alphas, Cali, Torin, and Mikah should come the rest of the way,” I said.

A round of objections rose up from the gathered wolves, especially Ava.

“You said I could hunt by your side,” Ava snapped, looking at me like she wanted to use one of the arrows on me.

“I know, but the cave isn’t big enough for all of us, and the dark magic will overpower all the werewolves. If the creatures somehow escape, you’ll all be here waiting for them.”

Ava said nothing, just crossed her arms over her chest and looked away. I knew she was angry, but this wasn’t the time to smooth things over.

I led the selected crew to the nest’s entrance, my adrenaline pumping.

Greyson and I locked eyes, then I jumped through the mouth of the cave with my arrow at the ready…but the nest was empty. The baby Night Stalkers were gone.

**Episode 5795**

Like everyone else, I was staring at the large fragments of eggshell on the cave floor mixed in with the remains of a nest. That was the only trace of the babies that had nearly torn Xavier to shreds.

Part of me was relieved. None of us could be sure that the arrow would work the same in Xavier’s hands, or if it even had any power left if it did. The idea of Xavier trying to drive the arrow into the Night Stalker’s mouth while it was actively trying to eat him gave me chills. Now, maybe we could regroup and make sure that we could really kill these things.

Xavier looked back at us. “They must have flown the coop. Literally.” He shook his head. “Fuck. I was so ready to take them out one by one.”

“You still will,” Greyson said. “We just have to track them. There’s no way in hell we’re going to let them get away.”

Dejected, we all left the cave to join the others waiting patiently outside. Greyson made quick work of explaining what we’d found—or rather—what we hadn’t, and then Greyson shifted to wolf form along with the others and we were on the move, trying to pick up the monsters’ trail.

Torin was riding on Jay’s back, Mikah was on Gabriel’s, Rowena was on Porter’s and Big Mac, clearly not interested in riding on Xavier or Colton’s back, had chosen Maya instead. I felt safe and protected with all my friends around me, but deep down, there was a bit of fear that the babies could sneak up and catch us by surprise.

There was no turning back. I knew that I couldn’t convince Xavier to take a second to regroup—he was determined to kill these things as revenge for the pain and torture they’d put him through, and I understood that more than he knew.

I wrapped my arms tighter around Greyson’s neck and a second later, I heard his voice in my mind.

*Thanks again for what you did, saving everyone from the Night Stalker. You’re so amazing, so brave, so strong. I don’t know what I did to deserve you but whatever it is, I’m happy I did it.*

His praise made me feel warm all over. *I only did what I had to do,* I replied. *What any good Luna would have done.*

*Stop being modest, especially when I’m pretty sure no other Luna could have done what you did. You’re special Cali. Simple as that.*

I glanced at Ava, wondering if she would ever have the guts to admit the same to me.

*Doubtful. Ava would never admit that I’ve done anything right. It would ruin her devotion to making me feel like I don’t measure up to her or any other Luna. That I’m a failure simply because I’m not a werewolf.*

*Got it,* Greyson suddenly said. *I’ve picked up their scents.*

He made a sharp turn, leading everyone up a thickly wooded section of the mountain’s steep slope. We ran for what felt like miles before he stopped suddenly and lifted his nose.

*The scents diverge here,* he explained.

A second later he was moving in another direction, this time down toward the base of the mountain. Then he stopped so suddenly I nearly flew off his back. But I quickly saw why: a Night Stalker was heading our way.

It wasn’t nearly as large as the one we’d killed, but it was still large enough to make me wonder if facing off with this thing was a really bad idea.

*Careful,* Greyson mind linked. *Don’t underestimate this thing just because it’s smaller than the other one.*

*Believe me, I’m not,* I replied. I was only hoping it would keep its mouth shut and refrain from screeching like its mother, putting the werewolves out of commission.

I slid off Greyson’s back slowly, not wanting to make any sudden moves. With similar caution, the rest of the wolves formed a line, blocking the Stalker in. It snarled, twisting its head back and forth as it took a few more steps toward us.

Xavier was the only wolf to shift back to human form, and he wasted no time advancing on the creature, gripping the arrow in his hand like it was a sword.

*I should be doing this,* I thought to myself. *If that thing decides to screech and incapacitate Xavier, things will take a turn and we might not be able to save him.*

I reached out to Xavier through mind link, hoping he would give up on trying to be the hero and listen to reason.

*I think I should be the one to do this, Xavier. It’s too risky for you and you nearly died last time!*

Before Xavier could reply, and before I could say anymore, the creature lunged and Xavier roared, moving ahead fearlessly. My heart was pounding as I watched them run at each other until Xavier came to a stop just a few yards shy of the creature.

It growled, its strange eyes roving over Xavier while it snapped its jaws. I held my breath, hoping that it wouldn’t make the sound that could turn the tide in its favor.

“As soon as I jab it, go in for the kill,” Xavier said to us. The wolves growled their agreement and once again, I reached out to Xavier, warning him to be careful, reminding him that I was more than willing to take over for him.

But I knew better. There was no way Xavier was going to let me get within striking distance of that thing.

The only thing I was sure of was that I couldn’t handle seeing him hurt again. Not like before. What if Torin hadn’t brought the moss juice? What would we have done then? And what if there wasn’t enough left to save him if the creature got the advantage over him?

To my horror, Xavier started egging the Night Stalker on.

“What’s the problem? Looking for your mother?” Xavier hissed. “She’s dead! And you’re next!”

The creature growled and took another step forward, swiftly shortening the distance between them.

“Come on, open that big mouth of yours. I’ve got something for you,” Xavier said, his voice low and menacing.

The creature opened its mouth and let out the deafening scream. Xavier staggered for a beat before jolting forward and ramming the arrow right into the creature’s open mouth. It stopped screeching and immediately snapped its mouth closed, nearly snapping the arrow and Xavier’s arm in the process.

Xavier growled in surprise, and I watched with bated breath as Xavier yanked his arm free.

*Thank god that thing didn’t bite it off!*

There was a momentary lull as the creature hesitated, as if confused by the arrow jabbed into its mouth.

Greyson’s roar sent the signal, and within a split second, the werewolves swarmed the Night Stalker with impressive ferocity.

Blood sprayed everywhere as they tore into the screaming Stalker, fighting with its tail, avoiding its claws, its jaws, and taking every chance they got to tear at its flesh. It didn’t take long for them to overtake it, and in a matter of minutes, the creature fell to the ground, dead.

Then everything was quiet. As awful and dangerous as the creature was, I didn’t take much pleasure from seeing it lying there ripped to shreds, bleeding out on the soft ground. Everyone was watching the creature with caution, checking for any sign of life.

“It’s dead,” Xavier said, breaking the tense silence. He stepped close and grabbed the arrow. Mikah forced the Stalker’s mouth open with a sickeningly wet sucking sound, and Xavier quickly yanked the arrow free.

A chunk of flesh was stuck to the point, likely a hunk of the creature’s throat, and Xavier shook it off nonchalantly and wiped it on the mossy ground. I was happy to see that the arrow was still intact.

*It worked. I can’t believe it. He did it.*

The arrow’s power had stopped the creature’s shrieking, negating its dark magic powers. Our plan had worked, and I was overcome with relief.

I rushed over to Xavier and threw my arms around his neck. This time he was the hero. He’d done it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ava’s face go red with anger. Her growl cut through the excited shouts from the others, but I didn’t care.

*Like it or not, he’s still my mate and I’m not going to hold back just because she doesn’t like it.*

I hugged Xavier while everyone cheered, all in human form now, to celebrate our victory. I’d been worried, but now I realized I shouldn’t have been. Xavier had never failed to impress me, and today was no different. He’d shown that he could face anything, even a creature that could bring a werewolf to its knees just by making a sound.

“We have to backtrack!” Greyson shouted over the cheering, quieting everyone down. “Let’s not forget, there are still two creatures out here somewhere. We’re not out of the woods just yet.”

**Episode 5796**

**Greyson**

I was proud of Xavier, but I knew there wasn’t time to waste standing around praising him. I wasn’t about to admit it to anyone, but the thought of two more of these creatures roaming around out here somewhere was extremely unsettling.

The arrow had worked…this time. But I’d seen up close just how easily Xavier could have lost his arm trying to jab it at the back of the creature’s throat.

*What if he’s not so lucky next time and that thing rips his arm off? He won’t heal from that. We have to be careful.*

With Cali planted firmly on my back, I led the pack in the direction of where the monster’s scents had diverged. I was taking the lead on this, and that meant our success or our failure was riding on me alone.

Xavier had already proven that he could do what needed to be done once we found the Stalker, and now I needed to make sure we tracked the next two down without letting one of them get the jump on us first. It was a burden I was more than willing to carry.

We arrived at another point, about a mile from the other, where the two remaining scents diverged. I had to figure out which trail to follow. After some quick thinking and with everyone’s eyes on me, I decided to follow the fainter of the two scents since the stronger one would be much easier to pick up and follow later…assuming there was a later.

If we didn’t kill the next one, it wouldn’t matter. We’d all be dead, and the remaining Night Stalkers would go on to take out every other werewolf it could get its claws on.

*But I’m not going to let that happen.*

I sensed that Kendall was close behind me, and I reached out to her through mind link.

*I didn’t get a chance to thank you for what you did.*

Kendall’s response was immediate and dry. *Thank me? As if you gave me a choice in the matter.*

*You didn’t give me a choice. I did what I had to do. Consider us even? No hard feelings?*

There was a long pause where I thought she wasn’t going to answer before she said, *Sure. Whatever, Grey. I didn’t realize we were keeping score.*

I smiled, glad that she wasn’t threatening me again. I would take that as a win. And I was relieved that at least now I didn’t have to pretend to Kendall that Cali and Xavier were in the dark about her MIB ties.

I turned my attention back to the trail ahead. After a few more minutes, the trail opened into a clearing bordering a sheer cliff. The Night Stalker’s scent ended here.

I stopped and looked around, confused.

*What the hell. Where is it?*

Everyone shifted to human form, looking around in confusion.

“Up there!” Cali shouted.

I looked up just in time to see the creature soaring above us with its wings spread out. It looked a hell of a lot bigger than the one we’d just killed, but it was still a touch smaller than the first one.

“It must have had a major growth spurt,” Xavier said as he came up beside me, his eyes glued to the creature as it swooped and dipped above us.

“How in the heck are we going to kill that thing! It’s airborne!” Maya said. “Last I checked, werewolves can’t fly.”

“Maybe one of us can throw the arrow at it?” Colton said.

I gave Colton a look. “Seriously?”

“What?” Colton sputtered. “It was just a suggestion. At least I’m offering ideas!”

Maya snorted and patted Colton’s back. “I love you, babe, but let’s leave the ideas to the Alphas for now.”

“Way to be condescending,” Colton muttered. “Let’s not forget how many times I’ve saved your ass.”

Colton stalked off and Maya followed.

“I can be the bait again,” Xavier said.

“Are you fucking serious?” Ava shrieked. “You’ve risked enough.” She looked around at everyone. “Why don’t one of you big bad Alphas be the bait this time and quit offering my mate up for the slaughter?”

“No one’s offered him up,” Porter said. “He’s volunteered each and every time.”

“And it worked,” Mace said.

“It did,” I said.

“Why fix what isn’t broken?” Lucian offered, as if just to be a part of the discussion. “The creature likes what it likes, no use giving it a taste for the rest of us.”

Ava glared at all the Alphas. “Yeah, just as long as it’s *my* mate that gets broken in the process, huh? You’re all a bunch of assholes.”

Xavier tried to pull Ava to the side to talk to her, but she snatched away from him. “No. Don’t try to handle me. I’m saying no. You don’t ever listen to me any other time, but you’re going to listen this time. You are *not* going to be that thing’s bait.”

We all went silent as the creature swooped low and perched itself on an outcropping above us.

“What the hell is it doing?” Rowena said under her breath. She was moving her hands as if she was waiting to conjure up a spell to protect us, and I was reminded of how happy I was to have witches along for this ride.

We all gasped when it suddenly disappeared.

“Looks like it’s got a lair or something up there,” Big Mac said. “Probably a cave.”

“Good, then we can just climb in there and kill it,” Xavier said. “It’ll be easier to corner it that way, and at least it’s not airborne anymore. That would have complicated things.”

I gazed up at the outcropping. “Looks like it can’t be more than a fifty-yard climb, and it’s not completely vertical, so that’s a plus.”

Lucian cleared his throat. “I should mention that I’ve scaled many of the world’s tallest peaks, so I’m happy to lead the way.”

I was tempted to let Lucian risk his neck for once, but then again, we needed our best shot and Lucian wasn’t it.

“Thanks, but no thanks, Lucian,” I said. “Xavier and I will lead the charge.”

“Surprise, surprise,” Lucian muttered.

“Give me the arrow,” I said to Xavier. “I’ll go after it first.” I gave Ava a pointed look and for once, she looked back with thanks in her eyes. “The rest of you can follow,” I said.

Cali gasped. “But Greyson, you’re a werewolf, what about the dark magic? What if it screeches?”

“I’m going to jab it before it gets the chance…hopefully.”

Xavier passed me the arrow, and I sensed his hesitation. But as much as Xavier and I were often on different pages, we could at least agree that we could handle ourselves, and so Xavier wasn’t about to tell me I should reconsider.

“We’ll be right behind you,” he said.

With the arrow in hand, I eyed the cliff. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to scale it while holding the arrow.

Cali must have read my mind because she took the arrow from me. “I’ll hold it,” she said. Then she wrapped her arms and legs around me with the arrow clenched in her hand.

“Hold on tight,” I said to her as I started pulling myself up the outcropping. I shifted my hands so that I could use my claws to hold onto the rock. I looked down to see Xavier, Cali, Kendall, Maya, Porter, and the other Alphas following while the rest waited and watched at the bottom.

It didn’t take long to reach the ledge, and as Big Mac had suggested, there was a cave big enough to provide shelter for the young Night Stalker. With Cali hanging on, I pulled us up over the ledge. Just as I looked down to tell the others that I’d found the cave, part of the ledge began to crumble, sending a cascade of rocks showering down below.

I fell back as the ground gave way under my feet. I heard Kendall’s shouts and my wolf reacted with alarm. Once I’d regained my footing, I dropped to my knees and looked over the edge. My stomach twisted. Kendall was hanging from a rock by one shifted hand, blood dripping from her forehead.

Even from where I was, I could see the fear shining in her purple eyes.

“She needs help,” I said.

“Who?” Cali said as she crawled to my side. “Oh my god! Go help her!”

I hesitated, and Cali urged me on.

“Go, Greyson! I have the arrow; I have my magic. I’ll be okay. GO!”

“Okay,” I said. “Don’t do anything without me, okay? Just stay here and I’ll be right back.”

I swung one leg over the ledge and took one look back at Cali before I threw my other leg over and descended as quickly as I could to Kendall.

I was just about there when I heard Cali’s scream. A wave of sweat drenched my body, and I went cold as I looked up to see the creature swoop down to take Cali into its claws and soar into the air.

**Episode 5797**

I screamed in pain as the creature dug its claws into me. I couldn’t believe how things had gone so far left, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

I nearly dropped the arrow as the Night Stalker made a sudden move and soared high up into the air. The air was cool and thin, and I stopped screaming long enough to gasp more breath into my lungs as we gained altitude.

My heart was still racing from the shock of what had happened—one minute I was staring down at Greyson, waiting for him to save Kendall, and the next I was in the creature’s clutches.

I didn’t even see it coming, and by the time I’d realized, it was too late. I kept screaming as we gained altitude, even though it wasn’t getting any easier to breathe at such heights. It was all I could do to keep the arrow in my hands. The creature let out its bloodcurdling screech and I watched the werewolves down below covering their ears and shrinking in pain.

*I have to stop this! But how? This thing is way more powerful than me and it’s got the upper hand. What can I do?*

My head spinning from the pain and fear, I tightened my hold on the arrow as the creature continued shrieking with its huge mouth wide open. I wanted nothing more than to choke this thing to death by stabbing the arrow into its mouth, but I was at the wrong angle and it was almost a guarantee that I would miss my target.

I started flailing, trying to stab it with the arrow anywhere I could, but each time I did the creature pivoted and swerved and the arrow glanced off its body. I could tell that my attempts were angering it, and it tightened its grip, digging its claws deeper into my shoulder.

The pain was now so intense that the arrow began to slip from my fingers. I caught it by the tail feather just before it slipped out of reach. I clutched it against my chest like it was the most precious thing in the world, because at this moment, it was.

The creature jerked in another direction, and I flailed as I swung to and fro. The ground was so far away now that there was no doubt I would die if I fell, so this precarious position I was in wasn’t sitting well with me.

The Night Stalker let out another screech as it pulled me tighter against its body. I didn’t want to be so close to it, but at least I felt more secure and like it wasn’t planning to drop me to my death at any second.

*I don’t have to strike it in the mouth to negate its dark magic…I can hit it in the chest or wing or anywhere. I just have to do something.*

I scrambled to remember exactly what my grandfather had told me…and then it came rushing back to me. I had to hit it in the throat or just below the rib cage. Those were its weak spots, and the arrow would do next to no damage if I didn’t focus there.

I looked up at the fearsome beast, trying to figure out where its rib cage began and ended. I couldn’t be sure since it wasn’t like I had an anatomical make up of this thing in my mind, so I just chose a spot that seemed like the right one. With a shaky hand and my heart slamming away in my chest, I aimed the arrow and thrusted it into the Night Stalker with all my strength.

The arrow glanced shy of its mark once again as the creature made another quick change of direction. Not only that, but the sudden movement snapped the arrow in half and the shaft fell. I watched in horror as the splintered arrow plummeted out of view.

*There goes the only chance we had of killing this thing. Now what am I going to do?*

My blood ran cold when I heard a strange, terrifying voice in my mind.

*I will kill you for what you’ve done! Your magic only makes me stronger.*

The creature was speaking to me, mind linking! How could it tap into this werewolf power when it wasn’t a werewolf? Did this thing follow any rules? My fear wouldn’t let me just hang there in its claws, so I began struggling, throwing wild strikes at it to try and veer it off course to buy myself more time to make my next move.

“Stay out of my head!” I shouted. It angered me that it could communicate with me like my mates did. That was something special that Xavier and Greyson and I shared, and I didn’t want this evil thing anywhere near my thoughts. I felt violated and frightened of learning what else it was capable of.

I thought about what it had said—that my magic would make it stronger. But what if I just blasted the hell out of it?

*Torin’s magic backfired on him when he tried to use it against this thing’s parent, but his magic is very different from mine and maybe that means I can still use it.*

I thought back to how I’d used my magic against the parent a few times, so maybe this thing just wasn’t aware of what I had in store for it. It

I summoned my magic, waited for it to build to its peak, and then I placed my hands flat against the creature’s strange, smooth skin. It repulsed me to touch it, but I couldn’t afford to miss, and this was going to be a direct shot if I pulled this off.

I unleashed the magic and the force of it nearly blasted me right out of the creature’s grip. It screeched in pain and swooped and plummeted about a hundred feet before it righted itself.

*Good. Looks like it’s vulnerable to my magic after all, but it’s obviously going to take a little more firepower to kill this thing, or at least wound it.*

I cursed and summoned my magic again, grabbed the creature with both hands and let it rip once more, unleashing every bit of magic I’d gathered—right down to what I had waiting in reserve. The magic connected with a huge explosion and blood sprayed against my face. I screamed in shock and disgust as the creature howled and reared upward before it began freefalling.

*Shoot! I should have thought this through. If it crashes, I crash along with it! I should have waited until it landed!*

The creature probably would have taken me somewhere, maybe to another lair, to kill me, though I couldn’t pretend to know what this thing was thinking. But if I’d waited until we were both on solid ground and blasted it then, I wouldn’t be potentially plunging to my death right now.

Panic welled up inside of me as I realized just how grave my mistake was.

*Oh no. I’m going to die! This is it. There’s no way I can survive this fall.*

The only consolation was that the creature was going to die, too. That way, now Greyson and Xavier and the others would only have one more Night Stalker to deal with.

I closed my eyes and waited for the inevitable. My life didn’t exactly flash before my eyes, but I thought about my mates, reliving the amazing, tender moments I’d shared with each of them. I’d lived a good life, even in the complicated moments that had characterized our relationships.

I wished I could say goodbye, I wished I could see them one last time. I loved them both so much and I knew that my death was going to tear them apart…but at least I’d done my best to help save them.

It took me a few beats to notice that I wasn’t in as much pain as before. In the next moment, I opened my eyes and realized why. The creature had released me and was flying upward and away from me, seemingly recovered from my attacks.

The wind swallowed my screams as I fell. I flailed and kicked as I plunged toward the side of a cliff. This was it. I *was* going to die, and the creature was going to live. I failed.

From some distance, I couldn’t tell how far, I heard the werewolves calling my name. I tried to see who it was—could it be Greyson? Xavier? I supposed it didn’t really matter since I only had mere seconds to live. This was it. This was the end.

I felt a sudden jolt and the pain was back, and it took me longer than it should have to realize that I hadn’t splattered on the ground and was back in the creature’s clutches. It had swooped back down to catch me, and its voice was ringing in the depths of my mind once again.

*You belong to me now. I will devour every last drop of your magic.*

**Episode 5798**

I couldn’t stop shaking. I’d been so sure of my imminent death only to have this awful beast invade my head with more ominous bullshit…but at least I wasn’t a broken mess on the ground. I didn’t know why it saved me, but it didn’t give me a good feeling. I was sure it had plans for me that would turn out much worse than the quick death falling would have provided.

Something jarred the Night Stalker, causing it to swoop dangerously low to the ground. I looked up and saw that Maya had landed on the creature’s back with one half of the arrow in her hand. The creature opened its mouth and let out only one second of the ear-splitting screech before Maya drove the arrow into the creature’s chest.

It shook and quaked and then we all crashed to the ground, rolling together in a tangled heap. It was all I could do to keep the creature and Maya from crushing me.

As soon as we came to a stop, Maya shifted, got her footing, and then attacked the creature aggressively as it clawed and pulled at the half arrow, trying to yank it out of its chest.

I crawled clear of them both with every bone and muscle in my body aching. I felt like I was going to vomit. I watched as Colton led the pack to close in on the creature and join the fight. I turned away with no interest in watching them tear the creature apart even though I was very happy it was happening.

I wiped the blood from my eyes just after I saw Xavier and Greyson running to join in the fight. Someone took me gently by the hand.

“Hey, you okay?” It was Torin.

I forced a smile. “Do I look okay?” I felt like I’d just been run through a meat grinder. My stomach burned as badly as my eyes, my shoulder was bleeding and stung like hell, and my legs felt like they may never work right again, all from being handled so roughly by the Night Stalker.

Torin placed a hand over mine and it glowed blue. I felt a pleasant, warm sensation and then a second later, the pain was only a memory. I thanked him with a hug, but it was cut short by the sound of a howl, and then seconds later, more howls joined in.

I didn’t need to look to know that the creature was dead. Relief filled my chest.

*Three down, one more to go.*

“You okay?” I turned to see Greyson and Xavier standing behind us. I hugged them both and for once, I wasn’t worried about stepping on anyone’s toes by showing them how much I cared. I missed both and I wasn’t going to pretend anything different.

Colton’s shouting interrupted the moment.

“What were you thinking, Maya? Or were you not thinking at all? We have kids now. You can’t go all G.I. Jane anymore.”

I broke away from Xavier and Greyson and ran to Maya’s side. I pulled her into a hug, not caring that she went stiff at the contact.

“Maya, thank you! You saved my life!”

Maya peeled my hands off her, clearly annoyed. “I just saw an opportunity and I took it,” she said. “I’m glad you didn’t die, though. Don’t make it a thing.”

“Um…okay?” I said.

“I can’t believe you jumped on that thing while it was in midair!” Colton said.

“Why would I miss my chance? It had finally flown low enough for me to pounce, and I had the arrow in hand. There was no other option as far as I’m concerned.”

“But it was so dangerous! You could have died!” Colton said.

“But I didn’t, and it’s over. I’m standing right here in one piece. All of us are. I’m an Alpha, and I had an obligation to my pack.” She gave Xavier and Greyson a look. “And to my alliance.”

“Maya, I’m happy you took the risk…but I get why Colton’s upset. You could have been killed,” I said.

Maya gave me a death stare and I shrank back, realizing that it was best for me not to get between her and Colton right now.

“Did you think about the twins for even a second? Did you consider the obligation you have to them?” Colton said. There was no hint of joking in his tone, and I even sensed a bit of anger. It was rare to see Colton being so serious and passionate, but I understood where he was coming from even if Maya’s daring behavior had benefited me.

“You want to know the real reason I did it? And it wasn’t to save Cali,” Maya said before shooting me an apologetic look. “I did it because if that thing survived, no werewolf would be safe, and that includes Orion and Lyra. I did it to protect them.”

“Sure, whatever you say,” Colton grumbled. “But I would have had a hell of a time explaining that to our kids if you didn’t survive that little stunt of yours.”

“All I know, Maya, is that I think you’re a badass,” I said, unable to help myself. “And I’m confused…how did you end up with the arrow?”

“I saw it fall when you were fighting with that thing, and I happened to be about three feet from where it landed. A bit of luck, I guess.” She smiled. “Or it was a sign.”

“Thanks for doing what you did, Maya,” Greyson said. “You should claim the arrow so we can use it again.”

“Don’t mention it. All I know is I will never get that smell of that creature out of my head for as long as I live—so if someone else wants to do the honors, I’d appreciate it.”

“I’ll do it,” Lucian said.

Before he could, Greyson stepped forward. “No, I will. I was the one who was supposed to use it, after all.”

That reminded me of the reason Greyson and I had been separated in the first place. “How is Kendall?”

She stepped into view. “I’ll live,” she said.

Greyson moved to get the arrow from the creature’s chest while Colton and Maya continued bickering amongst themselves and Kendall and I stood by in an awkward silence.

Greyson returned holding the bloody arrow half in his hand. “We still have one more monster to kill, and I’ll lead us all back to where the scents diverged so we can make that happen,” he said.

Everyone started to gather, but Greyson turned to me, his eyes rimmed with guilt. “I never should have left you behind. I feel like all of that was my fault.”

I hugged him tight, grateful that I’d survived and could touch him again. “Don’t you blame yourself for even one second. You have not one thing to feel guilty about. I told you to go, and you did the right thing. Kendall was in trouble.”

“Yes, but I still shouldn’t have left you.”

“Don’t obsess over it, Greyson. Everything worked out. You saved Kendall, and I’m okay, too. I never would have forgiven you if you didn’t try to help.” I paused, wishing that Kendall wasn’t his mate, but I wasn’t about to bring that up. Not right now.

“I’m pretty sure you would have done that for anyone who needed your help,” I added.

Greyson kissed me and smiled. “Fine. I’m glad you’re okay. Just…don’t get snatched up by a baby Night Stalker again, okay? My heart can’t take it.” He pulled back and his expression was serious. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I said as I hugged him again.

Xavier’s gruff voice broke the moment. “Are we going to finish this or what? I don’t want to lose daylight.”

The obvious edge in his voice was no surprise, and it made me pull away from Greyson as if I’d done something wrong. I had to wonder if he was jealous, though I knew that by now, that wasn’t really a question.

“And for the record,” Xavier said, stepping close to Greyson, “I never would have left Cali alone up there.”

Greyson tightened his jaw as he raised his gaze to meet Xavier’s head-on.

I quickly moved between them, fearing that this could turn into a fight—something that hadn’t happened for a long time. Now wasn’t the time to pick that tradition up again. We had much bigger fish to fry, and I was hoping they both realized that.

Mace stepped in. “You two can deal with your personal shit later. We have a monster to kill and then we can all get back to our lives.”

“Not necessarily,” Big Mac interrupted.

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “Big Mac, what do you mean?”

“Rowena and I have been talking. It’s great that you’ve killed three out of four of these creatures, but the question remains, what happens to all the dark magic they released when they died?”

**Episode 5799**

**Xavier**

“Do you really think that’s a problem? That the dark magic was released and is a threat now?” Cali asked Big Mac while we all crowded around her.

“We don’t really know,” Big Mac replied. “All we know is that dark magic just doesn’t disappear because you kill its host. It needs somewhere to go, which begs the question, where did all that magic go when you killed those three creatures?”

I didn’t reply, too worked up with confusion and anger to say anything. Now, it wasn’t enough that we’d killed the thing, their magic was primed to come back and bite? And what did it matter? Whether we released the magic or not, it wasn’t like we could leave the creatures alive to prevent it.

“What are you witches talking about?” I said. “Screw the dark magic, we have to kill the creature. That’s the only threat we know for sure.”

“So we’re good enough to fix one of the millions of problems you have at any given time, but we’re not good enough to listen to when we’re offering a warning?” Big Mac snapped.

“It’s not that. It’s just that I don’t see what any of that matters. I believe you when you say the magic has been unleashed, but that doesn’t change anything.”

I was still pretty pissed off about these things trying to snack on me not all that long ago. I was also pissed that Greyson had been dumb enough to leave Cali unattended right beside a monster’s lair. I thought that my brother always put Cali first, but obviously, that wasn’t the case.

“Rowena and I will do more research on the matter,” Big Mac said.

“You do that,” I barked. “In the meantime, can we get to killing this thing? Maybe if we’re quick about it we can make it back home in time for dinner.”

Cali shot me a sharp look.

“What?” I said.

“Xavier, don’t downplay this. Big Mac’s only warning us because she’s concerned, otherwise you know she wouldn’t have brought it up. Why don’t we ask Vander about it?” Cali said.

Greyson seemed as skeptical as I was. “Vander didn’t seem to know all that much about any of this,” he said.

“Maybe…but having dark magic that powerful floating around doesn’t seem like a good idea. There’s a good chance it has or will end up affecting the balance of things, and that’s certainly Vander’s wheelhouse,” Cali said.

“I won’t argue with you there, but the longer we stand around debating this, the further the creature could be getting. We don’t want it to leave these woods.” Greyson turned to address our group. “We’re backtracking again to go take this thing out.”

As everyone began gathering, preparing to finish this long day and put an end to the last Night Stalker’s terror, Greyson pulled me aside.

“What the hell is your problem?” he hissed at me.

I stared my brother down, my jaw set, anger roiling in the pit of my stomach. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes. That’s why I asked,” Greyson snapped. Then he shook his head and threw up a hand to stop me. “I already know what this is about. You weren’t there, Xavier. And I never would have left her if I thought she was in danger.”

I sucked my teeth and stared past him. “Well, I guess now we know that thinking isn’t your thing.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed. “Don’t you dare. You know how much I care about Cali.”

“Maybe so, but you had a choice up there. Which mate will you protect when it comes down to it? Seems like you chose Kendall. That says it all.”

Greyson stepped close; his voice flattened into a growl. “Watch it. It wasn’t like that, and you know it.”

“No? Because that’s exactly what it seems like. Oh, and thank you for giving me a heads-up that you were going to tell Kendall that I know she’s MIB.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Oh, so now you want to be mad about that for some reason? I saw no reason not to tell.”

“You really are a piece of work, Greyson. You had me bending over backward keeping it from her!”

“Please, you don’t bend over backward for anyone. Don’t act like it took such a toll on you. You’re being dramatic,” Greyson said. “I don’t know why I trusted you in the first place.”

I wasn’t getting any less angry. This conversation was setting me on edge. “If Cali wasn’t here, if we weren’t chasing that creature, I’d teach you a lesson.”

*It would feel good to hit him. Just one good shot, that’s all it would take.*

Greyson stepped close. “Doubtful. There’s nothing you know that I don’t. You can’t teach me shit. But if that’s what you want, to sort this out now and take out your groundless aggression, then do it. It won’t change anything. I did what I had to do. Cali understands that, so I don’t give a shit if you do.”

I clenched my fists, using every bit of willpower I had to keep cool.

“Anyway,” Greyson said, his voice suddenly lighter, “we’re all still relatively unharmed. So I don’t give a shit what you would have done. Like I said, it was me up there, not you. I made a decision, and it all worked out in the end. You’re making a big deal out of nothing…as usual.”

Greyson turned as if he were about to storm off, but then he stopped and got in my face again.

“And remind me, who was it who stopped MIB from arresting Cali while you just stood by scowling? It was me. And it’s me who’s leading the final attack to take out this menace. So whatever issues you’re cooking up in your head, put them on the back burner.”

Greyson slapped a hand on my shoulder, and I almost shifted and pounced on him, but I kept it together.

“Now, fall in line. We’ve got business to take care of,” he said in a condescending tone.

Before I could reply, Cali came walking over. She took the broken arrow from Greyson. “Everyone’s ready to go. What’s the holdup?”

I looked over my shoulder to see that everyone had shifted. Without another word, Greyson shifted too, and my blazing anger dulled to a brisk simmer as I watched Cali climb onto his back.

A few minutes later, I was running alongside Ava. She was quiet, which spelled trouble for me. When it got to be too much, I finally broke the silence.

*What is it?*

*It shouldn’t bother you*, she said.

I gritted my teeth, realizing all too late that I should have kept my cool. Now I’d pissed off Ava. I didn’t need to have that on my mind going into another deadly fight. And on the other hand, I was so angry that I didn’t care that Ava was pissed.

*I know she’s your mate, but honestly, this is exhausting.*

I didn’t say anything. It was exhausting, I knew, but Cali was my mate and nothing anyone said or did was ever going to change that.

We slowed to a stop as we reached the place where the scents diverged. I was actually glad that Greyson had been so adamant about leading the charge because it had given me some time to think.

And while I never ever took pleasure in seeing Cali perched on Greyson’s back, it was better than her being in Greyson’s bed.

*Why did I even think of that? Now I’m even more pissed.*

My wolf was chomping at the bit, agitated and looking for somewhere to put all this anger. I hoped we found the creature fast so I could throw all this ire right at the thing that deserved it.

*I’m sorry*, I said to Ava.

She whipped around to look at me. *What?*

*I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said all that back there. I’m just pissed off about what that Night Stalker did to me, and I’m not myself right now. I won’t feel better until the last one is dead.*

Ava was quiet for a few beats and I wondered if she was going to buy my excuse or give me more attitude.

*Then maybe you’ll actually let me be by your side and help you kill it?*

I smiled. *I’d like that.*

Ava laughed. *Look how romantic we’ve become.*

Some of the tension inside of me drained away now that I knew that Ava and I were in an okay place. Just hearing her laugh made all the difference in the world.

We were moving quickly now. The creature’s scent was powerful and brought on terrifying memories of when I’d been trapped, bruised and beaten, in the nest. I did my best to shake those awful thoughts off and focus.

*I’ll tap into those thoughts again when it’s time to tear that thing to pieces.*

A voice thundered through my mind.

*Stop this now, or I’ll kill both your mates.*

I came to a sudden stop and looked around, drawing Ava’s attention.

*What is it?*

*It knows we’re coming*, I said. *We could be walking into a trap.*

**Episode 5800**

*Cali, can you hear me?*

When I first heard Xavier’s mind link, I was certain that he was about to apologize for how he’d been acting with Greyson, blaming him for something that wasn’t his fault.

*I hear you*, I replied.

*It’s a trap! It knows!*

*A trap? What do you mean?*

Before he could say a word, Greyson slowed to a stop, halting everyone else. We all went quiet as Greyson walked over to Xavier to speak with him through mind link.

In the heavy silence, I looked around, trying to get a sense of what was going on. What had Xavier meant by that? A trap?

I noticed that Ava was glaring at me, which wasn’t surprising, but I wondered what I’d done now. It didn’t help that Ava’s glare was ten times more frightening when she was in wolf form.

*What now? Is she really blaming me for Xavier’s outburst? I had nothing to do with that. She must see that.*

Even so, I wouldn’t mind setting her straight. I was tired of feeling like I was walking on eggshells around her.

Once Greyson and Xavier were done chatting, he came over and shifted to human form.

“Everyone, Xavier has reason to believe that the creature knows we’re coming. He heard a voice and he’s sure it was the creature making a threat about us coming to neutralize it.”

I shuddered, hating that the creature had the means to communicate with us whenever it chose. How did it have those powers if it wasn’t a werewolf? I didn’t understand it, and I didn’t like it.

“What do you want to do?” I asked Greyson.

“Kill it. Same as we’ve been planning. Nothing changes,” he said. “We just have to be more careful and keep our eyes peeled for an ambush. We’ve gotten this far, and I’m not about to let that thing get the jump on us.”

Greyson shifted to wolf form once again and I jumped on his back with the arrow in hand. It was sticky with blood, bent, the shaft splintered. It had certainly seen better days, and I could only hope that it would hold up long enough to use. It was hard to believe that it had any power left in it at all.

We continued up the trail until we came to something lying on the ground. We slowed, and Greyson, Xavier, and I approached what seemed to be a mangled body crumpled on the ground.

Greyson sniffed and then said, *It’s a deer. I wish I could tell you it was attacked by a mountain lion or something like that, but I smell that creature all over it. It’s close.*

I leaned close to study the corpse, feeling a little sick to my stomach. *Do you think it’s some kind of message?* I asked. *Is the creature taunting us? Showing us what it’s capable of?*

*Could be*, Greyson admitted. *If he’s sending threats psychically to Xavier, I wouldn’t put a physical sign past it. But it doesn’t make a difference. We still have to kill it.*

The ground began shaking and a tree just ahead of us split with a loud crack and crashed to the ground, taking a couple of other trees down with it. A moment later, I saw a shadow passing through the trees straight ahead.

I pointed. “What’s that?”

Greyson paused and I felt the hairs on his back stand up.

*It’s the Night Stalker!* he said.

I looked up and gasped in fear. It was huge, almost as big as its parent. I couldn’t believe it. How had it snuck up on us? Better yet, Xavier had called this thing a baby. How could it have gotten so large so fast?

*Get off my back*, Greyson said. *I may have to rush the attack.*

I was barely off his back before he was shifting to human form and reaching for the arrow. I hesitated with my eyes glued to the creature as it lumbered toward us.

Greyson had the arrow in his hands and turned to face us. “As soon as I stab it with the arrow, attack.”

I loved how confident he seemed, how there wasn’t an ounce of fear in his eyes, but even so, I couldn’t help but think about what Big Mac had said—the dark magic we released each time we killed one of these things.

I rushed to Greyson’s side. “I was thinking about Big Mac’s warning about the dark magic, and I can’t help but wonder if maybe this final creature absorbed the dark magic from the others. It could explain why it’s so big. It could be even more dangerous than the others.”

Greyson nodded and held up the broken arrow. “We’ll just have to see how dangerous it is. We can’t stop now. We’re almost at the finish line.”

He kissed me and I allowed it to linger, knowing that we were about to go into a battle that could change everything. The bad feeling in my stomach was building by the second, but Greyson was right. We could only press ahead at this point.

Greyson turned and started to move toward the creature. Behind me, the other wolves moved in closer, falling into step behind Greyson. Mikah and Torin came to my side.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Mikah asked.

“If the creature screeches, the werewolves will be incapacitated and we may have to take the attack into our own hands,” I said.

Then I went quiet, watching nervously as Greyson made a few sounds to draw the creature’s attention.

*He’s doing the same as my other mate*, I thought bitterly. *Offering himself up as bait. Sacrificing his safety to protect us, for a chance at ensuring all werewolves are safe.*

The creature roared and lunged at Greyson. Greyson drew his arm back to stab it with the arrow, but he wasn’t quick enough and the creature took Greyson into its jaws.

“Greyson, no!” I screamed. I rushed forward, but Torin and Mikah grabbed me.

Despite it all, Greyson’s expression was steely and determined as he raised the arrow and brought it down into the creature’s chest. It screamed, its mouth opening wide and releasing Greyson from its jaws. It thrashed about, taking out trees and kicking up dirt. Its large, spiked tail sliced through the air and smashed against the ground, narrowly missing Greyson.

He rolled into safety and then got to his feet and screamed, “Attack!”

I watched the creature, realizing that something wasn’t right. Like the creature before it, it clawed and plucked at the arrow, trying to remove it. But as the werewolves closed in, it screeched.

Even though the sound didn’t incapacitate me like it did the werewolves, it was still loud and brain numbing. I covered my ears and watched in shock as every werewolf around me collapsed in pain.

The creature was hysterical, clawing at its chest and knocking into trees, still screeching, still keeping the werewolves at bay. It was sweeping its tail around like the weapon it so clearly was, and if most of the werewolves hadn’t been nearly laid out on the ground, I was sure it might have injured many of them.

“We have to do something!” Torin shouted.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “Why didn’t the arrow work?”

“Because the arrow’s magic is exhausted,” Big Mac shouted over the creature’s screeching.

“I can try my magic again,” Torin said.

“What? No!” Rowena said.

“She’s right. You saw what happened last time. You shouldn’t risk it,” Big Mac said.

I thought back to the first creature we fought today and how I’d stunned it with my magic. Maybe this time, I could do much more than that.

I looked at where Greyson had stuck the arrow—right below the creature’s rib cage.

*What would happen if I used my magical sword in the same spot?*

There was no way to know for sure, but I couldn’t just stand here. I had to do something. I charged forward, taking a running leap over the creature’s thrashing tail and tripping and falling into the Night Stalker’s leg.

It looked down at me, blood from the wound dripping down. I rose to my feet, my heart pounding, and summoned my magic. I wasted no time letting loose a blast that stunned the creature.

I felt good knowing that it worked again, but I knew I was going to have to do more than that. As the creature staggered backward, I summoned my sword, took a running leap and drove it into its chest, right in the wound that the arrow had formed.

The creature roared in pain, but I hung onto the arrow and channeled my magic into bubbles like I’d done once before. I focused them onto the sword and sent them blazing down the blade and exploding into the creature’s widening wound.

I put all of my force and effort into it, and then it all happened at once: the sword glowed blindingly bright and erupted in a loud explosion, blowing the Night Stalker apart and sending me flying.

**Episode 5801**

I let go of the sword just as I was thrown back from the explosion. I landed on the ground with a heavy thud, all the air knocked clear of my lungs. My ears were ringing from the blast, and my head was spinning, blood pulsing in my temples.

Disorientation seized every one of my senses, and for a second, I forgot where I was. Only a moment later, a burning hot pain overtook my body, clearing my head and making me cry out in agony.

“I’m on fire!” I shouted, patting my arms as if to put the fire out. But when I looked down, I saw that I wasn’t on fire at all. It only felt like it was—but too bad that realization didn’t stop the pain. My skin was still burning, and I wondered how to make it stop if it wasn’t even real.

Greyson ran over and knelt at my side, gathered me in his arms. I looked up at him to see that he was saying something, but I couldn’t hear a word of it over the ringing in my ears. I shook my head, trying to indicate that I couldn’t understand him.

He leaned close and spoke again before he finally realized what was happening, and then his mind link came through clearly in my mind.

*Are you hurt? Do you need me to bring Torin over here to heal you?*

I shook my head.

*No, I think I’m okay. The explosion must have temporarily deafened me, though. I can’t hear a thing over the ringing.*

I started to stand and Greyson helped me. He checked over my limbs, smoothing his rough, warm hands over my skin before he smiled at me.

*You’re okay, as far as I can tell*, he mind linked. *Some bumps and scratches and bruises, but that’s all. The blast didn’t hurt you.*

I nodded at him, relieved at that and grateful that the burning pain was starting to subside. Even the ringing in my ears was beginning to quiet. I closed my eyes and relished the feel of Greyson’s hands giving me the once over again, and once he was certain that I was okay, he pulled me into a tight hug.

*That was so stupid, Cali, but also the bravest thing I’ve ever seen*,he mind linked.

I smiled at him. “Thanks.”

The others came rushing over to make sure that I was okay.

“Cali, that was amazing!” Torin said, and I was happy to realize that I could hear him clearly. The ringing was nearly gone.

“I’ve never seen anything so badass!” Maya said.

My heart warmed. I was certain that was the best compliment—and maybe the only—that Maya had ever given me. I enjoyed round after round of props from the others until my heart felt full enough to burst.

“I’m glad it all worked out,” I said.

“It more than worked out!” Big Mac said. “That was amazing! You killed the monster!”

I smiled at my friends and then checked in on them to make sure that they were all okay as well. That explosion could have taken any one of them out, and I was glad that the only casualty seemed to be the Night Stalker.

*But wait, where’s Xavier?*

My heartbeat quickened with worry, but my anxiety was short lived. A moment later I spotted him pushing his way through the others to get to me. He looked bruised and battered, but not horribly injured or maimed. He was okay.

*My mates are safe. That’s all that matters.*

“You good?” he said.

I nodded at him. “I’m good. How about you?”

“Never better,” he said with a smile.

“We should get out of here,” Big Mac said, narrowing her eyes as she looked around. “I can still taste the dark magic in the air. It’s trying to find somewhere to go, and I don’t want it to affect anyone here.”

“She’s right,” Greyson said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

We all turned to head into the woods but stopped short when we ran into Kendall.

“What? Here to arrest us for killing those things outside of protocol?” Greyson said to her.

Kendall scowled, and for the slightest second, I felt a twinge of guilt. What if we cost her her job? But what other choice did we have? It was obvious that the MIB wasn’t equipped to take the Night Stalkers down, so we’d done what we had to do. There was no reason to feel ashamed about that.

Kendall rolled her eyes and lifted her chin defiantly. “You’re not far off. I *could* arrest you.”

I was about to protest, but then Kendall held up her hand, as if anticipating that I was about to argue.

“But I won’t,” she said. She sighed. “It would be wrong. You did what you had to do, and I get that. Now get out of here before Imamu arrives. You and I both know he won’t be as lenient.”

Greyson gave her a terse nod as he pulled me away. I glanced back at Kendall where she stood on the ridge. She looked all along out there. Lonely. Vulnerable.

*If I really wanted to, I could just walk up and give her a little push over the edge…*

I shook my head hard, dashing the thought away. Why had I even thought that? It was a ridiculous—and violent—thought to have, even if I was jealous of Kendall’s bond with Greyson. I was shocked at my behavior…that I would even think anything so…dark.

*That explosion really must have gotten to me, and I must have hit my head or something when I landed. I need to get some sleep, get my head right so I stop having these weird thoughts.*

Once we were back home, Greyson got busy fussing over me.

“You need to get some sleep, or at least lie down for a bit,” he said.

“But Greyson, I don’t want to go to bed. I don’t even think I can. I think my adrenaline is still pumping,” I said. “But maybe I’ll sit on the couch for a bit.”

Greyson sighed, and I could see that he was trying to figure out whether to argue or not. He pinched the bridge of his nose and looked toward the kitchen. “Fine. Then I’ll make you some herbal tea so you can relax.”

“Thank you,” I said, giving him a quick peck on the lips.

When he left, I eased down onto the couch. My back ached, and so did my legs and arms. Hell, everything hurt, but that was no surprise. I’d landed hard, and that wasn’t even considering the force of the explosion, and the pain of being carried in that thing’s claws. I’d been through a lot today, so it would have been strange if I *weren’t* in pain.

Greyson returned a few minutes later with tea in hand. He sat down next to me and watched me closely as I sipped from my cup.

“Are you sure you’re really okay?” he said.

“I am. I mean, I’m a little sore, but I’ll live.”

Greyson nodded. “Good.” He leaned forward and cupped my cheek. “When I saw that explosion, I have to say I feared the worst. I thought I was going to lose you.”

I sat my cup down and leaned into him, happy to be so close to him. “I’m fine, and I’m right here with you, where I belong.”

I kissed him to reassure him, and threaded my fingers through his hair as I deepened the kiss. Things got heated quickly, and soon I was pushing him down to lay flat on the couch. My fingers danced tentatively over the buttons of his shirt and then I was gently unbuttoning each one, eager to get my fingers on his bare skin.

I sighed with pleasure when he began tugging at the waist of my pants, but then the front door slammed open and we jumped apart.

Lola didn’t even seem to notice what she’d interrupted as she shouted, “We better still have some good alcohol lying around! Has Big Mac brought over any moonshine lately?”

A second later everyone else was barreling in, thoroughly interrupting our moment. In seconds, the place was full of Vanguards—who were on the somber side because of their losses—Blue Bloods, and Samaras.

“Seems like they all decided that the Redwood is the place to debrief,” I whispered to Greyson, who nodded. I could see the frustration on his face.

Lola dashed over to the liquor cabinet and pulled out the good stuff—the moonshine. “Score! I knew that we had the right supplies.”

Greyson and I exchanged a resigned look as all hopes of sharing a quiet, intimate evening together slipped away before our eyes. Everyone was still on a high from the battle, and they were looking to celebrate. I couldn’t blame them.

“Do we have food?” Jay asked.

Torin stroked his chin in thought. “I didn’t have a chance to stock the fridge because of all the battle prep.”

Mace threw his arms over Torin and Jay’s shoulders. “We have to fix that, then. We can’t celebrate properly without it.”

“Then let’s do it!” Lola cheered, pulling out shot glasses. “Who’s down for a celebratory barbecue?”

Everyone cheered, even the Vanguard. I realized that they needed this as much as anyone, and this was the perfect way to seal our victory.

Greyson sighed and turned to me with a crooked smile on his handsome face. “Well, I guess we’re hosting a party.”

**Episode 5802**

“I don’t know about everyone else, but before any partying, I need a shower,” I announced. I was still a mess and covered in that Night Stalker’s blood and guts.

“Showers for all who need them, and then a party none of us will never forget!” Lola announced before racing past me and up the stairs. I started after her but paused and looked down at the packs milling around the living room, lost in conversation.

I spotted Xavier talking to Ava, and Greyson talking to Kendall. A strange, deep sadness settled in the pit of my stomach. Despite our victory over the Night Stalker, despite my deep feelings for both my mates, at the end of the day, Greyson hadn’t trusted me to keep Kendall’s MIB connection a secret. Somehow, that hurt more than seeing Xavier with Ava.

Mate bonds could be blamed for a lot of things—the sexual pull between mates, the conflicted emotions that arose from time to time…but trust? That should be a given in any mate bond.

The trust between me and Greyson should have been rock solid and unaffected by any other mate bonds, right?

I’d come to not only love Greyson, but trust him, too. That was a far cry from how it had been when we first met. I’d been afraid of Greyson then. I’d heard such terrible things about him, after all. But that was in the past, and now I knew that he was an amazing man deserving of my trust…but why didn’t he trust me the same?

I turned around and continued upstairs, hoping that a hot shower would wash away not only the dirt and grime of the day, but also all these melancholy thoughts that were popping up.

After all, I should have been happy. We’d killed not one, but four deadly Night Stalkers in a matter of hours. It was a reason to celebrate, to have a barbecue with the people who’d fought by my side, the people I cared about.

*And I was a key part of our victory. I helped them kill that thing with my magic. Artemis would be so proud of me. Look how far I’ve come with my magic skills.*

That put a smile on my face, but then the sadness returned tenfold as I wished that my sister was here to celebrate with me.

*I hope that wherever she is, whatever she’s doing, she’s okay.*

By the time I was showered and dressed, the barbecue had already started. I walked out onto the back porch to see that almost everyone was gathered outside. Colton was busy tending to the bonfire, which was right on the cusp of burning out of control. Maya was beckoning to the flames with an angry expression and obviously giving him an earful about it.

Lola and Jay were laughing together and drinking, Ravi and Marissa were dancing close to the pumping music. Charlie and Violet were busy making hot dogs with Dani, Lilac, and Perrie canoodling nearby. Sage and Zainab were lighting sparklers and passing them around to the others while some of the Blue Bloods and Vanguards were involved in some kind of arm-wrestling competition.

Seeing everyone having so much fun gave me a warm feeling, but behind the warmth a bit of that earlier worry remained.

I saw Greyson watching me and as soon as we locked eyes, he headed over. “You look…” He kissed me, as if that gesture said more than words ever could.

“Thank you,” I said. “You too.”

He was freshly showered and dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a T-shirt. It was uncanny how he could make anything he wore look amazing.

He wrapped his arms around me and buried his face in my neck, then kissed me again. It felt good, and the last of the melancholy feelings finally started to wane.

I wanted to talk to him more about the trust issues, but not now. It wasn’t the time. At this moment, all I wanted was to enjoy myself. I wrapped my arms around him, and we held each other.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asked me.

I didn’t get a chance to answer before Big Mac and Mrs. Smith came walking over. Big Mac had eyes only for me.

“Cali, how’re you feeling?” she asked gruffly.

“I’m good,” I said with a grin. “Better than good, in fact.” I looked up at Greyson and kissed him on the cheek.

Big Mac nodded, her eyes narrowed slightly as she continued looking at me.

*Why did she ask me that? I told her earlier that I was fine…and why is she looking at me that way?*

“What, do I not look okay?” I said.

“It’s not that. I’m just asking everyone who was within ten feet of that creature because I’m concerned about the dark magic.”

I remembered Big Mac’s warning about how dark magic didn’t just dissipate into nothing, it needed somewhere to go.

“I get it,” I said. “But I’m fine, really. I’m surprised I feel as good as I do. I’ve got a few aches and pains, but that’s to be expected.”

Big Mac nodded slowly, still watching me. “Okay, but if either of you notice anything unusual, anything at all, even if it’s small, let me know. Now’s not the time to stop being vigilant.”

I grinned at Big Mac. “This sounds like you care about me,” I said.

Big Mac scoffed. “I’m being thorough. If one of you were infected by the dark magic released when we killed those things, then it will spread like a disease and affect everyone else.”

“That’s Big Mac’s way of saying yes, she does care,” Greyson added.

Big Mac rolled her eyes and grumbled something under her breath. Mrs. Smith took her hand.

“Why don’t we go dance? Forget about the dark magic for a while and make some magic of our own?” Mrs. Smith said.

Big Mac gave her a half smile, and they moved off to join others who were dancing in the center of the yard. I watched them for a while as they slow danced.

“It’s weird to see Big Mac being so romantic,” I said.

Greyson shrugged. “She loves my mom, so it makes sense that she’s her softest around her.”

“That’s true. Do you think they’ll ever actually get married?”

Greyson smiled. “I sure hope so. My mother seems really happy when they’re together, and believe it or not, so does Big Mac.”

A short while later, the party was in full swing. I was busy trying to explain to a very eager Ravi all the reasons I didn’t like shots, particularly the one he was trying to give me.

“It burns my throat, and then I feel sick for a few seconds and have to concentrate on not puking,” I said.

“But all of that’s normal,” Ravi deadpanned. “Come on, Cali! You have to do a shot. You earned it when you killed that baby Night Stalker!” He pushed the shot toward me, but I waved it away with more force this time.

“Ravi, thanks…but no. Maybe Lola wants it?”

Marissa came by and plucked the shot from Ravi’s hands. “Don’t pressure Cali into drinking, Ravi.” She downed the shot.

I gave Marissa a quick, appreciative hug and then slipped away, only to run smack into Xavier.

“What a coincidence, I was just looking for you,” he said with a big smile. Hearing that made my heart swell. It always felt good to know when he was thinking about me.

He was all healed up and looking freshly showered and dressed just like Greyson. And, just like Greyson, he looked good enough to eat. I had to resist fanning myself as I took him in. I couldn’t believe how hot my mates were.

“Could we go somewhere a little more private to talk?” he said, gesturing toward the house.

I nodded, and together we made our way to the back porch. We sat down and watched the party in silence before Xavier finally spoke.

“I want to make sure we’re okay. I’m still really sorry about what you saw in the shed and what happened…”

My stomach twisted in a knot at the memory. I hated thinking about it, let alone having Xavier bring it up. He put a hand on my arm.

“Just tell me we’re good, Cali. Are we okay?”

I hesitated. Part of me wanted so much to say no, that anytime Xavier was with Ava it hurt…and it only seemed to get worse with time. It was something I would never get used to. But I also wanted things to be okay between us. In fact, I wanted them to be better than okay.

“I think we will be…okay,” I said.

Xavier nodded and sat back in his seat, looking a little deflated. “I guess I hoped we were even better than okay, but I’m happy to start there.”

I had the sudden, overwhelming urge to kiss him, to start on that road to making things better. He obviously wanted that, and I guess I did, too.

A sudden shiver down my spine caught me by surprise just as a loud, clear voice appeared in my head.

*If you don’t choose your mate, you will die!*

**Episode 5803**

**Greyson**

I was talking to Mace and Lucian about the creatures and Lucian’s plans for the new Vanguard palace—I was relieved to hear that the construction was coming along nicely—but I was much more interested in watching Cali and Xavier talking on the porch.

We were just close enough to hear them, though I was missing much of it due to Lucian’s loud declaration of his plans for making the Vanguard palace bigger and better than ever.

Suddenly, Cali turned and rushed away from Xavier and slipped inside of the house. She looked shaken. I wasted no time marching over to Xavier.

“What did you say to her?” I barked.

Xavier eyed me coolly, in no hurry to answer me.

“I asked you a question!” I snapped.

Xavier chuckled. “Oh, I heard you, just like everyone else at the party.” He motioned to the others who were watching us wearily as if bracing themselves to watch us fight yet again. I cleared my throat and tried to calm down a bit. This was supposed to be a celebration, after all.

“Anyway, it’s none of your business what we talked about,” Xavier said.

“Cali is always my business, and you obviously said something to upset her.”

“She had to go to the bathroom,” Xavier said.

I growled, annoyed that my brother wouldn’t just be straightforward with me. “That’s not all and I know it. What did you say?”

Xavier looked annoyed. “Why don’t you ask her?”

“Because I’m asking you!”

Xavier smirked. “What do you think I said?”

“All I know is that Big Mac said something about dark magic lingering behind looking for a place to go, so I’m worried about her. I need to know that she’s okay.”

Xavier suddenly looked serious. “Wait, did you see something?”

“No,” I said, quickly getting exasperated with this whole thing. “But she was the one who blasted the creature when she gave the killing blow. It literally exploded its dark magic all over her.”

Xavier glanced over his shoulder and eyed the house, likely thinking about Cali and what she was doing in there, much like I was.

“Fine, I’ll keep an eye on her,” he said.

I wasn’t happy hearing him say that, but I couldn’t let my jealousy get in the way when it came to Cali’s safety. Having another pair of eyes on Cali was never a bad thing, even if those eyes belonged to Xavier.

“Why don’t you worry about your other mate?” Xavier said, doubling down. It was clear he wouldn’t mind a fight, or he wouldn’t have gone there.

I shifted my gaze to Kendall and then glared at Xavier. “Watch it. Don’t push me right now.”

Xavier held up his hands. “Just saying.” Without another word, he turned and headed off to talk to Gabriel and Mikah. I stood there seething for a moment, contemplating whether to follow him even as I knew that wasn’t the right move.

Kendall came over and handed me a beer. Despite everything, my wolf stirred at her closeness. I popped the beer open and took a long drink before saying, “So, you decided to come by and congratulate us?”

Kendall looked out at all the partying packs. “You do realize we got lucky, don’t you? If things had taken a slightly different turn, we could have easily been killed and the Night Stalkers would be destroying every werewolf alive.”

I didn’t try to hide my annoyance. “But we did kill them.”

“Yes, and MIB is unhappy.”

I almost spit out my beer. “Frankly, I don’t give a shit about MIB. I thought that was clear by now. No offense.”

Kendall smiled. “None taken…but MIB is talking about the council.”

That gave me pause. “The council? Why?”

Kendall shrugged. “Agent Imamu sees the council, and particularly its leader, as an impediment.”

I laughed. “Tell Imamu to get in line. That’s probably the only thing me, the alliance and the MIB agree on.”

“So why don’t you do something about it?” Kendall said. “That is, before MIB does.”

I frowned. “Is that a threat?”

“Do you always think everything is a threat, Greyson? You’re starting to sound paranoid.” She sipped her beer. “It’s not a threat. I’m just telling you what I was told, which I’m regretting. I just thought you’d want to know.”

“Okay…so what do you think I should do?”

Kendall didn’t say anything for a long while. She simply took a few more sips of her beer and looked up at me. “If anyone would be good at it, it would be you.”

I did a double take, wondering what she was talking about until it finally dawned on me. I had to keep from laughing.

“You mean leading the council?” I said. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am serious. You’d be a big improvement.”

I snorted. “A mossy stone would be an improvement over Cesaries, so that’s not saying much. Anyway, I’m the Redwood Alpha. I have my hands full enough as it is. I can’t take that on.”

Kendall shrugged. “Suit yourself, I mean it’s your decision of course. But I truly think you should consider it. I really think you’d be good—the breath of fresh air that the werewolf council so desperately needs.”

I eyed her for a second before a smile spread across my lips. “Wait a minute, are you complimenting me?”

Kendall laughed and my wolf stirred again.

“Don’t let it go to your head, okay? It’s already big enough as it is. And whatever you do, don’t tell Imamu we had this conversation. He already thinks I favor you.”

Before I knew it, we’d locked eyes.

“And…do you?” I said.

Kendall looked away, but not before I noticed the blush rising to her cheeks. “Don’t flatter yourself, Grey. I’m just calling it like I see it. I think you could do well by the Council, that’s all. Don’t read too much into it.”

I smiled and sipped my beer, waiting…begging…my wolf to calm down. For all the grief that Kendall had given me, she wasn’t such a bad person to hang out with. I could admit that. In fact, right about now I could also admit I was enjoying her company.

She glanced at me. “What?”

“You never told me about your family’s curse.”

“And I never will,” she shot back.

I gave her a little nudge with my shoulder. “Really? After all we’ve been through?”

Kendall laughed again and it was possibly her most genuine laugh so far. “You’re not wrong about that. We *have* been through some shit.”

“Right,” I said, chuckling a little. “So, what’s the big deal about sharing a bit about this curse or whatever? You already mentioned it to me, so why not explain?”

Kendall let out a long sigh then took a big swig from her beer, emptying it. She licked her lips and then the words came spilling out of her mouth.

“Everyone in my family who’s met their mate dies soon after.”

I spit out my beer. “What?!”

“It’s true.”

I pointed to myself. “But I’m not dead.”

She smirked. “Not yet.”

“Okay since now this kind of involves me, you have to give me more details.”

Kendall groaned and shut her eyes. “Do I have to?”

“I think you do.”

I was smiling, but there was an air of seriousness in my tone that I was sure Kendall picked up on.

“I had an uncle who met his mate on a Thursday. Two days later, he died in a car accident. And then there was my cousin on my mother’s side. He married his mate and then was killed by a vampire within a year.”

My mouth dropped open as Kendall continued.

“And my parents…well…” She paused. “They died, too.”

I felt a stab of empathy at all the loss she’d experienced. It was a wonder she was still standing.

“But when did your parents die?” I asked.

Kendall shook her head. “Does it matter?”

“But I mean, they raised you, right? Just because they were mates it doesn’t mean that their deaths had anything to do with it—or with any of the other deaths for that matter.”

Kendall stared at the ground. “But what if…what if it’s true? What if it is a curse? Would you take that chance if you were me?”

I thought about it for a second, wanting to give her a genuine answer. “All I know is that life is full of taking chances, some of them risky. I’ve taken a lot of chances and endured a lot of risks myself.”

I put a hand on her shoulder and my wolf went crazy, but I calmed it as much as I could.

“Don’t let a bunch of what ifs hold you back from something you want. Something that could be good for you.”

Kendall looked up at me again, her purple eyes flashing in the firelight as she muttered, “Noted.”

All I could wonder was why it felt like somehow, I was talking about myself.

**Episode 5804**

**Xavier**

I couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen. As hard as I tried to push the feeling away and count it out as lingering adrenaline from fighting the Night Stalker, the feeling wouldn’t go away.

It didn’t help that after my chat with Greyson, I’d started worrying about Cali. What if Big Mac was right and there *was* some kind of dark magic hanging around waiting to poison one of us?

It reminded me of how Seluna had used Cali as a vessel of some sort.

*Maybe I’m making something out of nothing. After all, when I spoke to Cali, I didn’t notice that anything was off. I know Cali so well. If something was wrong, I would have noticed…right?*

But the way she’d rushed inside with a look on her face like something was very wrong said differently. I knew that I hadn’t said anything to warrant that reaction, so why had she behaved that way? She’d seemed confused for a moment, and then frightened.

I’d asked her about it, but then she’d just told me that she needed to use the bathroom. It wasn’t like there was any reason to argue with her about that. I believed her.

*But maybe she hadn’t told me the truth. Is something else going on? Is she more upset about the whole shed thing than she’s letting on?*

Colton suddenly slapped me on the back, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“We did it, bro! We killed those beasts!” he said. He handed me a drink even though I was already holding one. “Nothing like a barbecue to celebrate.” He whistled. “I didn’t realize until today how much I missed these parties when we were with the Grimcrests. Their barbecues were more like dry dinner parties with nothing to celebrate.”

Colton had a far away look in his eyes as he sipped from his beer as if remembering the horrors of those meals before he snapped his attention back to me.

“What’s wrong? You look like something’s on your mind.”

I realized then that I’d been stealing glances at the house, waiting for Cali to return. Before I could even say anything, Colton said, “Cali trouble?”

“Something like that.”

“Hmmm. Maybe you shouldn’t have banged Ava in that shed. Women don’t like it when the guy they’re obsessed with has sex with another woman within a few feet of them.”

I gritted my teeth and glared at him. “Let’s not do this again.”

Colton shrugged. “Suit yourself. It’s your life.”

I frowned at the memory of Cali’s face when she saw Ava and I rolling around in the shed.

“I do feel terrible about that whole thing,” I said. “I wasn’t thinking about anything. It just sort of happened…which is often how it happens with Ava. But in the end, it wasn’t worth it at all. I hurt Cali, I hurt Ava, and I hurt myself.”

Colton nodded. “Yeah, you kind of fucked everything up…and you’re a repeat offender.”

I wanted to snap at him and tell him he was wrong, but he wasn’t. I did keep messing up, and I did keep hurting Cali and Ava in the process.

We sipped our drinks in silence for a few beats before Colton said, “Do you remember how mad at me you were when Lola and I conspired to get you a girl? All that anger and we were just trying to get your wolf back.”

I snorted. “Did you really ask me if I remember that? Of course I do! And I also remember that Cali was terrified of me, and I was so mad about losing my wolf that I took it out on her.”

“And as mad as you were, it worked. She got your wolf back.”

I nodded and couldn’t stop grinning as I remembered those early days when it was just me and Cali. “It’s true. It worked like a charm.”

“You and Cali have a true connection, and it’s more than you two being mates. And I know you love Ava but…with Cali, it’s different.”

I smiled. “She is that.”

Colton scoffed and smirked at me. “You know what I mean, man. You’ve been fighting this ever since Ava came back from the dead…literally. Yes, Ava will be your first and she’ll always be that, but that doesn’t mean she’s the right one for you.”

“Why are you telling me all of this? It’s not like I can just break my mate bond with either of them. It’s not that simple. And let’s not forget the fucking *due destini*. Cali may be the one for me but that doesn’t mean that I’m the only one for her.”

“I doubt anyone can forget the *due destini*,” Colton grumbled. “It hangs over all of us like a dark cloud.” Colton glanced at Maya. “She and I had an undeniable connection that we both fought in the beginning. But it was too powerful to resist it. And I’m glad it was because now I can’t imagine living without her.”

The look of love in my brother’s eyes warmed my heart. How easy it had to be for him, to have one mate, one person that you gave everything to without worrying who you were neglecting in the process. Sure, Maya could be…a lot…at times, but she loved and cared about Colton, and now they had their beautiful twins. I was glad for him.

“I’m happy you’re happy, brother,” I said. “You and Maya are meant for each other.”

“We are, and I want the same for you. What I’m saying is, I want you to be happy, too. Even if you are a pain in the ass.”

“Takes one to know one,” I quipped. Colton gave me a playful punch in the arm, and I imagined it would have been plenty painful to a human.

“I’ve been thinking—”

“Oh no,” I said.

“Stop!” Colton snapped. “I’m being serious. Cali has the burden of making a choice because of the *due destini* curse, but what about you? You have choices, too. And whatever you decide to do, make sure it’s the choice that makes you happiest, because right now, I don’t know, you just don’t seem…happy.”

I looked at my brother, wondering when he’d become so wise. Was it the twins? The journey he’d been on with Maya? How was he seeing something that I hadn’t even admitted to myself?

“I hate to say it, X, but you’re kind of reminding me of when you lost your wolf. You were a mess then, miserable. You’re Xavier fucking Evers. The man, the Alpha wolf, who takes what he wants and lives life on his terms. You deserve better.”

Ava came walking over and I wondered if her ears were burning. She looked between me and Colton before asking, “What are you two up to?”

Colton shrugged. “Boy stuff.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Don’t want to know.”

“Good, because I wouldn’t tell you anyway.” As Ava scowled, Colton squeezed my shoulder and said, “Be happy.”

Ava came to stand beside me and we watched Colton head off to join Maya. “What was that all about?” she asked.

I didn’t answer her, too caught up in thinking about what Colton had said to me, reeling from how insightful it was when insightful had never been Colton’s thing.

“Do I make you happy?” I said. I was as surprised by the question as she looked, and it had just sort of come out.

Ava narrowed her eyes. “Is this a trick question?”

“No. I’m being dead serious. Do I make you happy?”

“You’re my mate. I came back from the dead for you.”

*That isn’t exactly what happened, but okay.*

“You’re my Alpha and I’m your Luna.”

“And that’s not what I’m asking. You’re stating facts when I’m talking about more than that. Do I make you happy, Ava?”

Ava bit her lip and sighed. “Am I happy?” She looked down into her glass, still biting her lip but harder as the seconds passed. “Not always. Sometimes you really piss me off. Make me feel like I’m not a priority.” She stared off into the distance. “But at the end of the day, I love you. Isn’t that all that matters?”

“No,” I said a little louder than I meant to, drawing stares.

Ava looked surprised. “What? Don’t I make you happy?”

“I’m asking you,” I shot back. “I love you too. And I know you love me. But that isn’t the same as being happy.”

Ava stared at me; her lips parted a little. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet and small. “What are you saying?”

“I have no idea what I’m saying. Only that I know we argue and hurt each other all the time. Is that how love is supposed to be? Is that happiness?”

Ava was slowly shaking her head as if rejecting everything I was saying. “What’s gotten into you?”

My eyes shifted to the house as the door opened and Cali came walking out.

“Never mind,” Ava ground out, her voice hard. “I know the answer.”

**Episode 5805**

**Artemis**

I drifted in and out of consciousness for what felt like days but what could have only been a few hours. My mouth was dry and my head felt foggy. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I remembered…an old lady.

*No, that’s not right. A younger Fae woman? Memphis…right? She must have drugged me with something.*

I tried to open my eyes, but it was hard, and everything looked blurry…but from what I could make out, I was still in that strange cottage. I blinked again and slowly looked to my right and saw darkness outside one of the windows. It was nighttime.

When I looked the other way, I saw the flicker of a lantern in another room. I tried to push myself up to a seated position but quickly laid back down. My wounds were still aching, and I felt like hell…but I could also see that my cuts and bruises were healing and better than they were before. Apparently Memphis was tending to my wounds…but to what end?

I was feeling more awake by the second, and the only thing on my mind was escaping, though I didn’t know if Memphis had brought any of the weapons from where she’d found me with Zale. I couldn’t leave without some kind of protection, and I wasn’t about to rely on my spotty magic to protect me right now. I was still so weak that I knew it wouldn’t come through for me when I needed it most, just like it had failed me when I was going toe to toe with Zale.

I was about to try and get up again so I could survey my surroundings better when the lantern began moving. I laid back down in bed and snapped my eyes shut, pretending to sleep. I even tried to calm my heartbeat.

I felt someone enter the room and the light from the lantern shined against my closed eyes. I heard Memphis’s strange, arrhythmic humming and then felt her brush my hair back off my face. The woman’s hand lingered and it took everything in me not to slap her hand away—or throw up.

“Beauty is always so wasted on the young, but no matter. What’s yours will be mine soon enough.”

Memphis’s voice was so syrupy sweet that it made my stomach turn.

*What the fuck is that supposed to mean? What’s mine will be hers?*

Memphis put a hand on my jaw as if to open my mouth and I heard the swish of liquid drawing near.

*Is she going to try and force me to drink something? More of that drug? Or will it be something else?*

My heart rate quickened again and I couldn’t help it. Things were about to get really bad, and I couldn’t let that happen. I had to get out of here.

I was gathering all my strength, preparing to strike, but then I heard a strange noise and Memphis’s hand left my face signaling that she’d heard it, too. It was a creaking sound, and it was coming from inside the house…almost like someone had just come in.

Memphis moved away and I heard her sit the cup down before moving away from me.

“Hello?” Memphis called out. The uncertainty in her voice proved that she wasn’t expecting any visitors.

*Okay, this is my last chance. If I don’t do something now, I may end up stuck here. I didn’t go through all of this to end up imprisoned in some weird old Fae’s cottage for the rest of my life, feeding whatever hunger she has for what? My beauty? My youth?*

I opened one eye and spotted Memphis moving through an archway that led to the front of the house. I forced myself to get up and grabbed the cup and dumped its contents onto the floor.

“Hey!” Memphis shouted as she turned around and saw me. By then I had both feet on the floor, preparing to rush Memphis and get the hell out of here—but someone beat me to it.

A hulking figure leapt from the shadows and tackled Memphis to the ground. Marius! I’d never been so happy to see him.

Memphis hissed, revealing two rows of horrible sharp teeth. Her limbs cracked and shifted into grotesque shapes that I’d never seen before.

“Go, Ari! Go!” Marius shouted as he struggled with the old woman who’d now become something more than a woman, something awful and horrifying. I almost wondered if I were seeing things, if whatever Memphis had been giving me was making me hallucinate like how I had with Zale.

*What if Marius isn’t even actually here? What if I’m dreaming all of this? What if I’m still lying in bed while Memphis takes whatever she wants from me?*

The front door slammed back on its hinges and Adair and Rishika came running in. Another wave of relief rushed through me as Rishika called out to me.

“Artemis, so glad you’re okay!” Rishika put an arm around me, and it felt very real, like I wasn’t imagining things. Maybe she was real this time. She had to be. She helped me to the door. “I was going crazy, Artemis, worrying where you were and hoping that nothing bad had happened to you.”

“How did you find me?” I asked her. “I thought I was in the middle of nowhere.”

Rishika smirked. “I’m a werewolf, remember?” She tapped her nose and winked at me. “Finding people is kind of my thing.”

I laughed crazily, and Rishika gave me a look like she was worried I was losing it. I wasn’t completely sure that I wasn’t. I’d been through a lot and had been drugged, likely more than once with all sorts of things. It was a wonder I could even see straight.

Rishika yanked me out of the way as Adair and Marius began fighting Memphis in earnest. She was fast, powerful, seemed to almost be in two places at once with her strange limbs and sharp teeth shining in the flickering lantern light.

I’d never seen her kind in real life, but I had an inkling about who—and what—she was. She was the kind of Fae that subsisted on the life forces of others. She’d brought me here to feed on me so that she could continue to live, to be young.

If Marius and the others hadn’t come here to save me, I was sure that she would have gotten her fill of me, draining me slowly to reclaim her visage of youth.

Rishika put a protective arm around me as we pressed up against a wall, staying out of the way of the fight. Marius and Adair were relentless, things were breaking, dishes and tables and chairs crashed to the floor. Adair’s whip was crackling through the air in pursuit of Memphis but she always seemed to avoid it at the very last second.

Once the fight had moved a safe distance away from us, Rishika grabbed me and together we made a break for the exit where Tabitha stood guarding the door. Tabitha slotted herself under my other arm and together, she and Rishika helped me out of the cottage.

“Thanks, Tabitha,” I said breathlessly. I wished I could help Adair and Marius, but I was in no state to fight.

“Don’t mention it. Glad to see you in one piece,” Tabitha said.

“Glad to be in one,” I replied.

The three of us ducked for cover as Memphis came crashing through one of the front windows and landed on the ground. Adair and Marius scrambled through the window after her, Adair’s energy whip stopping Memphis before she could get to her feet and take off.

“Let me go!” Memphis cried. “I’ll let her go! I’ll let all of you go! I wasn’t going to take much of her beauty, she’s got more than enough to share, anyway!”

“We’ll let you go on one condition,” I said.

Marius, Rishika, Tabitha, and Adair all said, “We will?!” in impressive unison.

“Yes, I mean…she did heal me after all. Sort of,” I said.

I gently pulled away from Tabitha and Rishika, wanting to stand on my own even though I barely had enough energy to stand up straight. “If you tell us where the purple stones are on this mountain, my uncle will let you go.”

Adair gave me a look that said he was not happy about this.

“Purple stones?” Memphis shrieked.

“Yes. They turn purple when the light hits them a certain way. There’s only one place here where that happens, so where is it?”

“It’s a day’s walk from here,” Memphis shrieked. “But maybe only hours if you hurry. Now that I’ve told you, let me go!”

Rishika looked at me. “Do you believe her? She could be lying so that we’ll set her free.”

“Good point,” I said. “Adair, how long can your whip hold her? After all the trouble she put us through, Memphis should escort us, don’t you think?”

**Episode 5806**

I stood at the tree line feeling unsure about how I’d ended up there. A voice in my head had sent a very clear warning: choose between my mates or die…and then I was so startled that I said nothing to Xavier about it.

As if on autopilot, I’d made up an excuse, went inside, and locked myself in the bathroom. I didn’t know how long I’d stayed there staring at myself in the mirror, wondering—hoping—and then worrying that I’d imagined the voice.

*If I imagined it, why? And if I didn’t, where the hell did it come from?*

Then, the next thing I knew, I was leaving the house and walking toward the woods, humming to myself in hopes of drowning out any other demands from that strange, unknown voice.

But why was I here? And if the voice wasn’t my imagination, who the hell did it belong to? Who was telling me to choose? It obviously had something to do with the *due destini*, but why? And why now after everything?

A chill caused me to shiver and Big Mac’s warning about the dark magic lingering after the deaths of the Night Stalkers was haunting me stronger than ever before.

*Is that what’s going on? Am I infected with dark magic just like Big Mac feared I might be?*

I dismissed that thought as soon as it occurred. It couldn’t be that, especially when the dark magic hadn’t affected me when the Night Stalker was alive to use it. The sound it had made only affected the werewolves, not me. So that couldn’t be the reason for the voice…but maybe it was time I discussed it with Big Mac.

I wasn’t even sure why I didn’t just tell Xavier what was going on. Maybe because any conversation around me choosing between him and Greyson never ended well. I didn’t want him to think that things had come to a head, that I was ready to decide just because I’d heard some unfamiliar voice demand it.

And if I did just choose…no. That was too overwhelming to even think about.

The curse had always been lingering in the background, never far from my mind, and the curse compelled me to choose. If I didn’t, I would go mad and die.

I closed my eyes and tried to recall the voice, the way it sounded, the tone and timbre. Was it someone I knew? Could it have been Cassandra reaching out to warn me again of the consequences of not choosing one mate once and for all?

*What if Cassandra was only trying to warn me because I’m going to suffer the same far? Or maybe the voice itself is a sign of my madness slowly coming true.*

I jumped when a hand fell on my shoulder. I spun around, breathing hard with my magic at the ready and surging right at my fingertips.

It was Xavier.

“Whoa, what’s wrong? You looked like you saw a ghost,” he said slowly.

I opened my mouth but then snapped it closed just as fast, stopping myself. I had no idea what to say. How to explain it.

*Why don’t I just tell him. He’s always been here for me and there’s nothing I could tell him that would scare him off. Why don’t I share this confusion with him so I don’t have to deal with it all on my own?*

I fell against him and he immediately wrapped me in his arms. “Whatever it is, Cali, I want you to know that it’s going to be okay. It can’t be half as bad as the shit we just went through, right?”

It felt so good, so easy to get lost in his embrace. I felt at home in his arms, letting him shield me like he had so many times before.

I looked up at him. “How do you know if you’re losing your mind?”

Xavier pulled back with a concerned look on his face. “What?”

“I think it might be happening. I think the *due destini* curse is finally closing in on me and I’m losing it.”

“So, you didn’t really have to use the bathroom, did you?” he said.

I shook my head. “No. I heard a voice.”

Xavier’s eyes hardened. “A voice? The creature’s voice?”

I shook my head. “No, it wasn’t that. It was Cassandra from the legend. She told me… She told I had to choose or I’ll… I’ll die.”

Xavier looked away. “So, are you going to?”

“How can you ask me that?” I gasped.

Xavier looked at me again. “Because you *have* to, Cali. Even if you choose him, I would rather that than have you…die.” His voice broke and he looked away again. “At least then I would know you’re okay,” he whispered.

My heart ached for Xavier. I could see the pain in his eyes, could practically feel the pain I would inflict on him if I chose Greyson. I had little doubt that if I were looking in Greyson’s eyes while he told me to choose Xavier rather than forfeit my life, I would see the same hurt.

They could both tell me to choose the other, but I know that each would suffer if I didn’t choose them. I couldn’t imagine hurting the two people I loved the most in the world—not like that.

Xavier lifted my chin, forcing me to look him right in the eyes. “Are you sure it was Cassandra? Could it have been someone else? Anyone else?”

“I’m not sure about anything.”

“Maybe we should talk to Big Mac,” he said.

I froze. “Do you think it could be the dark magic the monster released?”

“I don’t know, but I told her I would let her know if anything unusual came up, and I’m sure you can agree this counts.”

Xavier turned and started back toward the party, but I grabbed his arm, stopping him. “I’m afraid to find out,” I said softly. “I’m really not sure what would be worse, the *due destini* closing in on me or being infected with ancient, dark magic.”

The pain in Xavier’s eyes lingered and seemed to be deepening. “I hate seeing you like this. I want to fix it and I think Big Mac’s the place to start, but if you’re not ready for that and want to stay here for a while, I’ll stay with you.”

I rested my head on his chest, hating how overcome and helpless I felt. I’d just helped slay two fearsome, powerful creatures and yet here I was feeling like I didn’t even have control over my own life.

“Just hold me,” I said. “You don’t have to say anything, and you don’t have to fix things. At least not yet.”

I sighed with pleasure when he wrapped his arms tightly around me, pressing my cheek against his chest.

*Why can’t it just be like this? Why can’t we be like normal couples and steal a few moments away from the party just to enjoy each other’s company without some huge thing hanging over our heads, threatening our lives and happiness?*

“Why does everything have to be so difficult? So complicated? Why can’t things ever be easy for us?” I asked as if he had any more answers than I did.

“Cali,” Xavier whispered.

I looked up.

“You’re shivering.” He tightened his hold on me and rested his chin on the top of my head. One of his hands combed gently through my hair, the other drifted down to rest at the small of my back.

“When you first met me, did you ever think we’d be mates?” I asked him.

“Not at first,” he admitted after a short silence. “But then I began to realize it. It’s why I couldn’t let you go back to Minnesota and we had to come get you and Lola at the airport. I knew then that you belonged with me. I was just too afraid to admit it.”

We stared at each other in silence for a few beats before I rose up to my toes just as he leaned down to capture my lips in a soft kiss. Softness gave way to heat, and it quickly became an explosive kiss full of feeling and longing and desire.

He cupped my head in one of his strong hands and I leaned into him, pressing my hands flat against his chest and putting my all into this, letting myself just be Cali, letting him be Xavier. And we were. Back to the basics.

He suddenly broke the kiss.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I gasped.

A pained look shot across his face. “I can’t and we shouldn’t. You asked why things have to be so complicated, so hard, and I don’t know. They just are, I guess. But I don’t want to make things more complicated. I want you, I won’t lie, but I also want you to be sure. I want you to be able to think for yourself.”

“But Xavier—”

“I’m worried about the voice,” he said, gently cutting me off. “I’m worried about the dark magic. Let’s talk to Big Mac, okay?”

I wiped a tear and nodded. And as Xavier led me back to the party, I let Xavier hold my hand despite my better judgment, despite it all, because at the end of the day, I loved him, too, for better or for worse…

**Episode 5807**

**Ava**

I noticed Marissa’s eyes darting over her shoulder before quickly returning to meet mine. She was trying to keep her expression neutral, but I could tell that her expression had changed as we carried on talking about Ravi.

I glanced in the direction Marissa had just looked and immediately saw what Marissa must have spotted—Xavier and Cali exiting the woods hand in hand.

My mouth went dry as hurt coursed through me.

*I knew it. Something told me to just go home after my conversation with Xavier about whether we were happy or not. I should have known it would come to this. It almost always does. And what’s worse, Xavier isn’t even trying to hide it anymore. I’m sure Cali is eating it up.*

Marissa cleared her throat, obviously trying to catch my attention again.

“Just avoid him,” she said. “He’s not worth you getting torn up over for the millionth time.”

“Me avoid *him*? Why should I have to do that? He’s my mate,” I snapped.

“Yeah…but he’s her mate, too, and it’s obvious it hurts you to see them vibing like that. I’m only trying to look out for you. This is supposed to be a celebration.”

I held my breath for a few beats, trying to claw back some semblance of control over my emotions, but how could I when Xavier and Cali were only a few feet away looking more connected than ever?

“I don’t have a lot to celebrate right now,” I said. “But I have no regrets about what happened in the shed. I would do it again if I could.”

Marissa smirked. “Why? So you can rub it in Cali’s face?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Something like that. I don’t know, I’m just getting tired of this game. The back and forth between me and Xavier that never seems to end.”

“And have you talked to Xavier about how it’s affecting you? Have you told him how much it hurts?”

“I have,” I said. “And even if I hadn’t, Xavier knows. How could he not? There’s never been any love lost between me and Cali, so he knows exactly what he’s doing.”

“So you admit he knows that what he’s doing hurts you, but he does it anyway?” Marissa said. “That sucks.”

“It does,” I admitted. “But I don’t blame him. I blame messy, always in drama Cali and her fucking *due destini*. If not for that, Cali would be a distant memory.”

*My life—my new life, that is—would be a million times better without Cali around. Without that damn curse. If it weren’t for that, I would be with Xavier right now and he would be all mine.*

“Anyway, I think Cali’s had enough Xavier time. I’ll see you later.”

I made a beeline over to Xavier and Cali, ready to get some of my own Xavier time. I scowled when I saw the guilty look on Cali’s face as I approached them.

“Hey Ava,” Xavier said. I couldn’t help but notice how he angled Cali behind him slightly, as if protecting her from me. “I’m taking Cali to see Big Mac.”

I sucked my teeth. “Please. Cali’s a big girl. She can go see the witch on her own.” I aimed a cold gaze at Cali. “Can’t you, Cali?”

“Are you seriously jealous right now??” Cali shot back.

I bit back all the nasty things I wanted to say and instead smiled and fluffed my hair over my shoulder, wanting to look as unbothered as possible. “Hardly. I just want to talk to my mate without you hanging around.”

Cali turned to Xavier, ignoring me. “I’ll go talk to Big Mac.” She paused and then brushed a hand down Xavier’s arm. “Thanks again.”

Xavier nodded and I clenched my fists and my jaw as Cali walked away. She knew what she was doing. She played all sweet and caring and innocent to her mates, but she was none of that. She was no better than anyone else, and I wondered why Xavier couldn’t see that.

But I didn’t care about Cali. She could assert her claim over Xavier all she wanted, that didn’t change that Xavier was my mate. It also didn’t stop me from turning an angry gaze on Xavier as soon as Cali was out of earshot. “Thanks? What, did you take her to the shed, too?”

Xavier glared right back at me. “Will you knock it off? She’s still freaked out about the creatures and the dark magic stuff and—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Xavier. I’m so sick and tired of it all. I want it to stop.” My voice was shaking and I hated that, but at least I was telling him how I really felt. There was no use beating around the bush. What purpose did it serve? It wasn’t like it was making Xavier and I any closer or pushing Cali and further away.

Xavier shook his head and took a step back from me. “You want it to stop? What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that the both of you lean on the *due destini* like a crutch, like it’s the only thing that matters.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes at me. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m taking matters into my own hands.”

“You’re what?” Xavier growled, leaning close.

“I’ve been looking for ways to break the *due destini* so that you can be free. And Cali, too. Greyson would want to be free of it, too. I know he would. So I went to see a witch and—”

“What have you done, Ava?” Xavier growled in that same, deep menacing voice.

I was thrown—why was he so angry?

“Are you upset?”

“What have you done, Ava!” Xavier hissed.

I hadn’t done much of anything, truthfully. Seeing the witch only confirmed what everyone already knew—that there wasn’t much anyone could do to break the curse. It was far too powerful for anyone to tamper with.

“I just made a few inquiries with the kind of supernaturals who may know how to end the curse,” I said. “I just wanted this shit to be *over*!”

“And you don’t think that’s something you should have told me about?” Xavier said angrily.

“I—I don’t get why you’re so mad. I thought you would be relieved. I thought you hated the *due destini*!”

“I do, but you can’t just do something like that!” he said. “It doesn’t just affect me. It affects Cali, too.”

“But I thought you’d be happy to be free of it.”

“You thought wrong,” Xavier snapped. “If you thought at all. Breaking any curse is dangerous business and the *due destini* isn’t just any old curse. It’s something else entirely. You were tampering with forces you don’t understand.”

“Well refusing to do anything about it is just as bad,” I shot back, getting angry, now, too.

Xavier took another step back, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “I can’t believe you.”

Realizing that I may have pushed too far this time, I reached for him, but he pulled back and walked away.

Marissa was at my side in a flash. “What happened? Is everything okay?”

“I fucked up,” I said, my heart beating rapidly in my throat. “Really badly. I told Xavier that I looked into breaking the *due destini* curse and he got pissed at me! Can you believe that?” I balled my hands into fists, wishing I could punch something. “What an ungrateful asshole!”

“Wait, so you told him you’d been looking into how to break the curse?” Marissa asked.

“Yes… I mean all I did was ask around, but it didn’t do any good. The truth is no one can break the *due destini* bond. And even if I could, look at how he reacted! If I did somehow figure out a way to break it, what would be the point? Xavier would hate me. That much is clear.”

Marissa shook her head and looked over at where Xavier stood talking to a few Blue Bloods. I was certain that he would find his way back to Cali as soon as he could. I wondered if he would tell her what we talked about—what I’d done.

“So what are you going to do?” Marissa finally asked me.

“I don’t know. I guess I have to either grin and bear things as they are, or risk having him hate me forever.”

“Those can’t be your only options,” Marissa said. “You need to go to Xavier and tell him that you’ve just been feeling fed up lately and you haven’t actually done anything to break the curse.”

I looked away from Marissa and searched the crowd for Xavier again, but he wasn’t where I’d last seen him. My heart was crushed when I finally spotted him talking with Cali and Big Mac. Just like I knew he would, he’d found his way back to Cali’s side.

*I can’t fucking take this anymore.*

A single, fat tear slid down my cheek as I turned back to Marissa and said, “I’m going to lose him, aren’t I?”

**Episode 5808**

Big Mac heaved a loud sigh as she looked me over. “Cali, you sure do hear a lot of voices, don’t you?”

“It’s not my fault!” I said, already on the defense. “It’s not like I invited the voices in!”

Xavier shot Big Mac a sharp look that she returned head on. “Come on, Big Mac, can you tell if she’s carrying dark magic or not?”

“That depends,” Big Mac said. “Dark magic is cagey, which is what I told her way back when she was playing around with that key from Lucian’s cellar. It has ways of keeping its presence hidden. It’s one of the reasons it’s managed to stick around for so long.”

“That doesn’t sound promising,” I grumbled. “Isn’t there some kind of proactive spell you can cast to take care of it just in case?”

Big Mac shook her head. “That’s not how it works. If I hit you with a spell to counteract dark magic that isn’t even there, it could do more harm than good. For now, you’re just going to have to let me know if you hear any more voices or if you start feeling sick.”

I shuddered, thinking about the werewolves dropping to the ground in agony from the black magic shriek from the Night Stalkers. But mostly, I kept thinking about Xavier’s lips and how good they’d felt on mine and how I wished he hadn’t stopped. But he was right. Now wasn’t the time or place.

*Not that he thought about that when he was romping in the shed with Ava. But maybe I get it now. I know why Ava can’t keep his hands off him.*

I gazed at Xavier, picturing his hands all over me, his lips dragging across my skin, lighting a fire in its wake.

“Did you hear me, Cali?” Big Mac said with obvious frustration. “Why do you have that strange look on your face? Is something happening?”

My cheeks flushed with warmth. “No, nothing’s happening. Just drifted off. Not because of dark magic though.”

I wasn’t sure if that was true. Why did I keep drifting off thinking about Xavier at a time like this? I shouldn’t be thinking about that right now.

“Good, just make sure to come get me if anything strange happens again.” With that Big Mac went off to rejoin Mrs. Smith leaving me with Xavier.

“Well, that was useful,” Xavier snorted.

“At least she’s doing something,” I said, trying to be more understanding. “She’s helped us a million times before, so if we need her and if things really do get worse, I’m sure she’ll do it again.”

“Yes, but what is she doing right now? She warned us about the dark magic to get us all up in arms about it and when we come to her with symptoms that could be caused by it, she does nothing. I don’t get it.”

I laughed. “She’s just being Big Mac. You know as well as I do that only the direst situations push her into action.”

Xavier’s gaze suddenly shifted, and I turned to follow it just in time to see Ava shift into wolf form and take off into the woods.

“Shit,” Xavier hissed under his breath.

“You should go after her,” I said. “She seems upset.”

“I suppose I should,” Xavier said. He took a few steps in that direction and then hesitated.

“Go,” I pressed. “I’ll be okay. It’s like Big Mac said, there’s nothing to be done right now, and she didn’t seem particularly concerned…so maybe it’s nothing.”

Xavier looked skeptical.

“Come on!” I huffed. “I’m here with how many packs? How many Alphas? Nothing is going to happen to me, okay? Go after her.”

“Fine,” Xavier said, stepping close. His heat washed over my body and once again, I had a flash of him kissing me, the way his warm, solid body felt pressed against mine in the woods where no one could see us.

He caressed my cheek and my insides melted.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” he said before shifting and disappearing into the woods.

*I wish it was me he was chasing after.*

“Cali! Come over here, we’re roasting marshmallows!” Torin waved at me with the marshmallow speared on a stick in his hand.

I waved back and took one last look at the woods before heading over to join Torin and a bunch of others around the bonfire. Tonight was for celebrating, and it was time I focused on enjoying myself.

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“Wake up, you silly B! You’re late!” I jumped up with a start, gasping for breath. Lola was shaking me so hard my head was rattling.

“What is it?” I panted.

My mind ran through a million bad scenarios as Lola yanked me out of bed.

“You’re going to be so late, Cali, and you know if you’re late, if you miss this, you’re going to be kicked out. No more second and third and fourth chances!”

I was still so confused. “Kicked out of what? What are you talking about?”

Lola rolled her eyes as she threw a pair of shorts and a T-shirt at me. “What would you do without me? You’ll be kicked out of college, Cali. You’ve got crew! You’ve got the big regatta today and the couch already has you on probation!”

“Shoot!” I said as it all finally came rushing back to me. I’d been so wrapped up in dark magic and Night Stalkers that I hadn’t thought twice about class or my commitments to the crew team for days.

I grabbed my clothes and started getting dressed. Lola was so right. I would be in deep trouble without her.

“Maybe I *should* get kicked out. It would be a hard life lesson I deserve to learn seeing as I didn’t even remember I have a regatta today! And I can’t remember the last time I turned in an assignment on time.”

Lola snorted. “You’re not getting kicked out—at least not on my watch.” She shoved me—half dressed—out of my bedroom.

I planted my feet, suddenly panicking. “Wait, where’s Greyson?”

“You’re asking about *Greyson* right now? I don’t know, and he isn’t going to be able to help you if you get kicked out, so keep moving.”

Lola pushed me again and I nearly tripped down the stairs and fell on Greyson just as I stumbled off the bottom step. Luckily and not for the first time, he caught me.

“Hey, hey, hey, what’s going on?” He passed a confused look between me and Lola.

Lola shoved me again—this time toward the front door. “Sorry Greyson, no time to chat. She’s got a regatta to win so we have to fly. Show your support and come watch.” Then she handed me a protein bar and out the door we went.

I looked back as Greyson came out onto the porch. “I’ll make sure the whole pack comes,” he said. “Good luck!”

A short while later, I was surrounded by my teammates—Gael, Codsworth, Schmiddy, Johnny, Bear, Patel, Kayden, Wu, and Rodrigo. The energy in the air was electric, and I was so happy to be back—and feeling a ton of guilt for making them worry that I’d abandoned them.

Coach Ludwig snarled from the dock. “Nice of you to bless us with your presence, Hart. You’re lucky this is the last regatta of the season, or I’d bench your ass for good.”

I started to apologize, but he gave me a look that said it would only make things worse. “Don’t give me the old ‘I’m sorry coach it’ll never happen again’ song and dance. Apologize by helping us win the cup.”

Then he turned his back on me and motioned for everyone to gather around. “Get ready everyone, especially my always tardy coxswain, the race starts in a few minutes!”

I fell into step with the rest of the crew as we approached the boat.

“Good to have you back,” Gael said. “I was starting to worry that Schmiddy was going to have to sub in for you. That would have been a disaster.”

Schmiddy glared. “I know how to coxswain, and I show up to every practice…on time!” he said.

“I’m sorry, life’s been kicking my ass,” I said.

“It happens, but we’re glad you’re here. Schmiddy has heart, but the role needs rhythm, and Schmiddy has none,” Codsworth said.

Everyone laughed—even Schmiddy. It was a great way to relieve the tension.

As we readied the boat, Rodrigo gave me a bit of news.

“Some guy from one of the other colleges was asking about you.”

“Really? Who?”

“Can’t remember his name,” Rodrigo said.

I looked around at the other crews, wondering who would ask about me and why. But I didn’t see anyone I recognized, even though spotting anyone would be difficult with how hard everyone was hustling.

Before long, we took our positions, and I guided our team to the starting line. I heard Lola’s voice above everything else as she screamed from the side, waving her hands and jumping up and down.

My heart swelled as I spotted the Redwood pack cheering me on, but I didn’t even have time to wave at them. The race was starting, and then I was shouting at my crew through the bullhorn as I got my head in the game.

One of the boats was neck in neck with ours, and then I heard my name and spotted the last person I expected. My jaw dropped.

“Alex?!”

**Episode 5809**

To say I was stunned was an understatement. What in the hell was Alex doing here of all places? Too bad I couldn’t stop to figure out how the universe had brought us back together—I couldn’t risk even getting a good look at him. I had to keep my focus on the race.

I shouted through the bullhorn until my voice was almost hoarse, and until the competition was down to my crew and Alex’s, both of us neck to neck.

“Come on, Kangarats!” I screamed just as Alex’s team, the Green Devils, pushed slightly ahead of us.

I was surprised to see my old friend Alex Chevere here, but that didn’t mean I was about to let him beat us. I had to bring the competition home and prove to the coach, our competition, and the rest of our crew why I deserved to be here even if I wasn’t the model teammate.

“Come on, push! Push! Row! Row!” I screamed until I felt a vein popping dangerously in my temple. “Give it all you’ve got!”

We pushed ahead of the Green Devils but our lead was short lived, and with a powerful push the Green Devils flew past. I screamed louder, tempted for a moment to send out a little blast of magic to propel us forward, but I knew better—not only would it be risky, but it would also be cheating.

“Come on, this is the one that counts!” I screamed. “Make it matter, prove to everyone that the Kangarats are second to none!”

Everyone groaned with effort and pushed themselves and we edged past the Green Devils just as we crossed the finish line. It was the definition of a photo finish, and the Redwoods erupted in cheers when we were announced as the winners.

I looked over to see Greyson waving at me with a huge smile on his face, but then I spotted Kendall standing by watching.

*No big deal, right? The MIB agent with the piercing purple eyes who happens to be my other mate’s mate is still pretending to be a school administrator, so it makes perfect sense that she’s here…but still.*

Coach Ludwig was jumping up and down waving his arms and shouting with glee. When we reached the dock, the crew lifted me up on their shoulders and carried me down the dock. It was a wild celebration and I was on cloud nine.

“It’s official!” The announcer began, holding the cup in hand. I stared at it, unable to take my eyes off it. I couldn’t remember ever winning a trophy as grand as this one, or maybe any trophy at all. “The Kangarats are the winners and champions! Congratulations!”

More cheers erupted and there were high fives and hugs all around.

The Redwoods thundered down onto the dock and surrounded me, their cheers overpowering everyone else’s—werewolves were used to being heard, and today was no exception. I felt so proud to have them there, and there was something special about seeing them mingle with the others.

Lola fought her way through the crowd to get to me with a big smile on her face. “I’m so proud of you, bestie!”

“Thanks, and I know that if it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be here today. And that’s not an exaggeration,” I said. “You woke my ass up, you encouraged me, hell, you’re the entire reason I’m in crew in the first place!”

Lola’s smile widened. “Don’t mention it…right now I mean. Be sure to put it in your acceptance speech, though.”

“I’m pretty sure I won’t be asked to give a speech,” I said, laughing.

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Wait a damn minute. What the hell is HE doing here?”

I turned around just in time to see Alex heading our way. It was a shock to the system to see him—he was like an artifact from a world I’d left behind.

“Great win, Cali,” he said, holding out his hand.

Tentatively, I reached for it. It felt so surreal.

“Thanks,” I said. “What are you even doing here?”

Alex pulled his hand away and then pulled me into a hug…which felt even weirder.

“Wow,” Lola scoffed. She had her arms crossed over her chest and didn’t seem to be happy to see him at all.

“Wow is right,” Alex said smoothly as he released me. “Small world, huh? I’m here for the same reason you are, to compete. I’m the captain of the Green Devils rowing team from Eugene. Strange seeing you here…and seeing you as coxswain. I didn’t know you were interested in rowing.”

“Well, she is,” Lola said. “And what a surprise. You followed Cali all the way from Minnesota.”

Just then, a woman’s voice interrupted. “Alex, aren’t you going to introduce us?”

Alex grinned and pulled a pretty girl up to his side, draping an arm over her shoulder. “This is Kallie, our coxswain, and my girlfriend.”

Lola’s eyes were about to pop out of her head. “*Seriously*?”

I elbowed Lola to silence, even though I was a little weirded out, too. She even looked like me. I was relieved when Greyson appeared. I jumped into his arms without hesitation, and he alternated kissing me showering me with congratulations.

“And this is Cali’s boyfriend Greyson,” Lola said a little too loudly and eagerly.

Greyson pulled me close, towering over every single person around. He presented Alex with an easy grin before giving me another quick peck on the lips. “You were awesome, love. I’ve never seen you so…hyped up. At least not while sitting at the helm of a boat.”

I flushed with pleasure, excited to share this moment with Greyson and probably a little too happy about showing off my hot mate to Alex and his girlfriend who could have been my twin.

“Oh, Alex, this is Greyson,” I said. “Greyson, Alex.”

Greyson shook Alex’s hand, swallowing it in his large palm. Alex seemed a little cowed, but his smile remained as he said, “Nice to meet you, man. Cali and I know each other from back home.”

Greyson nodded. “Cool.”

There was an angry shout from one of the Green Devils. “Yo, Alex, get over here! We need you back at the boat!”

Alex flashed a sheepish smile. “Maybe we can all grab a drink later? Catch up?”

“Yeah right,” Lola snorted under her breath.

I eyed her and then shrugged at Alex. “Maybe. I’ll text you. Same number?”

“Same number,” Alex said. “Hope to see you later.”

Greyson watched as Alex and Kallie walked away. “Wow, that girl looked a lot like you or am I just seeing things?”

“I know,” I said. “Weird, right?”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Everything about Alex is weird.”

“Obviously he has a type,” I said.

Greyson smiled down at me and gave me a little pat on the butt. “I can’t blame him. I think I have a type, too.”

Lola made a gagging sound.

I said my goodbyes to the Redwoods, except Lola, who decided to hang with me and the team to celebrate our victory.

“You’re officially off probation,” Coach Ludwig said as he came over with the trophy cradled in his arms like it was a precious jewel. “You can stay in school.”

“Thanks Coach, I really appreciate it,” I said. I was so relieved. I’d been worried that I would have to lie to my parents—something I knew I would be bad at—and that I would hate to do.

After the last of the gear was stowed, I started toward the parking lot to meet Lola and drive back to the pack house. I was only mildly surprised when Kendall fell into step beside me. She’d moved so quietly that I hadn’t noticed her until she was upon me, which was regretful since I may have tried to avoid her otherwise.

“Congratulations on the victory,” she said. She pumped her fist. “Go Kangarats.”

“Thanks…but I’m sure you didn’t wait around all this time to congratulate me.”

Kendall smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Very perceptive of you.”

“So why are you here?” I said.

“I wanted to thank you for your discretion when it came to protecting my identity. It was good of you not to tell anyone who I work for.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” I said, unable to hide my annoyance.

She shrugged. “I don’t care who you did it for. I’m just telling you I appreciate it.”

“Are you upset that Greyson told me?”

“Of course I was at first. The point is to stay undercover, not broadcast my identity to just anyone. But I also understand why he did. You’re his mate, after all.”

I was struck by that, but I tried not to show it.

“I have to get going,” I said. “Lola’s waiting for me.” But as I made my way to the lot, I thought about how Kendall had trusted Greyson enough to tell him the truth about who she was and who she worked for.

*But it was Greyson who broke that trust and told me, but Greyson accused me of breaking my word.*

That was really bothering me. Would Xavier have done the same?

**Episode 5810**

**Greyson**

I was so damn proud of Cali, and impressed, too. I couldn’t wait to celebrate privately with her as soon as she got back to the pack house. And based on the way she’d handled herself on the boat, the fear of her succumbing to some lingering bit of dark magic seemed more and more unlikely.

I still had no idea what had happened between her and Xavier the night before at the party, but as usual, my brother had been an absolute pain in the ass. I had no plans to pressure Cali for the details, though. If she wanted to tell me what happened between them, she would.

I was hoping that we were truly good now and that she was ready to move on from the trust issue. I never should have questioned her. If I could take anything back that I’d ever said to her, it would be that.

When we arrived back at the Redwood pack house, I was dismayed to see Lucian’s parade of RVs still parked on the lawn. Not only was it an eyesore of epic proportions, but it was a constant reminder that Lucian was likely going to be here for the foreseeable future.

*Maybe it’s time for Cali and me to take a trip. What if we went to Portland for a few days just to get away and hang out? We need some one-on-one time, an extended period to focus on each other and no one else.*

I couldn’t remember the last time we’d done something like that. It was something that normal couples seemed to find the time to do, so why not us?

I spotted Lucian and Elle sitting in lounge chairs under the awning of his monstrosity of an RV. He smiled and waved me over and my dread grew. I would rather bash my head into a wall than talk to Lucian, but I headed their way, mostly for Elle’s sake.

“Any idea when the new Vanguard pack house will be done?” I said.

Lucian sighed. “No idea, but it feels like it’ll be forever.” He frowned. “I’m getting the impression you don’t want us here.”

“I don’t,” I said. I shot a glance at Elle. “No offense. But I also know you don’t have anywhere else to go, so I’m allowing you to remain.”

“How very generous of you,” Lucian said flippantly as if he were bored of this conversation and ready to move on to something else. “Anyway, Elle and I were discussing our upcoming nuptials, and I have to admit that the palace’s destruction has thrown a wrench in our plans.”

“We don’t need a fancy wedding,” Elle interrupted.

Lucian scowled at that. “Of course we do, my forest rose. You deserve it.”

I suppressed a smile. What Lucian really meant was that *he* deserved a fancy wedding. There was no way Lucian wasn’t going to turn his wedding into a spectacle. Showing off was his lifeblood. If he couldn’t rub his fanciness in people’s faces, he would probably cease to exist.

Ravi came walking over with a wrench in his hand. “We’ve got visitors.”

I watched a trio of wolves appear from the woods. Ravi arched an eyebrow, shaking his head slightly.

“Wait, is that…”

I cursed. “Yep, Ravi, it’s them. Cesaries and two of his council lackeys.”

“Ugh. What do they want?”

“Only one way to find out,” I said.

Lucian got up. “I should come with you.”

I stepped in front of him. “Why don’t you and Elle start discussing your wedding plans? I’ll fill you in on my convo with the council later.”

I had no plans to make a point of doing that, but I knew it would be easier to get rid of Lucian if he thought I planned to keep him in the loop.

I turned and made my way over to Cesaries only after Lucian and Elle were blissfully deep in wedding talk—and I didn’t mind at all making the council members wait.

*Throwing Lucian into whatever this is will only make matters worse. Not to mention that he talks so much he’d make their visit a hell of a lot longer than it needs to be.*

“I don’t suppose this is a social visit?” I said to Cesaries and the others as I approached.

“The council doesn’t do social visits,” Cesaries said in his normal dismissive tone.

“Great, then I’m sure you’ll be all too happy to cut the bullshit and tell me what you’re doing here.”

“Mind your manners,” Cesaries snapped. “Remember who you’re talking to. After all, I speak not only for the council but for all werewolf packs.”

I couldn’t keep the sarcasm from my voice as I said, “Oh, is that what you do? You had me fooled. In fact, you had all of us fooled since getting your help for werewolf matters is like pulling teeth.”

Cesaries’ face went red with rage. “How dare you? Your disrespect will be your undoing.”

I blinked at him. “Doubt it.” I took a step toward him. “In fact, I’m tired of your indignation, your attitude, your uselessness. You’re lucky I’m not throwing you out of our territory by the scruff of your neck.”

“Nobody talks to me like that,” Cesaries sputtered.

“Funny because I just did. What are you going to do about it? I know, what you always do. Nothing.”

Just then, Cali and Lola came pulling into the driveway. My heart fluttered with anticipation. It would be good to spend some time with her—especially after this unpleasantness with Cesaries.

“Say whatever you have to say and leave, please. I have more important ways to spend my time than going back and forth with you.”

Cesaries was still sputtering, still balling up his fists, still looking like he wanted to do something but didn’t have the balls to even attempt to do it.

“We want our crossbow back,” one of the other council members said while Cesaries continued to short circuit.

I laughed. “Your crossbow? Really? The one that we used to kill the monster that you refused to do anything about?”

“Are you serious? We *did* do something about it. We gave you the crossbow!” Cesaries nearly shrieked. “We entrusted you with the crossbow and with arrows. It was a loan, not a gift!”

“And we simply want it back,” the other council member added.

“Sure, and you’re welcome to go get it,” I said. I paused just as Cali came up to join me with a puzzled look.

“Hey…what’s going on?” she said.

“Do you remember where we left the crossbow?” I asked her.

Cali frowned. “Isn’t it at the base of the mountain?”

I smiled. “Ohhh, that’s right.” I turned back to Cesaries. “You heard her. It’s near the base of the mountain. It’s all yours.”

Cesaries and his lackeys exchanged a look. “Which mountain?”

“It’s—”

*Don’t tell them*, I mind linked to Cali, interrupting her.  *Let these useless bastards find it on their own.*

Cali smiled, then frowned. “Which mountain was it again? I just can’t remember! Oh, I know!”

Cesaries’ expression brightened.

“It was really big,” Cali finished as Cesaries’ face fell.

“Very big,” I said, playing along.

“Oh, and it had trees,” Cali said.

“Lots of trees.” I wrapped an arm around Cali’s waist.

“Where is it?!” Cesaries fumed. “I’m not here to play your silly games! I demand you tell us where to find our property!”

I shrugged. “I wish I could tell you, but we were just so busy saving the werewolves from complete destruction while you did absolutely nothing that we must have let it slip our minds. Guess you’ll just have to look for it.”

I gave the other two council members a look.

“Seems like you have enough manpower for the job.”

“What?! This is unacceptable!” Cesaries shouted.

I got in his face, ready for this little interruption to come to an end. “You know what’s unacceptable? You. You and your council members who don’t know their asses from a hole in the wall. You don’t do anything to help wolves other than throw parties and mixers and make demands. You talk big, but when it comes down to it, you hide behind all your arcane rules and do nothing to actually lead!”

I was raising my voice, and I didn’t care. People were gathering around watching, and I saw more than a few smiles.

“You don’t make anything better or safer for werewolves. It’s like we’re on our own. It’s really a shame.”

“How dare you?” Cesaries growled. “You have a lot of nerve making those groundless insults!”

“They’re not groundless. You and I both know everything I said is true, and that your council hasn’t made a difference in a long time.”

“So what is this? Are you challenging me?” Cesaries said.

I looked at Cali who was watching me with wide eyes.

“You know what? I think I am. I *am* challenging you, Cesaries. I think the council is way overdue for a new leader.”

**Episode 5811**

I stared in shock at Greyson, stunned at his challenge to Cesaries. I had *not* seen that coming. Where in the world had he gotten that idea? I had no idea what that would even mean – did Greyson mean that he would take Cesaries’s place as leader of the werewolf council? How would that work?

I somehow doubted they would hold an election. Werewolves were fair…but in their own way. They did things differently, and it usually involved violence.

Cesaries got over his own shock and scoffed. He clearly thought Greyson was joking. “No one has challenged me, Greyson Evers. Not since I earned my place as head of the council over twenty-five years ago now. And if you think you’re just going to step in, you have got another thing coming.”

He narrowed his eyes and Greyson made a low, angry sound in the back of his throat. They both sounded as though they were going to shift right then and there.

“Please,” I pleaded, stepping between them, “please don’t do this. Let’s just all calm down.” I looked between the angry men.

“You’ve been nothing but dead wood since you started!” Greyson snapped, shouting over the top of my head at Cesaries. “You’ve been content to rely on your cronies to do the bare minimum while the packs you’re all charged to protect are left to fend for themselves!”

Cesaries looked lethally angry now. “That is a very dangerous charge you’re making, Greyson Evers,” he hissed. “Are you invoking the Concilium Bellicus?”

I frowned. I had no idea what the Concilium Bellicus was, but it sounded worrisome.

Greyson glowered at Cesaries for a moment, then he looked over at me…then over at Kendall, who looked back at him with a hint of a smile.

My frown deepened. What had that smile meant? Was this some kind of MIB secret plan?

Greyson turned back to Cesaries. “Let’s make it official.”

The blood seemed to drain from the council leader’s face. “*What*?”

Greyson nodded. “I invoke the Concilium Bellicus,” he boomed out. “I challenge you—the current so-called council leader.”

Behind Cesaries, the other council members he’d brought along gasped and stirred. They turned to each other, beginning to murmur and talk amongst themselves.

Cesaries looked furious. “Then I have no choice but to accept your challenge,” he growled back.

This caused even more uproar among the council members, and now from the members of the Redwood pack, who looked just as shocked as I felt. Even the Samaras looked surprised.

I grabbed Greyson’s arm and pulled him close to me. “What are you doing?”

He looked at me for a moment, then up at Cesaries, his stormy eyes seething with anger. “Something I should have done a long, long time ago.”

“Greyson,” I said, trying to keep my voice reasonable, “I get why you’re angry and Cesaries and the rest of the council, I really do—I am too—but what does all of this even mean? What even is this thing you just challenged him too? What’s the Concilium Bellicus?”

“It’s a challenge for his position,” Greyson explained. “If I win, I take his place.”

“And if you don’t win?” I asked quietly. “What does losing mean?”

“It’s like the Lupo Finale,” he told me. “Once the Concilium Bellicus is invoked, the challenger and incumbent face off.”

I swallowed hard. I well-remembered the Lupo Finale in Thor’s Well. I could still remember what it was like to watch the werewolves all try to kill each other for the hopes of becoming the Redwood Alpha. It had been horrifying to witness. I knew it was how the werewolves did it, but the memory of it made my stomach turn. Ryker had poisoned Xavier with silver and nearly killed him.

“Is it going to be like last time?” I asked with a shudder.

Maybe Greyson understood what I was remembering, because he shook his head. “The Concilium Bellicus is different. It’s not the kind of free-for-all that the Lupo Finale is. It’s only going to be me and Cesaries.”

“You’re going to fight to the *death*?” I gasped, the worst memories of the last Lupo Finale flashing through my head.

Greyson’s jaw tightened. “It doesn’t have to be like that. It doesn’t have to end in death,” he said evasively. “Though I have to admit that Cesaries certainly deserves to die for what he’s done—and has failed to do. But as long as one of the opponents surrenders, the challenge is over. I plan on making Cesaries plead for mercy.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand, Greyson.”

“What?” he asked.

“I don’t understand why you are doing any of this.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “I have to. I can’t continue to stand by and let the council treat the packs this way.”

“I know that,” I conceded. “But what does it mean if you win?”

“You mean *when* I win,” he corrected me with a grim smile.

“When you win,” I allowed.

“It means I take over as head of the werewolf council, and I can replace all of Cesaries’s minions.”

I took that in. “So—can you do that and still be the Redwood Alpha?”

Greyson didn’t answer. He looked away, unable to meet my eyes.

“Greyson,” I said, pulling on his hand to draw his attention back to me. “I asked you a question.” A feeling of dread was churning deep in the pit of my stomach. “What does it mean if you win? What about the pack?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but no words came out.

I could feel my own mouth open with shock. “Did you think about this part, Greyson? I mean, I don’t know the rules here, but it doesn’t seem like you can be impartial as the head of the werewolf council if you’re the Alpha of one of the packs, right?”

He shook his head. “I—I can figure something out.”

I just stared at him. “You can…*what*? Are you serious? Greyson…” Now it was my turn to shake my head.

I just couldn’t figure out what was going on. Greyson was usually so thoughtful and measured. To do something like this—out of nowhere—seemed so strange and out of character for him.

“Why did you do this at all?” I asked, still keeping my voice down. I could feel the watching eyes on us as we spoke, so I was careful to speak quietly enough that we wouldn’t be overheard. “Why did you suggest this challenge in the first place? What put this idea in your head all of sudden like this? I mean—the council has sucked for such a long time. Why now? Why you?”

Greyson didn’t answer, but his eyes shifted, and I followed his gaze…right over to where Kendall stood.

My heart sank as I realized that was my answer.

“Did Kendall put you up to this?” I asked in a whisper.

“Cali—”

“Is this some kind of MIB operation?” I pressed, asking the question I’d been wondering about since she and Greyson had shared that smile.

Greyson sighed. “No, it’s not. And Kendall didn’t put me up to anything. She just…she just suggested that I would be a better leader than Cesaries.”

My eyes went wide as I stared at him, shocked. “And you didn’t bother to tell me that—or to talk to me about it first? Before you challenged Cesaries?”

“It wasn’t that big of a deal,” Greyson said dismissively.

My stomach tightened. “*Not that big of a deal*? This challenge we’re talking about could be a fight to the *death*, Greyson. You said that yourself. And the fact that you don’t think it’s not that big of a deal says all you need to say.”

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes, and I wiped them quickly away. My head was spinning, I tried to keep my composure, but it was hard. Greyson and I were supposed to be mates. We were *supposed* to tell each other everything. We were supposed to trust each other implicitly, and yet he had chosen to keep me in the dark about all of this.

Glancing over, I saw that Kendall was speaking to Mikah, and I felt a stab of cold jealousy at the sight of her. Greyson had confided in Kendall. He had spoken to her about this—taken her advice to heart and acted on it—without even talking to me. She had known about this before me. Even putting our mate bond aside, I thought Greyson and I were more than friends. I thought we relied on each other. We had each other’s backs. We told each other everything because we cared. We wanted—and valued—the other’s opinion.

Had I been wrong about that? Had I misunderstood the nature of my connection with Greyson? How was that possible?

I glanced at Greyson, then at Kendall as my stomach tightened anxiously. Was Greyson’s mate bond with Kendall stronger than I had thought?

**Episode 5812**

**Xavier**

Standing back, I watched as Greyson and Cesaries got angrier and angrier, getting into each other’s faces. I wouldn’t mind watching my brother rip Cesaries to shreds right here and now. I’d had more than enough of that bastard—but I had to admit that all of this was surprising. This all just seemed uncharacteristically impulsive for my normally level-headed brother. And the Concilium Bellicus challenge he’d just made—what the hell was that about? It sure as hell raised a shitload of questions for all of us. Not the least of which about the argument I had just seen Greyson and Cali get into.

Cali had seemed just as surprised as the rest of us to hear Greyson challenge Cesaries like that, which could only mean that Greyson hadn’t discussed the Concilium Bellicus with her first. Considering the magnitude of what it meant for all of us, it seemed wild to me that he hadn’t spoken about it to his mate. What was Greyson thinking?

I needed to find out.

I started toward him, but just as I did, I realized that Greyson was walking toward me. I narrowed my eyes as we neared each other.

“Okay, so that was either really stupid, or really brilliant. I’m not sure which, but I’m leaning toward stupid,” I told him, crossing my arms across my chest.

Greyson’s looked grim. “It needed to be done.”

I shrugged. “You’re right about that, but what’s the rush?”

He shook his head. “What are you talking about? I should have done that ages ago. You should know that better than anyone.” He glowered over his shoulder in Cesaries’s direction. “That bastard stood by when that fucking monster almost killed you, feeding you to its babies for a morning snack. The only reason the rest of us didn’t die is because we finally took action. What did the council do?”

“Whole lotta nothing,” I supplied.

“Exactly,” he snapped. “We made it, but what if next time we aren’t as lucky.”

I considered this for a long moment. “I don’t disagree with any of this, man, but still—you didn’t even let anyone know what you were planning.”

Greyson shot a glance back toward Cali, who was watching us. “I should have told her.”

“You think?” I scoffed.

He turned back to me. “I need a favor.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you think I’m going to help you patch things up with Cali, you can fuck right the hell off. She deserves better than that—”

“That’s not what this is about,” Greyson said hurriedly. “I want you to be my second in the Concilium Bellicus.”

That was *not* what I had been expecting him to say, and I was thrown by the request. “Wait—*what*? Seriously?”

He nodded. “Yeah, dead serious.”

I pushed a hand through my hair. “So if you can’t fulfill this fucked up challenge you threw out without telling anyone about, you want me to jump in?” I blew out a breath. “Was I your first choice? Or your last?”

Greyson’s eyes were steady on me. “I asked you first because there’s nobody I trust more than you, Xavier.”

If I’d been shocked before, now I was stunned. That had come out of nowhere. Part of me was annoyed as fuck—but I had to admit, if only to myself, that I was moved too.

Greyson took a deep breath, and for the first time I saw anxiety in his eyes. “I know that if something were to happen to me, you would make sure that Cali was safe.”

“And yet you didn’t even bother to warn her of your plan today, to see how she would react to all this.” I thought for a minute. “And what happens after you kick Cesaries ass? Can the new werewolf council leader remain with his pack?”

Greyson twitched his shoulders. “We’ll work something out.”

I rolled my eyes, annoyed again. “A brilliant plan. It really sounds like you’ve thought of everything, Greyson—”

“I didn’t come over here to hear you editorialize about my decision,” Greyson growled. “I came to ask you to be my second. I’ve asked, now I need an answer. Will you do it?”

“Greyson, think,” I said, starting to feel a little crazed. It felt strange to have to be the logical voice of the conversation. “It raises the same questions. If you can’t challenge Cesaries and I have to step in, what happens to the Samaras? I’m their Alpha.”

Greyson thought for a moment. “Talk to Ava.”

I snorted a laugh. “Yeah, I was planning to. You might take your own advice and straighten things out with Cali and your pack, too.”

“I will,” Greyson said, clearly fighting to keep his voice even, “but I need your answer.”

“I’ll let you know,” was all I would tell him. “In the meantime, don’t do anything rash. It doesn’t suit you,” I said with a frown. I clapped him in the back, maybe a little harder than was strictly necessary, and turned away.

Ava was standing a little ways back, and I started toward her, though in my heart, I knew I’d rather speak to Cali first.

Ava’s eyes narrowed as I drew close. “What did Greyson want?” she asked.

“You heard his challenge,” I started.

“The Concilium Bellicus, of course. We all did.”

“He wants me to be his second—”

“Absolutely not,” Ava said before I could even finish my sentence. “You didn’t say you would, did you?”

“No,” I assured her.

“And you won’t,” she said quickly, her blue eyes anxious. “What if something happened to Greyson? No one’s issued a Concilium Bellicus challenge in decades. What if something were to go wrong? What if you had to step in? You can’t be the head of the council. You’re the Alpha of the Samara—”

“And I will still be the Samara Alpha,” I said, once again in the position of being the calm voice of reason. “Think about it, Ava. The odds of anything preventing Greyson from being able to face Cesaries are almost zero.”

“But not completely zero,” she pointed out. “Are you really willing to take that chance? After all we’ve been through as a pack? I feel like if you were, you would have already agreed.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t come over here to argue. My brother asked me to be his second because he trusts that I would be able to defeat Cesaries if he couldn’t, and because he knows I would be a competent council leader if it came to that.”

My words surprised even me. They must have surprised Ava too, because she gave me a long, assessing look.

“Well, it sounds like you’ve already made up your mind,” she finally said, her voice tight.

“I have,” I said, realizing that she was right. “But I wanted you to be the first to know.”

“Thanks,” she said, in that same tight voice. Then she turned on her heel and strode away, her dark hair swinging behind her.

I watched her for a moment and almost started after her but stopped myself. I knew Ava, and I knew that she needed to cool down before we would be able to talk. In the meantime, I would find Cali.

Looking around, I caught sight of her sitting on the porch. She was alone, and when I walked over to her, she eyed me warily as I approached.

My heart sank—I hated how upset she looked.

“Hey,” I said, stopping at the foot of the steps.

“Hey,” she said quietly. “What’s going on?”

“Greyson asked me to be his second for the Concilium Bellicus.”

Her dark eyes flashed with pain. “What did you say?”

“Nothing, yet. I haven’t told him one way or the other. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

She gave me a sad smile. “Thanks. I…” She shook her head. “I just don’t understand.”

I walked up the rest of the stairs and dropped down to sit on the top step beside her. I looked out at the gathered packs, all of them bunched up in groups on the winter-brittle grass, talking and looking warily around. I tried to imagine what Greyson’s victory over Cesaries would mean for them.

“If Greyson does become the council leader, who would be the Redwood Alpha?” Cali asked. She looked up at me. “Would it be you?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. I really wasn’t sure about so much, but I kept thinking about what Greyson had said to me about trusting me, and about taking care of Cali.

“I don’t know everything there is to know about Alphas,” Cali admitted, “but I’m pretty sure it’s not possible to be Alpha of two different packs at the same time, right?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. It’s not something that I’ve ever heard of, that’s for sure.”

“So what do you think would happen?” Cali asked, her voice quiet with worry. “What would this mean? Would you combine the Redwood and the Samara packs?”

**Episode 5813**

**Artemis**

With Adair’s whip securely on Memphis, the old woman was *encouraged* to escort us through the treacherous mountain terrain.

The paths were winding and steep, and we moved slowly. As the hours passed, I started to feel nervous. My stomach clenched, my heart raced, and my palms started to sweat. Even my breath was coming fast, though we were moving fast enough for me to be winded. It was like all my pent-up energy had nowhere to go.

Rishika gave me a sideways look, and—seeing my distress—she reached out a grabbed hold of my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“It’s going to be alright,” she said quietly.

“I hope you’re right,” I said, looking ahead at the old woman. I didn’t trust Memphis, but it did seem like she would rather escort us all through the mountains to the sight of the purple shining stones, rather than being killed. The threat of death really could be a significant motivator.

As we headed downhill, I realized we were walking toward what looked like a rock quarry. I frowned, and as we neared it, my frown deepened. I could see that there were passageways through the rocks, but they were so narrow, I was immediately suspicious.

Marious narrowed his eyes at Memphis. “Are you leading us into a trap?”

The old woman glared at him and spat at his feet. “No. This is the way. The stones are hidden on all sides. To reach them, we must go through here. I’m not a liar, boy.”

“Well, that remains to be seen,” Adair muttered in a low voice.

“This reminds me of Joshua Tree,” Tabitha said, looking at the narrow passages in the rocks.

“Joshua Tree?” I asked.

She nodded. “It’s a national park in California. They have these slot canyons that look a lot like this,” she said, nodding toward the passages.”

“Oh yeah, I think I’ve heard of that,” Rishika said. “What are they called?”

“The Hall of Horrors,” Tabitha said, with a look toward the rocks.

“That’s lovely,” Marius said sarcastically. “Really fucking lovely.”

“Everyone calm down. We can get through those rocks,” I said, trying to sound more certain than I felt. I looked warily at the rocks. Those passageways were really narrow. I wasn’t claustrophobic, but still…

“I’m not so sure about this,” Adair said doubtfully. He looked around. “Is there another entrance? Kadmos is a large man, and the chances of him getting through here…” He shook his head.

My stomach dropped. Shit.

“There is another way,” Memphis admitted, “but not where we are. To get there, we would have to go a week and a half’s walk around the other way. But you all seem like you are pressed for time, are you not, Dark Fae?”

Adair gave her a sharp look. He opened his mouth to answer her, but I spoke before he could.

“Let’s just go,” I said. “If she’s right, then we’ve found the spot. If she’s wrong…”

“Then we get crushed by rocks,” Marius finished.

“Way to stay positive,” Rishika said, rolling her eyes.

Adair glanced at Memphis. “What about her?”

I shook my head. “We don’t need her.”

I walked toward the narrow opening in the rock, letting Adair do what he was going to do with Memphis to let her go. It didn’t matter to me one way or the other. My focus was on finding the purple stones—and finding my father.

The opening of the canyon was narrow, but I figured I would be able to slip in sideways. I was just considering how far the canyon reached when Marious stepped next to me.

“I can go in first,” he offered.

I shook my head. “No, I brought you all here. I’ll go first.” And with a deep breath, I slipped into the slot canyon.

The rocks on either side of me rose up. They pressed into me as I slid through. It wasn’t comfortable, and with my injuries, not at all pleasant, but there was more pushing me onward than holding me back.

I could hear the others entering behind me. Rishika was closest behind me, then Marius behind her, with Tabitha and Adair bringing up the rear.

We’d been walking in silence for only a few moments when Marius cried out—

“FUCK!”

I tried to twist around to see what had happened, but I couldn’t turn. The rocks were too tight. My heart pounded, wondering if Memphis had lied to us and we were going to be crushed.

“Marius?! What happened?”

“These fucking rocks,” he growled. “They just about crushed my balls. *Fuck*.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Rishika snorted. Then she started to laugh. Tabitha joined her, and then I did too. I laughed and laughed, so hard my stomach started to hurt.

Even Adair joined in.

“I’m glad you’re all enjoying this,” Marius said, but I could tell by his voice that he was smiling.

“Alright, if it’s all the same to you all, I’d like to get out of this,” Adair said, pulling it together.

I nodded and, glad the tension had been broken, wiped tears from my eyes. “You’re right—let’s go. I think I see the other side now.”

The rocks seemed to grow even tighter as I neared the light, but just a few moments later, I emerged from the slot canyon into a clearing in the trees. I looked around. We were still deep in the woods, but there was a little space here, with wildflowers on the ground.

I took a deep breath, glad to have the space to move my lungs now that I was out of the passageway. The others emerged from the canyon one at a time, and when Marius came out, he knelt on the ground and took a long, grateful breath.

“We are *not* doing that again,” he announced.

“Agreed,” Rishika said with a nod.

Tabitha was looking around when a cloud moved from in front of the sun. “Look!” she gasped, pointing.

I followed where she was looking, and realized that as the sun hit them, all around us, the stones of the mountain began to shine a purple so deep it looked almost blue. I stared at it in wonder—it was exactly as my mother had described. The sight of it took my breath away, and for a moment, all I could do was stare.

Around me, everyone else had gone quiet, equally stunned.

“Kadmos must be here,” I said. “We need to look.”

Not sure where I was going or really what I was looking for, I started into the wildflowers. There were still so many questions, but the hope in my heart was suddenly overflowing. I reached the edge of the clearing and looked into the trees. There, in the darkness was…*something.*

I rubbed my eyes. Was that a cabin?

My stomach tightened with excitement and fear, and I just started to run toward the cabin. Behind me, the others called after me, but I ignored them. I knew that anything could be out here—even someone or some*thing* dangerous—but I didn’t care. I just sprinted toward the cabin.

As I neared it, I saw a figure moving.

“Dad?” The word just slipped out of me. “*Dad!*”

The figure turned toward me. It was an old man.

My stomach lurched at the sight of him. That couldn’t be Kadmos. He was way too old. But—the man looked so startled.

“Where did you come from?” he asked in a dry, reedy voice.

“I’m—I’m looking for someone,” I panted as I slowed down. “I’m looking for my father, Kadmos. Do you know him? Is he somewhere near here?”

The old man stared at me for a moment. He blinked. “No one…you’re the first Fae I’ve seen in…years. I don’t know…”

The first Fae in years? I was crushed. He wouldn’t have run into Kadmos, then.

“Artemis!”

I turned to see Rishika, Marius, Tabitha, and Adair running toward me.

The old man looked frightened at the crowd nearing us.

“We won’t hurt you,” I assured him. “We just—I just thought you were someone else.”

Still, the old man stepped back as the others drew near. He looked at them warily. “Are you all Fae?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer the question. I was worried that if I told him that Rishika was actually a werewolf, which would freak him out even more.

“Can we please just speak to you?” I asked.

The old man hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

I stepped toward him, and the others followed, but as we got close to him, the old man’s skin began to shimmer. I paused and watched as the old man transformed before our eyes into a younger man. Not young, but a man about Adair’s age. A man who looked astonishingly like the man I’d seen in my mother’s memories.

Next to me, Adair stopped in his tracks.

When he spoke, his voice was a choked whisper:

“Kadmos?”

**Episode 5814**

**Greyson**

“Here.” Kendall handed me a beer as she stepped beside me. “You look like you could use this.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the icy-cold bottle with a wry smile. “I guess I could. Invoking the Concilium Bellicus seems to have pissed everyone off.”

Kendall looked at me. She kept her eyes locked on mine as she reached over and popped the top off my beer. “Not everyone.”

My wolf stirred within me, growling for her attention—and mine. This was not new—I’d been aware that my wolf had been reacting more and more to Kendall lately.

Kendall looked away, her purple eyes out into the trees in the distance and took a sip of her own beer. “Whatever anyone else thinks, I still think you’re the best choice to run the werewolf council, Greyson. And I suspect the MIB would also prefer a chance in leadership. At least they know they can work with you, instead of that blowhard in charge now.”

“That’s all well and good, but I have to defeat Cesaries first,” I noted.

Kendall scoffed as she looked over at me. “You sound like you have any doubt that you can. You shouldn’t. I’ve seen you in action. Cesaries might have his share of scars and stories of his own victories, but come on. He’s never come across an Alpha like you.”

I had just taken a drink and almost choked on my beer. “Careful,” I warned her. “That almost sounds like a compliment.”

She looked out at the trees again, but her cheeks dimpled as she suppressed a smile. “It’s not. Just a fact. If you face him in the Concilium Bellicus, you will become the new leader.”

“I asked Xavier to be my second.”

Kendall glanced over at me, then at Xavier, who was sitting on the porch of the house, next to Cali.

As I followed her gaze, I was surprised to realize that I didn’t feel jealous to see Xavier with Cali. Instead, I felt a strange sense of relief. Maybe Xavier could explain to Cali what I hadn’t been able to.

Kendall nodded. “Xavier’s a good second, but he’s not you.” She was quiet for a moment, then she looked back at me. “Did you invoke the Concilium Bellicus because of what I said? Or was it because of something else?”

I rolled the top of my beer between my fingers, thinking for a moment. “I suppose it would be easy to say that it was all because of your suggestion, but the truth is that I’ve always felt like my return to the Redwood was for a larger purpose. I came back to the Redwood to protect my brothers from our father, Silas, and becoming Alpha was part of the process. It was a means to an end more than anything else. But I never really thought about what it would mean to stay an Alpha long term. It wasn’t something I necessarily wanted. It was something I had to do at the time. And then I found out that I was mated to Cali and then time passed and…” I shrugged. “And here we are.”

Kendall took that in. She nodded. “I think you’re right. I think you’re destined for a larger purpose.”

I was about to ask her what she thought that purpose might be when a voice cut through the cold air—

“I say, Greyson!”

With a groan, I turned to see Lucian striding across the grass toward us.

“What’s up, Lucian?” I asked.

“I was about to ask you that same question,” he said, stepping in front of me. “I have to tell you that I was a bit surprised when you invoked the Concilium Bellicus. I was going to do it, but then you went and beat me to it.”

Kendall and I shared a skeptical glance. Clearly neither of us believed a word of Lucian’s claim.

“But, since you invoked the Concilium Bellicus, I demand that I be your second,” Lucian concluded.

That made me nearly spit out the drink of beer I’d just taken.

I coughed, trying to recover my composure. “Too late again, Lucian,” I said, wiping my chin. “I’ve already asked my brother.”

Lucian stared at me, stunned. “*Colton*?! He’s not even an Alpha!”

“No, I asked Xavier. And he is very much an Alpha. And you were never in the running, for the record.”

Lucian looked insulted. “And why not?”

I shouldn’t have said that last part—it just slipped out. I didn’t want to cause anymore unnecessary friction, so I took the route that would most easily sooth Lucian’s ego.

“I should think it would be obvious. You’re the leader of the Vanguard, Lucian. There is no one here who could ever take your place in that.”

Lucian’s perturbed look disappeared, and he puffed out his chest. “That’s true.”

“Besides,” I went on, laying it on thick, “you’re going to be so busy rebuilding your palace after everything that’s happened. I wouldn’t want to interfere with everything you have going on.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, beaming. “You know, it’s going to be even more palatial than it was before when it’s complete. You can’t even begin to imagine!”

“I have no doubt,” Kendall muttered, rolling her eyes.

Lucian, missing her sarcasm completely, turned on his heel and headed off, looking pleased.

Kendall looked at me, a wry smile on her face. “You handled that well, Greyson. Extremely diplomatic. Another reason you should be head of the council. You know how to deal with the…personalities in the area.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I said, returning her smile.

“Greyson Evers.”

I looked up to see the two council members who had come here with Cesaries approaching me. “Yes?”

“We will leave you now, but we will be providing you details about the Concilium Bellicus,” one said.

My smile grew into a grin. “Terrific. I can’t wait.”

The other council member nodded. “Await our communication.”

I nodded and they turned to leave. They walked to the edge of the trees, then shifted and disappeared into the woods.

Kendall watched them. “They looked relieved, don’t you think? With the thought of a new leader coming down the pike. Especially one like you.”

I was still thinking about that, wondering if she was right, when Colton walked over.

“Just stopping in to say goodbye,” he said.

“Goodbye?” I asked.

He nodded. “I think so. Now that the Night Stalker and all her little babies are RIP’d, the Grimcrest are all going to head back to the lake house.”

“Got it. Thank Maya for bringing the Grimcrest, will you?” I asked him. “For me.”

“Sure,” Colton said.

There was a strained pause.

“So,” Colton finally said. “You’re going to become the new council leader, huh?”

“That’s the plan,” I said with a sigh.

Colton nodded. “Well, that’s a hell of a thing.”

I braced myself, wondering if he was going to tell me I had acted rashly, just like everyone else—every except for Kendall—had been saying.

Colton glanced around, then leaned in. “Listen, between you and me, I think it’s a good plan, Greyson,” he said quietly.

I stared at him, stunned. “You do?” I was shocked. I was sure Colton was going to give me shit about declaring Concilium Bellicus.

Colton shrugged. “When you first came back to the Redwood, I was pretty wary, man. I didn’t trust you at all. I didn’t know why you’d even come back here.”

“I know that,” I admitted. “I felt that. That’s why you were always in Xavier’s corner.”

Colton laughed. “That’s true. Even though Xavier can be a real dick sometimes. But he is my twin, after all.” He thought for a moment. “But since then—since you got back here and everything—you did okay, Greyson. You helped us defeat Silas, you kept everyone safe. More than once.” Colton reached out and clapped me on the shoulder. “I might even be proud to call you my brother.”

As I looked into Colton’s laughing eyes, my throat tightened as I felt a surge of emotion. Colton’s speech had been unexpected. I had never expected such praise from Colton. I had never expected anything from Colton—nothing but jokes and maybe to get my balls busted.

Colton gave my shoulder one last squeeze, then turned and headed over to join the rest of the Grimcrest pack.

The pack welcomed him, and as I watched him as he joined them, I felt a warm gladness for my little brother. Whatever happened with the council, I was happy for Colton. He would always have Maya—and they had each other, their babies, and their pack. And that was a lot. That was stability, something I never would have expected for Colton.

Taking a deep breath, I looked around, searching for Cali. I had a sudden feeling that I needed to talk to her. I had a sense of something changing all around me, like sand shifting beneath my feet. Something was changing, and I wasn’t sure what it meant.

**Episode 5815**

**Maya**

I was exhausted as the Grimcrests arrived back at the lake house. But it felt good to get back and—despite all my previous misgivings—it was weirdly starting to feel like home.

Even though it had only been a few days, walking back inside the house and looking out the wide windows to see the lake stretching out before us felt good. The water was so peaceful, and it felt good to be with my family and my pack. There was so much space for Orion and Lyra to run around, and the rest of the pack seemed to be comfortable too. As everyone shifted back to their human forms and streamed back into the house, they all heaved sighs of relief.

“Everyone, make sure you rest and relax,” I called out. “It’s been hell with the Redwoods and all the Vanguards over there. Let’s make sure we take some quiet time for ourselves to unwind.”

Genji laughed and shook his head. “That’s one way to put it. That Lucian guy is something else.”

“And his sister is a piece of work too,” Nash added. He shrugged. “Hot, though.”

“That’s true,” Hawke said.

“She’s hot,” even Genji had to admit.

Bennett glared at the three men as she stomped into the house. “You three are disgusting.”

Davina had heard as well, and she glared at Hawke. “Don’t even think about getting into my bed tonight if you’re so interested in Aysel.”

Colton and Gabriel, each holding a twin baby in their arms, stepped beside me,

Colton shook his head at Hawke. “Damn, man, you fucked up already?”

Hawke looked worried. “Come on, D, don’t be like that—”

But Davina wasn’t listening. She hooked her arm through Bennett’s and together the women headed up the stairs.

Hawke shook his head. “Fucking hell.” He glared at Nash. “Fuck you, dude. If you hadn’t said that thing about Aysel. And you didn’t have to agree with him,” he added, turning his anger on Genji.

“What the hell did I do?” Genji asked, looking offended.

“You know what you did,” Hawke snapped.

Ignoring their squabbling, I took Lyra from Gabriel’s arms.

“Thanks for taking care of her,” I said. “Hey, how long do you think Mikah will stay over, giving Greyson counsel on his…um, decision?”

Colton looked over at Gabriel. “Yeah, what the fuck was all that? On one hand, I admire the guy, but on the other, he’s an idiot. Why would he give up being an Alpha to become—what? A werewolf UN diplomat or something?”

Gabriel shrugged. “It’s a sudden decision, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, though if Greyson were head of the werewolf council, that might change things for the better,” I had to admit. “The council would actually be helpful for once, rather than whatever bullshit they are now. I mean, do you remember when they were going to kill Joss because Greyson had stepped away? Talk about medieval. If Greyson was in charge, he would never do something so ridiculous. He’d be a good leader.”

“Wow,” Colton laughed, “well, I guess we know who amongst us is the biggest Greyson fan.”

I glared at him, bouncing Lyra in my arms as she began to fuss. “Greyson is fine, but you have to admit that the council as it stands now is all sorts of fucked up. And he’s ten times more responsible and respectable.”

“All true,” Gabriel said.

“Still, what about the Redwoods?” Colton asked. “How can he think about just walking away from them?”

I frowned at this. I knew Colton felt a lot for his old pack, and he’d made a lot of sacrifices to be part of the Grimcrest pack with me as Alpha—not that I was sure I was doing a great job at it. It just seemed to me like I’d brought my new pack members into dangerous battles right off the bat. But we’d all come out unscathed—this time at least. But there was always going to be a next time when it came to the werewolf packs around here, and the danger they were always getting into.

I sighed. “Look, none of that is really our problem, Colton. I know he’s your brother and you’re worried about him, but he’s a big boy, and he’ll figure it all out. The Redwoods will be okay.”

“Maya’s right about that,” Gabriel agreed. “Greyson’s as capable as they come. He’ll figure out what to do. There are a lot of good heads in that pack. They’ve got it covered.” He clapped Colton on the shoulder.

Colton nodded. “Yeah, I hope so.”

Satisfied that everyone was settling back in, I handed Lyra to Colton and headed upstairs to take a shower.

I made it fast and, stepping out, got dressed and ran my fingers through my hair. Colton had put the babies down for a nap while I was showering, so when I headed downstairs, I was feeling good.

Downstairs, the rest of the Grimcrest pack was gathered in the living room. Colton and Gabriel were standing in the doorway of the living room, lingering, like they weren’t sure if they were coming or going.

As I walked in, Bennett got to her feet. “Alpha?”

I felt a strange pang in my heart—anxiety, sharp as a nail—but I looked over and smiled, trying not to betray the feeling that was so unusual for me. “Yeah?”

Bennett stepped toward me. “We’ve been talking, and we just want to thank you.”

I stared at her, shocked. “*Thank me*? For what?”

“For your bravery,” she said.

“We saw when you attacked the Night Stalker,” Nash added. “During the battle back there. You gave everything for us—for the pack.”

There were nods all around.

“I think a lot of us—all of us, probably—have forgotten what that feels like,” Genji admitted, glancing around. “To be cared for like that by an Alpha. A *real* Alpha.”

I felt emotion welling in my chest. “Well, we’re a pack,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “We’re a team, right?”

I glanced over at Colton, who was watching me, looking proud. When he caught my eye, he smiled at me and winked.

I cleared my throat and turned back to my pack. “So what happened back there—with the Redwoods—that wasn’t too much for all of you? You’re not scared off, being a part of this new pack?”

“No fucking way,” Hawke said without hesitation. “I loved it. It shows how badass and powerful we can all be together.”

“Hell yeah!”

A cheer went up from the pack.

I grinned and shook my head. “Listen, I can’t promise that things are going to work out perfectly every time, or that things aren’t going to be hard now and then, but you’re right. As long as we’re together, and work as a team, I know we can overcome anything.”

Bennett, who was holding a beer, raised her can in the air. “To the Alpha!”

Colton handed me a beer, which I raised into the air.

“To the Grimcrest pack!” I added.

“Hear, hear!” the pack cheered.

I took a long drink, then slammed the can down on the table. Someone flipped on the music and the pack got to their feet. Some headed started dancing, some headed into the kitchen for more drinks.

As the party started, Colton stepped next to me, sliding his arm around my waist and pulling me close. He nuzzled into my neck.

“I love you, Maya,” he said quietly. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

I took a deep breath and let myself rest against him for a moment, breathing in his scent. “I love you too. I couldn’t do any of this without you.”

He snorted a laugh. “I know.”

I gave his shoulder a playful shove.

He laughed again. “You better get to work giving me that Lunae mark before someone else comes and snatches me up.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “I’m not sure anyone else would have the patience to deal with you.”

He pulled back so he could look me in the eyes. He smiled at me, though the laughter in his eyes was gone, replaced with something more peaceful. “Just you.”

My heart thudded hard. This was my mate, my fiancé, the father of my children, and my true love.

“You’re right,” I whispered back. “Just me. And just you.”

Colton leaned down and kissed me. The kiss started out soft, but it deepened quickly. The world around us faded until I suddenly remembered where we were when I heard the pack start to whoop and holler.

“Get a room!” Gabriel yelled.

I smiled against Colton’s lips but didn’t pull away. I slid my hand around the back of his neck as he tilted my head, deepening the kiss even more, pressing his body tightly against mine.

When I finally pulled away, I was breathless and flushed. I looked around, taking in the beautiful house with the lake stretching out. I looked at the pack all around us, and thought about the life I’d created for myself, and for Colton, and for my children.

It wasn’t perfect, but it was perfect and *mine*, and I wouldn’t change a thing.

**Episode 5816**

As I watched the packs begin to disperse, heading back to their own pack houses, I felt a wave of sadness sweep over me. As terrifying as the circumstances had been, it had been amazing to have everyone come together in the way they had, to defeat the Night Stalker. It had felt like real teamwork.

But that feeling was gone, and Greyson’s announcement had left me feeling shaken and unsettled.

Xavier walked back toward me. “The Samaras are going to head out, but I wanted to check on you before we left.”

I nodded. “Thanks, I appreciate it, but I’m okay,” I told him.

He gave me a long look. “How about not pretending that everything is fine, Cali, because I can tell it’s not.”

The lump in my throat seemed to grow larger as I looked into Xavier’s dark blue eyes. “No, everything’s not fine,” I admitted, “but it will be…right?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. “Just be honest with me. Tell me what’s going on with you.”

I took a shaking breath. “I just can’t get over the fact that Greyson made that decision—that *major decision*—without discussing it with me first. He just—” I shook my head. “He just did it. Because Kendall encouraged him to do it. I can’t help but wonder what he would have done if he had mentioned it to me and I had told him not to.”

“Would you have told him not to?” Xavier asked.

I bit my lip. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “But it just feels like Greyson and I are out of sync.”

Xavier frowned. “Were you fighting with him? Before he challenged Cesaries?”

“We argued,” I conceded. “He didn’t trust me to keep the secret about Kendall being MIB. He accused me—he thought I’d told when I didn’t.”

“Fucking hell,” Xavier said, shaking his head. “I’m sorry.”

I looked at Xavier for a moment. “I know that you and I have had our issues with trust. But that was mostly because of Adeluce. And I like to think we’ve overcome that, haven’t we?”

There was a spark of joy in Xavier’s eyes. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “I think so.”

I couldn’t help but smile.

“Cali, are you jealous of Kendall?” Xavier asked me.

I looked down for a moment. “I would be lying if I denied that was part of it, but it’s more than that. Do you think that Greyson’s mate bond with Kendall is pulling him toward her?”

“You mean like you and me?” he asked.

My heart leapt unexpectedly. “What do you mean by that?”

Xavier shrugged. “I mean look at us.” He gestured around. “We’re still here, you and me. In spite of everything—all the shit we’ve been through. All the stuff with the *due destini*, Adeluce, all the other mates, we’re still here. You and me.”

I looked at him, and the truth of what he was staying sunk in. “Yeah, we are.” Then I shook my head. “But you’re with Ava and the Alpha of the Samara pack. And I’m with Greyson, here with the Redwoods. We’re not really still here, are we?”

Xavier heaved a heavy sigh. “Yeah, I guess that’s true. But still…” He trailed off, though it looked like there was more he wanted to say.

“What?” I pressed, my curiosity getting the best of me.

“We’re still mates, Caliana Hart,” he said, his voice low and gruff. “So no matter what happens with Greyson and the Concilium Bellicus, that fact won’t change. It’s been true since the beginning, and it’s going to stay true until the end.”

My heart seemed to be beating at the base of my throat now. “Promise?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I promise.”

He stepped up to the top of the porch, pulled me to my feet, and wrapped me in a tight hug. Without really realizing what I was doing, I melted into his arms. It was just second nature.

“You know that I never stopped loving you, Cali, and I never will,” he said quietly.

My chest felt tight and my eyes stung with tears. “I love you, too, Xavier,” I managed to say back.

He tightened his hold on me. “I never doubted that. No matter what happens, we’ll be okay.”

I closed my eyes, letting his words wash over me. “Do you really think so?”

“I *know* so,” he said confidently. “I’ve always known.”

I pulled away just enough to look up at him, and as I did, he looked down at me. Our faces were close—so damn close. I had a sudden urge to kiss him—to connect with him—but I knew this wasn’t the time or the place, so I stepped back, dropping my hands away from him.

Xavier kept his eyes on me. “Do you want me to be his second?”

“No,” I said, looking down at my feet. “I don’t want any of you to leave the packs.”

He tucked a finger under my chin and lifted it, so I met his eyes once more. “I just told you, I will never leave you. But I will be Greyson’s second.”

I sighed. “I know. I knew you would. There’s no one else.”

He smiled at me. “I need to get my pack and head out.”

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Later that night, after the sun was well and truly gone, I was pulling on some pajamas and thinking about what Xavier had said to me before he left when there was a soft knock at the door.

“Come on in,” I said, pulling an old t-shirt over my head.

Greyson opened the door and stepped into the room. “Hey.”

My face flushed, embarrassed about what I’d just been thinking of. “Hey. You didn’t have to knock.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t want to just barge in.”

I dropped down to sit on the bed. He cleared his throat. The tension between us grew, impossible to ignore. It was so strange, because awkwardness was something Greyson and I had never really had before.

“How are you doing?” he asked, glancing at me.

I looked down at the duvet cover. “How do you think I’m doing?”

He pushed a hand through his hair. “If I had to take a guess, I think you’re angry with me. And I’d get it, if you were. I should have talked to you—told you before I challenged Cesaries. I shouldn’t have surprised you like that—”

“So why did you?” I snapped, unable to stop myself.

Greyson looked out the window at the dark night and blew out a heavy breath. “I don’t really know,” he admitted. “It just kind of…happened.”

I shook my head. I hated this—it felt like we were having a circular argument. I kept asking the same question and Greyson kept giving me the same answer. Over and over and over again. It was making us both crazy.

“I should have talked to you, Cali. I didn’t, and I’m sorry.” He looked at me again, his grey eyes stormy. “But don’t you understand that I have to do this? That I have to do something to stop Cesaries?”

Anger flashed in my chest. “I understand that we used to make these kinds of decisions together, Greyson. And now we don’t. And I don’t understand why.” I paused as my stomach clenched uncomfortably. “Or maybe I do.”

He gave me a puzzled look. “What does that mean?”

“Kendall.”

I watched as his eyes changed. First there was a look of confusion, and then they shifted to something that looked like guilt, maybe. I wasn’t certain. But whatever it was, it made my stomach clench tighter.

“I don’t know why I didn’t talk to you first, Cali,” Greyson said, his voice a growl, “but it has nothing to do with Kendall.”

“But you talked to her about it, and you didn’t talk to me,” I pointed out. “What does that say about—”

“Kendall only suggested it,” he said, cutting me off. “I didn’t tell her what I was going to do.”

I stared at him, biting my lip, trying to figure out how to put the pain I was feeling into words. My chest was on fire and my head was spinning, but no words were coming. I didn’t know how to articulate that it didn’t matter that he hadn’t told Kendall what he was going to do. That Kendall got to be a part of the process—that he had let her into the inner circle of his thoughts, while keeping me at a distance—that was what hurt.

No words came, but Greyson must have been able to see the pain in my eyes, because he stepped forward and took my hand.

“I never meant to hurt you—”

“But you did. Twice now,” I said, looking down at his hand holding mine. “You let her suggestion drive you to do something that is going to affect everyone. And you never even thought about me, did you?”

Greyson opened his mouth to answer, but then he stopped himself.

Tears pricked my eyes as I looked up at him. “If what Kendall thinks is more important than our relationship, then tell me, Greyson—what are we even doing here?”

**Episode 5817**

**Greyson**

I stared at Cali, stunned by her question. *What were we doing here?*

I guess I hadn’t realized things between us had become so dire so quickly.

Shaking my head, I held her hand tightly. “Love, I promise you, I didn’t prioritize Kendall’s suggestion over my relationship with you.”

But even as I spoke the words, I realized that they felt somehow hollow—as though I really didn’t mean them. I hadn’t meant to hurt Cali, but I hadn’t even thought of telling her. I should have, but the thought hadn’t occurred to me. She should have been the first person I’d spoken to about it—no Cesaries, not in front of everyone. But I hadn’t.

I shook my head. “Maybe my ego just got the better of me back there. Kendall just planted the idea in my head of becoming the council leader, but it must have appealed to my ego—the idea of being in charge of the werewolf council.”

Cali’s eyes glistened as she shook her head. “Greyson, if it were Lucian we were talking about, I would agree without hesitation. But you are not Lucian. I have watched you make sacrifices for the good of your pack—and for all the other packs.” She sighed. “Maybe that’s it. Maybe I just didn’t want to see it, but maybe you’ve always put the pack first.”

Now I sighed. “That’s an Alpha’s job, love.”

“I know,” she said sadly, “but I’ve always felt like you struggled to make those kinds of decisions, and I’m sorry if you did it because of me. An Alpha *should* always put the pack first.”

“But you are part of the pack,” I reminded her. I pulled her into a tight hug. “And you are a part of me.”

Cali hesitated. She felt stiff against me, and that startled me. Hell—it more than startled me—it shocked me.

I looked down at her. “Is there anything I can do to fix this? To fix us?”

Tears began to roll down her face, then she crumpled back onto the bed, sobbing. “I don’t know.”

I sat down next to her and pulled her tight against my chest, wondering what I should do, what the hell I should say. When had I fucked this up so much?

Listening to her sob, I thought back through everything she had just said, and realized with a sinking feeling that the worst of it was that—as hard as it was to hear it all—everything Cali had just said to me had a ring of truth to it.

Shit.

Still holding Cali against me, I leaned back against the headboard. I wasn’t sure when Cali fell asleep, or when I nodded off, but then next thing I knew I was opening my eyes. It was the middle of the night, and I was flat on the bed, with Cali spooned against me.

My phone was next to me, and the screen was lit up with a message.

Squinting, I grabbed it and pulled it close. The message was from Xavier:

*I’ll be your second.*

It was immediately followed by a second text.

*But you better not fucking need me.*

I smiled grimly at the screen. At least I could count on my brother.

*I won’t*, I promised. *Thanks.*

Next to me, Cali stirred in her sleep. I put the phone down and waited until she was quiet again before I slipped out of bed, doing everything I could not to disturb her. Getting to my feet, I stood above her for a moment, watching her sleep. I felt a wave of guilt as I looked at her, ashamed that I’d brought her to tears. That was the last thing I’d ever wanted to do. I loved her so much. But—was that enough?

The pack was supposed to be more important than anything. Every Alpha worth a damn knew that. But werewolves—even Alphas—weren’t machines. Just like everyone else, we fell in love, and we wanted to protect the ones we loved at all costs. But we also had an obligation to our packs.

I walked over the window and looked out into the dark and freezing night. The woods beyond the pack house were pitch black, nearly invisible in the darkness, but I knew right where they were. They called to me, and I stared into them.

Had I forgotten my duty to my pack? By loving Cali, I had managed to hurt her. Would she have been better off without me?

I shook my head. That wasn’t fair. We were mates, and I loved her. We needed each other.

“What are you doing?”

Her soft voice started me, and I turned to face her.

She was tired, barely awake.

“Just thinking.”

“Come back to bed,” she said, holding out a hand. “We can talk more in the morning.”

I nodded and slipped back into bed. I took her into my arms and pulled her against my chest, holding her tight until she fell back asleep.

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“Greyson.”

I sat up straight and looked around, my heart beating hard. The voice was female, and slightly familiar, and I wondered who the hell was in the room.

Next to me, Cali slept on, but across the room, there were three silhouettes next to the window.

My brain, asleep an instant before, sprang into action, and when the figures stepped forward, I immediately recognized them as the three witches—Chloe, Posie, and Lauren.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed. “What the hell do you want?”

“You are at a crossroads, Greyson Evers,” Chloe said. “Destiny and fate haven’t finished with you. Not quite yet.”

She spoke at her normal volume, not bothering to keep her voice down, but somehow Cali didn’t seem to hear her, because she didn’t even so much as stir. All the same, I didn’t want to risk waking her, so I stepped out of bed and over toward the witches.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, still whispering. “Do I still owe you for something? Is that why you’re here? Whatever you want, surely it can wait until the morning? There’s no need to burst into my room in the middle of the night like this—”

“The only thing you owe is what you owe yourself, Greyson Evers,” Chloe said, shaking her head.

“Huh?” I asked, baffled.

“Choose the path before Caliana chooses it for you,” she went on.

“*The path*?” I repeated.

“You had to know, didn’t you?” Posie asked, her face shadowed in the darkness.

Lauren nodded. “All this time, you must have known it would come down to this.”

I looked between the three of them, taking in their owlish faces. “I have literally no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The clock has always been ticking, of course. You just refused to hear,” Chloe said reproachfully.

Lauren clucked her tongue, shaking her head.

“But you can’t ignore it anymore.”

Behind me, Cali stirred.

I glanced at her over my shoulder, then at the witches. “You need to leave. Come on,” I growled, pushing them toward the door. I opened it and ushered them into the hallway.”

“You should see her,” Chloe said, turning to me.

“*Who?*” I asked, struggling to follow their train of thought.

“Your mate,” she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I rolled my eyes and gestured to the bedroom behind us. “Cali is right in there.”

“Don’t fight it,” the three women said in union.

I opened my mouth to ask what I wasn’t supposed to fight, but before the sound could leave my mouth, the witches were gone.

I stared at the spot where they had just been standing, blinking stupidly. I shook my head, trying to clear it. Had I been dreaming? What the hell had that been about? All that talk about destiny and choosing…

Then, like I was being moved by an outside force, I looked back at the bedroom door behind me. A cold chill ran down my spine. Was *that* what they meant? That Cali was going to finally make a choice—and that choice was going to be Xavier? Is that what they had meant when they had said that I had to know?

I grasped the door jamb as I swayed on my feet. I suddenly felt like I was on the deck of a rocking boat. My heart thudded and my head spun. I was reeling. *Had* I known it would come to this? Had I known that Cali was always going to choose Xavier?

I closed my eyes as I staggered backward, away from the room I had just left. The whole house seemed to shift around me. I didn’t know where I was going—I wasn’t even fully conscious of moving. But when I opened my eyes again, I had dropped to my knees, my palms flat against a door.

Had I moved at all?

There was a shuffling behind the door, and suddenly it swung open.

Kendall stood in the doorway. Her hair was mussed, and her eyes and lips were puffy with sleep, like she had just woken up. She was wrapped messily in the sheet, and she looked down at me in surprise.

“Grey? What are you doing here?”

**Episode 5818**

**Kendall**

My wolf was going crazy as I looked at Greyson kneeling in front of my door in the middle of the night. And I *hated* that my wolf was going crazy at the sight of Greyson kneeling in front of my door in the middle of the night.

Fuck. This whole thing was a mistake. I should have just gone back to my apartment instead of staying in the Redwood pack house. I had planned to go back, but for some reason I still couldn’t put my finger on, I just hadn’t.

And now, as Greyson got to his feet in front of me, all six-foot-plus of him, I was suddenly very glad I hadn’t.

Not that I would ever admit that to him.

“Did you see them?” he said, frowning as he looked around.

I raised my eyebrows. “Who?”

His grey eyes were storm-tossed. “The three witches.”

“No,” I said with a small laugh. “Are you okay? How much did you drink?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

“So…then what are you doing outside my bedroom door at”—I looked over my shoulder to glance at the clock on the bedside table—“at 3:17 in the morning?”

“I…I don’t know,” Greyson said. I don’t even remember walking here.”

For the first time I realized that he didn’t just seem sleepy, he seemed disoriented, and I felt a twinge of anxiety.

“Are you okay?”

“I—” He put a hand to his head. “I’m not sure.”

“Hey,” I said, taking his arm and leading him inside the room, “come sit down for a second.”

Greyson was usually so capable, and while I was worried, my wolf howling with pleasure at Greyson in my room was making everything a lot more difficult than it should have been.

She went crazy when he dropped down to sit down on the bed.

I took a step away from him, which helped a little.

Greyson leaned forward and put his head in his hands. “I must have been sleepwalking.”

I gave him a skeptical look. “Sleepwalking?”

He looked up. “How else would you explain me ending up here?”

Suddenly, very aware that I’d been sleeping naked on that bed just moments before, I wrapped the sheet more tightly around myself. “It’s not really for me to explain, Greyson. Is sleepwalking something you’ve done before?”

He shook his head. “No, not that I know of.”

“And yet, here you are.”

He looked up, locking eyes with me. A moment passed between us, heavy as lead. He got to his feet. “I should get back to my room.

“Wait,” I said, though my mouth felt suddenly dry. “Why are you here?”

“What?”

I tipped my head. “Sleepwalking or not, you chose to come here. To my room. To see me. Why?”

A muscle in his jaw worked for a moment. “I don’t know.”

I searched his face, wondering if he was telling the truth, or just avoiding an answer. “You said you saw the three witches. What did they want? What did they say?”

“Something about fate.” His brow creased again. “They told me to see my mate.”

My wolf threw back her head and howled at the mention of mates, and I took another step back, for my own sake. I had a powerful, growing urge to drop my sheet and take those steps back toward Greyson, but my logical brain knew that would be a terrible idea.

I fought the urge, gritting my teeth to manage it. “Well then, that explains it—you did what the witches said.”

He looked at me in confusion. “What?”

“God, Greyson, did you forget that I’m technically your mate? Maybe that’s what they wanted you to do—to come see me, your other mate. That’s how you ended up at the door.”

He stared at me, and I watched as the realization sank in. “I—I didn’t forget that you’re my mate, Kendall, but I didn’t intend to see you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Wow, you really know how to sweet talk a girl, don’t you.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“I’m busting your balls, Grey. It’s fine,” I said with a casual shrug. I tried to play it off, but it was kind of a double bluff. I knew that wasn’t what Greyson meant, and I knew I shouldn’t care, but there was something about his words that stung.

Was he sorry that he had ended up in my room?

He shook his head, looking more confused than ever. “No, I just don’t understand why they would want me to see you.”

“Is that what’s bothering you?” I asked as my wolf growled within me.

He turned toward the door. “I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“So you’re not going to answer me?” I asked, stepping after him. “Tell me—are you bothered that they told you to see me…or that you listened to them?”

He turned back to me, his grey eyes troubled. “Both.”

I drew back, feeling that strange sting again. “Well,” I said, trying to cover what I felt, “then you should probably go. I’m cursed, after all, and I wouldn’t want that to affect you when you face off against Cesaries.”

“You have to stop saying that, Kendall. You’re not cursed,” he said, frowning.

I snorted an angry laugh. “I am.”

He stepped closer to me, and my wolf howled so loudly it nearly rattled my bones.

Taking me by the shoulders, Greyson looked into my eyes. “I don’t believe for one second that’s true. I think you use that as an excuse to keep your distance from people, because you think if you let yourself get too close, you’ll open yourself to getting hurt.”

His deep, sleepy growl of a voice was like velvet to my ears. I was only half-listening, very aware of the heat of his hands on my bare shoulders, and how close the distance was between us. I was hyper-aware of the intensity of his eyes on me—or was I just imagining that?

Was the temperature really rising between us—and did I actually like it?

I knew I shouldn’t—I shouldn’t even think about it. It was never going to happen. He could say all he wanted about curses, but I knew.

Yet, why was my wolf going crazy? Why did I want to drop my sheet, close the space between us, and kiss his stupid mouth?

I’d wanted to kiss him ever since—hell, ever since I’d first met him. I’d done all I could to ignore how I felt. Sometimes my efforts worked, but sometimes they failed miserably, like that time at the festival when he and I had been drugged and were delirious with dark magic. We had always both maintained that it was nothing more than a mistake. And kissing him now—here—would be an even bigger one.

Gritting my teeth, I tightened my hold on my sheet, as if that would prevent me from doing something I’d regret.

His eyes darted to my hand, my knuckles white with the effort. He reached out and put his hand over mine.

I held my breath, watching his eyes, wondering for a moment if he was going to rip the sheet away himself. And wondering if I would stop him.

I knew that I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t even try. My whole body was alive with heat—I was gone. I felt things for Greyson Evers that I never should have—things that I had tried everything to stop feeling—but I couldn’t. And now I didn’t want to stop them.

Suddenly, his mouth was on mine, pressing hard against mine. My mouth was open, and his tongue slid against mine, pressing, insisting, wanting. I wasn’t even sure who had moved first. It was like spontaneous combustion, and suddenly his hand was in my hair, tipping my head, angling it so he could deepen the kiss even more.

Electricity surged through me as though I had stepped into an electric storm. Greyson’s hands were in my hair, firm and strong, holding tight, letting me know that he was there and in charge, and I melted against him, molding my body against his. Still wrapped in my sheet, I slid my leg between his, feeling him harden against me. He made a low, growling sound at the back of his throat and kissed me harder and deeper, his hands moving downward, cupping my ass and pulling me close.

The kiss seemed to last forever, and also only an instant. When we finally pulled apart, I was breathless, like I’d been sprinting, and when I put a hand to my bottom lip, it felt swollen and pulsed beneath my finger.

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. What the hell was I supposed to say after that world-stopping, earth-shattering kiss?

Greyson didn’t say anything either. He stared at me, his eyes stormy, but completely unreadable.

Finally, he stepped away, out the door and into the darkened hallway.

My wolf went wild, howling for me to go after him.

The feeling was chilling, because it was then that I knew for sure:

I could reject Greyson Evers all I wanted, but I was never really going to mean it.

**Episode 5819**

**Ava**

I looked around at the Samaras as they moved around the pack house. Everyone was back, at the house, eating and drinking and relaxing. Marissa was next to me on the couch, and I could feel her watching me closely.

Xavier was gone. He had gotten back and immediately left for a run. Which was for the best. We both needed some space.

All around me, the pack seemed excited. There was a lot of talk about Greyson invoking the Concilium Bellicus. I’d been listening since we got back, and everyone was in support of it. But it was a lot of excitement, and not a lot of deeper thought.

“They’re not thinking about what it would really mean,” I said, looking over at Marissa.

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think many people are. Everyone’s so sick of Cesaries that everyone’s just excited about the idea of having him gone. No one’s really thinking about what it would mean if Greyson really became the council leader. How it would have a domino effect on all the rest of the packs.”

“And how it would affect the Samaras especially, because of Xavier,” I said, looking around.

Marissa sighed. “You talked to him, and things didn’t go how you wanted, yes. But you’ve never been one to quit, Ava,” she said supportively.

I shrugged. “I didn’t used to think so, but I’m getting tired, Marissa.” I leaned my head back on the couch. “I feel like I’ve been doing nothing but fighting to claim my mate since I returned back to the land of the living. But here I am, no better off than I was at the beginning. Still fighting and still losing. I don’t want to lose Xavier.”

“To Cali?” Marissa asked quietly.

I thought about it for a moment. “I’ll never like Cali,” I admitted, “but I’m not blaming her anymore. Whatever happens next, it’s not about her. It’s Xavier’s choice. It’s the *due destini*. I can see that now. And as bad as losing Xavier to Cali would be, I think it’s bigger than that. I think I’m losing Xavier to the Redwood pack. Which means that I could lose the Samara pack.” There was a sharp pang in my heart at that thought.

“Don’t say that,” Marissa said quickly. “You could find another Alpha. Come on, Ava, if it wasn’t for you, we would have fallen apart ages ago. No offense to your cousin, but Knox was a catastrophe.”

“I know that,” I said with a grim laugh. I shook my head. “But I always imagined how perfect everything would be with me and Xavier—Alpha and Luna of the Samara pack.”

Marissa nodded slowly. “I guess I am a little envious of the Grimcrests. I mean, they’re kind of a ragtag group, but their Alpha is Maya. How often do we see a female Alpha? She’s kind of a badass.”

I thought about that, and what would happen if Xavier left the Samara pack for the Redwood.

The thought made my stomach ache with anxiety. But Marissa was right about one thing—*I* was the one who had prevented the Samaras from completely crumbling into nothing after Nolan’s death. *I* had pulled my pack back from the brink of complete extinction. *I* had fought for Xavier to become Alpha. And *I* had the same Alpha blood as my brother.

I had never wanted to be Alpha. I had always seen my own role as the strong Luna of the pack. But I also never thought Xavier and I would be at this point in our relationship, or with our pack.

“Do you think Maya likes being Alpha?” I wondered aloud.

Marissa looked over at me. “I assume she does. Why?”

“She just always seems a little…angry. I guess she was always pretty standoffish anyway.”

Marissa rolled her eyes. “Besides, Maya’s with Colton, so she probably comes by that honestly.”

We both laughed at that, but after a moment the smile slid from my face.

“Do you think I could do it?”

Marissa’s eyes went wide, and the blood drained from her face. “Do I think you could be Alpha? Would you?”

“Do you think I could?” I asked nervously.

“Are you kidding?!” Marissa’s face flushed. “Ava! I think you’d fucking kick ass!” She threw her arms around me.

I was overwhelmed. “Are you just saying that?”

She shook her head. “You should know I don’t bullshit.”

I pulled back to look at her. “What about the others? Do you think they’d support me?”

Marissa narrowed her eyes to menacing slits. “They wouldn’t dare not support you.”

I smiled. “I appreciate that, but I would rather earn the pack’s support than threaten them to get it.”

“Well,” she shrugged, “why don’t you ask them then.”

I glanced quickly around. “Not yet,” I said. “Right now I’m just posing some hypothetical questions.”

Marissa gave me a long look. “Don’t you doubt yourself, Ava. You’ve got what it takes. I’ve seen it. We’ve all seen it. And we all know it. But I won’t say anything more about it until you decide what you want to do.”

The front door opened and Xavier walked in, returned from his run.

Marissa glanced at him, then gave me a quick hug. “Whatever you do, you can count on me.”

I nodded and pushed the idea out of my head. I followed Xavier as he headed upstairs to our room.

“Have you thought more about what we were talking about?” I asked him, shutting the door behind me.

Xavier nodded, though he said nothing as he pulled on a pair of black joggers.

I blew out a frustrated breath. “Are you going to speak? I can’t read your fucking mind, Xavier.”

He pulled on a black t-shirt and looked at me. “If Greyson wins the Concilium Bellicus, he won’t be able to continue on as Alpha. He’ll have to vacate his position as the Redwood Alpha.”

“I know that,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Why are you telling me this? And why are you talking like that? Are you reading from a script or something? Why do you sound so formal?”

“I’m just trying to tell you—” A muscle in Xavier’s jaw twitched. “If Greyson does that—after he wins the challenge—I’m going to go back to the Redwood pack. I’m going to be their Alpha.”

The silence in the room then was nearly overwhelming. It rang in my ears. I knew there were other pack members in the house, but I couldn’t hear them now, not over the rush of sound in my head.

I was shocked, but somehow, I wasn’t surprised. I wasn’t even hurt, not really. I’d been expecting it. The doomsday voice in the back of my head had been telling me this was going to happen, so I’d been able to prepare myself, in a way. Though of course I’d been hoping the little voice was wrong.

But it wasn’t wrong, and now I was hearing the words from Xavier himself.

I took a deep breath, feeling my heart beating at the base of my throat.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” Xavier asked me.

I met his eyes. “And the Samaras? What happens to us?” I asked. “You’d combine the packs?”

He nodded. “Yes. I think that seems like the best plan.”

“For who?” I asked with a flash of anger.

“What?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Ava—”

“No. I know what would happen. The Samaras would disappear. Maybe not right away, but within a few years—maybe even less—it would just be the Redwoods again. The Samaras would be no longer. There’s no way I’m going to let that happen.  
 Xavier’s tense expression softened. “Listen, I know this is a lot to deal with, but it really does make the most sense. Logically and logistically, the packs would work together in time, their territory is nearby, everyone seems to get along already…”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “The Samaras brought you in when you had nowhere else to go, Xavier,” I reminded him.

His face tightened. “I know that.”

“Before that—before Nolan died—the Samara pack was always my home. You helped, but *I* clawed it back, Xavier, and I’m not going to let it vanish into the Redwood pack.”

“Ava,” Xavier reasoned, “think about what you’re saying. I know how much the pack means to you, but think how hard it was to get it here. How can it survive—”

“You mean without you?” I snapped. “I’ll make sure we do.”

Xavier was quiet.

I took a shaking breath. This was it. It hurt like hell, but this was it, and I had to say it. “I can’t do it, Xavier.”

A crease appeared between his eyes. “What?”  
 My chest burned, the pain like fire. “I can’t lose it all. I’m already losing you. I can feel it—” my voice cracked. “I know you too well to pretend otherwise.”

Xavier’s blue eyes flashed with pain. “Ava…”

But I put up my hand to stop him. “We’re losing each other, aren’t we?”

**Episode 5820**

**Greyson**

When I woke up, Cali was still asleep next to me. I stared up at the ceiling, thinking. There was way too much to fucking unpack.

I pulled my phone over to stare blearily at it—Saturday, March 2.

My mind was hazy from last night, and I could only remember fragments of the events. Part of me wondered if it had all been a dream, but I knew that it hadn’t. I could still feel Kendall’s lips on mine.

As god as my witness, I wasn’t sure how it had all started last night—or even who had kissed who first—but, honestly, I’m not sure it even mattered. I had allowed it to happen before I’d even realized what was happening. Once I did realize I’d stopped it, but the problem was that it had happened at all…

A wave of guilt washed over me, crashing down hard enough that it pushed me out of bed. What the fuck was wrong with me? Dream or not, it was all fucked. I slipped out and stood up quietly. I didn’t think I had it in me to face Cali until I’d had a moment to sort things out.

Heading downstairs, I went outside into the early morning. I dropped my clothes onto the porch, shifting as I leapt down onto the lawn. A run and some fresh air would help, it had to give me the answers I was looking for.

I ran through the woods, hard and fast, streaking through the trees in a dead sprint. But as hard as I ran, I knew it wasn’t helping. The knowledge of what I had to do sat with me, heavy as a stone. I had to tell Cali what had happened between Kendall and me the night before.

The worst part of it was that I couldn’t even offer up any kind of excuse this time. Kendall and I hadn’t been drugged this time, and there was no dark magic to blame.

As bad as I felt, I also felt my wolf reacting to the memory of kissing Kendall in her room in the dead of night. I had felt my wolf last night too. My wolf had wanted her so fucking bad, and it had taken all my willpower to finally reign myself in.

I’d kissed her. And I’d wanted more than that, too. I’d nearly torn that fucking sheet off her. And as bad as I felt now, last night…it had just felt good. So fucking good.

Fuck.

It shouldn’t have felt so good. I never would do that to Cali…

But I had. And I couldn’t explain why. Was it the mate bond between Kendall and me? Is that what this was about?

What about all that stuff with the three witches? Had that just been a dream? Or had they really visited me last night? All that talk about fate—about Cali and choices…

It made my head hurt to think about it.

Regardless, I couldn’t ignore Cali forever. I needed to get back to the house and tell her what happened. And that was going to suck.

I finished my run and shifted as I reached the house again. I pulled my clothes back on and headed inside, wiping sweat from my head before it froze in the frosty air.

When I walked into the warm kitchen, Cali was standing at the counter, making tea.

“Good morning,” she said warily. “Where were you last night?”

“What?” I asked, startled.

“I woke up in the middle of the night and you were gone. And you were gone when I woke up this morning. Did you not come back to bed?”

My stomach tightened. I hadn’t realized Cali had woken up while I was with Kendall.

I glanced around. There were a few pack members sitting at the table, having an early breakfast. I didn’t want to have this conversation in front of anyone, so I nodded toward the back door.

“You want to take your tea outside?” I asked.

Cali hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Sure.”

She followed me outside, onto the yard, pulling her sweater closer around herself. When we stopped, she looked up at me. “What’s wrong?”

I took a deep breath. “Something happened last night.”

She froze, her hands gripping her mug. “What?”

“I don’t know if I was sleepwalking or what, but I went to see Kendall.”

There was a flicker of pain in her eyes. It killed me to see it, but I pressed on. I had to get it out.

“I kissed her.”

“You did?” Cali asked, her voice eerily calm.

I nodded.

Cali looked away. “Did you do anything else?”

“No,” I said quickly. “I stopped when I realized what was happening.”

She bit her lip. “So you went to her room and kissed her.”

“Yes. I’m so sorry, Cali. And I’m sorry I’ve been telling you that I’m sorry so often…” I trailed off.

Cali was still for a moment, then took a sip of her tea, which steamed in the chilly air. “Did she kiss you? Or was it just one way?”

I didn’t mean to think of it, but when she asked, I had a flash of the kiss. Kendall had *definitely* kissed me back—it had most certainly not been just me.

“We kissed,” was all I said.

Cali’s eyes welled with tears and my heart felt as though it was being squeezed by an iron fist.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Greyson,” she said, her voice choked, “this hurts to hear. But at the same time, I can’t blame you. And I can’t blame Kendall. After all, I’m the one who told you to figure things out with her. And that was before you learned about the mate bond.”

I nodded slowly. I had been prepared for her to be angry—this quiet acceptance was worse.

She met my eyes. “If anyone knows what it’s like to be pulled between two people, it’s me.”

“I know,” I said.

She put her mug down in the grass and slipped her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly. “It hurts, Greyson, but I want you to be happy. And if I don’t make you happy, then you need to find that happiness with someone else.”

“You do make me happy, Cali,” I said, hugging her back.

She leaned back so she could look up at me, wiping a tear from her face. “I think we made each other happy, once. But maybe…” She shook her head. “Maybe it’s just not that simple anymore. Maybe it never really was.”

I pulled her hand to my lips and kissed it. I was surprised to feel tears stinging my own eyes, then coursing down my cheeks. “This can’t be happening, can it?” I asked.

“Greyson, if Kendall is the one who can make you happy—really happy—then I don’t want to stand in your way. I have no right. But…I do worry. She said she rejected you—and your bond.” She frowned. “I’m worried she’s only going to hurt you.”

I shook my head. “I can’t believe it. Even now, Cali, you’re still more worried about me getting hurt than your own pain. I’ve always loved that about you—how much you care about others. You always put other people first.”

She gave me a sad smile, though her face was still streaked with tears. “I guess that’s something my parents taught me.”

I pulled her back into a hug. I was afraid to let her go. “I want you to be happy, too.”

“Hey, Greyson!”

Cali and I drew apart and looked over to see Lola leaning out the back door.

“One of those council guys is here to see you!”

I nodded and reluctantly released Cali. I cleared my throat. “It’s probably about the Concilium Bellicus.”

Lola stepped out the door onto the porch, eyeing us suspiciously. “Everything okay?”

Cali and I exchanged a look, unsure of how to answer.

Finally, Cali forced a smile. “No, not really, but it will be. Won’t it, Greyson?”

I nodded. “Yeah, it will be.”

I gave her hand a squeeze and headed back into the house. I needed to find the council member, though I was half-hoping it would be Cesaries himself waiting for me. That would give me a chance to wage a little psychological warfare.

But unsurprisingly, when I got inside, I found one of the council cronies waiting for me in the living room.

“What can I do for you?” I asked coolly, stepping into the room.

The man stepped forward and handed me an envelope. “As the incumbent leader, Cesaries has the right to choose the time and date for the Concilium Bellicus. You will find the details inside.”

I tore open the envelope and unfolded the paper inside, staring at it in shock as I read it.

“*What?*” I bellowed. I looked up at the council member, stunned. “It says the Concilium Bellicus is *today*?!”

**Episode 5821**

Lola stared at me.

“What?” I asked, starting to squirm under her gaze.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

She shook her head, like I was being intentionally obtuse. “Are you going to tell me what that was all about with Greyson?”

I took a shaking breath. The truth was that I was still reeling from that conversation, and still trying to process it myself. “Greyson is challenging Cesaries.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “I know that. Everyone knows that. It’s all the pack is talking about. Everyone is upset about it—they don’t know what it means, and your dear mate hasn’t told anyone what’s going to happen. Do *you* know what it’s going to mean?”

I shrugged. “I wish I knew, but one thing I’m sure of—if Greyson wins, he won’t be the Redwood Alpha anymore.”

Lola’s face tensed. “Here we go again.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you remember that when we first got here, the Redwoods didn’t have an Alpha? It was chaos. Are we going to have to go through all that again?”

Tears pricked my eyes. I was trying to listen to what Lola was saying, but I just kept thinking about what had just happened between Greyson and me.

Lola, perhaps noticing the pain on my face, stopped speaking and put her arms around me, pulling me into a hug. “I’m sorry, Cali. Here I am, talking about the pack, when I should be asking about you. What does all of this mean for you?”

“I’m not sure about that either,” I admitted. “The only thing I am sure about is that Greyson won’t just be leaving the Redwoods—he might be leaving me, too.”

Lola pulled back in shock. “*What?!*”

I nodded, choking back a sob. “It’s his mate bond with Kendall. It’s pulling him away from me.”

“That *bitch*!” Lola snarled. “I *knew* we shouldn’t trust her!”

“No, Lola, stop,” I insisted. “I’m not blaming Kendall, and I don’t want you to either. What’s happening sucks, and it’s crushing me, but it’s no one’s fault.”

Lola gave me a long look. “What are you going to do?”

That was the question, and hearing Lola ask it made me feel like I was about to fall down a deep, dark hole.

“I have no idea,” I told her honestly. “Everything about what’s been happening is completely overwhelming.”

Lola grabbed hold of my hands, holding them tight. “Whatever happens, Cali, I’m going to stand by your side. No matter what.”

“Thank you, Lola,” I said, managing a sad smile. “That really means a lot. I just don’t know what to do.”

I wanted to tell Lola about the conversation I’d had with Xavier, but I was hesitant to bring it up. I knew Lola was still angry with Xavier. Lola had been primarily raised in the Midwest after all, same as me, and Midwesterners knew how to hold a grudge.

Lola sighed and glanced over her shoulder, looking back at the house in the direction where Greyson had disappeared. “I just hope there’s not going to be another Lupo Finale. A bunch of testosterone-fueled Alphas all together, swinging their dicks around?” She shook her head. “That’s a hard pass for me.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “God, Lola, you really have a way of wording things.” My smile slid off my face, and I sighed too. “I really hope there isn’t a Lupo Finale-style fight either. Greyson says it’s not like that but…” I thought for a moment. “What would you think if Xavier wanted to come back?”

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Come back? Come back to what? To you?”

“No! I—I mean come back to the Redwood pack,” I stammered. “Come back to take Greyson’s place as Alpha.”

“Oh,” she said, relaxing slightly. “Well, I guess that all depends.”

I frowned, not sure of what she meant. “Um, depends on what?”

Lola looked into my eyes. “It depends on what you want, Cali.”

My breath caught. I knew Lola was my friend—my best friend—but when she got mad, she stayed mad. And she had been *mad* at Xavier. That wasn’t the response I’d been expecting from her.

“What do you mean?” I asked her.

“Do *you* want Xavier to be Alpha?” she asked.

“I’ve thought about it, of course,” I told her, “but it’s so complicated. There’s the Samara pack to think about. And then there’s Ava—”

“There’s always Ava,” Lola said, rolling her eyes theatrically. “She’s just always there, isn’t she? Lurking like a fungus.” She shook her head. “But what if we took all that other stuff away. What if that stuff wasn’t an issue, just for a minute—would you want him back?”

Lola’s question seemed to open something inside of me, and for the first time, I really let myself consider what it would be like. I let myself imagine what it would be like to have him back without all the hurdles of Ava and the Samaras and all the barricades that had been standing in our way for so long. I thought of how he’d opened up to me, pointing out how hard he’d fought for me, and how we just kept coming back to each other, again and again. I thought about how he loved me.

I felt my face growing warm as I flushed. “He’s grown a lot over the past few months,” I said quietly.

Lola raised an inquiring eyebrow. “So is that a yes?”

My heart thudded in my chest. “Maybe?”

“So…” Lola tipped her head. “If Greyson is shacking up with Kendall…does that mean you’re choosing Xavier?”

I gasped. “God, Lola, *no*! I’m not choosing anyone. No, that’s not what’s happening. This is just…” I shook my head. “This is just the way it’s all playing out.”

Lola shook her head with a sigh. “You do know that someday, Cali, you are going to make that choice. You’ve been kicking this can down the road for so long I wonder if you’ve convinced yourself that you’ll never have to, but that’s a lie. One day you’re going to have to, and when you do, make sure you choose yourself.”

“*What?*” I asked, baffled.

She smiled. “Make sure you do what’s best for Caliana Hart, okay? Do what your heart says. Promise me that, yeah?”

I nodded, though I couldn’t speak. I was afraid to open my mouth, worried I would burst into tears. It was all too painful and surreal to think that any of this was actually happening.

Lola’s eyes fixed on something over my shoulder and her expression went cold, hardening in an instant. “Speaking of…” she said in a low voice.

I turned to see Kendall coming out of the house. She walked down the steps of the back porch and began to approach us.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go vampire on her ass?” Lola asked me. “Seriously, Cali, just say the word and you got it—”

“It’s really fine,” I assured her.

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “I think you’re making a big mistake, but if you’re sure—”

“I am,” I insisted. “Anyway, I need to talk to Kendall.”

Lola looked hesitant, but she nodded. “Okay. But if you need me, I’m just over there,” she said, nodding toward the house.

I’m not even sure if she was aware of it, but she flashed her fangs in Kendall’s direction as she headed back to the house, giving Kendall the cold shoulder as she passed.

Kendall’s expression was closed and tense when she reached me. “Given how Lola just glowered at me, can I assume that Greyson already told you what happened between us last night?”

“Of course he did,” I told her. “He tells me everything. Or at least he used to,” I added.

Kendall looked uneasy. “It was a mistake. I’m sorry it happened at all—”

“What would be a mistake is if you hurt him,” I said, cutting her off.

Kendall looked at me, surprised. “What?”

“I don’t know what you feel about him—what you *really* feel about him—but I do know that you told me that you rejected him. But last night still happened. And I know it wasn’t an accident or a mistake. So either the mate bond drew you two together, or…you used him for some reason—”

Kendall’s face flushed. “It wasn’t like that,” she cut in, looking angry.

Too angry. I could see the raw emotion in her face, and I recognized it. She cared about Greyson. She might even love him.

I shook my head. I couldn’t believe I was saying this. “Listen, Kendall, you can lie to me about your feelings for Greyson, but don’t lie to yourself. You’ll only hurt both of you that way.”

She frowned at me, like she was trying to figure out a puzzle. “I don’t understand—why are you telling me any of this?”

I balled my hands into fists, ready to say what I had to say. “Because I love Greyson, and I don’t want to see him hurt. What’s your excuse?”

**Episode 5822**

**Greyson**

I sat at the desk in my study, drumming my fingers on the desk. Cesaries’s letter was in front of me, but I wasn’t looking at it—I knew what it said. I just needed to think. I had no problem fighting the guy, I just thought I’d have a few more days to prepare to put some kind of plan into motion.

Everything seemed to be happening so damn fast. I was still reeling from the conversation I’d had with Cali outside. Was all of this really happening? I could still hear her words echoing in my head…

*If I don’t make you happy, then you need to find that happiness with someone else…*

I never even imagined that would be possible. I’d always seen my happiness centered around Cali. But that was before Kendall…

There was a soft knock at the door, and I looked up as my mother slipped into the small room.

Clearing my throat, I got to my feet, but before I could get any words of greeting out, my mom had crossed the room and wrapped her arms around me, pulling me into a tight hug.

“It’s going to be okay,” was all she said.

I felt a lump in my throat, which I hadn’t expected. Somehow my mom knew what I was going through. I had no idea how she knew, but I could tell she did.

She leaned back and looked up at me. “I heard about the Concilium Bellicus.”

I cleared my throat. “You don’t have to worry about me,” I started to assure her. “I’m not going to have any trouble with Cesaries. That guy’s expiration date is long past—”

“I’m not worried about that,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m not worried like I was before the Lupo Finale. I know you’ll triumph over Cesaries. I’m worried about what will happen after.” Her expression was anxious. “When you’re declared the new council leader. How is all of this going to impact the packs?’

I blew out a breath as I pushed a hand through my hair. “I—I’m still trying to sort all of that out,” I admitted.

“And what about Cali?” my mom asked, raising an eyebrow.

That lump in my throat seemed to grow, making it hard to speak.

I coughed. “I tried to talk to her, but I don’t really have any answers for her either. “

My mom’s face softened. “Cali loves you, Greyson. No matter what. But that doesn’t mean she’s the only one who does.”

I nodded, but before I could respond, there was a commotion outside the still open door.

Ravi stuck his head into the study. “Hey, Greyson—oh, hi Mrs. Smith. Sorry to interrupt, but it’s time to go to Three Devils Point.”

“I’ll be right there,” I told him.

“Greyson,” my mom said soberly, “I’m not going to go to Three Devils Point—”

“I wouldn’t expect you to—”

“But I want you to know that I know you’ll do what’s best for the packs. You have always put them first, even if you didn’t always realize it. But I don’t want you to lose yourself in all of this.” She gave me a searching look. “Is this what you really want? To lead the werewolf council?”

“Something has to be done,” I started. “Cesaries is awful, and the council is completely ineffective. It’s putting the packs at risk, and someone needs to—”

“That’s not what I’m asking,” my mom said, putting a gentle hand on my arm. “I’m asking you if this is what *you* want. Are you doing this for *you*? Are you willing to make this sacrifice?”

I took a deep breath. “I have to.”

There was still worry in her eyes, but she smiled. “Then you will do it well. It will be a shock to the packs, but we will be stronger for it, I’m sure of it.” She leaned forward and brushed a kiss on my cheek, then turned to walk out.

Alone, I looked around the study, then out the open door into the rest of the house. This was the place I called home, but after I won today, it wasn’t going to be my home any longer.

Cali stepped into the doorway. “Hey,” she said quietly. “Everyone is outside, Greyson. We’re waiting for you.”

I nodded, then moved to her, pulling her into a hug. “Listen to me—I want you to know that if Cesaries kills me—”

“*Greyson!*” she gasped.

“Which he won’t,” I added quickly.

“Then why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want you to know that if for any reason I don’t come back from Three Devils Point, Xavier will take care of you.”

Cali peered up at me, her dark eyes searching. “And what happens if you win?”

“The packs will be stronger,” I said firmly. “It might be a little challenging to adjust as things shift into place, but in the end, having replaced Cesaries will only make the packs in this area stronger, our ability to defend ourselves better, and the prospect for peace between the packs more likely.”

She considered this. “And us?”

I gazed down at her, my stomach a tight knot. “I love you, and I hope I have your support.”

She nodded. “You do. Of course you do. Always. I love you too, Greyson.”

She wrapped her arms around me. We hugged, which felt good, but also strange in a way I couldn’t explain. Like we no longer fit together.

I took a step back and took her hand. “I still consider you my Luna, Cali, and I want you by my side when I talk to the pack.”

She nodded, though her smile was a little sad. “Yeah, of course. Let’s go, everyone’s waiting.”

We walked through the quiet, empty house to the door, then out onto the porch. As we stepped outside, the pack—waiting on the lawn—turned to look up at me.

The sight of the gathered Redwood pack—all waiting expectantly for me—warmed my heart.

“Thank you all,” I called out. “Before I go, I wanted to say a few words to you. I invoked the Concilium Bellicus, not because I believe I deserve it, but because I know we and our fellow packs deserve better treatment from the werewolf council. I’m doing this because I believe a better world is possible for us all.”

I looked around, taking in the familiar faces, all turned up, looking at me, listening to me.

Catching sight of Kendall in the crowd, I lingered on her face, getting lost for just a moment in her memorizing purple eyes. She nodded at me, giving me a small, encouraging smile.

“Whatever lies ahead of us,” I went on, turning back to the pack at large, “I trust that the Redwood pack will only become stronger over time. I have faith in you—in all of you.”

Cali stepped next to me. “I stand firmly with Greyson,” she said in a loud, strong voice. “I know there are lots of things to work out, but we’ll work them out, and we’ll be better for them. I know we will.”

“I stand with Greyson!” Jay echoed.

“With Greyson!” Sage called.

“Greyson!” Ravi yelled, throwing up a clenched fist.

The pack cheered at this, throwing up their own hands, howling and baying in agreement.

I looked over at Cali, who smiled back at me.

*Thank you*, I mouthed soundlessly at her. Then I turned to the pack. “Now let’s go! Let’s get to the Concilium Bellicus and show the werewolf council just how strong and united the Redwoods are!”

“Hell yeah!” Ravi bellowed, pumping a fist in the air. “They’re going to know!”

I laughed, letting his enthusiasm be contagious. I was tense, but I liked a fight, and if that’s what Cesaries wanted, then that’s what he was going to get. I could feel my hands start to tingle with the thought of what was coming. I was nervous, but excited too, and as I headed down the porch steps, I felt some of the heaviness I’d been feeling start to drain away. In its place, I felt the same sense of driven determination I’d felt when I’d first invoked the Concilium Bellicus and challenged Cesaries in the first place.

The pack started toward the trees, shifting as they neared them. The sound of snapping bones cracked through the cold March air, and as we walked toward the woods, Cali turned to me.

“I want to ride with you, Greyson,” she said. “When we get there, I want them to see us together.”

I nodded and shifted, then waited as Cali clambered onto my back. When she was settled, I took off, sprinting into the trees. Cali held tightly to my neck, which reminded me of all the many times we’d ridden just like this. And that made me wonder—with a heaviness I wouldn’t have ever expected—if this would be the last time things were like this.

**Episode 5823**

**Artemis**

My body was frozen in complete shock. As I stared at the man in front of me, I realized that I’d seen him before. A slightly younger version, but Fae didn’t age fast. I’d only seen him in my mother’s memories, but now here was, standing in front of me.

Next to me, Adair looked as shocked as I felt.

He moved, lurching forward. “*Brother?*” he rasped.

Kadmos tipped his head, taking us in. “Who are you? I don’t believe we’ve met.”

There was confusion, but in spite of it, my father’s bearing was regal and so powerful I could nearly feel energy radiating from him.

“I’m Adair,” Adair said in a choked voice. “I’m your brother.”

He looked back at me, and when our eyes met, I saw that Kadmos looked confused.

Tabitha stepped toward Adair, taking his arm. Seeing her move helped me find my voice.

“Don’t you remember him?” I asked Kadmos, gesturing to Adair.

My father shook his head, frowning more deeply than ever. “No. I’m sorry, I don’t recall having met any of you.”

My heart beat hard. If he didn’t know his own brother, he wasn’t going to have any idea who the hell I was, his own daughter who he’d never met at all. For a moment I thought I was going to be sick.

Then I felt a supportive hand on the small of my back. When I turned around, I found Rishika standing just next to me, and Marius wasn’t far behind her.

“Are you okay?” she asked me in a quiet voice.

I shook my head. “I…I don’t know. I don’t know what to feel. It’s… He’s my father, Rishika—”

My voice broke as I spoke and she wrapped her arms around me, pulling me into a hug. Marius came close, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“It’s going to be okay, Ari,” he said reassuringly. “We’re going to figure this out.”

We were all somber for a moment while I fought to pull it together.

Tabitha cleared her throat, and the sound of her voice speaking broke me from my swirling thoughts.

“I’m Tabitha,” she said with a tense smile. “And we’ve all come such a long way to find you. Will you…excuse us all for a moment?”

Without waiting for a response from Kadmos, Tabitha pulled Adair a little way away from him, waving pointedly for the rest of us to follow.

When we’d stepped away, Tabitha looked expectantly at all.

“Well? That’s him, right?” she asked.

Adair, looking stunned, nodded. “Yes, that’s my brother. Without a doubt.”

“From the memories I’ve seen, that’s him,” I confirmed. “He’s my father.”

Tabitha nodded and looked at Rishika and Marius. “I think if he had glamour magic—which my magic negated—do you think it’s possible there’s other magic at work here?”

Her words snapped me out of the strange cloud of thought that had enveloped my mind.

“You’re right, Tabitha.”

Tabitha looked surprised. “I am?”

“You have to be,” I said.

Marius nodded. “I think you’re right, Artemis. Kadmos’s magic never had anything to do with glamour or anything, right?”

He looked at Adair for confirmation, and Adair shook his head.

“No, my brother was always powerful in other ways. And of course, he had the manipulation magic that made him so feared by enemies. That’s what put the target on his back.”

“So how did he end up like this?” Rishika asked, frowning. “Glamoured as an old man who doesn’t even know who he is?”

My mind was racing. “What if he did this to himself?”

Adair looked taken aback. “What do you mean? I just said—he can’t glamour—”

“I know, I know. I’m not saying he did all of this. But what if…what if he used his magic on himself?”

“Like in a mirror or something?” Tabitha asked.

“I don’t know, but maybe,” I mused. Then I turned on my heel and strode away from the group.

I approached Kadmos slowly. Tabitha’s negation seemed to have completely canceled out the glamour, but this…

If I was right, what this was ran so much deeper.

Kadmos looked down at me, his imperious glare intimidating. He was every bit the fierce Fae warrior I’d heard about. I’d been hearing stories of Kadmos the lost warrior my entire life. I’d just never know he was my own father.

Taking a shaking a breath, I gathered my magic, and before Kadmos could say anything to me, I spoke:

“Remember who you are.”

I felt my magic moving through me, the manipulation magic my father and I shared. I could feel it at work inside of me as I held his gaze.

And when I saw his eyes begin to clear—the clouds beginning to part—I sucked in a breath. Those eyes—they were such a bright blue. The same color as my own.

Kadmos gasped and staggered. Adair was at his side in a moment.

“Kadmos? Are you alright?”

Kadmos looked at him in shock. “*Adair?* Where are we? What’s happened? What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be back behind the battle lines—”

“The war is over,” Adair cut in, his voice tight with emotion.

“*What?!*” Kadmos was genuinely shocked, but who could blame him. “How?”

“We thought we lost you,” Adair said, shaking his head as his eyes grew right. “We thought you were dead. And you were here.”

Kadmos looked around, his eyes blazing with anger now. “Where *is* here? Where am I? Is this some kind of trick?”

I stepped forward. “No, there’s no trick. You must have a thousand questions, and we will try to answer them all in time. There was an organization—the Order of the Winding Thorn. They must have done this to you. They wanted to see you fall. They didn’t want the peace that was promised when you married Orla Wrenthorn, and they were afraid of what your baby represented. They had too much to lose if peace came to the land. They prioritized their selfishness and need for chaos over the good of all Fae.”

Kadmos looked at me, like he was seeing me for the first time.

“Maybe you were able to put all the pieces together, but somehow…” I shook my head as a lump grew in my throat. “But you’re safe, somehow. And you’re right where my mom said you would be. You came to the place you wanted to bring her.”

Kadmos winced. He put a hand to his temple, like his head was paining him. But he kept his eyes open, like he was desperately trying to place me. “Your mother?”

He looked around, taking in the mountains and the trees all around us. As he did, a look of understanding dawned on his face. “The Ceravela Mountains. But I only ever told…”

He trailed off, and his eyes slid back to me. He stepped away from Adair’s grasp, moving toward me.

As he moved closer to me, I could feel tears gathering in my eyes.

He reached out to touch my face, but hesitated, unsure. “Artemis?”

Tears began to flow down my cheeks. “Dad?” I sobbed.

I could see it happening in his eyes. He knew I was his daughter, just as I knew he was my father, and I finally let myself go, falling into his open arms as I sobbed.

After a long moment, he pulled back to look down at me, astonishment all over his face.

“You look shocked,” I said, half-laughing, half-crying.

“How could I not be?” he asked, shaking his head. “You’re my daughter. You’re Artemis. How is this… Where is Orla?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but before a sound could come out, I heard a distinctive whizzing. It blew by my ear, the arrow narrowly missing both myself and my father. It lodged into a tree five feet in front of us, quivering.

“*An attack!*” Adair shouted.

We spun around to see a figure dropping down from a tree twenty feet away. She had raven black hair and light eyes, and her appearance was followed by half a dozen others.

The raven-haired woman stood straight and stared at my father.

“Kadmos,” she said, inclining her head, but never taking her eyes off of him, “it’s been a long time. So glad your daughter could be so helpful and lead us right to you.”

Kadmos’s expression darkened in an instant and he stepped in front of me protectively. “Taleena. What is the meaning of this? Where is Orla?”

The name jogged my memory, and I suddenly recognized the woman who had dropped from the tree. I had seen her in a memory as well—it was Taleena, the woman responsible for stealing me from my parents.

“We have so much to catch up on, Kadmos,” Taleena said, her voice cold as ice, “though you won’t be alive for much longer, so it’s time to cut the reunion short.” Her eyes narrowed. “Kiss your daughter goodbye. This ends here.”

**Episode 5824**

As I rode through the familiar woods on Greyson’s back, the air felt freezing on my cheeks. I was confused about why that would be, until I realized that I was crying, making the icy morning wind feel unbearable.

Dashing the tears away, I tried to unpack what I was feeling. I was happy for Greyson, and happy that the Redwoods had shown their support. But I was filled with a deep, penetrating sadness. Sitting astride his back, it was like we both knew this was the last time we would share this experience together. It might be the beginning of something new and wonderful, but it was also the end of something that had been so powerfully amazing that I couldn’t help but feel the heavy weight of its loss, even while I was still so close to it.

Gripping tightly to Greyson, I wished that Three Devils Point was far, far away, so that the ride there would take much longer. I wanted this journey to last forever.

As if he could read my mind, Greyson spoke to me through the mind link:

*This won’t mean we won’t see each other again, Cali. Things will be different, but we’ll figure it out.*

I nodded, though he couldn’t see me. I knew that, but somehow hearing him say that made all of this feel so much worse. Yes, of course we would still see each other, but when we did, what would that mean? How would it feel? What would we do and what would we say to each other?

There were so many unanswered questions.

I thought of what he had told me—that if anything happened to him, Xavier would take care of me. My heart thudded at the thought of it. Xavier was his second in this challenge, so they must have spoken about it.

*I don’t want you to worry about me, Greyson*, I told him. *I know you said Xavier would take care of me if anything were to happen…*

I trailed off. I couldn’t even bring myself to think of what that might mean, and what could happen.

But I took a shaking breath and went on. *But I think I can take care of myself. I’m not the same girl who came here all those months ago. I’m stronger now. I’ve got my Fae magic, and I know the pack will always have my back. I think I’ve earned their respect.*

*I know you have, Cali. But…* He hesitated. *Xavier will still be there for you, even if I can’t always be.*

I frowned. I couldn’t even imagine what that would be like. I was about to ask him what he meant, but before I could, I realized that Greyson was slowing to a stop. We had arrived at Three Devils Point.

As I slid off his back and looked around, I felt my stomach tighten into a nervous ball. I was trying not to think about it, but I was already having flashbacks to the Lupo Finale. The nervous energy I’d felt, the fear of what would happen when Xavier and Greyson faced off. The very real possibility that only one of them would be returning for me.

But as Greyson shifted and moved away, his face dark and tense, I had to acknowledge that this felt different. In some ways, there was even more at stake now, because this was going far beyond who would be the Redwood Alpha.

The other Redwood pack members had arrived, and I joined where they were standing at the far side of the clearing.

“—I thought you said there weren’t any rules,” Charlie was saying to Violet.

Violet shrugged. “Well, there aren’t, not really. The guidelines are that two werewolves fight until one of them surrenders. No weapons allowed, and they have to stay in the clearing so the rest of the packs can watch the whole thing. That minimizes the chance of cheating.”

My thoughts went to Ryker using the silver nail polish to poison Xavier during the Lupo Finale, and I took a shaking breath. I wondered what would happen if Cesaries cheated. What would be his punishment? Given that he was the leader of the council in charge of issuing the punishment, I didn’t have a lot of faith that it would be fair and impartial.

“Hey! You guys ready for this?!” Lola called, bustling over. When she caught sight of me, the smile slipped from her face. “I mean, how’s everyone doing?”

I rolled my eyes. I knew Lola was excited, but she was trying not to show it, for my sake. “It’s fine, Lola. I know you like a good fight.”

Lola grinned, looking relieved. “I have fifty bucks on Greyson.”

“You’re making money off of this?” I asked, glaring at her.

She shrugged. “When opportunity knocks…”

“Such a Lola thing to do,” I said, shaking my head.

We all quieted down when a council member stepped into the center of the clearing, holding up her hands for quiet.

“The Concilium Bellicus will begin shortly!” she bellowed into the cold air. “Will the challenger—Greyson Evers, Alpha of the Redwood pack—please approach!”

My heart was beating in my throat as Greyson separated himself from the rest of the werewolves and stepped into the emptiness of the clearing. He strode purposefully over toward the council member to the sound of cheers and applause from the gathered wolves.

Looking around, I saw that it wasn’t just the Redwood pack in attendance. Every pack from the alliance had shown up, and they were gathered around, cheering for Greyson, here to support him. My heart swelled with pride.

I looked around to see the Vanguards—Lucian, Elle, Aysel, Armin among them. Mace and Spencer were standing with the Blue Blood pack. Maya and Colton were there with the Grimcrests, with Gabriel and Mikah standing by. And of course, Xavier with the Samaras. And Ava.

Though, as I looked over, I realized that Ava wasn’t standing in her usual place beside Xavier. She was standing with Marissa.

And off to one side, Kendall stood, watching on. She belonged to no pack, but she had come. Of course she had.

It felt strange to me as I looked around, to see the three of us—myself, Ava, and Kendall—all mates, all watching together.

I wondered if we all wanted Greyson to win. Yes, we were here all showing support, but if Greyson won, there was a chance that Xavier would leave the Samara pack. And then what would happen to Ava? Would Xavier bring her along as his Luna?

If he did, what would happen to me?

Kendall would want Greyson to win, of course. It was her suggestion that set this whole thing in motion. I considered that for a moment, turning it over in my brain. I thought about everything I knew about Kendall. It wasn’t much—that was clearly the way Kendall wanted it—but what I did know about her, it was that nothing she did seemed to be accidental.

Had she suggested this challenge to Greyson so she could force him away from the Redwoods—and from me?

I supposed it was possible, but this whole thing felt less like it was being forced, and more like something else. It felt almost like it was being propelled from some kind of external force. Like fate was willing it all to happen.

My gazed moved away from Kendall and back to the council member at the center of the clearing as her voice rang out:

“Cesaries! Leader of the werewolf council!”

Cesaries emerged from the crowd and walked into the clearing. It was clear he was trying to look strong and intimidating, but his appearance was met with boos from the werewolves from the alliance, which he seemed to register at once.

That wasn’t wholly surprising to me. I knew how the other packs felt about him. But what was surprising to me was the tepid response Cesaries seemed to be getting from the other council members, who were gathered together across the clearing from where I stood.

I watched them carefully as they looked on. Was it possible they also wanted their useless leader to lose this challenge?

The thought of that made me smile, but I tried to conceal it.

“The challenge will proceed as follows!” the council member shouted, and her voice seemed to echo in the cold air. “The two opponents will shift when I give the signal. You will fight until one surrenders, or until one opponent is incapacitated—or killed.”

The word seemed to hang in the air. It sent a chill down my back, and I gripped Lola’s hand.

The council member took a step back from where Greyson and Cesaries stood, staring each other down.

She raised her hand high in the air, then dropped it. “*Start!*”

With the sharp sound of the cracking of bones, Greyson and Cesaries shifted to their wolf forms. Cesaries howled as his four paws hit the ground. Greyson snarled and lunged. The fight had begun.

**Episode 5825**

Holy shit. Had Cesaries always been that big in wolf form? I couldn’t remember.

I swallowed hard as I looked at the massive wolf form of the council leader. Even though Greyson was larger, Cesaries was still huge and powerful. And I doubted that the head of the council had any intention of playing nice.

Suddenly, my certainty that Greyson would prevail today felt a little less certain.

“Oh god,” I murmured as my stomach tightened with fear.

Lola looked over at me. “What are you worried about?”

“Are you kidding me?” I squeaked. “*Everything!*”

She shook her head. “Remember, Greyson used to be a fighter. Like, professionally. When do you think the last time Cesaries was in a fight? A real fight?”

“I…I don’t know,” I admitted.

“Exactly. He probably doesn’t either.” Lola didn’t look the slightest bit worried. “Cesaries is about to get his ass handed to him in front of everyone.”

I nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I know you’re right.” Of course she was right. I believed that was true, but I was still shaking with anxiety.

Greyson had lunged first, but Cesaries had dodged, and now the two wolves were circling each other, growling and snarling.

Cesaries lunged, going for Greyson, but Greyson easily dodged, sidestepping away. He swung around, attacking Cesaries, who rolled back, away from Greyson with a snarling yelp.

Now it was Greyson’s turn to go on the attack. This was more effective, he got Cesaries down on the ground. As they fought, I had to remind myself to breathe.

It felt like being a dream—more of a nightmare, really. I knew this was going to happen. I’d seen werewolves fight before, but standing here, watching Greyson battle so hard and so fiercely while everyone stood around, not doing anything to help, was so real and so frightening that it was all hard to believe.

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**Greyson**

I kept my eyes fixed on Cesaries as I got back to my feet. He was proving to be stronger and a more competent fighter than I remembered. His fighting style reminded me of the Bitterfang pack. It was unusual and unpredictable, but it was also beatable. And I had every intention of beating Cesaries. There was too much at stake to let this pompous, useless prick continue to wield power over the packs.

He lunged at me again. I scrambled back, but not quite fast enough, and his jaw fastened around my leg. The pain shot through me like lightning. With it came a burning fury I hadn’t felt in a long, long time, and for the first time, I almost wished this challenge wasn’t expected to end in a surrender. I wished it was like the Lupo Finale, where death was the most common outcome. In the Concilium Bellicus, death was unlikely to occur, and as I’d prepared for it, I knew that I didn’t want to deal with the messy aftermath Cesaries’s death would doubtless cause.

That was still true, so the humiliation of his defeat would have to be reward enough.

I yanked my leg free from his grip and countered, attacking with a powerful swipe. As I raked my claws across Cesaries’s snout, blood bloomed immediately. He howled and drew back, his eyes filled with hate.

*You think you can do what I do?* Cesaries asked me through the mind link. *You fool. You have no idea what this calling requires. You think you can waltz in with the cheers from your pack, and their support will be enough, but let me tell you now—you are going to regret challenging me.*

I could only laugh at his failed attempt to taunt me.

*You must be joking. The only one who will regret anything today is you, Cesaries. Your pride keeps you from seeing what everyone else can see. You should have stepped away from your position long ago, but today you’ll be stripped of the power you’ve been abusing for the last twenty-five years.*

This must have pushed his buttons because he growled and attacked, ramming me hard enough with his head that it sent me reeling backward.

As I tried to catch my breath, Kendall’s voice in my head startled me:

*Why are you playing with him, Grey?*

*I’m not playing. He’s actually pretty good, in case you didn’t notice*, I snapped back.

Kendall snorted. *You’re better.* She said this with complete certainty, as though there was no room for argument. *When he moves toward you again, feign to his left, then strike on his right. He’s not protecting his right side.*

*Easier said than done*, I growled.

I could tell the crowd around us was making noise, but it was nothing but a dull roar to me. I was blocking out everything but Cesaries, who was circling me. He was starting to foam at the mouth, so I knew he was getting fatigued, but he clearly had a lot of fight left in him.

As I moved, keeping my eye on him, I figured I might as well try Kendall’s advice. She was a pretty badass fighter, after all, so I knew she knew her shit. And she was in the MIB, so she must have had training.

It should feel weird to mind link with her, but at the same time, it didn’t feel weird at all. It felt normal, like it was the most natural thing in the world. I suppose that was what felt so weird.

With a snort of effort, Cesaries started toward me.

*No time like the present*, I figured, so I tried Kendall’s approach. I lunged as if I was going to attack him on the left, and Cesaries moved to guard. But at the last moment, I shifted direction and charged for Cesaries’s right flank.

Cesaries made a strange, confused, yelping growl as I moved. He clearly wasn’t expecting the attack—Kendall had been right about that—and he wasn’t prepared to guard his right side. As a result, he was wide open and my teeth found their mark, sinking easily into his flank. Blood flowed as I bit down with all my jaw strength.

Cesaries’s body seized up. His muscles tensed as he struggled to shove me away. He was snapping his jaws, but the pain of my attack was clearly distracting him and making it hard to focus. I used my powerful back legs to kick his exposed belly half a dozen times, effectively winding him. This made it easy to pin him, using my paws to hold him down. He struggled, but it was clear the attack had taken some of the fight from him.

*Do you yield?* I growled.

*Never*, he snarled back. He struggled with renewed strength, but when he snapped his jaws, they caught nothing but air.

Using my powerful paws, I grabbed Cesaries by the throat. I could feel his labored breathing, and I knew how easy it would be to simply crush his windpipe—and to end this. To end him. But I needed to show restraint.

I could hear the yells of the crowd. There was a rush of sound in my ears, and I could hear my own heartbeat, but I knew the packs were yelling. Maybe they were yelling for me to kill Cesaries. Maybe they would want me to kill him. God knew we’d all been mistreated by the council and left without support and protection when we needed it most. There was a lot of anger, but I thought of Cali.

Cali was in the crowd too, watching. She would want me to show mercy, and I knew I needed to now. Mercy was the sign of a strong leader, a leader capable of discipline and restraint. Moving my paw out of the way, I bit down on Cesaries throat. Blood filled my mouth in an instant, hot and bitter.

*Do you yield?!* I asked again.

I could feel Cesaries gasping. I could feel the rapid beating of his heart, and I knew if I held on my longer, there was a good chance Cesaries was going to die, whether I intended it or not. I didn’t want that. As I tasted his blood in my mouth, I knew it for sure. I did not want to kill him.

*Do you yield?!*

There was movement beneath me, and Cesaries shifted back to his human form. He lay beneath me, bruised, bloodied, and breathless.

“Yield,” he gasped, his eyes on the cloudy sky over us. “I…I yield.”

The crowd erupted, and for the first time since the fight began, I could hear them clearly in the cold morning air. Their screams were deafening, and they began to chant. I was so stunned by the end of the fight that it took me a moment to realize what they were saying:

“*GREYSON! GREYSON! GREYSON!*”

I stepped back, releasing Cesaries from my grip. He clambered to his feet, looking much less threatening in human form than he had a moment ago in his wolf form. Now he looked very much like an ordinary man.

I shifted to my human form as Cesaries looked around, taking in the chanting crowd.

The council member who had begun the fight stepped forward again. “The winner of the Concilium Bellicus is…*Greyson Evers!*”

**Episode 5826**

**Xavier**

Greyson raised his hands triumphantly as the council member called his name. The packs of the alliance cheered, the sound deafening, and I couldn’t help but smile. My brother had done it. He’d kicked that useless motherfucker Cesaries to the curb. *Finally.*

But as I looked around at the smiling, cheering packs standing around the clearing, the questions began to hit me. What the hell was going to happen now?

I couldn’t even bring myself to look over at Ava. I could feel her, standing a ways away from me. I could sense her, but I didn’t look over. She had probably wanted Greyson to lose so that I wouldn’t leave the Redwood pack, but it was too late for that. The wheels were in motion now and as Cesaries stood in the center of the clearing, defeated and humiliated, it was clear there would be no going back now.

It felt so strange—I’d always wanted to be the Redwood Alpha. I’d fought a fucking Lupo Finale and almost died for the chance, but I never thought it would come to me this way. If I decided to go through with it, that is. And this time I wouldn’t have to fight for it. I wasn’t going to have to fight at all, unless someone challenged me. But who in the pack would do that? There were no other Alphas.

I’d always believed—always hoped—that I would earn my place as Alpha through the Lupo Finale, but I’d been robbed of that chance by Ryker’s dirty, nearly lethal trick, and Greyson had won in the end.

I’d been furious with the outcome, but in all the time since, I’d never challenged Greyson. I could have, but I knew why I hadn’t…

Cali.

I could have defeated Greyson in a fair fight, of that I was certain. But I’d be lying to myself if I pretended I didn’t recognize that things between Greyson and me had changed since that Lupo Finale all those months ago. Back then, he was as good as an enemy to me, and now…

Greyson could still be a pain in the ass—some things never really changed. And I was pissed that he’d upset Cali. Though, in fairness, I’d had my own share of missteps and fuckups with her. But Greyson had also helped unite the packs. As I looked around at the cheering crowd, it was clear that he had built goodwill not only within the Redwood pack, but with the other packs as well. Not just with their leaders, but with the wolves too. Greyson had helped defeat Silas, helped bring me back after Adéluce, saved me from the Night Stalker, and neutralized countless other threats the pack had faced.

Back when Greyson had first shown up out of nowhere, he said he’d come back to the Redwoods to protect the pack…and he had.

I was considering what I should say—and if I could bring myself to congratulate Greyson—when Cesaries straightened, stepping next to the council member.

“I *do not* cede!” he shouted.

This shocking pronouncement quieted the crowd in an instant.

Cesaries stared angrily around. “I do not cede because Greyson Evers *cheated*!”  
 I snarled as anger flashed through me. If Cesaries accused one of the Evers brothers of cheating, he was accusing us all. I knew Greyson, and he was a fucking Boy Scout. He would never cheat—he didn’t have to.

Chaos had ensued after Cesaries’s unhinged announcement, with members of every pack flooding into the clearing. I stormed into the crowd, joining the other pack members who had surrounded the council members who all looked unsure of what to do.

“You’re a fucking liar!” Greyson roared at Cesaries. His eyes blazed furiously in his face and he lunged for the disgraced leader.

I stepped in front of him, catching Greyson and pushing him back. Then I turned to Cesaries. “We all saw Greyson kicking your ass. What are you trying to pull here?”

Cesaries face was flushed. “He cheated, and I refuse to yield. He should be disqualified,” he said, pointing an accusing finger at Greyson.

Greyson snorted. “Try to disqualify me then. I beat you once—I’ll gladly do it again.”

He lunged again, and I struggled to keep them apart. I looked over to the council members.

“What is the deal?” I called to them, growing desperate for help.

They didn’t answer, only looked at each other uncertainly.

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head at their obvious cowardice. Then I looked around. “Did anyone see any cheating?” I asked, polling the packs. “By any party?”

This question was met with jeers and shaking heads. After a heavy silence, supportive chants of Greyson’s name rose up. It was clear who the people wanted to lead them.

I turned to Cesaries. “Where’s your proof, asshole?”

Cesaries opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, I leaned close.

“Here’s how it’s going to work,” I hissed, my voice only loud enough for Cesaries to hear me. “You’re going to apologize, yield to Greyson, and then you’re going to walk the fuck away from here. You got that?”

The defeated leader glowered at me. “And if I don’t?”

That was what I was hoping he’d ask, and I smiled. “If you don’t then you’re going to have to fight two Evers brothers.”

“*Three* Evers brothers.”

I looked up to see that Colton had stepped beside me. All three of us—myself, Colton, and Greyson—stood together, taller than Cesaries, towering over him.

He looked between the three of us, and I could see him doing the math in his head. He was pissed, but he wasn’t a complete fool.

He spit at our feet—blood, I noticed—then turned to the council, who were still looking worried.

“I may have been mistaken about the cheating accusation. If I was, then I apologize.” The word seemed to physically pain him to speak. He balled his hands into fists. “I *yield*.”

The crowd erupted with cheers at this, shouting and hollering and howling into the cold winter air.

Greyson smiled at me, and I slung my around Colton’s shoulders.

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” I told my twin. Then I shrugged. “Or maybe I could.”

Colton jabbed me in the ribs. “Come on, nobody can take on the three Evers brothers.”

*The three Evers brothers.*

I thought about how strange that sounded. Colton and I had never included Greyson before…but now we did.

Looking around, my gaze fell onto Cali. She was smiling as everyone around her cheered like maniacs, but even from a distance I could see there was a sadness in her eyes that made my heart ache. I wanted to go to her, to comfort her—Greyson’s victory undoubtedly had brought on more uncertainty and change.

Then my gaze moved to Ava, who looked profoundly sad. I could see it in her crystal-clear blue eyes. But I knew Ava—she was strong. She could recover from anything. She was more of a fighter than anyone here—myself included. She’d said it herself—she’d clawed her way back from the land of the dead. She was a fucking survivor. I could see that in her eyes too. An unmissable steely certainty. Whatever happened, I knew she would land on her feet.

When I caught sight of Kendall in the crowd, I paused. Now she was an enigma in all of this. Kendall was looking at Greyson, a small smile on her face. I had no fucking idea what was going to happen there. Kendall and Greyson were mates, but that didn’t guarantee anything. Maybe there were no guarantees in anything.

With that happy thought, I turned back to Greyson. I needed to talk to him about what the hell was going to happen now.

“Well, congrats, man,” I said. “That was a pretty decent fight, though I could have taken that old guy out faster.”

Greyson rolled his eyes as he wiped blood from his mouth, then looked down at the nasty wound on his leg. “Yeah, I’m sure you could have.”

I watched as he looked around, taking in the packs celebrating. Someone had brought drinks—a lot of someones had brought drinks, from the looks of it—and people were passing around beer and seltzers. Everyone seemed so happy, but I saw what Greyson saw—it all just seemed a world away.

I cleared my throat. “That shit looks pretty bad,” I said, pointing to Greyson’s leg. You should have Torin take a look at it.”

He shrugged. “It’ll heal.”

I was about to ask him what was going to happen next when the woman who had started the fight stepped forward again.

“Can I have everyone’s attention?!” she shouted over the crowd.

She had to repeat herself a few times, but finally everyone shut up and looked over.

“As the winner of the challenge today, Greyson Evers is the new head of the werewolf council!”

This was met with more cheers, and Colton slapped Greyson on the back.

“Which means…” the council member went on, trying to be heard over the rowdy packs, “that Greyson Evers must immediately resign as the Redwood Alpha!”

**Episode 5827**

My stomach dropped. My mouth went dry as a desert and my heart started to beat like a hummingbird’s wings. Had I just heard that right?

I turned to Lola. “Did she just say what I think she said? That Greyson has to resign *immediately*?”

Lola looked nervous. “Yeah, that does seem kind of…sudden. No two weeks notice or anything?” She gave me a worried look. “Are you okay? You look pale.”

I shook my head. I *wasn’t* okay. This was all happening so fast. There were so many things that still needed to be worked out. Greyson was the Redwood Alpha. He was *my* Alpha. Could it all just end like that?

The world seemed to sway beneath my feet, and I leaned into Lola as black spots appeared in my vision.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I murmured.

“Oh god, you’re as white as a ghost.” Lola grabbed hold of me. “Hey,” she said firmly, “look at me. You are *not* going to be sick. Do you hear me?”

I nodded numbly.

“For one, I do not want you to throw up on my clothes. For two—and more importantly—you are strong, Caliana Hart. This all might be happening at the speed of light, but that doesn’t mean that it’s going to chew you up. You are going to come out of this in one piece, I promise you that.”

“You promise?” I asked vaguely.

She narrowed her eyes. “Do you remember when you found out I was a werewolf?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m never going to forget that.”

“That freaked you out, didn’t it, and you survived that,” she recalled.

“That was different—”

“I know that was different, but this is not necessarily worse,” she said, talking over me.

I gripped onto her, holding for dear life. “But what is going to happen, Lola? What is going to happen to the Redwoods? To me?”

Lola looked at me for a moment, then pulled me into a tight hug. “I guess we’re going to find out.”

I hugged her back. “Thank you.” I pulled away. “But I really need to talk to Greyson.”

Lola nodded, and I stepped away, into the crowd who were in the midst of a full werewolf celebration.

As I moved through them, I realized someone was striding next to me, and when I looked up, my stomach dropped again when I realized it was Kendall.

That was perfect fucking timing.

When we had almost reached where Greyson was standing, I turned to her.

“Do you mind if I talk to Greyson for a second?”

Kendall slid a glance at Greyson, then shrugged. “Sure.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, and continued toward him.

As I approached, I could overhear the council member speaking to Greyson:

“—and as you know, the incoming Alpha has the right to the outgoing Alpha’s Luna.”

I froze where I stood. “What?!”

Greyson looked over at me, and I could see his eyes pleading with me. It was clear this was all news to him as well.

He turned to the council member. “That’s outrageous. What does that mean—the new Alpha ‘has the right to’ the Luna?”

The council member looked annoyed. “I didn’t make the rules, Mr. Evers. I’m merely letting you know what you can expect.”

I was reeling. I just felt like this was something we should have known about. Obviously Greyson hadn’t known about this, but it was something he should have been aware of and thought about before he’d challenged Cesaries.

Greyson stepped toward me, pulling me to the side. “Cali, I’m sorry—I didn’t know about any of this. And if I had, I wouldn’t have gone through with this—”

“You *had* to go through with this,” I said, stopping him. “I’m not blaming you. I—I just wish I would have known.”

He shook his head. “I’ll change the rules now that I’m the council leader. It’s a stupid and antiquated tradition. It’s bullshit.”

“Is Xavier going to be the Redwood Alpha?” I asked. I swallowed hard. “Am I going to be his Luna now? How does that work, exactly? He has two mates—me and Ava. Can he have two Lunas? I don’t understand this at all.”

“Cali, listen to me,” Greyson said firmly, “you are mated to Xavier, but that doesn’t mean he *gets* you. You’re not some prize to be won. You don’t pass to the next person automatically like a piece of furniture. I’ll talk to Xavier. I doubt that he’ll even expect such a stupid thing—”

“No,” I said automatically.

Greyson frowned. “What?”

I shook my head. “No, *I’ll* talk to Xavier.”

“This is my fault. Let me—”

“I know that if you had been aware of this, you would have gone about all of this differently,” I told him. “But it’s too late. You did amazingly today, Greyson. You should be really proud of yourself. I’m really proud of you.” I managed a smile. “The council is going to be different in the best of ways. You will see to that and fix all these stupid rules. But you can’t fix this, not yet. If Xavier decides he wants to be the Redwood Alpha, then he and I are going to have to figure this out on our own. We have to figure out what this means for me—for us.”

“Cali…” he said quietly, but there was no fight in his voice. He wasn’t going to argue with me.

I took a shuddering breath. “If you want to talk to anyone, you should talk to Kendall. She’s waiting for you.”

Greyson gave me a long look. Then he nodded. “Okay. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“I will.”

Greyson gave my arm a squeeze, then walked past me to where Kendall stood waiting for him.

I turned to watch him, my heart thudding in my chest. As much as it hurt to watch him walk toward her, I knew it was the right thing to do. I needed to work things out with Xavier.

But I had only taken a couple of steps toward where Xavier stood when Ava stepped in front of me.

I stopped, and for a moment I had a vision of what my future could look like—no matter where I went, I was always going to be running into one of my mate’s mates.

I sighed. “I guess we’re both in a pretty shitty position.”

Ava gave a derisive laugh. “Some of us more than others.”

“I just lost Greyson,” I pointed out.

She gave me an assessing look. “And got what you always wanted. Maybe this makes it easier.”

“What have I always wanted?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Like you don’t know.”

I gritted my teeth. “I want to hear it from you.”

Her eyes were icy. “Xavier. And he’s yours now. Don’t pretend you don’t want him. You only wanted Greyson to win so that Xavier could use the Redwood Alpha vacancy as an excuse to make his move. Well, the door is wide open now. Congratulations. You get first prize,” she said, her voice tight with pain.

“I didn’t know about the Luna going to the incoming Alpha until just now,” I snapped.

“So?” she shot back, her tone icy. “You still get what you want. And Xavier, for reasons I’ll never understand, gets what he wants. *You*.”

I stared at her, shocked. “But—but you’re his Luna. In the Samara—”

“All this time with werewolves and you still haven’t figured it out,” she said, shaking her head. “You must not have been paying attention, because you’ve gotten it all wrong. Being a Luna is not like a marriage—it’s a position. An appointment based on the situation. A Luna can be changed, just like any other job.”

That was news to me. I had believed it was more like a marriage. That was what it looked like in some of the packs I had seen. That was what it looked like with Maya and Colton, and with Lucian and Elle. But now that Ava pointed that out, it did make practical sense.

I looked at Ava, into her blue eyes, which always seemed so cold and distant to me. But I had seen her with her friends, and with her pack, and I knew she wasn’t always like that. She was harsh and intimidating, but she could also be warm and funny. She was a fierce fighter, both in battle and in ensuring the survival of her pack. But she could laugh, and I knew her pack loved and respected her. I knew Xavier did too.

I bit my lip. “It doesn’t have to be like this—”

I stopped speaking as Xavier walked over to us. He looked between Ava and me, his expression unreadable.

Ava looked at him and tipped her chin toward me. “You two should talk. Because I’m fucking done.”

**Episode 5828**

**Xavier**

I wasn’t sure what had been going on between Cali and Ava when I walked over, but I was thrown by Ava’s statement—what did she mean she was done?

Baffled, I watched as she strode purposefully away. I was torn. I wasn’t sure who to speak to first—Ava or Cali. What Greyson had just sent into motion wasn’t my fault, but here I was, having to clean up the mess he’d left. That felt familiar. I guess some things never really changed.

Cali stared up at me. “What just happened?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” I admitted.

“She’s upset,” she said. “Obviously.”

“With you?” I asked.

Cali shrugged. “With everything, if I had to guess. The way things went down with Greyson—all of it. Maybe you should go talk to her.”

I hesitated. “I’d rather talk to you. Are you okay?”

She gave me a small smile. “I’m okay.”

“Really?” I asked, not sure if I believed her.

She shrugged again. “I think so. Or at least I will be. I’m just trying to make sense of everything that’s happening. It all happened so fast.”

“I know it did, but I swear, everything’s going to turn out okay,” I promised. “Just hang in there.”

She gave me a questioning look.

I smiled back at her. “Trust me.”

She hesitated, like she wasn’t sure if she could, but it felt like there was a window open, so I took my chance.

I brushed the back of my hand softly down her cheek. “Please, Cali.”  
 She stared at me for a moment longer, then nodded.

With that assurance, I turned away, to find Ava.

Looking through the crowd, I searched for her long, black hair. Almost everyone was partying, drinking and congratulating Greyson when they could catch sight of him.

But there, in the distance, I saw Ava. Her figure was distinctive against the darkness of the trees, and I watched as she shifted to her powerful wolf form and took off, disappearing into the woods.

Fuck.

She never did make anything easy, did she?

I looked around and caught sight of Geraint.

“Hey,” I called, waving him over.

“What’s up, Xavier?” he asked.

“I’m going to go talk to Ava,” I told him. “Have everyone return to the Samara house. I have some things to discuss with the pack.”

“You got it,” Geraint said with a nod.

I hurried toward the woods, shifted, and began to run. The darkness was immediate, but I took a deep breath, and when I caught Ava’s scent, I simply followed it into the woods.

I could tell that Ava was angry. She was running hard and fast, the same way I ran when I needed to vent my fury. I wasn’t worried though. She had a head start, and she was fast—she had Alpha blood in her after all—but I was bigger than she was, and I knew I could catch up.

I tailed her through the woods, but her path was eccentric. I wasn’t sure where she was heading. Though maybe she was just running, without a destination in mind.

As I rounded a bend in the path, I nearly collided with her wolf.

*Why are you following me?* she growled through the mind link.

I pulled up short. *Because we need to talk, and you took off before we had a chance.*

She shifted to her human form, but when she looked at me, her eyes were so dark and distant, I barely recognized her. “I told you, Xavier, *I’m done*,” she snarled.

I shifted back. “What does that mean?”

“It means I’m done with this,” she snapped. “I’m done with you, with this bullshit. God, Xavier, how much more do you expect me to give? How much more are you going to ask of me? How much more do you think I can take?”

I stared at her, the raw emotion in her voice raking across my heart like a jagged claw.

She shook her head. “I can’t do it anymore.” For all the pain in her voice, her eyes were dry. “I don’t have any more to give you.”

“*Ava*,” I breathed.

“Go back to her,” she said, jutting her jaw back the way we’d come. “That’s where you’ve always wanted to be.”

“That’s not true,” I burst out, speaking honestly. “I’ve loved you. I still love you.”

She lifted her chin. “Maybe that’s not enough. Not for me. It hurts too much. I start to think that each time you come back to me it’ll be different. For a while there, I thought it might be…” She shook her head. “But I was wrong. It’s always the same. It’s not fair, and I’m so fucking tired of fighting.”

And for the first time—maybe ever—I saw it. I saw the weariness in her. It was there, just beneath the surface. I only saw it for a moment, like a flash of summer lightning. Always so strong, I could see how hard she’d been fighting, how hard she’d been trying—and I realized how hard I’d made it for her. Guilt washed over me, but as fast as the weariness appeared, it was gone again, replaced by Ava’s usual steeliness.

“You became the Samara Alpha, but your heart has always been with the Redwoods. I thought that would change—that once you realized that the Samaras needed you, and needed *us*—that you would see how good we could be together. But you never really saw the vision, did you?”

She waited for me to answer, but I didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t wrong. I had tried—but in my heart, I had always known I would find my way back to the Redwood pack. And to Cali.

My silence must have been answer enough, because Ava took a shaking breath.

“So, no, I can’t be with you anymore. It kills me to say it, but I have to. It’s over between us,” she said, her voice flat and emotionless now. “There’s nothing I can do about our mate bond, but that doesn’t mean we have to stay together.”

My head was spinning, and my heart ached. It ached for Ava, and for us. For all we had ever been. Ava had been my first love—my first mate. No matter what, she would always occupy a special place in my life, and in my heart.

I took a step toward her, but she took a step back.

“*Don’t*,” she warned.

I hesitated, unsure of what to do next. I thought of the Redwoods. “We need to tell the pack.”

She nodded. “We can do it together. The blow will be easier if they hear it from us both.”

It didn’t escape me that even in the midst of what had to be a huge amount of personal pain, Ava’s thoughts were first with the good of her pack.

“You go first,” she instructed. “I’ll follow.”

It also didn’t escape me that she didn’t even want to run with me the distance to the pack house.

I shifted to my wolf form and began to run, but instead of feeling powerful and free as I usually did when I ran, I felt strange and strained. Alienated from even my own wolf.

My head was spinning with so many thoughts as I ran that I was almost lightheaded. I thought about everything that had happened since I’d first turned up at Ava’s trailer after Adéluce had shown up. Hell, I thought of everything that had happened since Ava had returned from the spirit realm.

I had never wanted to hurt her, but even going over everything again, I just didn’t see any way I could have avoided it.

I ran through the woods until I reached the Samara pack house. The rest of the pack was already at the house, having returned from Three Devils Point.

“Xavier!” Geraint called as I shifted back to my human form and walked toward the house, where everyone was gathered. “There you are!”

Knox looked around. “Where’s Ava?”

“I’m here,” Ava said, emerging from the woods.

I turned to look at her, and my breath caught. Maybe it was the knowledge of what was about to happen, but she somehow looked more beautiful than I’d ever seen her, walking out of the woods. Her skin was pale as moonlight and her dark hair swung down her back as she strode toward me.

She eyed me beadily. “Tell them.”

I was startled to realize that she didn’t look sad or defeated. She looked stoic, as though she was fully prepared for this moment—like she was prepared to be strong for her pack.

I turned to the pack, looking into the familiar faces who had—only recently—pledged their loyalty to me as their Alpha.

My throat felt tight as I looked around. This was so much harder than I’d thought it would be. I hadn’t realized when Greyson and I had first spoken about this how difficult it would feel in this moment. How it would feel like a betrayal to all these people who had put their trust in me. Who I had asked to put their trust in me. And now I was just going to walk away…

I hesitated for a moment, but I could feel Ava’s gaze on me, so I pushed on.

“It’s official: I’m leaving the Samara pack,” I announced, “to become the Redwood Alpha.”

**Episode 5829**

As the packs began to leave Three Devils Point, Lola turned to me.

“Are you ready to go? Everyone is heading back to the house.”

Looking across the clearing, I caught sight of Greyson, who was speaking to the council members. Remembering our ride over her, I turned back to Lola.

“Would you mind if I rode back with you?”

Lola shot Greyson a sideways look. “Why don’t you ride back with—” She stopped herself before she finished the sentence and forced a smile. “Of course. Hop on.”

She shifted and crouched so I could climb on her back.

I settled in, and she took off. I loved Lola, but holding onto her as she ran through the trees just wasn’t the same as when I held on to Greyson.

I looked over my shoulder at Greyson as we left the clearing. He was still standing with the council members, but he was watching me as Lola and I galloped into the trees.

The ride back to the Redwood house was quiet. Lola and I couldn’t mind link, and honestly, I was grateful for the silence. I wasn’t sure I could have even spoken about how I felt if I tried, because I didn’t know how I felt.

I kept thinking about what Xavier had said to me just before he ran after Ava—he’d asked me to trust him.

How many times had trust been an issue between Xavier and me? Too many to count.

And yet…this time felt different, somehow. This time I really *wanted* to trust him. But what that actually meant—I wasn’t yet sure.

He had told me it would all work out.

But how?

Ava had said that I was going to get what I always wanted. But was this what I always wanted? I was losing Greyson, I could feel that. And as for Xavier—as far as I was concerned, he was still the Samara Alpha, still mated to Ava, and Ava was still his Luna.

So, no—I wasn’t getting what I wanted. And maybe I never would.

How could I expect to when I wanted both my mates, and now it felt like I was going to lose them both?

When we got back to the Redwood pack house, the whole pack was there, and everyone was shifting back to their human form. There was a nervous energy, and everyone was buzzing. I could see the consequences of Greyson’s victory over Cesaries was starting to set in. I could see it on everyone’s faces. There was no more dancing or drinking—whatever celebration remained was muted.

“Does anyone know what this means?” Sage asked as we all trooped back inside.

“Greyson has to vacate his position as the Redwood Alpha,” Zainab said. “The council member said it.”

“Yeah, but what does that look like?” Ravi asked, looking around. “Is Xavier going to replace him?”

“Do we even want him to?” Sage asked.

“If he does, what does that mean for Cali?” Violet asked, glancing over at me.

“What about Ava?” Ravi wondered. “What about the rest of the Samaras?”

“You’re back!” Mrs. Smith called, coming in from the kitchen. Big Mac trailed behind her. While the witch didn’t share Mrs. Smith’s smile, she did carry a tray of mugs, which she started to pass out to everyone.

“Now, you know, I did teach Greyson that move he used at the end,” Lucian was saying to another Vanguard wolf whom he’d pulled aside. “The one he used to pin Cesaries. He never would have won if it wasn’t for that.”

I rolled my eyes. Such bullshit, but classic Lucian. Some things never changed. I was tempted to walk over and call him out—explain to the Vanguard wolf that Greyson was a skilled fighter who had proven himself again and again, all without *any* guidance from Lucian—but I knew it wasn’t really worth it.

Stepping over to the doorway, I looked out just in time to see Greyson emerging from the woods. He was still in his wolf form, and with the winter sun behind him, his grey coat seemed to glow, shining like silver. It added an aura to him, giving him an added sense of power.

I smiled as I watched him moving toward the house. He had never looked better, never looked more deserving of adulation, even if everything now seemed tinged with uncertainty.

As I watched, Greyson shifted to his human form and walked toward the house. He came up the steps, pausing next to me.

“Will you stand with me when I tell them?” he asked me.

I took his hand. “Of course.”

Holding tightly to my hand, he stepped into the living room, where everyone had gathered. When the stragglers had come in from the hallway and the kitchen, Greyson took a deep breath.

“As you’re already aware, because of my new position as head of the werewolf council, I will no longer be your Alpha.”

This was met with a heavy silence.

“Who’s going to be the new Alpha?” Zainab asked.

“I am.”

We all looked over to see Xavier standing framed in the pack house doorway.

I was jarred by his sudden entrance.

Of course I knew this was possible, but I still wasn’t prepared for him to just show up like that.

Greyson nodded and waved Xavier into the living room.

Xavier stepped in front of the pack, looking around at the upturned faces. “You all know me; I don’t need to introduce myself. I’ve stepped down as the Samara Alpha, and I’m here to take my brother’s place as your Alpha—”

Murmurs broke out amongst the pack.

“—but I won’t take it,” Xavier went on, speaking over the chatter, “unless everyone here accepts me and is willing to pledge their loyalty to me. I know that I’ve done things that have hurt some of you, but that is *never* going to happen again. I swear on my life.” His eyes locked on mine.

I looked away as I felt my face flush, suddenly remembering what the council member had said—that Xavier, as the new Alpha, was entitled to claim me as his Luna. Would he really do that?

Jay cleared his throat, and I looked back over to see him getting to his feet.

He stepped to the front of the room. “I don’t know if I speak for everyone, Xavier, but you have my pledge,” he said as he knelt down on one knee.

There was a pause, and then Violet stood.

“And mine,” she said, kneeling as well.

“And mine,” Ravi added.

“Mine.”

“And mine.”

One after the other, the whole of the Redwood pack stood and then knelt before Xavier, and my heart swelled to see them pledging him their loyalty.

Greyson looked around, then nodded. “Congratulate my brother, Xavier Evers—your new Alpha!”

He clapped Xavier on the shoulder, and the Redwood pack got to their feet, cheering loud enough to raise the roof of the pack house.

I twisted my hands in front of me, my feelings conflicted. I was overjoyed to have Xavier back with the Redwoods, but I was also devastated that Greyson was stepping down.

Jay and Ravi and the rest of the pack swarmed around Xavier. Violet and Lilac looked thrilled. I knew they loved and respected Greyson, but they loved Xavier too.

That’d been my problem all along—I loved them both too.

Greyson walked over to me as the pack crowded Xavier. “Are you okay?”

“Me? What about you?”

Greyson looked around. “This is harder than I thought it would be,” he admitted. “And I thought it was going to be hard.”

I could see he was hurting, so I tried to stay positive. “Well, it’s not like you’re going to disappear from our lives, right? You’re just…going somewhere else.”

Ravi walked over and slapped Greyson’s shoulder. “I hate to see you go, but now we know there’s someone who fucking rocks sitting on that council. This is good for everyone, man. When my pack was decimated by Ryker, the council didn’t do shit about it. You’d never stand for that.” He nodded. “This is a really good thing. It’s like you’re the Alpha of all the packs now, and I can’t think of anyone better.”

I’d never thought of it that way, but as I did, I realized that Ravi was right, and I was really proud of Greyson, even though my heart ached to think of him leaving.

Greyson clasped Ravi’s shoulder and pulled him into a one-armed hug. “Thanks, man. I’m going to try to live up to all of that.”

When Ravi pulled away, his eyes were bright. He nodded at Greyson and walked away, wiping his eyes as he turned his back. Zainab pulled Greyson away for a photo, and when I looked around, I caught sight of Xavier coming my way.

As I watched him walking over, I thought again about him claiming me as his Luna. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. It wasn’t that I was against being his Luna—if that was something we could figure out together. But the idea of him simply *claiming* me without discussion was a different story.

I should have a say in something like that, shouldn’t I?

Xavier stopped in front of me. “We have some things to talk about.”

**Episode 5830**

*We have some things to talk about.*

I swallowed nervously.

He was right, of course. We did have things to talk about—probably a lot of things—but I didn’t want to get into an argument with him about being claimed. Not now, not here, not with so much happening all around me.

“What about?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“Everyone pledged their loyalty to me,” Xavier said, his eyes steady on me. “Everyone except you.”

There was a puzzled look in his eyes, and with a sinking feeling I realized that he was right, and how strange that must have appeared.

“Oh! No—I mean, yes, you’re right. I saw that. I didn’t, but it’s not because…” I shook my head. “It was because I was thinking about the Luna thing.”

Xavier raised his eyebrows. “The Luna thing? What Luna thing?”

I bit my lip. “Xavier, are you planning to ‘claim’ me?”

Xavier stared at me for a moment, then he leaned in close. Close enough my heart seemed to slip a beat.

*No*, I told myself sternly. *Don’t let him distract you. Focus.*

“Do you want me to claim you?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

I pulled back, annoyed, putting some much-needed space between us. “That’s not what I asked you.”

He smiled. “I’m kidding. No, I’m not going to claim you, Cali. Do you seriously think I would do that?”

“I—I don’t know. Apparently you have the right to, according to the council,” I huffed, irritated.

He gently cupped my chin. “Just because the council gives me the right, doesn’t make it right. Do I want you to be my Luna? Of course I do. I don’t even have to think about that. But”—he leaned in close again—“only if you choose me.”

My breath caught. “*Choose?*” That was my trigger word, and my heart began to flutter hearing it. “You know I can’t choose my mate, Xavier—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” he said, putting up his hand to stop me. “Though of course I do want you to choose me. But I’m talking about you being my Luna. I’m not going to claim you and force you into anything, Cali. If you want me to be your Alpha, and you want to be my Luna, then yes, I would do it in a heartbeat. There is no one else I’d want.”

“But—what about Ava?” I asked.

Xavier hesitated for a moment. “You don’t need to worry about her.”

“But what about the Samaras? Are you going to merge them with the Redwoods? There can’t be two Lunas.” I didn’t know everything there was to know about werewolves, as everyone kept reminding me, but that much seemed obvious.

“There aren’t going to be two Lunas. I’m not merging the packs. The Samaras will be their own pack with their Alpha and Luna,” Xavier said firmly. He looked around, at the house and the rest of the pack, then back at me. “I belong here now. With you.”

My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. The feelings coursing through me were nearly overwhelming. “What are you saying, Xavier?” I asked, barely able to breathe.

“If you’ll have me,” he said, his voice barely a whisper now.

My throat felt suddenly dry. “Are you expecting an answer right now? I—” I shook my head. “I’m still working things out with Greyson. And what about Ava…?” I took a step back, nearly stumbling as I did. “I need to think.”

And without waiting for him to answer, I turned on my heel and hurried away. As I threaded my way through the crowd of pack members, I was half-hoping Xavier would follow me, and half-afraid he would.

The pack’s celebration had spilled back outside, onto the lawn, and I followed the flow of people into the cold winter air. My head was pulsing with pain, and my stomach was so tight with nerves that I was starting to feel sick. A breath of fresh air sounded good, but even outside, I didn’t feel any better.

I headed down the porch steps and around the side of the house, fighting off the nausea.

Away from everyone else, I leaned against the side of the house with a sigh, trying to think through everything that had just happened.

Xavier wanted me back. He had asked me to be his Luna. He wanted me to choose him—in every sense.

The idea of any of that had always seemed so impossibly out of reach, so inconceivable. The *due destini* technically wasn’t a curse, but it had always felt like one, hanging over all of us, making us miserable.

Distantly, I could hear the pack continuing to celebrate, but for the first time in a long time, I felt truly alone.

Was I foolish to think that I could really belong to this? They were all werewolves, and I was not. I was half-Fae, half-human. What was I even doing here?

Maybe I should just slip away, go back to Minnesota, and try to rebuild my life as I’d always thought it was supposed to go. I could move back in with my parents, get a job, go back to college.

But even as I thought this, despair settled over me. The thought of that life felt so alien to me now. I knew I couldn’t live that now. However strange it was, this was my home now. My friends and my family were here.

Suddenly, my heart ached for Artemis—I missed my sister.

“You’re not joining in on the fun?”

With a gasp of surprise, I spun around to find Big Mac standing beside me, staring keenly at me.

When my heart returned to its normal rhythm again, I sighed and leaned back. “It’s not fun,” I told her. “At least not for me.”

She gave me an assessing look. “You’ve been under a lot of pressure. You’ve been dealing with a lot of expectations.”

“Yeah, kind of—wait.” I stared at her, shocked. “I’m sorry—are you being *sympathetic*?”

The witch looked unamused. “When I first discovered your *due destini*, I was sure you were going to succumb to it.”

“Succumb to it?” I repeated.

“I thought you were going to go mad,” she said, more explicitly. “Be crushed by the weight of it all.”

She said this so frankly and bluntly that I had to laugh.

“That’s very flattering.”

She shrugged. “I did. I didn’t think you were strong enough. But I have to hand it to you—you’re a lot tougher than I gave you credit for. Because here you are.”

I shook my head. “But where am I? I feel completely lost.”

“Yes, you look it, too,” she said unhelpfully. She looked up, into the sky over our heads, which was bright blue and cloudless. “Sometimes life leads you back to the person you’re meant to be with. Maybe there’s a reason Xavier Evers is back.”

“Do you really think so?” I asked tentatively.

She smiled at me. “Look at me. I met Sabine when we were both teenagers. But I knew even then that I loved her. And when I lost her, all those years ago, I always kept a place in my heart for her. First loves are like that. They become rooted inside of you.”

I frowned at her, still feeling confused and overwhelmed. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I had a second chance to get Sabine back. And look at us—we’re getting married. Because we love each other, and because we’re choosing to spend the rest of our lives together. First loves never forget.”

She put a hand on my shoulder—a surprisingly tender gesture for the gruff witch. “You feel lost right now.”

“Yes,” I said quietly. Tears pricked my eyes and began to roll down my cheeks. I did feel lost—lost and alone, and it felt strangely comforting to have Big Mac, this unlikely friend, notice. “Yes, I do.”

She nodded. “Of course you do. Everything is changing, everything you thought you knew is shifting.”

“Yes, exactly,” I said, using the collar of my shirt to wipe my eyes.

“I’m not a werewolf,” she said, her growl of a voice strangely kind, “and I’ve never lived under the *due destini*, but I know that it is more than what feels like a curse, Caliana Hart.”

“What?” I asked, confused. “What are you talking about? The *due destini* has done nothing but ruin my life.”

She shook her head. “I believe it can also be a guide.”

“*What?*” I gasped.

“Maybe it’s led you on a twisted, torturous journey, but maybe it did so for a reason.”

“What reason?” I demanded, though I was speaking the question into the universe more than I was actually asking Big Mac. “What reason could there possibly be for everything I’ve gone through?”

Her eyes were steady. “When you look into your heart—*really* look into it—who do you see rooted there? Is it Greyson? Or is it Xavier?”

**Episode 5831**

**Artemis**

Seeing Taleena and remembering her face was a total shock to me. Knowing that Taleena had followed me, had used my obsession with finding my father to lead me here, overwhelmed me with sharp stabs of guilt.

I’d been a bounty hunter for so long—and a damn good one, I’d thought—so how could this have happened?

But there was no time to dwell. As each second passed, more Order of the Winding Thorn were surrounding us all. We were going to have to act before they did, or this would really turn into a tragedy.

I turned to Kadmos—my father. It felt strange to even think about it, that this was the man I’d been searching for all this time, and now he was standing right here sharing a fresh crop of danger with me.

“I—I’m sorry,” I said to him. “I didn’t know. If I had I never would have—”

Marius grabbed me, his other hand resting on his sword. “You can deal with all that later. Right now, we need you.”

I nodded, snapping out of it as Taleena charged at us both. Rishika shifted and lunged at Taleena, and both went crashing to the ground. And then all hell broke loose.

I conjured my bow and arrow and without wasting a second sent an arrow flying right at Taleena, but it missed and only caused Taleena to rear back out of our reach to avoid it. As soon as Taleena had regained her balance, she turned an icy gaze in our direction.

“Now, Order. Take what you came for! Kill Kadmos!” she shouted.

I felt an unsurprising surge of protectiveness over my father and rushed to his side. He still seemed a bit dazed, and who could blame him? Everything was happening so quickly, even I could barely keep up and I’d been in too many all-out brawls to count.

Marius just managed to stop one of the Order from reaching me, leveling a swift uppercut at the Fae’s chin that sent him flying. The sight of Marius defending me and my father—and so swiftly and effectively—was ultra-attractive, but now wasn’t the time to drool over him. There would be opportunity for that later, I hoped.

“Stay back!” Adair shouted at Tabitha.

I knew exactly why he was warning her off—her negation powers could wreak havoc, negating all our attempts at using magic as we fought the Order.

Adair took a running leap forward and conjured his whip, using it to strike down a bunch of the Order who were thundering toward us at Taleena’s order.

Before I could follow up with an attack of my own, a blast of magic struck me from behind. I fell but Kadmos caught me and pulled me against his chest.

“Don’t bother fighting. It’s all over for you!” Taleena shouted as she rushed toward us with magic swords in each hand, holding them high and at the ready.

“D-Dad!” I shouted in warning, but Kadmos remained strangely calm, turned toward Taleena, and sent out a jolt of magic that lifted Taleena from the ground, sending her flailing through the air before she was blasted aside.

The rest of the Order were too focused to lose a step as they continued their attack, sending out blasts of magic, shooting arrows, swiping with shimmering daggers coated in poison. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rishika kill one of the Order, ripping out their throat before tossing them aside.

Marius was fighting, too, his clothing torn and bloodied as he fought off one attacker while landing a death blow on another—driving his dagger deep into the center of a Fae’s chest. Then he focused all his attention on the other, blocking strikes and slashing at the Fae with his sword until the Fae retreated and fled into the woods.

Taleena was on her feet again, and her face was a mask of rage as she hurled a volley of fireballs our way. They exploded at our feet and fire, heat, and smoke obscured our vision. And then, in a show of magic that would have impressed me if I wasn’t disoriented from her attacks, Taleena appeared before us in a swirl of smoke with a magic dagger in her hand, poised to stab us.

Taleena grinned. “Father and daughter will die together in one fell swoop.” As she spoke her dagger grew, the blade lengthening until its needle point tip was only inches from my face.

Just before she struck, a strange expression crossed her face.

“Leave my mind alone!” she screamed. And then a second later she was yelling, gibbering nonsense. It was obvious that her mind was scrambled, and I was certain that my father’s mind control magic was responsible for it.

*It’s no wonder they all feared him. Taleena should have counted on his power before she came rushing in hell-bent on killing him.*

With Taleena all but neutralized, I conjured my bow and arrow and fired off a strike. The arrow struck Taleena in the chest and she looked up at me with a confused, shocked expression on her face. The force of the blow threw her back against a tree, and she was dead before she hit the ground.

Kadmos turned his hard gaze on the rest of the Order who were standing by, frozen in terror by seeing their leader killed. “The same fate awaits you!” he warned them. His eyes sparkled as he turned to face his brother. “Should we kill them?”

Adair shrugged. “We could flip a coin.”

“Kill them all!” Marius shouted. Rishika howled.

Kadmos turned that striking gaze of his on me. “What do you think we should do, daughter?”

Hearing him call me that word filled me with emotion, but now wasn’t the time to dissolve into tears of happiness and relief. We still had unfinished business.

“If we let them go…I don’t know. They’ve tried to kill me several times.”

Suddenly, I thought of Cali. Cali always preferred to show mercy whenever she could, and that was one of the many things I admired about my sister.

“There’s been so much killing,” I said.

Kadmos nodded his understanding, and then a slight crease formed in his brow as he used his magic. What remained of the Order members began clutching at their heads before dropping their weapons and falling to their knees.

“You are no longer members of the Order of the Winding Thorn. The Order no longer exists,” he said in a level, penetrating voice.

There was a flash, a burst of magic that I could feel more than see, and then the Order looked around confused and scared.

“What are we doing here?” one of them said.

“You were leaving,” Adair said. “Now go!”

The Order scrambled off into the woods, not throwing even a parting glance over their shoulders.

Rishika let out another howl before shifting back to human form. Marius quickly handed her his cloak to cover herself with.

Kadmos hugged me, and I stiffened at first before relaxing against him.

“You’re so brave,” he said.

“Thank you,” I muttered, feeling shy all of a sudden—and full of questions. I was overwhelmed. So much had happened that I hadn’t had even a second to satisfy the curiosity that had surged in me the moment I laid eyes on him.

“What happened to you?” I asked. “How did you end up here?”

“The Order captured me,” he said. “They used glamor magic on me to make sure no one would recognize me. They told me that…that you and Orla were dead and demanded that I use my mind manipulation magic in the war.” He shook his head hard as if dashing away the memory. “I refused.”

He turned away, overcome by the memories. He was shaking a little, and I felt a kinship with him in that moment—that we’d both obviously been suffering because of all we’d lost and all we didn’t know.

“I was devastated by losing you both. I knew the Order would never stop trying to use me and my magic. I couldn’t let them do that—you saw for yourself what my magic is capable of. One night I escaped them, and when I saw my reflection in a pond—that of a haggard old man—I used my own magic to wipe my memory.”

“How did you end up here?” Adair asked.

Kadmos looked around. “I wandered aimlessly for years but found myself drawn to this place.” He looked at me. “I think it must be because I once told your mother about it and how I wanted to settle here one day away from the madness of politics and war.”

Kadmos hugged me tighter and kissed the top of my head.

“And I’m so glad you found me. That you’re alive. My daughter…” He pulled away to look me in the eye. “And your mother? Is she…?” He trailed off, afraid to ask.

“No,” I said quickly. “She’s very much alive.”

Kadmos gasped then whispered, “Orla.”

Adair clapped a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “It’s been over twenty years. She’s…moved on.”

A pained look crossed Kadmos’s face before he nodded. “Good. She deserves to be happy. I’d like to see her. Where is she?”

“She’s in the human world,” I said, nearly saying more but stopping when I saw understanding on his face.

He looked determined. “Can you take me to her?”

**Episode 5832**

**Greyson**

Bittersweet. That was how it felt. I’d worked so hard to keep this pack together, to keep my family safe. I’d fought hard to become Alpha. Defended my position from those who wanted it for themselves—like my brother. But now that it was official, now that Xavier had stepped in, I knew it was time to move on.

It felt surreal, knowing that my brother was now the Redwood Alpha after everything we’d been through, all the time we’d spent fighting over the pack and challenging each other. Now there was no fight. I’d made a choice and moved on, and Xavier was the perfect person to take my place.

Things were changing—there was no getting around it.

*Moving away from the pack is one thing, but what about Cali? What does this mean for us?*

I stepped away from the porch so that Xavier could assume the spotlight and address his pack. I needed to find Cali, but then I remembered something Xavier had said. An accusation he had made. It was about how when we’d been fighting the Night Stalker, I’d chosen to protect Kendall over Cali.

At the time, I’d been furious that Xavier would dare accuse me of such a thing…but ever since, the suggestion had haunted me.

*Was he right that day? Did I make that choice without even realizing it? Did I choose one mate over the other?*

Even if I hadn’t been aware of it, perhaps my subconscious had made the choice. I tried to replay the events in my head, but there’d been so much happening. Cali had been safe and Kendall had been bleeding and hanging onto that cliff by a thread.

*Wait…I didn’t make that choice to rush to Kendall’s aid…my wolf did. And because of that, the creature got to Cali.*

I could blame my wolf all I wanted, but in the end, we were one and the same. Wracked with guilt, I grew frantic in my search for Cali, but she wasn’t with the others.

I stopped and lifted my nose to the air to follow Cali’s scent and was surprised when it took me to where Cali stood away from the others with Big Mac. They were hugging. I’d never seen anything like it.

As I approached, Big Mac released Cali almost as if she’d been caught doing something wrong. “Don’t think I’ve gone soft,” she grunted, plying me with a harsh stare. Then she gave Cali a pointed look before returning to the others.

Right away, I saw the pain in Cali’s eyes. What I wouldn’t give to hold her, to do everything I could to make her hurt go away. But I was the source of it. What she was feeling was my fault because I’d done this to her.

My voice was raw when I spoke. “What’s going on? Are you leaving?” I paused. I hadn’t really thought about it…the mechanics of it all—what it meant now that I wasn’t the Redwood Alpha and this pack house wasn’t technically my home anymore…at least not in the way it had been only hours ago.

“Or would it be better if I’m the one who leaves?” I said cautiously. “Would it make things easier for you? I could go to Portland. I still have a place there.”

Cali grabbed me and cried into my chest. I simply held her, wanting her to take her time to express whatever it was she was feeling.

Finally, she looked up at me. “I want you to stay. I want you to fix this somehow. Fix us.”

I opened my mouth to speak but then realized that I had no idea what to say. Could I somehow fix things? Was there a way to make this easier for everyone?

“But I think you need to go,” Cali said. “Because what I want and what you need may be two different things. I’ve spent so much time trying to figure out what I really want. And what I want more than anything is for you to do what’s best for you.” She looked away. “Even if it hurts.”

She sniffed and wiped her tears with a rough swipe of her hand.

“We’re mates. No matter what happens, we’ll always have that,” she said. “And even if we aren’t together…” She paused, choking on the words as my heart broke. She forced a smile. “Even then, we won’t be alone.”

“Cali…are you? Are we…? Fuck. I hate this.”

*I can’t say it. It doesn’t sound right. It can’t be right. After everything…this can’t be the end, can it?*

She nodded silently. “I think it’s time. You are about to start a new journey, and maybe it would be better if you started it without me. And someday, who knows, maybe our paths will cross on that journey and bring us back together.”

I nodded, too stricken with emotion to say anything.

“Just know this, Greyson. No matter where we end up, no matter where our paths take us, I’ll always love you.”

I clung to her, the misery of this reality taking my breath away so that it felt hard to breathe. “I love you,” I choked out.

I didn’t want to let her go. If I did, it would feel too final, too much like the end. We were breaking up, and it wasn’t happening how I thought it would. This wasn’t what I’d imagined. Hell, I’d never imagined being without her. It had never crossed my mind.

Though if I were being honest with myself, the *due destini* had put enough doubt in my mind. I’d just been too in love, too lost in Cali to realize it. I’d always feared that in the end, when it came down to it, she would choose my brother.

But I never thought it would play out like this.

And she didn’t choose anyone. She didn’t make that choice—the *due destini* wasn’t responsible for this. This was just something she had to do…but that didn’t make it hurt any less. In fact, it hurt like hell.

Cali cleared her throat. “I—I think Lola is looking for me.”

I took a breath. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Cali stepped back and started to say something, but then she just turned and walked away. My wolf howled, mourning the loss, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

My knees felt weak, and I had to reach out and brace myself against the house to keep from running after her.

I wasn’t sure how long I stood there. Time was behaving strangely; everything felt upside down, disorienting. I was trying to imagine my world without Cali. It felt impossible, like trying to live in a world without air to breathe.

My wolf finally began to settle, and I took a deep breath. A second later, a familiar scent hit my nose. Kendall. My wolf stirred but it was still cautious, still overcome with loss.

Kendall appeared and hesitated when she saw me. She started to say something to me about hiding, but then she stopped when we made eye contact, and an expression I’d never seen before took over her face.

She edged closer, approaching me like I was a skittish animal she was trying not to spook. “Are you okay?” Her voice was soft, quiet, nurturing.

I wasn’t sure if I should answer. I didn’t trust myself. I wondered if I should run. Seeing Kendall right now felt wrong—like too much too soon. But there was also something soothing about her. A gentleness that I’d never seen, or more accurately, had only seen traces of, was now starkly at the surface.

She’d always been easy to talk to, though right now I didn’t feel like talking. Kendall leaned against the house, standing right beside me. Close but not too close. She wasn’t crowding me. She was obviously giving me space.

“Hell of a day, right?” she said.

I laughed, a snorting sound that surprised me. “That’s putting it mildly, I think.”

“Cali?” Kendall’s voice held no derision, it wasn’t pitying, she was simply asking with nothing hiding behind her words.

“We just broke up.”

The words crashed out of my mouth, and still, it didn’t seem real. How could we break up? How was it that things had ended just like that when we obviously loved each other so damn much?

*I guess it’s true what they say. Love isn’t enough sometimes.*

Kendall’s expression flashed with surprise, and she shook her head a little as if she didn’t believe it. Before she could say anything else, Lucian and Elle interrupted us.

“Greyson, best buddy, the Vanguard’s prime ally—there you are!” Lucian said with a brightness that pushed me further toward the edge.

I couldn’t even conjure up any anger at him for interrupting at a time like this. I felt numb…but I still wanted him to get lost. “Lucian—”

“Elle and I have made a very important decision!” he said, speaking over me. “Will you marry us?”

**Episode 5833**

**Xavier**

I was anxious, wondering if I’d told Cali too much…or perhaps too little. She’d asked about Ava, and I’d purposely kept from her that we’d broken up. Maybe I should have told her, but if I had…it may have impacted her decision, and I didn’t want that.

What I wanted was for Cali to make the decision I always knew she would—I wanted her to choose me all on her own. In the same way, I wanted her to choose to be my Luna—and not because Ava was out of the picture, but because she truly wanted me and wanted to lead the pack at my side.

If she wasn’t ready to choose? Fine. I would wait for as long as it took because I knew ultimately what I’d always known—that she would choose me. There was no other way this could turn out. Cali belonged with me, and it had just taken a while for things to set themselves right—for us to be together in the end.

Greyson was a threat, but that was all he was and all he had ever been—a distraction from the end game.

Me and Cali.

That had never been in doubt. From the moment I laid eyes on Cali, even if I didn’t quite realize it at the time, she was meant for me and only me. As for being my Luna, I knew that she would do what was best for the pack just like she always had. And in this case, what was best for the Redwood pack also happened to align with what was best for me.

With Cali as my Luna, the Redwood would be the dominant pack it was always meant to be. I needed her. We were meant for this. I knew it would all work out just as I’d always envisioned it. I just had to give it some time.

I was smiling at the thought when Lola stepped into my line of vision. “So, you’re back?” she said, almost as an accusation.

“Yes, I’m back…which is why you just pledged your loyalty to me.”

Lola crossed her arms over her chest as she rolled her eyes. “Make no mistake, my loyalty is to Cali and Cali only. You’re back. Great. But what does that *mean* exactly? Like are you going to hang around for a while until you find some other pack more in need of your, I don’t know, *Alphaness*?”

“I’m not leaving,” I deadpanned.

Lola had pledged her fealty but wasn’t treating me like an Alpha. Typically, pack members didn’t confront their Alpha, didn’t question them like they were the dominant force. But since I couldn’t blame Lola for being skeptical, I wouldn’t flex my power over her.

Not that that would have worked on Lola, anyway.

“Yeah, well, you said that before,” Lola snapped. “At least, I’m pretty sure you did.”

“A lot has happened since then, and you witnessed it all, so there’s no need for me to go down the list,” I said. “And anyway, the Xavier you seem to be all pissed at, that isn’t me anymore.”

Lola scoffed. “Oh, so now you’re new and improved? Is that it? Although if I’m being frank, the bar was pretty low to begin with.”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. If I were a tad less exhausted, I may have lost it on her. I wasn’t in the mood for this right now.

“Lola, please! Can you give me a fucking break?”

Lola grinned. “There we go—the Xavier I know and love. I’m glad you’re back…and of course Jay is your biggest fan.” She stepped close and dropped her voice low. “But I’m warning you, I’ll go full vampire on you if you hurt Cali. Whatever happens between you, don’t hurt her.”

I nodded and exhaled, hoping this interrogation or whatever it was was coming to an end. “Yes, ma’am.”

Torin came running over. “It’s about to begin!”

I frowned at him. What else could be brewing? Hadn’t enough happened already? “What?”

Even Lola looked confused.

“The wedding!” Torin said. He gestured toward the bank of RVs, which had been decorated to look like some kind of open-air chapel.

“When did all that happen?” I said. Apparently, I’d been so wrapped up in everything that I hadn’t even noticed a full-fledged decoration effort happening right under my nose. “And whose wedding?”

Torin started pulling Lola and me toward the epicenter. “Lucian and Elle!”

I was shocked. “Wait, you’re telling me that Lucian, the bougie princeling who lives in a palace, is about to get married in the shadow of a bunch of RVs? What the hell is in the air today?”

I wouldn’t miss this for the world. I was surprisingly excited. If Greyson taking over as head of the council was a crazy turn of events, Lucian throwing a wedding without a ten-piece orchestra and a million-dollar dessert table was absolutely mind blowing.

I joined the others as Lucian appeared in the doorway of the largest RV. He looked unbelievably happy, and deep down, I felt a spark of happiness for him. I guess today was just full of surprises.

“Thank you all for joining us on this joyous occasion,” he said, addressing us like we were his subjects. “The ceremony will begin in a few minutes.”

Lucian slipped back inside, and I could tell from the looks on everyone’s faces that they were all as surprised by this as I was.

*Leave it to Lucian to steal the spotlight away when it should be my moment.*

I was finally the Redwood Alpha—as it always should have been—but somehow now it was all about Lucian.

I turned my attention to searching for Cali, but I didn’t see her anywhere. Was she even still here? She’d seemed so upset when I told her that I wanted her as my Luna…and maybe I should have gone after her right then and there when she stormed off…

No, I’d done the right thing giving her some time to herself. She needed to figure all of this out without my influence, without any pressure from me, without worrying about what I wanted. I’d meant what I said, after all. I only wanted her as my Luna if she wanted to be.

I saw that Mrs. Smith and Big Mac were in a tiff about something, and then a moment later, Big Mac yelled out, “FINE!”

She begrudgingly walked over to Lucian’s RV and casted a spell with a sour look on her face. In a flash of sweet-smelling sparkles, a flowered arch appeared. Mrs. Smith beamed and clapped, threw her arms around Big Mac’s neck and kissed her.

“I’m not doing any more magic today,” Big Mac groused. “You do remember I charge for my services?”

Mrs. Smith just kissed her again, and I couldn’t help but smile. Somehow, those two worked, and that was magic in itself.

Greyson stepped under the arch, nearly bumping his head and sending it crashing over. Big Mac gave him a dirty look.

*What’s he doing…wait a minute…is he marrying them?*

More power to him and better him than me.

Greyson knocked on the door of Lucian’s RV. “Lucian, let’s go.”

I noticed something different about Greyson. Something I couldn’t put my finger on. Maybe he was just unhappy he’d been dragged into doing this. I certainly would’ve been.

Somebody put on some music, and a moment later Lucian stepped out dressed in a simple tux.

Jay sidled up to me. “Can you believe this is happening?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Not really. I expected something at least ten times gaudier.”

Jay laughed. “The day is young, there’s still time for trapeze artists and some freaky twist that Lucian springs on us at the last minute.”

“And it would end up as the most normal thing to happen today,” I deadpanned.

Jay clapped me on the shoulder as he laughed, and I realized at that moment just how much I’d missed our friendship. It felt good to be back.

Lucian descended the RV’s metal steps and went to stand beside Greyson. The music changed subtly as Elle appeared from behind one of the smaller RVs. She was dressed in a lacy, flowy white gown eliciting an audible gasp from the crowd.

I had to admit that she looked beautiful, and for reasons I would never understand—happy. If I were her, walking down the aisle to marry the princeling would feel like a death march.

As I turned back to look at the arch, I spotted Cali. My breath hitched. She looked breathtaking in her simple, violet slip dress. Her beautiful hair was piled in a classy updo at the crown of her head, and she looked positively radiant as she watched Elle glide toward her.

*What I wouldn’t do to be standing in Lucian’s place watching Cali walking down the aisle.*

Cali’s eyes met mine, and she smiled. I felt a spark of hope.

*Is this a sign? Is she going to agree to be my Luna?*

**Episode 5834**

**Greyson**

I waited for Elle to take her place beside Lucian, unsurprised by just how surreal this felt. They’d been planning the hell out of this wedding, and it had been shaping up to be a patented, grand Lucian production.

He’d asked me to be his best man, I’d overheard him ordering ice sculptures, and now they were getting married under a magical flower arch with RVs as the backdrop. Maybe true love had changed Lucian more than I realized because this was not at all what I expected of Lucian.

When I’d asked Lucian why now, why not wait, his eyes had taken on a seriousness I’d maybe never seen from him before. It was almost scary, and for once, my bullshit alarm hadn’t blared while he spoke.

“It was Elle’s idea,” he’d said. “She wanted it to be simple, and because she’s my beautiful forest rose, I’ll do anything for her. Anything. I only want to make her happy. This seemed like the perfect occasion, the perfect moment. I couldn’t pass it up.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I was glad in some ways. It was a nice distraction, a way to get my mind off the emptiness I’d been feeling ever since Cali and I called it quits.

A beaming Elle finally came to stand beside her groom, and Lucian took her hand and kissed it gently. For all the bad things I could say about Lucian, and I had an entire running list that grew by the hour, his love and care and devotion to Elle had never been in question…even if I’d hated them together in the beginning.

Using the notes Lucian had offered me, I opened the ceremony with as much reverence and respect and love as Elle deserved.

“Lucian and Elle were destined for this moment. Not only because of their mate bond, but because of their mutual love and devotion to each other. They get along. They respect each other, and Lucian proves his love for Elle every single day.”

“Heck yes, he does!” Elle said, smiling up into Lucian’s eyes.

The crowd erupted with “woos” and claps.

“Always and forever, my beautiful forest rose,” Lucian said softly. His eyes never strayed from Elle’s, and for the first time ever, Lucian’s focus wasn’t on being admired, but on his gorgeous bride who truly seemed to love him…a mystery that I wasn’t skilled enough to decipher.

When I finally announced them as man and wife and watched them share a passionate kiss, my eyes welled up. I looked down, feigning a sneeze-cough combo so that I could wipe my eyes without being found out. I would never live it down if Xavier or anyone else saw me crying…even if it wasn’t for the reason they would think.

I recalled a dream I’d had—of marrying Cali. But that dream was no more.

As the packs cheered and clapped, I slipped away and headed for my motorcycle. The only thing I wanted was to get as far away from here as I could. It was all too much. I wondered how much change, how many huge events, how many world shifting events a person could take in one day.

I was solidly and completely at my limit.

I revved my bike and took off in a spray of gravel. I didn’t dare look back. I couldn’t. All I would see behind me was destruction and loss and I couldn’t take any more of that.

I was driving but I had no idea where I was going. I could use a drink…or ten. I turned toward the Bend. There I would find a couple of bars that would serve my purpose. I just had to get as far away from the wedding as I could—and the Redwoods. And Cali.

That hit me hard.

*Imagine that. Me needing—wanting—to get away from Cali. I can’t believe things have come to this.*

I suspected that she needed space, too. Maybe this was what she was talking about…the journey I was starting. It was starting right here, right now. Even if I was kicking it off at a bar where I could drown my sorrows and forget how fucked everything seemed.

I arrived at the Bend and pulled up at the first bar I laid eyes on. It was still early, so there weren’t many people inside.

*Good. I’m not in a talking mood. I just want to sit and drink until I forget…or until I pretend to.*

A game was blaring on the television, and a few of the patrons—obvious regulars who also didn’t seem in the mood to talk—were watching. Thankfully they didn’t seem the least bit interested in me.

I ordered a whiskey and sipped it slowly, savoring the burn. I used to do this kind of thing all the time when I was still fighting. I’d be in a different bar in a different town every single night. It hadn’t bothered me back then—it was just the way things were. I’d embraced my rogue life, at least for a while.

And then I met Maren.

I raised a glass to her, hoping that she and Mace were doing well. Like Cali, she deserved the best, even if that wasn’t at my side.

I was just sitting my glass down when I noticed some of the patrons’ attention had veered away from the TV and to the door. I turned just in time to see Kendall strutting in, swinging her motorcycle helmet in one hand with a cocky look on her face.

*She knows they’re all watching her, and she knows she has them all in the palm of her hand.*

She sat down beside me, and her purple eyes flashed as she looked me up and down. “Care to buy a girl a drink?” She winked at me.

“What are you doing here?” I sputtered.

“Want me to leave?” She started to get up, but I pulled her back down—unable to ignore all the jealous looks I was getting. I had to admit, I would be jealous, too. This was probably the most exciting woman to enter their bar in decades.

I flagged down the bartender. “A drink for her please.” I looked at Kendall. “Whiskey?”

“Is there any other drink worth drinking?” she said with a smirk.

I smirked back. “Not right now.”

The bartender rushed off to pour her drink—obviously under her spell like every other person in this bar.

“So why are you here?” I asked again.

“I’m not sure,” she said around a sigh. “Maybe I was worried about you? You ran off from the wedding without even saying goodbye.”

“Oh. Did I hurt your feelings?”

“Feelings? Who has room for those?” She smiled, and my wolf growled.

“I followed you,” she added with a shrug. She didn’t seem ashamed, and my wolf growled a little louder. “I’ll admit it wasn’t my idea, but…my wolf had other ideas. What can I say?”

My wolf was howling now. I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to.

The bartender placed Kendall’s drink down in front of her, giving her a sly eye as he did. She didn’t pay him a second glance as she uttered a clipped, “Thanks.”

I downed my drink in hopes of drowning my wolf even a little, and then ordered another.

“Are you here because of the kiss?” The words tumbled out of my lips, and though I couldn’t really get drunk, it could be said that good whiskey could loosen even a werewolf’s lips a bit.

She scoffed. “Kiss? Forget about it. I already did.”

I turned to face her head-on. “That’s the thing. I can’t.”

This felt good. Being honest. Not holding back. It didn’t feel quite good…not yet. But I did like the feeling.

Kendall was staring at me with her drink frozen in midair. Her eyes were narrowed, and she was watching me very closely, as if trying to figure out whether I was telling the truth.

“No, it’s not just that I can’t,” I added. “It’s that I don’t want to.”

Kendall finally put her drink down. I couldn’t sense what she was feeling—she had that unreadable expression again—the one she usually had. Was she surprised? Put off? I couldn’t tell.

“What are you saying, Grey?” Her voice was soft and vulnerable, and that caught me off guard. I wasn’t sure what I expected. Maybe for her to blow it off like she always did whenever it came to discussing whatever this was between us.

I turned to make sure the bartender was bringing my next drink. I was going to fucking need it.

Kendall put a hand on my arm, her strange eyes searching mine. I felt like she could see right inside of me, but I had to be imagining that.

I hesitated, my wolf stirring like crazy from her touch. It all felt so fast because it *was* all really happening fast. But not fast enough.

“Should we try this?” I said. “You and me?”

**Episode 5835**

I was doing my best to celebrate Elle and Lucian’s wedding, but it wasn’t easy. In fact, at this very moment, it was torture. I’d seen Greyson leave as soon as the ceremony ended without even saying goodbye.

But then again, we had already said our goodbyes. With a heavy heart, I realized that Greyson’s whereabouts weren’t my business anymore. I cared for him and would always want him to be safe, but as I’d watched him leave, I knew that it wouldn’t make sense for me to go running after him, asking where he was going.

I looked over to see Lola and Jay dancing. They were staring into each other’s eyes, alternating between dancing close and structured and funny, goofy moves. They were laughing and hanging all over each other, so obviously in sync. So clearly in love. They were mates, and things were good and uncomplicated. They were lucky.

Charlie and Violet were dancing together, too, as were Aysel and Armand and everyone else, it seemed. They were all having such a good time, lost in each other and in the spirit of the night, and here I was struggling to keep from bursting into tears.

I took a deep breath and decided that I had to try to be happy for Lucian and Elle’s sake. I didn’t want to be the only person frowning at the wedding. I pasted on a smile and even managed to pull Elle away from Lucian’s side so that I could congratulate her.

“This is such a beautiful day, and I’m so happy for you,” I said. “You look stunning, and I’ve never seen Lucian so happy.”

Elle was blushing, and her eyes were shining and bright. “Thank you. This is the best day of my life.”

I believed her. She hadn’t stopped smiling since they exchanged vows.

Elle pulled me into a tight hug. “Thank you for being my friend, Cali. And for all the help and guidance you gave me when I first became a werewolf.” She paused and looked around. “Wait, where’s Greyson? He’s the one who turned me…I want to thank him, too. None of this would have happened without him.”

A knot formed in my stomach. I wasn’t sure if I should pretend I didn’t know…but I didn’t want to lie. Not to Elle and not today of all days.

“Greyson left,” I said. “Maybe he had some council business?”

It wasn’t a complete lie. I had no idea where he’d gone, and so that was as good a guess as any.

“Wow,” Elle said, looking disappointed. “I wished he’d at least said goodbye. I didn’t even get to thank him for performing the ceremony. But maybe you can tell him for us?”

Was this how it was going to be until everyone heard the news? Being slapped in the face with just how much things had changed? Being reminded of how much I’d lost at every turn? How was I going to get through this?

“Oh, um, I’m not sure when I’ll see him again. You know the council’s going to keep him busy…” My voice cracked as I trailed off.

Luckily Elle wasn’t paying attention because Lucian had just grabbed her and swept her into a kiss.

“Come, my forest rose. The guests are demanding to see the newlyweds dance!” His eyes were shining. “We can’t keep them waiting.”

I looked on, doubting that anyone had demanded anything of the sort, but I kept that to myself.

Lola came strolling over with a drink in hand. She tossed it down in one gulp and then turned to watch Lucian and Elle parade around in a dramatic dance that clashed with the RVs parked all around them.

She shook her head. “I don’t get it. Elle seems smart…why Lucian? Complete nonsense if you ask me. Elle could have any man she wants.”

“But she wants Lucian. They’re mates, after all,” I said.

“Still…ugh.” Lola made a face like she’d just eaten something bad.

I laughed. “I don’t know. Lucian has his fine points.”

Lola scowled at that. “For real? Where? Name *one*!”

“For one thing, he adores Elle.”

Lola nodded. “Okay, you got me there. That must be worth something…though I still have a sinking feeling that he adores himself more.”

“If Elle doesn’t hold that against him, I guess we shouldn’t, either,” I said.

Lola smiled. “You’re right. And man does she look beautiful. Lucian better be counting his lucky stars.”

I went quiet, busy watching the love overflowing between Elle and Lucian while that sick feeling of loss and confusion and sadness battled in my stomach.

“I’ve got to go,” I said to Lola, rushing off before she could question me. I knew Lola. If she got a good enough look at me, she would know that I was dying on the inside.

But I had to go. I couldn’t stick around here for even another second. I was finding it too hard to keep doing this—to keep smiling and pretending that I was enjoying myself while my heart was aching like this. I moved away from the celebration until the music was a dull thump in the background.

I leaned against the back of one of the RVs and tried to calm down a little. It wasn’t the end of the world…just the end of a relationship. A relationship with a wonderful man who I still loved so much it hurt.

*That’s not helping. I have to stop thinking about him.*

I braced myself against the RV as another wave of lightheadedness washed over me. It felt just like it had at the Concilium Bellicus. In a split second, my head was hurting—pounding, actually. If it kept on like this I was going to get sick to my stomach, and that was the last thing I needed. Puking behind an RV at Lucian and Elle’s wedding after the worst breakup of my life.

*What’s wrong with me? Maybe it’s the music. Or I’m hungry. Or I’m spiraling.*

I started moving farther away, toward the woods, when I caught something out of the corner of my eye. A flash of strange blue light. At first, I thought it had something to do with whatever was going on with my head, but when the light reappeared above the tree line, my heart jumped.

It was a wisp!

It hovered, a sparkling pearlescent blue, beckoning to me. I stepped toward it just as it drifted deeper into the woods. I was drawn to it like a moth to a flame.

*When was the last time I saw one of these things? What does it want? And where is it leading me?*

I hesitated as the wisp continued its trek deeper into the woods. The sun was starting to set, and I remembered when I first came here, how terrified I was of the woods, and of Xavier for that matter. Times had changed so much…

It was in these very woods that I’d encountered my very first werewolf. But that was before I understood, before I fell in love first with Xavier and then with Greyson. Before I came into my Fae powers. I could defend myself now. I could summon my sword and shield at will, and I could blast anything that came my way.

There was no reason to be afraid when I could now protect myself from any threat.

The wisp kept going, moving deeper and deeper into the thick trees, and I kept following it. For a split second, I wondered if I was seeing things. Was this wisp even real?

I was still feeling kind of sick and very dizzy. Maybe this was a vision? Or could it be dark magic at work? Or was it a trap? Was the wisp leading me to another Night Stalker lurking in there somewhere? Was the wisp a fishing lure…and I was the fish?

But I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. Maybe I was hungry for something to get my mind off things, even if that something was potentially dangerous. And the wisp was enticing. I could feel myself being pulled toward it, and its shade of blue reminded me of Xavier’s eyes.

I was looking up at it when I tripped and went down hard. Wincing, I looked up, searching for the wisp, but it was gone. I looked around wildly.

*I have to find it. I need to find it. Where is it?*

As I got to my knees, I heard something coming toward me. I didn’t feel fear, just an overwhelming need to prepare myself, to be ready for what was coming—whatever that might be.

I got to my feet just as I caught a glimpse of fur. A wolf appeared from a thicket, a large wolf shrouded in shadow, and then it was only a few feet away.

*Xavier’s wolf?*

He stopped short with his eyes on me and shifted back to human form. “Cali?” he said. “What are you doing here?”

**Episode 5836**

**Artemis**

As we climbed out of the tree trunk and into the human world, I was grateful to Adair and Kadmos for locating a portal that could bring us here. They’d done it so quickly, too, exhibiting how skilled they were in moving between worlds like it was nothing at all.

We all walked in a comfortable silence, heading toward Orla, toward a place I could honestly call home. We were getting close. I recognized these as the woods behind Cali’s childhood home. Before long, I spotted the roof of the house in the distance.

*We’re here.*

Suddenly, I was choked up.

*That’s strange. What’s the matter with me? Is it because I have my father right here beside me? Is it because he’s alive, because it’s really him? Because my search wasn’t for nothing? Maybe all of the above?*

I’d been right all along…that feeling in the pit of my stomach that told me he was alive. I was so proud of myself for never giving up, for following the feeling in my gut even when it seemed like I was chasing a shadow.

This was surreal. That was the only way to describe it. It was only going to get more surreal. I turned to Adair.

“How should I handle this?” I asked him.

He arched an eyebrow at me. “What do you mean?”

“Should I go talk to my mother first? Give her some kind of warning?”

Adair nodded a bit his lip as he considered my question. “There’s no great way to do it. It’s going to be a shock to her no matter what. I don’t know how you can prepare someone for something like this…for someone that meant so much to them coming back from the dead…so to speak.”

I thought of Tom. He was such a sweet man, and this was going to be a big shock to him, too. How was he going to take this? What would it be like for him, his wife’s Fae ex-husband coming to see her after so long? Tom wasn’t the jealous type from what I knew of him, but this would be a tough situation for anyone.

As we got closer, I spotted a small building in the back corner of the yard that I hadn’t noticed before. It was a small greenhouse.

My mother’s voice drifted out to me. “Tom, honey, did you water the tomato plants today?”

Tom called back, “No!”

“The grill is hot!” she said. “Why you want to grill in the dead of winter I’ll never know.”

“I have to try out this recipe I’m supposed to send to Torin,” he called back. “And anyway, I run hot now, so it’s no problem for me to grill tonight.”

Orla emerged from the house and was starting for the greenhouse when she spotted me. Her eyes went wide. “Artemis? You’re back!” She rushed toward me and then stopped short when the others stepped clear of the woods. She took one more step, and then her entire body froze.

“Kadmos?” She said it just above a whisper, but the emotion of the word was clear—as was her shock. She gasped, dropping the watering can in her hands. “Is it really you?”

She looked between me and Kadmos as a wide range of emotions played across her face.

“Mom,” I choked out, rushing into her arms. “I found him. We found him!”

Kadmos approached us where we stood embracing, his eyes watering. “Orla, wow. You haven’t changed one bit,” he said.

The door opened, and Tom stepped out, clearly surprised to see all these people standing in his yard, most of them strangers.

“Artemis, so glad you’re back,” he said to me. “Your mother has been so worried, we both have…”

He stopped talking when he saw Orla and Kadmos hugging. He lifted a hand as if to point and ask who this handsome, strapping man was hugging his wife, but his hand dropped to his side.

“Tom, that’s Kadmos,” I said quickly.

His eyes went wide. “Kadmos?”

Orla pulled back from Kadmos with tears streaming down her face. “Tom, yes, this is Kadmos. Kadmos, this is my husband, Tom.”

Kadmos smiled, rushing forward to shake Tom’s hand. Kadmos flashed a smile between us both. “I’ve heard such good things about you, Tom. And I’m grateful to you for keeping Orla happy, for helping her rebuild her life.”

Tom smiled. “Orla made it easy. It’s great to meet you too, Kadmos. I guess I’d better throw something really good on the grill…I wasn’t expecting guests!”

The others stepped forward. “We’ll help!”

I smiled at Adair, Marius, Rishika, and Tabitha. They’d been hanging back, obviously wanting to give Kadmos and Orla and me some space for our reunion.

“Thanks, guys,” I said.

“And I’ll definitely take you up on that help,” Tom said, leading them inside.

Kadmos turned back to Orla. “How are you?”

She laughed through tears that were freely flowing. “I’m stunned. But then maybe I shouldn’t be?” She glanced at me. “This explains why my daughter never gave up hope that you were alive. And then when I heard through the trees that there was a chance you were alive…well…Artemis insisted on going to look for you.”

I was crying now, too. Seeing them together was special, something I wasn’t sure I would ever see…and to think that it was happening, that I’d made it happen, that I was a part of reuniting them after all this time…well, it was a lot. But it was good.

Orla paused and looked down at the ground. “Even when everyone else thought you were dead, Artemis didn’t give up. She never stopped believing.” She met Kadmos’s eyes again. “You know, she’s a lot like you. And I’ve never been prouder of her than I am right now.”

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A while later—after an unexpected and chilly backyard barbecue full of laughter and lots of catching up, everyone was gathered around the dinner table enjoying Tom’s delicious cooking.

I was still stunned, and I kept one hand on Kadmos’s arm as if I was afraid that if I let go, he might vanish.

“It may be a little too soon to ask, but what are you planning to do now, Kadmos?” Adair asked.

Kadmos sat back in his chair, lost in thought. When he leaned forward again, he didn’t seem troubled, and I was happy for that.

“I suppose it’s time for me to return to the court. Reclaim my position and make sure that peace between the Light and Dark Fae remains. And that means making sure the Winding Thorn is destroyed.”

He knew as well as we all did that there were many more where the ones who’d attacked us had come from. My father had made good progress in snuffing out one cell, but there were surely others, and they would be mobilizing once they realized what Kadmos had done.

“I don’t suppose you’d like to join me, brother?” Kadmos asked Adair with an easy confidence.

“I’m glad to help,” Adair said. “But once you reestablish yourself in the court, I’m not getting drawn back into that world again. I did too much work to untangle myself from it. All of that’s behind me.”

Kadmos turned to me. “And what about you, daughter? What are you thinking? What’s next?”

I was intrigued by the question, and I realized at that moment that I hadn’t thought too much about what would happen *after* I found my father. I’d been so consumed with the overwhelming task of it that maybe a part of me couldn’t even see beyond the mission itself.

I had my family now. There was so much I wanted to do and now so much that I *could* do. I could learn from my father, spend time with him, get to know him. I had a huge family now…Cali, Orla, Tom, Kadmos…Rishika and Marius. Then there was the entire Redwood pack back in Oregon.

I felt so good. I’d started out with nothing, just a bounty hunter for the Kollector just trying to survive…a servant, a slave…and now I was surrounded by more love than I knew what to do with.

*Can I really be this lucky?*

Rishika covered my hand with hers. “Are you crying?”

I nudged her as I sniffled. “Way to call me out. And anyway, only a little. I’m just so…happy!”

Marius put a hand on my back just as my mother called my name.

“Artemis, what are you thinking? Are you going to return to the Fae world with your father?”

I looked around at my family and allowed myself to bask in the warmth of having them around me. It felt like nothing I’d ever experienced before.

“I’ll probably go back,” I said. “But before that, I think I’ll go check in on Cali and see what the hell she’s been up to.”

“I think that’s a marvelous idea,” Orla said.

Tears were welling up again, and I let them fall. They were tears of happiness, and I deserved it. We all did.

**Episode 5837**

**Greyson**

Kendall picked up her drink and downed it in one gulp before flagging down the bartender again.

“If I thought you were going to need an entire fifth to yourself, I wouldn’t have brought it up,” I said, wanting to break the tension. Needing to. “I didn’t mean to put you on the spot.”

Kendall gave me a wary look. “Greyson, I need to know something first, and I need you to be honest. You do know how to be honest, don’t you? That is something the Evers brothers know how to do?”

I leaned back like she’d struck me. “What kind of question is that? Of course I know how to be honest.”

“Good, because I need to know. Are you asking me that because you’re sad and lonely? Is this a rebound thing? I mean you literally just broke up with Cali.”

I sighed and slumped a little. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“Come on, seriously, Grey. I need to know. It’s important to me.” The bartender brought her drink, and Kendall sipped it, giving me a pointed look. “I’ve had my share of rebounders. And it’s not that I discriminate, but…I’m not sure I want to get entangled in this particular…snare.”

I sighed and looked down at my glass. “Does this feel like a rebound to you? We’ve been fighting this for weeks.”

She nodded and looked down, too. Suddenly we were both very interested in the glasses in front of us. It was safer territory than looking at each other.

“I know,” she said quietly. “Yet…here we are.”

“Here we are.”

“So what are you going to do? Do you know yet?” she asked me.

I was thrown. “About us? Well…I guess I’m still trying to work all that out. I’m not even sure we should *do* anything. I’m only trying to figure out—”

“No, Grey. I mean, where are you going to go now? Obviously you’re not going back to the pack house…unless you’re into painful, mind-numbing awkwardness.”

“I’m not.” I shrugged, thinking. “I guess I’ll go to Portland. I’ve got a place there.”

Kendall nodded. “I know.”

I snapped my head up to look at her. “How do you know that?”

She rattled off the address and threw in a few of my past residences for good measure. “Let’s not forget who I work for,” she said. “Knowing things is part of the job. A requirement.”

“So you’ve been spying on me?”

She raised a brow, and even that made my wolf react. I was a goner.

“Are you really asking me that? I know a lot about you, Greyson Evers, former Redwood pack Alpha, except where the hell you’re planning to go.” She leaned close. “Or what’s really going on in that pretty head of yours.”

“So you think I’m pretty?” I grunted. She smirked and rolled her eyes.

Truthfully, I should have been annoyed that she knew more about me than I’d told her, but somehow, it didn’t really bother me all that much.

“I already told you, I’ll probably head to Portland.”

“Tonight? Nah. I won’t hear of it. You can crash on my couch. Go to Portland in the morning. What do you say?”

A few minutes later, I was on my bike riding side by side with Kendall. It was almost like running through the woods in wolf form. I felt a kinship with her—or rather I was allowing myself to feel a closeness that had always been there, creeping under the surface of every interaction.

I had no regrets about ignoring those feelings before—there’d been no room for them when I was with Cali. I loved Cali, and I loved her hard…always would…and there’d been no place for Kendall in my thoughts while I was with her.

But now that I had permission, now that it wasn’t wrong, and I was free to explore my other mate connection…well…it felt good to be with Kendall like this. I wasn’t ashamed to admit it.

I couldn’t stop stealing glances at her, admiring the way her hair blew out from under her helmet. That alone scared me. Cali had been the only woman I ever wanted to admire or even wanted to look at for so long that it felt…disorienting to look at another woman that way.

Part of me wondered if I should just slow this bike down, fall back, and turn away before she noticed.

*This could be a big mistake. Am I ready for…sleeping on another woman’s couch?*

When we’d spoken about exploring this…thing between us, she’d admitted that there was something, but it also hadn’t seemed like she was open to talking about it. And then she’d invited me back to her place.

And I’d accepted.

But only to crash on her couch. Only for one night.

First thing tomorrow morning, I was going to head to Portland and figure out my next moves.

We arrived at her apartment, and it brought back memories of the time I’d pretended to be her boyfriend when that tattooed guy had come to pay a visit. Looking back at it now…I could admit my motives. Jealousy. I’d been jealous. Simple as that.

She led me upstairs and opened the door. “Sorry, don’t judge me, the place is a little messy. Things have been hectic, if you haven’t noticed.”

I stepped in, and it wasn’t messy, it just looked lived-in. She tossed her helmet on the couch and flipped on a light as she went into the kitchen.

“Would you like a drink?”

I nodded wordlessly and sat down at the bar that bordered her kitchen. I watched her pour us each a glass and tried to orient myself to where I was and who I was with.

The apartment smelled of her, and it was driving my wolf mad.

She handed me my drink, and our fingers brushed. It was a fleeting touch, barely anything at all, but I noticed the flash in her eyes and the way she avoided my gaze in the seconds after it happened.

She leaned against the counter, finally fixing me to the spot with those eyes of hers.

“So…Portland. Tomorrow. Then what?”

“Don’t know yet,” I said, licking my lips and savoring the taste of the whiskey. It was good stuff. “I have some council stuff to figure out.”

She shook her head and winced a little before saying, “I don’t know if Portland’s a good idea.”

I cocked my head to the side, studying her. “Really? Why not?”

“You asked me about us, right? You asked if we should try…us. Portland is a good ride away. Going to be hard to try much of anything with that much distance between us.”

Her voice took on a serious tone, like she was talking business and sorting through the details for herself as much as for my sake.

“I’m still assigned to this area, and then there’s my MIB cover as the college administrator. It’s a lot of work to keep up…”

I was half listening. My wolf was screaming. It was howling. It was champing at the bit. I couldn’t take my eyes off her ass. That was the problem.

*Wow. You’re a piece of work, Greyson. You just broke things off with Cali and already you’re drinking her in like those glasses of whiskey at the bar.*

But even when I forced myself to look away, my eyes were drawn right back to her. I knew what was going on, and I knew it well. I’d felt this pull before. The mate bond—the one both of us had tried so hard to deny, the one she’d insisted she’d rejected—had me in the palm of its hand.

It was as if it had been unleashed and was now free to wreak havoc and cause all kinds of trouble. And there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that this was going to be a hell of a lot of trouble.

But I couldn’t keep fighting it. The last few days had been long and had taken so much out of me. My willpower was at an all-time low. I felt helpless to resist it.

She’d stopped talking and was giving me a knowing look. She’d caught me eyeing her. She put her drink down and approached me.

“You know I’m cursed, right? I told you all about it, so…”

“You’re not cursed, Kendall, stop it.”

“Greyson, you don’t know that.” I got up and closed the distance between us. “I guess there’s only one way to find out for sure.”

I was slow, deliberate as I reached out to cup her cheek. Her breath hitched, and I felt like everything was moving in slow motion.

It was just us. We were all alone. There was nothing and no one to stop us.

I started leaning toward her, still moving slow, giving both of us ample time and opportunity to put a stop to this.

We didn’t. Maybe we couldn’t.

And then my lips met hers, and my wolf finally calmed the fuck down.

**Episode 5838**

**Greyson**

The kiss was building, heat blooming between us exploding into a raging inferno inside of me. Kissing Kendall was…different. But it was good. Really good.

Too fucking good.

And…*fuck*. If I was a bad person for doing this after everything that had happened today then, dammit, I was a fucking monster. But I couldn’t deny how it felt kissing her. It felt inevitable.

Fated.

My wolf’s calm was short-lived because right now it was raging, surging, excited that I was listening to it while it begged for more. I realized then that my wolf was far more vocal right now than it had ever been with Cali. I wondered why that was, but when Kendall stuck her tongue in my mouth, I stopped wondering.

From there, all thoughts about what I was doing, why, the right and wrong of it…all of it slipped away. Nothing mattered except this woman in front of me, this woman whose blazing hot body was pressed tightly against mine like it belonged there—like we’d been cut from the same cloth.

The heat was building, threatening to scorch us right through if we weren’t careful…and I had been careful with Kendall at first, but that time was long gone and now I was running my hands all over her, quickly learning what parts of her reacted strongest to my touch.

I loved the sounds she was making, the way she moaned and pressed her body against mine like she couldn’t get close enough. She wrapped her arms around my neck, she pulled at my hair, she squeezed and slapped and raked at me like she wanted to mark me and couldn’t figure out the best way to do it.

She pushed me down onto the couch and climbed into my lap. It was no-holds-barred, and we were tearing at each other, devouring each other, indulging in something that had been simmering between us while we’d both been trying to convince ourselves that it would never come to be.

And we weren’t stopping—not even slowing down. The pace was quickening, and that inevitable feeling was taking over. We were doing this. Kendall tore away and looked me in the eyes, her lips swollen, breathing hard.

“Fuck, you are so beautiful,” I said.

And she was. Her purple eyes glowed like amethysts in the dim lighting pouring in through the window from the street. Her dark hair was tousled, and I could keep my eyes off her breasts, now barely contained by her tank top and heaving in time with her choppy breathing.

“I didn’t think this was possible,” she said. “To feel this way about someone.”

I pressed a hand to her heart. “We’re connected,” I said. “It’s the mate bond.”

“But…doesn’t it feel like more than that? Like something else?”

I nodded and said nothing because I wasn’t sure how to describe it, either, but it very much was…there was something about this woman. There always had been. I’d known it, hadn’t wanted to acknowledge it, had been afraid of it almost, and how could I not have been?

Now though, when I looked at her, I allowed myself to feel it. It was like an electric current and kissing her had amped it up to a level I’d never felt before.

I didn’t care anymore. Judgments from anyone would pale in comparison to how this felt.

I kissed her again, launched myself at her, dropped my hands around her waist and squeezed as I anchored her hips against mine.

My entire body lit up, head to toe I came alive in a new way that made my head spin, and all the while I was taking over, dominating the kiss—asserting myself with this strong woman who fought as well as she kissed, as well as she touched me. I spiraled my tongue into her mouth and tasted her, moaned against her lips and shuddered at the way she was slowly revolving her hips, like she was doing it without even realizing it.

“*Grey*,” she hissed against my lips. “You have no idea how hard it’s been—”

“Hard? I think I have an idea.” I pivoted my hips up into the soft heat between her legs to share the message, to show her how good this felt.

“Fuck.” She pulled away, throwing her hair back and laughing. “You don’t know what you do to me. When you even just look at me—”

“I have an idea.” I cupped one of her breasts through her shirt and squeezed, taking note of the hard pebble of her nipple showing through the fabric. I pulled her against me and buried my face in her neck, kissed and licked her, inhaled her scent. “But tell me.”

“You make me wet,” she said.

“How wet?” I kissed her before she could speak. I sucked her tongue. I gripped her ass and squeezed it. I smacked it with both hands, and she moaned.

“Soaking wet,” she said between kisses. “Wet enough to fuck.”

“Fucking hell, Kendall.”

She pushed me back against the couch and continued grinding against me while she took back that control, nibbling and sucking at my lips, moaning and saying my name before dragging her lips to my ear and telling me things that made me want to pin her to the couch and skip to the best part.

“I’ve thought about this,” she said.

“How? How did you think about me? What did I do?”

“You were naked, for starters.”

“Then we better work on that.”

In one swift motion, she ripped her tank top up over her head, revealing her beautiful, heavy breasts. I was at a loss for words. She laughed at me.

“Close your mouth, you’re drooling.”

I snapped my mouth closed, enthralled by the full view of her snake tattoo that curved up to her collarbone. I licked my finger and pressed it against her skin, traced the tattoo whenever it went, and it went to some very mind-blowing places.

Just as I took one of her hard, sweet nipples into my mouth, she pushed me back and yanked my shirt over my head. Now it was her turn to drool.

It felt good, seeing her look at me like that. Like she wanted to swallow me whole.

“Fuck,” she breathed. “You look so fucking good. I mean…are you even real?”

I smiled and laced my fingers behind my head, letting her drink me in. She splayed her hands on my chest and took her time running her hands over the ripples of my chest, my abdomen, played her hands at the waistband of my jeans and popped the button open.

I let out a big breath, and it felt like some kind of release, acceptance and excitement that this was where things were going—and that she was obviously as eager about it all as I was.

She leaned forward, her hair brushing my chest as she kissed me all over. Then she reared back, and I palmed her breasts, pushed them together, leaned forward to lather them with my tongue and cover every exposed inch of her flesh with kisses.

“Should we take this to your room?” I asked her. Then I picked her up, and she yelped and wrapped her legs around my waist. Her laugh lit up the air, throaty and beautiful. I loved how she felt, clinging to me, pressing her breasts against my chest.

“Grey, what are you doing?” she shrieked. But she was still laughing as I walked her to her bedroom.

“It’s just…I’ve never seen your bedroom before.”

Then I grinned mischievously as I threw her on the bed. I straightened and took a long look around. It was pretty bare, but I noticed a few photos propped on her dresser. I went over to look at them.

One was of Kendall and a young kid. The picture wasn’t old, had maybe been taken only a few years ago. Next to that was a picture of a family and Kendall and another person with a few more young kids.

I heard the bed squeak, and then she was behind me, sliding her hands over my shoulders as I leaned closer to get a better look.

“My parents and my brother Emory. He’s in college.”

I turned back to look at her. “I want to meet him one day.”

“Maybe,” she said, batting her eyelashes, clearly flirting with me. She reached past me and slammed the photos face down. “But if it’s all the same to you, I don’t want to think about my family right now.”

I turned around to face her and walked her back toward the bed until she fell back onto it. “No? Then what do you want to think about?”

She rolled over onto her stomach and slid her jeans off, arching her back as she revealed a black thong. A groan slipped from my lips and I rubbed myself through my jeans, unable to help it.

She tossed her jeans at me and then beckoned me closer. “Come on, Grey. Join me.”

**Episode 5839**

**Greyson**

To put it plainly, Kendall looked good enough to eat. So good that I licked my lips as I touched the hot cleft between her legs, still covered by the thin lacy fabric of her thong. She hadn’t lied about how wet she was. Her panties were soaked through, and I was painfully turned on, myself.

It was crazy.

My wolf was howling, my blood was pumping south. I wanted this woman—badly—and feeling wanted by her, too…it was like I was flying. I put just a knee on the edge of the bed and teased her.

“If you want me to join you, Kendall, you better make some room for me.” Her eyes dropped down to where I was gripping myself through my pants, the imprint of my cock standing out stark relief.

She bit her bottom lip and spread her legs wide. “Done.”

I couldn’t hold back anymore, and there was no reason to. I dropped my pants around my ankles and then slid my boxers off next, and she let out a hungry-sounding moan when I stood up straight and she finally laid eyes on all of me.

“Greyson,” she whispered. She propped herself up on the bed and looked me up and down, and I waited, letting her take me in. Her eyes felt like a caress, and just before her fingers could creep between her legs to touch herself, I was upon her.

My wolf had quieted again because I’d satisfied it…or was about to. I kissed her hard, and when she tried to run her hand down my back, I grabbed her wrists and pinned them to bed with a roughness that made her whimper in pleasure.

The heat of her center was hot against my abdomen, and my shaft was lying between her legs, sandwiched between the smooth expanse of her thighs. Her body arched against mine, and she writhed as I kissed her slowly, teasing her. She wanted me. She was pivoting her hips, searching for me, trying to catch me at her opening so that she could take me inside of her, but I wasn’t making it easy for her.

Not only did I want to build the anticipation, but I was…nervous. Not nervous about having sex with her, at least not entirely. I was afraid of how good it was going to be. I wanted to savor these moments before everything changed, these last precious few seconds before we joined and there was no turning back.

“Please,” she was whispering against my lips. “Now. I want you now. *Please*.”

“Then you’ll have me.”

With that, I lifted my hips, allowed my tip to search out her opening, and then without another second of hesitation, I pressed at her opening and then slid into her searing hot warmth.

I faltered for a second. My elbows gave out, weakened by pleasure, and I landed on top of her with a silent, sharp intake of breath. It felt good. No, that wasn’t even close to how to describe it. She felt incredible.

“Fuck—Greyson!” It was a scream, and I could tell that it had slipped out, that my penetration had pulled it from her lips without her meaning for it to happen.

She wrapped her shaking legs around my waist and opened her eyes to look right into mine. It was too much, the beauty of her stare, the tight, slick feeling of her around me, pulling me in as she rocked her hips, hungry for me to plunge deeper.

I did. And then I retreated and plunged again. It was slow, hard, deliberate. Each time I bottomed out, each time I entered her completely, her breasts shook, and she moaned my name. It was amazing. It was driving me crazy.

The slow rock didn’t last long. Soon I was rolling against her, moving fast, banging against her body with a force that she spurred on with soft, hungry requests whispered in my ears.

“Harder Grey. Yes. Just like that. God. Oh my god. Fuck. Please. *Yes*. My god, Greyson. Fuck. Oh—right there. How…how do you feel this good?”

She spread her legs wide and aimed her toes at the ceiling, rocking her hips up to meet my every thrust until we were moving like a well-oiled machine, in perfect sync, and we didn’t take our eyes off each other once. We didn’t kiss, either. We were too busy moving, straining, slamming, scrambling to hold on to each other as our movements grew so wild it felt like we were going to break the bed in two.

I picked her up and slammed her against the headboard. She laughed and raked her hands down my back with a loud, “Fuck me harder, Grey. I need it. I need you.”

There was no other way to put it. I fucked her harder. I pinned her against the headboard with my body while my hands gripped the bars, and I used them as leverage as I thrusted, pistoned, plunged and plundered and slammed against her until we were both screaming, moaning, and sometimes, laughing.

I felt her tighten and quiver around me, and I knew she was about to come. I pulled away, guided her onto her hands and knees, and entered her from behind. I kept up the same pace, fast and deep, and then she was coming, clawing at the bedsheets, pushing her ass back against me.

That sent me over the edge, and I was coming, my entire body seized by jolts of white-hot pleasure. Once again, I collapsed, driving us both down to the bed where we thrashed and bucked until the last of our climax finally released us from its grip.

As we both came down from what was maybe the best sex I’d ever had, Kendall snuggled into my arms.

“Is this okay?” she asked.

“More than okay,” I said. “Is it okay for you?”

She nodded against me as she traced the lines on my chest.

I could sense that something was up. “What is it? You good?”

“I’m afraid that…that this is the last time. Or that maybe the curse—”

I gently lifted her chin to kiss her. “You’re not cursed, Kendall King.”

She sighed into me and kissed me back. I broke the kiss so that I could look at her head-on, so that she could see my intentions in my eyes.

“And this isn’t the last time, either. I know you feel what I do. And…I want to be with my mate. I want to see where this goes between us.”

She was silent for a beat before saying, “What about Cali?”

“Cali…is going to be okay.” I took a deep breath. “That’s one thing I’m sure of.”

“Is she going to get back together with your brother?”

I felt a little hope in that. “Maybe,” I said. “Those two have had a lot of ups and downs.”

“Will it upset you if she does?”

I stopped for a moment to really think about that. I was surprised that I didn’t feel even a shred of jealousy at the thought of it.

“If she does, I’ll be happy for her. Happy for him.” I sighed, trying to find the right words, and even wanting to keep things on the light side seeing as we were lying together covered in each other’s sweat, basking in the glow of what we’d just shared. “Our breakup was hard, yes, but it was a long time coming.”

Kendall looked up at me. “Really?”

“Really. There was a lot of love, but it wasn’t perfect.”

“I’m not perfect,” Kendall said quietly.

“I don’t expect you to be. And don’t get me wrong, I have love for Cali, but…” I didn’t know how to end that sentence.

It was likely what we’d both felt earlier…that there was something here, and I couldn’t put words to it, but I didn’t want to get too deep into the Cali stuff, either. I reached down and lifted Kendall’s chin so that we could lock eyes.

“I want to explore this with you. And I’ll warn you, I’m not perfect either. I know it’s hard to believe.”

We both started laughing, and it broke the little bit of tension that had begun to form.

“I came here as a Rogue and kind of fell into the Redwood pack. Before that, I was so broken from my own pack after my horrible father. But I joined the Redwood as Alpha, and now I’m leaving again, but not as a Rogue. As something else—an Alpha to all packs, I guess? I’m still trying to make sense of it.”

I sat up, leaning against the headboard as the rush of the day’s events washed over me. “That doesn’t sound like the perfect path, does it?” I said.

“No, but it does sound like your perfect path,” she said.

I liked the way that sounded. “So sure, maybe it’s my path, and I’d like you to walk it with me…if you want to, that is.”

Kendall arched her body against me, her lips ghosting mine as she whispered, “I do. I really, really do.”

My wolf surged to life again, and at that moment I knew. I belonged with this woman here. There wasn’t a single doubt in my mind.

I kissed her again, hoping that she could feel my certainty in the way my lips captured hers. I knew it was in the early stages, and I knew that nothing about this would be simple, perfect, any of that, but somehow, I knew this was meant to be.

**Episode 5840**

I gasped as I took in the sight of a very naked Xavier. I’d seen him this way so many times that I’d lost count, but it still took my breath away every single time. He was flawless, carved from stone, and those blue eyes—just like the color of the wisp—were drinking me in, too.

“What are you doing all the way out here?” I asked.

Xavier took my hand and dusted me off. I’d scraped my knee when I fell, but I didn’t care about that. I looked up at him, liking the way his eyes roved over my body before he finally met my gaze.

“I needed to go for a run,” he said. “Needed some time to think, to process, and there’s no better way to do it than to shift and reconnect with nature…and myself.” He arched an eyebrow. “But you still haven’t told me what you’re doing out here alone.”

“I left Lucian’s wedding and spotted a wisp, and you know me…I followed it. Honestly, I think it was fate… Fate led us to each other, and not for the first time.”

The lightheadedness hit me again and I faltered, but Xavier was right there to catch me and fell against the solid mass of his body.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he steadied me. “You sure you’re not hurt? I saw you take quite the tumble. And now you’re out here talking about wisps and fate…”

“Xavier, you don’t get it. The only thing I’m sure of is that the wisp led me to you, to us. I think I understand it now—the *due destini* and everything we’ve been through. It’s all led up to this moment. We were forced apart, but fate brought us back together.”

I reached up and put my hands on his cheeks. “I want you, Xavier. And not despite Greyson. Not in spite of Ava. This is so far outside of any of that. Big Mac said something to me earlier—”

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“It was good,” I said, smirking. “She said to look in my heart, and that first loves tend to remain there. So, I did what she said, and I realized something.”

Xavier stepped closer. “What?”

“I realized that whenever I look into my heart, whenever I really stop and think about what it really wants, what feels right, I see you there. You’re my first love, and I want you to be my last love, too.”

“Cali,” Xavier whispered, lifting my chin. He was hesitating, waiting, hoping. “What are you saying?”

“I love you, Xavier Evers. So, I choose you. If you want to choose me, too.”

Xavier sucked in a breath, and when he spoke again, I was surprised to hear the wealth of emotion in his voice. That wasn’t like Xavier at all. He was all composure. Eternally cool—until he his hot-headed nature came out. But not right now.

“The *due destini*?” he choked out. “You’re doing it? You’re *choosing*? Cali—”

I nodded. “Yes, but I need you to say that you want me, too. Because if I’m wrong, if I’ve misread you and this entire situation, well… I don’t want to burden you, Xavier. I don’t want to force you into something—”

He pressed a finger to my lips, silencing me. A second later, his lips replaced his finger, and he was kissing me softly, gently, wrapping his arms around me and drawing me tightly against him.

He moved his lips to my ear and said, “I want you, Caliana Rose Hart. I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again, I want you. I’ve always wanted you from the moment I saw you, even if it didn’t seem like it at first. I love you—I fucking love you with every ounce of my being. You’re part of me, the part I was always missing until I met you.”

He went quiet, and I didn’t move. I didn’t want to break the moment, and I wanted to give him the room he needed to express himself. I’d been waiting so long to hear his words of assurance, to know that he’d made his own choice.

“You’re everything to me, Cali. I’ve known for so long that you’re more than my mate, more than my partner, more than my girlfriend—you’re all those things, but you’re my *life*, too.”

Warm tears sprung into my eyes. What he was saying was so beautiful and so genuine that I was overcome with happiness. I hadn’t realized how much I needed to hear him say these things.

I wasn’t sure how to put an end to the *due destini* officially. It wasn’t like these kinds of things came with an instruction manual. Maybe all it needed was the knowledge of my choice clean and clear in my heart, but just in case that wasn’t enough, I said a few words, too.

“I, Caliana Hart, hereby declare that I choose Xavier Evers to be my mate, to be my everything.”

Xavier pulled back to look at me with the smallest smile on his lips. “Really? You declare? Is that it? Is that how it’s done?” His smile widened. How I would never get over seeing him be happy.

“I have no idea,” I said, smiling and holding back a giggle. “I just wanted to make it official without leaving any loose ends.”

Xavier laughed. “Got it, and I agree. But I think you should say it again.”

“What?”

“Come on, say it again. I want to hear it.”

I laughed. “Are you serious?”

Xavier’s eyes darkened as he nodded. “I’m dead serious.”

I looked him in the eyes. “Xavier Evers, I choose you forever.”

As soon as the words escaped my lips, a strange vibration shook my body. A humming sound filled the air, and the ground began quaking under our feet as the trees around us swirled. I clung to Xavier, confused, but not frightened.

“Do you feel that?” I said, looking around.

Xavier laughed. “Oh yeah, I feel it.”

He laughed as we held each other tighter, riding out the strange quake together. A plume of magic rose from the ground and swirled around us, and suddenly I felt lighter than air.

If Xavier wasn’t holding me down, I would have drifted up into the sky. I gasped, a little sliver of fear finally developing.

“Do you think…”

I was too afraid to say it out loud. But then just like that the fear dissipated, replaced by the feeling of wondering if this was all too good to be true.

Finally, I let the words escape my lips. “Do you think the *due destini* is finally going away?”

Xavier nodded, his eyes sparkling. “I think that’s exactly what’s happening. It better be. You chose me. Yeah?”

I nodded, smiling so hard my cheeks were starting to hurt. “Yeah. I did.”

It felt final. Concrete. I knew that the decision had been made and marked into the *due destini*. I felt it deep in my gut…that it had finally ended. That we were free. All of us.

“It’s over,” Xavier said, sounding positively gleeful. “It’s finally fucking done.”

And then it began to rain, surprising both of us. I looked up to see that the sky was visible through the tops of the trees. I saw the moon, bright and shining, but something was off.

“Seriously? Where is the rain coming from?” I asked. It isn’t cold either…it was warm. Soothing. I looked back down to see what he thought of it, but he wasn’t paying attention to the rain or the sky. He was looking at me in a way that made my heart skip.

*I made the right choice, and now I feel so much lighter. All this time I didn’t realize the heaviness I felt. I’d gotten used to it, I think.*

As the rain intensified, Xavier pulled me closer, touching his forehead against mine. The rain was soaking us, running down our faces. As I looked up at Xavier, I couldn’t quite tell if what I saw on his face were raindrops…or tears.

“I love you, Xavier Evers!” I shouted above the sound of the rain. “When I look into the future, when I look into my heart, what I want for the rest of my life is you. But only if you want me, too. Only if you choose me same as I choose you.”

An almost pained expression passed across Xavier’s face. “I love you too, Caliana Hart. You are a part of me, and I’m a part of you. You’re more to me than my mate, and I want to love you for the rest of my goddamn life. I want to be a better man day in and day out…for *you*. Cali, I—”

I kissed him, cutting him off mid sentence. When he pulled away, he was beaming.

“I’ll choose you every single fucking day. Every morning when we wake up in bed together, I’ll look over, kiss you, and know that I’m the luckiest man in the entire world.”

I let out a happy sob and choked out one more, “I love you, Xavier.”

“I love you, Cali. So much.”

This time when we kissed, it felt like the world stopped, but my pulse sped up. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the feel of his hands on me, the strength and protection and devotion of his arms wrapped around me.

I reached up to touch his face as our tongues met and mingled, as our lips moved in tandem. I ran my hands through his rain slicked hair, enjoying the feel of him as I claimed him once and for all, mind body and soul, my perfect man, my perfect choice.

**Episode 5841**

***Two Years Later***

I’d barely come up for air before Xavier wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me back down, covering my body with his while bathing my neck in breathy kisses. I supposed we had time for one more round—and this was the perfect way to take my mind off the stress of the crazy day ahead.

He buried his nose in my hair as he clasped one hand loosely around my neck. “You always smell so damn good, Cali.” He kissed my neck and moaned. “I’m addicted to you. I can admit it.”

I twisted around to kiss him, loving how attentive he always was. It was almost like he could read my mind—much in the same way I could read his. We knew each other so well, and that meant I knew pressing my ass against him would make him moan and reply by grinding his hips against me so that I could feel his arousal.

I yelped and then laughed, and Xavier rolled me onto my back and pinned my arms to the bed. “You’re mine, and I’m never letting you go,” he whispered into the crook of my neck. And then he was kissing me again and nudging my knees apart so that he could slot his muscular, tall body between my legs.

“Right back at you,” I said, breathless, relishing the feeling of being pinned beneath him and shuddering with pleasure.

He released my arms and slowly began making his way down my body, applying soft, teasing kisses as he went. By the time his lips found my center, his name was a chanted breath on my lips, and when I felt his tongue nudging my arousal to a fever pitch, I gritted my teeth to stifle a moan.

His strong hands levered my legs open wide so that he could lap at me. He flattened his tongue against my clit before sliding it down to my opening and tasting me there. It was all I could do not to cry out at the top of my lungs, and if he kept this up, I wasn’t going to be able to stop myself.

It wasn’t lost on me that our passion was through the roof now that we could focus wholly and entirely on each other, and so when Xavier pulled back, took himself in his hand and entered me, I gave up on being demure and called out his name.

“That feels good, I take it?” Xavier said with an evil grin. He ran his hands up and down my thighs, caressing me while his hips pivoted against mine, driving himself in deep before retreating achingly slowly only to repeat the movement all over again until he found a steady, torturous rhythm.

Just before I felt the warm tingle of release, he pinned my wrists to the bed and lay down on top of me. I gasped as he slid in so deeply my entire body shook with pleasure. Before I could cry out again, he captured my lips, spiraled his tongue into my mouth, and rolled his hips against me in smooth, fluid thrusts that took my breath away.

He ended the kiss and gazed deep into my eyes. I met his stare head-on, and we stayed that way, watching each other closely, getting off as much on our own pleasure as we were with the proof of it showing on the other’s face.

“Ride me,” Xavier grunted, rolling over his back and quickly pulling me into position so that I was straddling him.

He ran his hands through my hair as I hovered over him. I took him in my hands and slowly worked my hands up and down his shaft until he was rock hard against my palm. Then as he whispered dirty compliments and squeezed my breasts, I lowered myself down onto him, taking him into me completely.

Shivers overtook me, and I collapsed on top of him, too seized by the pleasure of his penetration to move just yet. When I finally started to move my hips up and down, I felt Xavier tense beneath me.

“You keep that up, I’m going to come, baby,” he said when I began to increase my pace.

“Then come,” I gasped, realizing then that I wouldn’t be far behind him.

“Not until you do,” he said. He grabbed my hips and lifted me up and down his shaft, driving his hips up into me every time I came down.

My climax hit me hard, and I lurched forward to bury my screams in a pillow—I couldn’t bear the thought of my parents hearing us.

Xavier gripped my ass and held me tightly against him as he came, and then I collapsed beside him, panting, loving the huge smile on his face.

I shoved him once I’d caught my breath. “Now, you actually *have* to go get ready. And you can’t see me again until it’s time!”

He grinned at me. “But I *want* to see you.” He started to pull the sheet down and I playfully slapped his hand away.

“Are you seriously trying to make us late for our own wedding?!” I demanded.

“I’m considering it.”

I glared at him. “You know that’s bad luck! Go, please! Before I change my mind.”

Xavier rolled his eyes before planting a hard kiss on my lips. He took my hand and held it up so that my engagement ring caught the light. It was a beautiful pear-shaped diamond with two delicate, smaller diamonds further down on the gold band. “I never get tired of seeing this on your finger.”

I kissed him. “I don’t, either…though it’s so big I’ve nearly poked my eye out with it a few times.”

“Glad I didn’t go bigger, then,” he said. He got up and stepped into his clothes. “See you soon.” Then, after giving me one more kiss, he left.

I splayed out on my back in the bed and looked at the ceiling, my body still buzzing from the afterglow. With a happy sigh, I finally pushed myself out of bed and hustled into the shower.

A little while later, I was in the bedroom drying off when I heard a knock on my door. “Come in!” I called out, wrapping my silk monogrammed robe tightly around me.

I broke into a huge smile when my mother and Artemis came in with massive smiles of their own.

“We’re here to help you get ready,” Artemis said. She had a dress bag in hand, and she held it up in front of me, beaming.

“Let’s do this,” I said, excitement making my voice shake just a little. “I can’t believe it’s my actual wedding day!”

As Artemis was helping me into the dress, she paused and ran her finger along the Luna mark on my shoulder. I twisted around to get a look at it in the mirror while Artemis and my mother watched.

“It hurt like hell,” I said. “But I’m proud of it.”

“You should be,” Artemis said.

Mom was teary eyed as she smoothed her hands over my shoulders, standing back a little to admire the dress—the same dress she’d worn when she married my father. “You look stunning, Cali. Just so, so beautiful.”

Artemis had her arms crossed over her chest as she shook her head in wonder. “Wow. You look amazing. Xavier’s going to lose his mind when he sees you.”

“You can say that again,” Mom said. “Artemis, I’m so sorry I don’t have the dress I wore when I married your father.”

Artemis shrugged. “No big deal. I’m in no rush to get married again, believe me. I’m just happy to be divorced from Kastian, and I doubt that Rishika or Marius will be pushing for marriage anytime soon…I hope. If anyone it’ll be Marius and I’ll have to reel him in.”

I smiled at my sister, happy to have her by my side. She’d found her father, just like she’d set out to, and she had not one but two people who loved and cared for her.

I knew that the adjustment of having Kadmos back in her life had been difficult. He had a lot to take care of in the Fae world and had started by retrieving his family’s title and relieving Adair and Artemis in the process.

I’d been concerned that Kadmos’s return would cause some problems for Mom and Dad, but they’d been taking the changes day by day. While it was clear that my mother loved my father, her feelings about having Kadmos back were powerful.

*I know all too well how it feels to have powerful love for two people at once.*

Mom wiped away her tears and hugged Artemis and me close. “I love you both so much. And I’m so proud of you.”

“I love you both, too,” I said, choking back tears. “And I’m so moved that everyone I love and care about is going to be here.”

Mom suddenly pulled away. “Oh, I must go check on your father, Cali. He’s been blubbering like a baby all morning.”

I teared up thinking about my father crying, but at least they were happy tears.

“Oh no, don’t you start crying now. Suck it up. You’ll get raccoon eyes!” Artemis said.

Mom took one last look at me before she left. “Look at you. My baby is all grown up. You got your degree; you’re marrying your mate…” She began sobbing.

Artemis pulled her into a hug. “You’re going to ruin your makeup too, Mom. Everybody has got to stop crying or I’m going to cry too!”

All three of us were crying and laughing when Lola came walking in.

“What happened?” she gasped. “I swear, if Xavier got cold, feet I’ll rip him apart—”

“No, these are tears of joy,” I said.

“Oh…thank goodness!” Lola said. She stood back and whistled. “Wow, you look like a total fox in that dress.” And then she was crying, too—and that triggered more crying and more laughter.

I looked around, in disbelief that it was all really happening.

*This is it. It’s all led up to this moment.*

I was finally about to marry the man I loved more than anything in the entire world.

**Episode 5842**

**Xavier**

“Quit messing with my bow tie,” I snapped, slapping Colton’s hand away.

“It’s crooked,” Colton said, making another grab for it.

“It’s fine. Leave it alone.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re acting like a little bitch, Xavier, you know that?”

I shook my head. “Was I as big a pain in the ass when you got married?”

“You were worse,” Colton snorted. He turned and grabbed my suit jacket off the back of a chair and held it out for me. “I still think you should have gone for the powder blue tux. It would have made a statement.”

“Not a chance,” I said firmly. “Cali would have sent me back to get the black one. She’s had an idea of what this wedding was going to look like in her head for a long time, and she wanted it to be perfect.”

“Then she shouldn’t be marrying you, bro,” Colton laughed as he helped me on with the jacket. “You’re about as perfect as a busted clock.”

“Look who’s talking,” I muttered, shrugging into the jacket.

Colton pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked the time. “Where the hell’s Greyson?”

I shrugged. “Cut him some slack. You should know better than anyone that he needs more time now.”

“Yeah…” Colton paused, thinking. “It’s hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“What?” I asked, glancing into the mirror as I straightened my jacket. “That I’m getting married?”

“Yeah. I mean, I hope you’re going to give me props for making this all happen. If it weren’t for my devious plan all those years ago, you’d probably still be a brooding, wolf-less, pity boy.”

I shook my head. “Maybe, but I’d still have that four hundred grand in my bank account.”

Colton scoffed. “Give me a break. You can afford it. Anyway, are you telling me Cali wasn’t worth it?”

My hands froze as I adjusted the bow tie. “I’d give up every penny I have for her,” I said in a low growl.

Behind me, Colton grinned. “True love knows no limits.”

The door of the bedroom burst open and Cali’s dad, Tom, burst in. “How is everything?” he asked, wiping tears from his eyes. “Orla put me in charge of making sure you stayed on schedule, Xavier.”

I smiled as I put an arm around his shoulders. “You don’t need to worry about me, Tom. Nothing is going to keep me from marrying your daughter today.”

Tears filled his eyes again as he nodded. “I’m happy, you know, despite this.” He gestured to his tears. “It’s just that Cali is my baby girl. And I’m both sad because she’s really starting a life of her own, and happy because she’s so happy to be marrying you—”

“Hey, Tom, I heard dinner’s going to be some kind of hibachi chicken situation,” Colton cut in. “Is that just a rumor or what?”

I shot a death glare at Colton as Maya stepped into the doorway.

“Hey, boys, Greyson just got here.”

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**Greyson**

As I pulled the car to a stop and looked up at the Redwood pack house, it looked like it was already a madhouse inside.

I knew the agenda for the day, and that included me getting ready with Xavier and Colton, and maybe helping with some kind of an arch that Lucian apparently had insisted on bringing. All I knew was that there were hundreds of flowers involved and it seemed obnoxiously over the top. Classic Lucian.

I’d been trying to field the dozens of text threads about the wedding plans alongside my normal flood of council business for weeks. Just recently we’d had a situation with a pack in Arizona, close to the Aspen pack, and I’d been trying to put that fire out for days.

I glanced down at my phone, scrolling quickly through the notifications of all the texts and calls I’d missed on the drive over.

Kendall reached over and took my hand. “Hey, you’re thinking too much again, Grey.”

I blew out a breath. “There’s kind of a lot to think about.”

“But today is about relaxing, and family, and—say it with me—”

“*Turning off the phone*,” we said in unison.

“I know, I know. You’re right,” I said, and turned the phone off.

“And if Lucian gives you any trouble about that damned arch thing, just show him Skye and he’ll melt.”

I laughed. “True. He’s been a total pushover ever since he and Elle had Lucia last year.” I shook my head. “I still can’t believe he named his daughter after himself.”

“I can,” Kendall said, snorting.

I watched her, mesmerized as I always was by their astonishing color. I still remember the feeling I’d had when I’d first met her. I couldn’t have known what she would come to mean to me, but I had felt—even then—that nothing would ever be the same.

I’d been right about that.

We both climbed out of the car. Kendall walked to the trunk while I opened the door of the backseat.

Nestled into a rear-facing car seat was a round-cheeked, pink and white angel. Only six weeks old, I still hadn’t completely gotten over the shock of fatherhood, and I was astonished every time I saw her.

Kendall was the most beautiful woman I had ever known, but hers was an almost fierce beauty, whereas Skye was the sweetest, softest baby I had ever seen. She was so small that Kendall and I had only taken her out in public a handful of times, but every time, strangers literally stopped us on the street to tell us how beautiful she was. I knew I was biased, but I couldn’t help but agree.

Skye was asleep, and as I reached down to unbuckle her, she stirred and frowned, her tiny face perturbed.

“*Hey*,” I said softly as I lifted her from the car seat, “it’s okay, sweetheart. I know it’s going to be a long day and you have a lot of people to meet, but they are going to *love* you.”

I didn’t know why, but the deep growl of my voice always calmed her. As I spoke her face relaxed again, and I tucked her easily into the crook of my arm.

Kendall slammed the trunk shut and stepped over to me. She handed me the diaper bag, which I slung over my shoulder. She draped the bag with our clothes for the wedding over her arm and took a step back, looking me up and down.

“If I had known how sexy this would all be, I would have made you a father a lot sooner,” she said with a smile. “You ready?”

“Absolutely,” I laughed.

Skye had fallen back asleep, and I looked down at her sleeping face—the way her chubby, dimpled hand rested against my arm. She looked so perfectly content, so certain she was safe, that it made my heart ache. I hadn’t known this kind of love was possible, or that it would ever be mine.

I reached for Kendall, slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her close. She still had some of the soft curves from pregnancy, and we fit together now in ways I never could have imagined. I had my daughter and my mate—I had my family. There had been times when I hadn’t known if that would ever happen for me. But here I was—and they were mine.

No matter what crazy stuff the day might bring, I had Kendall, and I had my daughter—I had my family.

I grinned down at Kendall, who was looking curiously up at me. “Let’s get this party started.”

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**Xavier**

“The tie is fine,” I snapped, slapping Colton’s hand away as I headed down the stairs. “Leave me alone, Greyson’s waiting.”

But as soon as I hit the bottom of the stairs, Torin appeared, putting his hand up to stop me.

“Not another step, Xavier,” he said. He gestured. “You’re only allowed to be on *this* side of the house today.”

“It’s *my* house, Torin,” I scoffed.

“Not today,” he said imperiously. “*Today* it’s a wedding venue, and you’re required to stay on *that* side,” he said, pointing. “Don’t make me tell Kevin to ban you from the house completely.”

I rolled my eyes. Ever since we had told Kevin about supernaturals, things had been interesting. But Kevin was a nice guy, at least.

Colton laughed, thinking Torin was joking, but Torin crossed his arms.

“I’m serious,” he said firmly. “You know the rules.”

“Why don’t we go to the study,” a deep voice suggested.

I looked over to see Greyson standing in the hallway, a tiny baby nestled into the crook of his massive arm.

Round-cheeked and dimpled, Greyson’s daughter was so beautiful, she almost didn’t look real.

I smiled at her, then glanced up at Greyson and shook my head. “You better get that kid’s DNA checked. There’s no way something so beautiful came from you.”

Greyson sighed. “The study?”

“You guys go ahead,” Colton said. “I gotta go check the twins. Mikah and Gabe have been watching them too much lately. Lyra keeps calling Gabe ‘Daddy,’ and I don’t need Orion starting too.”

I chuckled as Colton headed out, and Greyson and I headed into the study—under Torin’s watchful eye.

Inside, I carefully took Skye from Greyson’s arms. She blinked open her eyes, looking curious and alert.

“God, she really is beautiful,” I said, looking at the little one. Her eyes were stormy grey and seemed strangely wise as she looked at me. “She’s got your eyes,” I said, looking up at my brother.

Greyson smiled. “Yeah, thanks. I think she’s going to look like Kendall—”

“Lucky her,” I cracked.

Greyson smirked. “—but she came out with those grey eyes.” He leaned against the desk. “So, you ready for today?”

I tickled Skye under her chin, making her coo happily. “Greyson, I’ve been ready since the day I met Cali.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you’ve always made that clear. I’m really happy for you, Xavier. For you and Cali,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder.

“Thanks. That means a lot, man.” I had to speak around the lump in my throat, because, coming from Greyson, after everything we’d been through, I really meant it.

**Episode 5843**

**Xavier**

If I didn’t know any better, I would think I was trapped in some kind of dream…or an intense hallucination at the very least. Everything felt unreal even though I knew that this was my life, and it was turning out just like I’d pictured it from the moment I fell in love with Cali.

I was standing outside on the back porch of the pack house—one of the few areas Torin had allowed me to be—watching while Lucian ordered his Vanguards around. They were putting the finishing touches on our flower arch. He’d been so grateful to Big Mac for providing the beautiful arch for his wedding to Elle that he’d insisted on returning the gesture for Cali and me.

“Can you believe it? It actually looks…good,” I said to Greyson as he stepped out to join me.

Greyson stopped to admire Lucian’s handiwork. “You’re right. Someone must have taught Lucian a little restraint.”

“Maybe fatherhood calmed him down a little,” I said. “Gave him someone else to focus on rather than himself for once.”

“The only thing that’ll make that arch better is when you and Cali are standing under it,” Greyson said.

I eyed my brother, wondering if I’d heard him right. “What the fuck?”

“What?” Greyson said.

“That was just…really nice. Who are you and what have you done with my brother?”

Greyson chuckled. “It’s me, Xavier. I truly am happy. And I’m so glad I get to share this moment with you and Cali. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else right now.”

“Thanks, man. That means a lot.”

Greyson’s attention shifted to Skye as she groused and buried her face in her father’s chest.

“Someone’s hungry,” Greyson said. “I’d better find Kendall.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “See you out there.”

I felt so peaceful as I looked out of the back lawn, watching guests gather and chat amongst themselves. I didn’t move to join them just yet. I wanted to steal as much time alone as I could to think and bask in what was about to happen.

I saw Ava arriving with a tall, muscular guy covered in tattoos. She smiled at me as I left the safety of the porch to greet them. I hadn’t seen Ava in a while. She looked good. She looked happy, too. I guess being with a guy like James for a year and a half with no signs of stopping would do that to even the hardest of women like Ava. They’d met when Ava had had to go to California to get Knox out of some jam—I didn’t want to know the details then or now. But I was happy for her… Ava deserved to be happy.

“Xavier, always good to see you, man,” James said, extending a hand. We shook, and then gave each other a hug, patting each other on the back. We’d met a few times here and there before. “Looking good, too. Nice suit.”

“Yeah, you think so?” I asked.

Ava laughed. “He cleans up all right, I guess.”

Jamie laughed. “Congrats, man. We’ve been looking forward to today for a while. I’ll go grab us something to drink, babe,” he said, leaving to give Ava and me a chance to talk.

“Wow. You’ve been looking forward to today?” I asked, giving her a knowing look.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Yes, you dolt. I’m obviously looking forward to you making Cali an honest woman finally.” Where there once would’ve been bite behind it, there was amusement. A hint of something we’d put behind us long ago.

I glanced over at Jamie, who was getting two of the welcome glasses of champagne. “You and him good?”

Ava nodded, glancing back at James and stifling a beaming smile. “Yeah. We’re good. Really good. And if he wasn’t, I would have kicked his ass to the curb a long time ago.”

I snorted. “Wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“And actually, he’s moving into the pack house next month.”

I nodded, taking that in. “I’m surprised it took him so long,” I said.

“Well, unlike *some people*, he has a real job,” she teased.

“I guess I’ll be seeing a lot more of him then? Will he be coming with you to the alliance meetings?”

“Of course, if he can,” Ava said easily.

“Good,” I said, nodding as I trailed off. We were both silent for a moment when I said, “I just wanted to tell you, Ava, that you’re an amazing Alpha. I know we butted heads a little right in the beginning as we both…adjusted…but I think we’ve found our groove.”

“Finally,” Ava said with an eye roll. “We still know each other well, so that helps.”

“And it helps that I trust you wholeheartedly,” I said.

“It’s mutual,” Ava replied with a smile. “And thanks for saying it…not that I needed your assurance.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“But still, it’s nice. Thanks, X.”

“Any time,” I said, grinning.

She patted my arm. “And you do look really nice, Xavier. Congratulations.”

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**Cali**

Artemis took my hand, and the contact calmed my beating heart and helped slow my breathing.

“You ready, Cali?”

I nodded and took a breath. “Born ready.”

Artemis grinned at me as together, we left my room.

I had to admit I was nervous. I’d never been comfortable as the center of attention and had never been one to concern myself too much with how I looked…but as I stepped outside, everyone in the place was looking right at me.

Any worries I could have had about how I looked dissolved as I saw the looks of warmth and affection on everyone’s faces.

“Is this real?” I whispered to Artemis. “This is really happening, right?” I said.

Artemis smirked. “I’m pretty sure you’re not going to wake up and think, ‘Damn, I just had the strangest dream.’ Could you imagine, though? What kind of messed-up dream would all this have been?”

I laughed, which helped take the edge off some of my nervousness. Up ahead, I spotted Jay and Lola—my closest friend and Xavier’s closest friend standing together—ready to officiate our wedding. It seemed right that they should be the ones to join Xavier and me since they’d been by our sides through the winding path that had brought us to this moment. And Colton, of course, but I think everyone—even Colton—would’ve agreed that having him officiate would’ve been a mistake.

As Artemis led me toward Mom and Dad, I saw so many familiar, smiling faces. Dani, Tabitha and Adair, Kadmos, Marta and Okorie, Torin and Kevin, Lilac and Perrie, Charlie and Violet, Sage and Zainab, Steinar…and was that Vander?

I smiled as I passed Elle, Lucian, and baby Lucia. Ravi and Marissa were standing hand in hand, as were Gabriel and Mikah. Marius and Rishika both winked at me and Artemis as we passed, and I would never forget the soft, serene look on Big Mac’s face where she stood with Mrs. Smith by her side.

Aysel and Armin were beaming at me, and I remembered how shaky things had started between us—and I was happy that I could now call them friends.

Ava looked almost happy to see me as I passed by, and I gave her a little wave as her date put his arm around her. The rest of the Samaras were here in full force, and I was so happy to see them all. Even the Cobalts, Porter, and Rowena were dressed to the nines and gave me sweet smiles, and Maren and Fenrir—he had to be about seven now—waved from their spot with Mace and the Blue Bloods.

My heart fluttered when I saw Greyson with Kendall and Skye. They looked so damn happy. Greyson met my eyes, said something to Kendall, and then approached.

“I’ll be right back,” Artemis said. “Just going to give Marius a little warning to behave himself. You’d think we were past that, but we’re not. He and Colton really should’ve never had extended time together.” She squeezed my hand and rushed off.

Greyson’s eyes sparkled as he hugged me. “You look so beautiful, Cali.”

“Thanks, Greyson,” I said, smiling. “And so do you…and Skye… God, she’s so cute. She’s got the best of both of you.”

Greyson nodded and smiled. “So, this is how it’s supposed to be, right?”

I smiled. “I think so. And thank you for coming. It means a lot.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Be sure to come by more with Skye, okay? I know the council probably has you busy, but we’d all like to see you. All three of you,” I said earnestly.

Greyson smiled. “We’d love to.”

Artemis came rushing back over. “Mission accomplished. Also, Tom’s getting really teary-eyed. Mom’s worried he’s going to pass out from dehydration if we don’t get this going soon.”

Greyson squeezed my shoulder and then went back to join Kendall and Skye.

I took a breath. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Artemis led me toward Mom and Dad, and she was right, it was obvious that Dad had been crying. A lot.

“Are you ready, sweetie?” Mom said.

“I am.”

Dad took one arm, and Mom took the other, and together we stepped toward the aisle. I gasped when I saw Xavier. It wasn’t just that he looked unbelievable in his tux, it was the way he was looking at me—like I was the only person in the world right now.

There were no friends, no family, just me—his mate, his Luna, the love of his life. And I felt the same. This was the moment I’d wanted for longer than I’d been aware…the opportunity to make the ultimate commitment to the man I was meant to be with for the rest of my life.

Xavier’s eyes never left mine as I was escorted up to the arch. Mom gave me an extra squeeze, and she almost had to pull my father away.

“Love you, Dad,” I said. I kissed him on the cheek and then turned to take my place at Xavier’s side. His soft touch on the small of my back warmed me from head to toe, and the last sliver of my nervousness slipped away. Everything felt so right.

I couldn’t take my eyes off Xavier, and this was our day, so I didn’t have to. I knew that everyone was watching us, but I needed to look at him. I had to. The sudden deep timbre of his voice in my head startled me.

*You. Look. Fucking. Unreal.*

*You too.*

*I’ve waited for this day for so long, Cali. Please tell me this isn’t a dream. Tell me it’s real.*

*It’s not a dream. It’s real, Xavier.*

He smiled. *Good.*

Jay and Lola’s excited voices ended our little private moment, and just like that, our wedding ceremony began.

**Episode 5844**

I looked at Xavier and felt my heart race as he smiled at me. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him look as handsome as he did at that moment.

“Welcome one and all to this joyous occasion!” Lola began, looking around at the crowd of people quietly seated before us. “The union between Caliana Rose Hart and Xavier Astraeus Evers has been a *long* time coming. As many of you know, they were two parts of *due destini*—a difficult and tumultuous situation where one person has two mates. Some say it involves magic, and maybe they’re right, because maybe magic is what brought Cali and Xavier—and Greyson,” she added, making the crowd laugh, “—a lot of difficulty, a lot of tears, a lot of laughter, and, ultimately, a lot of joy.”

I took a deep breath as I smiled up at Lola. Her remarks were lovely, but they were bringing up a lot of emotions for me as I thought over everything that had happened since the day I’d arrived in Oregon. The journey here…this moment… I wouldn’t have believed it. Everything Xavier and I had gone through—everything we’d been through with his brothers, with our pack… It had all led to this moment.

And I wouldn’t change a thing.

“But everything has arrived exactly where it should be,” Lola continued. “Cali and Xavier have their love for each other, and Greyson has his beautiful family with his mate.”

I looked over at Greyson, who smiled at me. Kendall sat at his side, and he held his sweet newborn daughter in his arms. He looked as happy and peaceful as I’d ever seen him, and when he smiled at me, it wasn’t with the same intimacy we’d once shared. It was friendly and full of warmth—the smile one shared with a life-long friend. Which was exactly what we were.

“Xavier is one of my oldest friends,” Jay started, stepping up next to Lola. “I’ve seen him grow as a man, not that it was easy at times. He’s still hardheaded, and you better turn the other way if he’s had some of Lola’s coffee—”

“Hey!” Lola exclaimed.

“—but Xavier has become a man truly deserving of this woman here,” he said, gesturing toward me. “My wife’s best friend in the entire world.”

Tears gathered in the corners of my eyes as Lola smiled at me.

“Xavier will never be perfect,” Jay conceded, “and neither will Cali, but I think we can all see that they’re perfect for each other. Cali and Xavier bring out the best in each other. They push each other to be a better person for one another, for others. They’re the perfect balance.”

“And Cali is a wonderful Luna to the Redwood pack, doing what she does best—always anticipating other people’s needs. Together they are the best Alpha and Luna team around—no offense to the rest of you here.” There was some laughter in the crowd. “I’m truly so happy for the two of you, and I can’t wait to see where your lives go from here.”

“And now we ask you to tell each other the vows you’ve prepared,” Jay said, nodding to us.

I took a moment, pausing to collect my thoughts, and to stop the tears from flowing. I had made notes, but I didn’t need them. I had been dreaming of this moment for two years and had everything I wanted to say written on my heart.

Feeling the eyes of my pack and all our friends and family on me, I looked up at Xavier. His blue eyes were fixed on me, and I felt my body react on instinct. Our connection was so powerful, so innate—I just couldn’t help it. Tears gathered again, but—seeing this—Xavier smiled.

*Go on, baby*, he said through mind link. *Whenever you’re ready.*

I smiled at him and cleared my throat. “When I first met you, Xavier, I was scared. You seemed so mean and grumpy and at times, even terrifying. I didn’t know what this world full of werewolves—of wolf-bears—was. But beneath the façade you put on and all of that, I could sense something so pure, so *strong* inside of you. I was drawn to you, even when I knew maybe I shouldn’t have been. Your world was dangerous, but somehow, we both knew that we needed each other. And besides, nothing could stop me—nothing could keep us apart.

“Even when there were forces working hard against us. Those forces failed, time and time again. And that wasn’t just because we were mates, it wasn’t just because of the *due destini*—it was because I fell in love with you.” My voice caught in my throat. “I fell so hard it was frightening, because I worried you wouldn’t love me back. But you did, and my love for you only grew stronger. You protected me, and my family. You showed me how brave and fearless you are. And there is no one I’d rather spend the rest of my life with.” I took a deep breath as my heart thudded against my ribs. “You are my mate, my love, and my forever.”

Xavier’s eyes were bright as he reached for me. He took my face in his hands, cupping my cheeks.

“Caliana,” he said, his voice low and throaty with emotion. “*My* Cali. We have been through so much together. When we first met, I could never have imagined that we would be standing here. I knew I didn’t exactly give you the best first impression. And I didn’t do much to make you like me anyway. But then a strange thing happened.” He smiled. “I fell in love with you. You unlocked this place inside me that I thought I’d closed off for good… But then you came crashing into my life—this ridiculously cute, energetic tornado. I wasn’t ready for it, not at first. I almost didn’t know what to do with myself, so it was easier to keep you an arm’s length away. But even through that, you made me laugh, for the first time in a long time. You made me crazy with frustration, too. You made me realize that I cared about someone more than myself. You brought me back from a dark place. You showed compassion when I would have showed anger. You loved me when I was at my worst, and you’ve loved me at my best. You’ve helped me become the man and Alpha I once feared I never could be, and one day I know you’ll help me be the best father, too.”

“*Xavier*,” I breathed.

“I love you, Cali,” he said, his gaze locked on me. “I vow to always love you. You’re my mate, my love, and my forever.”

The world around us was silent for a beat. Jay and Lola wiped tears from their eyes.

“By the power vested in me by the certificate I got from the internet and the license I applied for through the State of Oregon,” Lola said, “we now pronounce you husband and wife!”

The crowd of pack members, family, and friends burst into cheers, wild whoops, and applause.

“You may now kiss!” Jay and Lola called over the noise.

Xavier grinned and reached for me, pulling me to him. He slid his arm around my waist and I rose up on my tiptoes, trying to reach Xavier’s towering height. He bent his head and brushed his lips across mine. Lightly at first, but that wasn’t enough for me. Emotion was surging through me, and I wrapped my arm around his neck and pulled him down, deepening the kiss.

Distantly, I could hear the cheers change to catcalls, but I ignored them. My whole world narrowed to the feel of Xavier’s lips and hands and his body pressed against mine. I had kissed this man thousands—maybe tens of thousands—of times, but there was something about this that felt so sweet, so sexy, and so, so intimate, despite the fact that we were surrounded by all of our closest friends and family.

Xavier slipped his hand into my hair, angling my head. He slipped his tongue into my mouth, sliding it gently against mine. My body tingled with electricity.

*This* was happiness. *This* was love.

And I would get to feel this thrill every day for the rest of my life.

When I pulled away, my heart was beating like I had just been sprinting through the woods. Xavier’s hand was still in my hair, and he smiled softly down at me.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you more,” he whispered back. Then he looked up at Jay and nodded.

Jay cleared his throat, getting the attention of the crowd again. “At the request of the bride and groom, you are privileged to witness one of the most powerful and binding traditions of werewolf culture. This is usually only shared between mates, but Xavier and Cali have chosen to make you a part of this special moment!”

My heart began to race.

“Xavier is going to give Cali, his wife, his Luna and his mate, the mate mark!” Lola added.

There was a collective gasp, followed by another round of cheers.

Through them, Xavier looked over at me. *Are you ready?*

I swallowed hard. I knew it was going to hurt, but I nodded. I’d never been more ready than I was at this moment.

Xavier partially shifted his hand, his eyes connected to mine the entire time. He only broke our connection once to reach over and push away the sleeve of my wedding gown, making sure it was completely out of the way. Then he leaned down, his breath hot against my skin, and I gasped as his teeth shifted as well and he bit down, piercing the flesh right next to the Luna mark he’d given me.

I hissed with pain at the initial shock, but within an instant, the pain was gone, and I was filled with an overwhelming sense of euphoria. Of completeness. I felt a warmth flow through me, and as I looked at Xavier, I knew it was the evidence of our powerful connection. It was his wolf calling to me, and my magic reaching back out to him.

And then it was over. He released my shoulder, and when he reached his full height, there were no more traces of his werewolf side.

“Cali, are you okay—” he started, reaching for my shoulder, but I caught his hand, squeezing it tight.

“I couldn’t be happier,” I assured him, tears streaming from my eyes.

“We are thrilled to present—” Lola started.

“Xavier and Caliana Evers!” Jay finished, spreading his arms wide.

The cheers of our friends and family were deafening in my ears as I turned to look at them. I gazed at the familiar faces, all smiling, most of them crying. My dad was sobbing into my mom’s shoulder. My heart was so filled with love it felt as though it would burst.

When I looked over at Xavier, he met my gaze with his own calm, steady look, and I took a deep breath, drawing his energy in. He took my hand and brought it to his mouth, pressing a kiss to it.

I loved this man so much. Everything we had gone through to get to this moment had been worth it.

“Oh my god, you’re my husband,” I said quietly, barely believing the words as I shook my head. “This is crazy!”

Xavier laughed. “It is, but it’s real. You’re my wife, Cali.”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. I kissed him back, letting myself melt into him. In his arms I was safe and protected. In his arms I was loved.

In his arms I was home.

It had taken paths I never could have expected and introduced me to so many people and places along the way, but in the end, Xavier Evers and I had finally found our happily ever after.

**Episode 5845**

**Ava**

***A Year and a Half Earlier***

The air was hot and humid as I returned from my patrol of the perimeter of the Samara land. As the Samara Alpha, it was well within my authority to send one of my pack members to run patrol, but—the truth was—I liked doing it.

As much as I loved being Alpha of my pack, it was a constant challenge, and I valued the time spent away from everyone else, alone with my thoughts. I liked the peace, and not having to deal with anyone else’s bullshit for an hour or so. I liked the brief break from responsibility, though it was always waiting for me when I returned home. My family was always waiting for me at home.

Becoming Alpha of the Samara pack had been a risk, but it had been the best, most natural thing I had ever done. It wasn’t the life I had envisioned for myself—I’d always imagined myself by Xavier’s side as he led the Samaras as their Alpha. There’d once been a time I hadn’t thought I was capable of being Alpha, that it was something I didn’t want. But from the second I had taken command of my pack, I knew this path was the one I was always meant to be on.

The Samara was *my* pack—I had fought for them. I had always believed it was for Xavier that I had clawed my way back from the spirit realm, but I had been wrong. It was for my pack. For myself. And now that I was leading them, we were growing stronger every day.

All the same, I groaned to myself when I saw Marissa waiting for me on the porch. I knew that meant something was wrong. It always was. The Samara was getting better every day, but some things never changed, and now it was just a question of who had done what.

“Hey,” she said as I shifted and headed up the stairs toward her, “you’re not going to like this.”

“Great. What?” I asked.

“I just got a call from Knox. He’s been arrested.”

“Are you serious?”

Knox had gone down to visit his parents. I should have known something like this was going to happen. Trouble always followed my cousin.

“Did he even make it to California?”

“Yeah, he did. He saw his mom and dad. He got arrested on his way back. Picked up at a roadside bar for assault—he got into a fight.”

I shook my head. I was pissed, but not surprised. In a lot of ways, Knox was a lot better behaved now than he had been when he’d first arrived at the Samara. But in other ways, his temper was as hair-trigger as ever. I wondered if part of it was because I had become Alpha after Xavier had left. A lot of things had changed after Xavier had gone. In some ways it felt like he’d just left, other days he felt like a distant memory. It was a work in progress.

“What do you want to do?” Marissa asked.

“Maybe we should leave him in some backwoods county jail for a few days. See if that sobers him up,” I muttered. I sighed. “But, since I’m his Alpha, I guess I’ll go get him.”

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When I stopped the car outside the county courthouse, I sat for a moment, thinking hard. Alturas, California—population 2,716—didn’t have much to recommend it. It was just like Knox to end up in a place like this.

I wondered if I was going to have to contact the werewolf council about this. Whatever Knox did or didn’t do, it always seemed to get sticky when werewolves, humans, and the law got tangled up. At least I knew that since Greyson had taken over the council, shit was actually getting done, and the council was now in the business of actually looking out for werewolves. You know, their job.

But still, I would like to avoid making that call if I could. I just had to hope it wouldn’t come to that, and I could handle this myself.

As I stepped out of the car, I heard a low, throaty growl. The sound plucked at me like a guitar string, and I turned to see a tall, wide-shouldered man leaning against a motorcycle.

He took his time taking me, looking me up and down. I could practically *feel* him taking my clothes off with his eyes. Asshole.

A slow smile spread across his face, which was tan and perfectly chiseled. “You look like you need my help.”

This threw me so much I stared at him for a moment, baffled. “I’m sorry, *what*?”

He pushed off from his bike, standing his full, considerable height. He was twice as wide as I was, but I could tell he was all muscle. His features were rugged, and bright green eyes peered at me keenly. “I can help you if you need it.”

Anger flashed up inside of me. “Who the *fuck* do you think you are?” There it was again—that plucking. My wolf stirred inside of me and in an instant, I knew that this man was a werewolf.

He grinned at me, apparently finding my confusion amusing. “I’m James—at your service.”

He extended a hand, but I ignored it, turned on my heel, and strode toward the courthouse. My wolf howled, begging me to turn back, but I ignored it. I was here to get shit done.

Was James hot in an aggressive, dangerous, guaranteed-to-ruin-my-life way? Yes. But I had seen his type before, and he was nothing but trouble. And I couldn’t get distracted.

It didn’t take much for me to get to Knox—Alturas’s County jail consisted of one holding cell—where I was escorted when I explained my relationship to the accused.

Knox looked up in surprise when I walked over. “Ava? What are you doing here?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking yourself that same question?” I snapped back.

He pouted. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“It never is,” I muttered. “I came to get you. I’m going to see about posting bail—”

“You don’t need to,” Knox interrupted. “I’m taking care of it.”

I stared at him. “*You’re* taking care of it?”

“Yeah.”

This was news. “How?”

He puffed out his chest. “I got a lawyer.”

“*Oh god*,” I groaned. Just when I didn’t think this circus could get any more absurd, Knox kept proving me wrong.

“Alright, sonny, time to go.” A deputy walked over with a large set of keys. He eyed me cautiously, then looked at Knox. “She coming with you?”

Knox nodded. “Yeah.”

The deputy shook his head as he slapped cuffs on Knox. “If you think her pretty face is going to get you out of trouble—think again.”

Rolling my eyes, I followed the deputy as he led Knox out of the holding cell. We walked down a short hallway and into a small county courtroom, where the deputy pushed Knox onto the wooden bench.

I dropped next to him, and we waited as the judge at the front of the courtroom listened to case after case of traffic tickets, jaywalking offenses, and drunk and disorderly conduct charges.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the courtroom door open, and a tall, broad-shouldered man strode in. I looked over and my mouth fell open in surprise when I realized I recognized the man. It was James—the asshole I’d met in the parking lot.

But he was no longer dressed in the dark jeans and black leather jacket I’d met him in—now he was wearing a perfectly fitted suit he *had* to have had custom tailored for his broad shoulders.

He looked directly at me—not looking the least bit surprised to see me—and slid into the bench next to me.

My wolf stirred again.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I whispered. “Are you following me?”

He glanced just past me and gestured toward Knox. “I’m his lawyer.”

I looked at James, then at Knox. “Is this some kind of a joke?”

Knox reached forward to shake with his cuffed hand. “James—good to see you. Ava, this is my lawyer.”

“*What*?” I said again. “So what was that earlier? All that fucking ‘I’m at your service’ bullshit?”

James glanced at me, probably appearing to anyone else like he was bored, but there was a fire in his eyes. “You were standing outside of a courthouse with a very concerned look on your face. I’m a lawyer—you seem smart enough to put the rest of the pieces together, Ava.”

This fucking guy—

“Bailiff, bring me the next case!” the judge bellowed.

“That’s us,” James said, getting to his feet. He reached across me and grabbed Knox’s arm. “Let’s rock and roll.”

“Hey,” I hissed, standing hastily, “are you seriously a lawyer?”

James paused and gave me that same cockeyed smile he’d given me in the parking lot. “I guess we’re about to find out.”

He marched Knox toward the front of the courtroom.

“Case 38766, drunk and disorderly conduct, assault, and contempt of an officer of the law—”

“Which is not a crime, and I move to strike that from this case,” James said firmly.

I looked at him in surprise. Gone was the teasing drawl, now he was all business.

The judge gave him a steely look, then nodded. “So moved.”

James didn’t smile, but I could see him clock the win, and his green eyes narrowed. The rest of the hearing took a shockingly short amount of time. The arresting officer hadn’t bothered to show up, which James argued was enough of a reason to dismiss the case. The judge didn’t agree, but James pressed and said that his client—Knox—couldn’t dispute the facts of the case against an empty witness chair.

In the end, I kind of thought the judge just wanted James out of his courtroom, so he dismissed the case and told Knox not to return to Alturas. When Knox didn’t answer, James elbowed him sharply.

“Yes, sir,” Knox said hurriedly, and was escorted out of the courtroom for his release papers.

James turned and strolled away from the judge’s bench.

He dropped down to sit beside me, the smug smile back on his face. “Admit it.”

“What?” I asked.

“I’m a good lawyer.”

I shook my head. “Humble, too.”

He chuckled, the sound so low I could feel it resonate in my chest.

I shook that off, trying not to notice how it felt. “How much do we owe you?”

He shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Oh, you can’t expect me to believe that—”

“Fine, nothing *if* you’ll have a drink with me.”

I opened my mouth, shocked. Who the hell was this guy? Where did he get off saying something like this to me? To anyone?

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said, grinning.

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He chose the bar, but I’d insisted on driving myself. It was dark and pretty empty—not surprising, considering it was the middle of the afternoon. I had dropped Knox off at a diner on the outskirts of Alturas and told him to stay out of trouble, and now I was staring across a tiny booth at James, who was still dressed in his suit.

He hadn’t taken his eyes off me since we’d sat down—not that I was complaining.

I should’ve been. What the fuck was this?

I bit my lip as I spun my drink in front of me. I wasn’t sure why I’d agreed to this at all. There was just something about this guy—I just wanted to know more about him. But why? Why was I even here?

“You’re wary,” he said, his voice a low growl. “I can’t blame you for that. I don’t usually do this kind of thing… If you’re uncomfortable, you don’t have to stay. I would never make you. I was just kind of…shooting my shot.”

Wait a second, was he *blushing*?

“I’m not uncomfortable,” I said bluntly. And I wasn’t. I should’ve been, maybe, but being with this guy—this stranger—somehow felt like the most natural thing in the world.

He took a sip of his drink. “When I took this job, I didn’t expect my day to end up like this.”

I cleared my throat, trying to gather my wits. “What do you mean?”

He gave me a narrow, intense stare. “I mean having a drink with the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

The frank way he spoke and the way he held my gaze made my body tingle. My nerves sizzled in a way that felt surprising, almost as though they’d gone dormant, and were just now coming back to life.

The feeling was nearly overwhelming, so I broke the connection between us and grabbed my own drink, trying to let the cold whiskey and coke shock me back into reality.

“I’ll bet you say that to every woman you meet.” I tried to sound cool and unaffected. “You seem like the type.”

James chuckled again. “Nope. I only say it when it’s true.”

“Ha,” I said, taking another sip of my drink. “So what’s your plan here? What’s your next line?”

He laughed, and I hated that it made my stomach twist. “No lines. I just want to get to know you. Tell me about yourself.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not that interesting, believe me.”

“Well, that seems impossible,” he said. I couldn’t help but notice how he adjusted himself in the booth, angling toward me. “You seem like the most interesting woman I’ve ever met. I want to know everything about you. Call it a compulsion.”

“Another line,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“You don’t let people in easily, do you?” he asked, tilting his head.

“No, been burned too many times,” I said.

My mind, of course, went to Xavier, but we’d both burned each other. It was a cycle we repeated constantly. I’d thought that was love, but seeing how he was with Cali… It was different. I couldn’t blame him anymore for choosing her. I understood it—as much as maybe I didn’t want to. They were good for each other. They weren’t volatile and a bomb waiting to blow.

Still, I’d been hurt for a long time. I’d been through so much my entire life that it wasn’t only Xavier who’d made me prickly to new people.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” James said, breaking me out of my thoughts. “Who’s the asshole?”

“Today? You,” I said, twisting in the booth toward him. “Before you? Probably my cousin. He’s always doing something stupid.”

James laughed, and that feeling came back in my stomach. “Yeah, I can tell he gets into trouble. Why were you the one to come get him?”

“I’m his Alpha,” I said without thinking.

James’s eyes widened. “Really,” he said evenly. “That explains a lot.”

I looked away from him, feeling hot as I drank my drink. “Like what?”

“Like how you command a room the second you walk in it.”

His words surprised me. I looked up at him, fast, and when I met his eyes, I felt my wolf stir again.

Slowly, he moved his hand across the table, brushing his knuckles against mine. “A female Alpha… You have no idea how impressive that is. Much more impressive than a Rogue with a law degree and a motorcycle.”

I didn’t move my hand. I was frozen, my body a live wire from his skin on mine. My head was swimming—what was this? Why was I having this kind of reaction to him?

“I’d say that’s pretty impressive,” I said. Did my voice sound *breathy*? Ugh. “The lawyer part, I mean.”

He laughed again, shaking his head. “I’m underestimated a lot because I confuse people. They seem to think I can’t be a lawyer if I ride a motorcycle. Like I’m not smart enough or something, which is, of course, bullshit.” His knuckles brushed against mine one more time before he withdrew his hand. “I bet you have some idea of what that’s like.”

My breath caught in my throat. I *did* know what he was talking about. Being a female Alpha, I was almost always underestimated. Luckily, with the packs nearby, they didn’t, but anytime we met someone new it was a toss-up of how misogynistic they were going to be. Werewolf culture was so steeped in the idea of a female werewolf being a Luna or baring children that the existence of a female Alpha like me or Maya was an abomination to them.

I didn’t say anything, but James seemed to understand without me having to speak.

Looking up at him, I was shocked to see the sincerity on his face. The way he was looking at me like he…saw me. And suddenly, I had no idea how the hell to explain it, but I felt this *need* inside of me. It was strong, like the current of a river, and before I knew what I was doing, I was reaching out for him.

I put my hand on his chest, which felt warm and rock-hard beneath my palm. His breath caught as my hand traveled up his chest until I reached his face. His gaze met mine as I ran my fingers across his jawline, searching for what, I didn’t know. For all this outward roughness, his skin felt astonishingly soft, but his eyes blazed like fire.

“Ava,” he said, his voice low. He said my name like he didn’t believe I was there.

“Say that again,” I said, breathless.

“*Ava*.”

I didn’t know who moved first. Suddenly, his hands were everywhere on my body, his insistent tongue pushing past my lips to plunge and explore. And I opened to him, eager and wanting, my hands clawing at his shoulders and pushing into his suit jacket to feel the muscles beneath. I was so hungry for him. I’d been so shut off for so long, but now my body remembered how much it needed *exactly* this, and it was going to get its fill.

I bit down on his lip hard enough that he growled. The low, dangerous sound in the back of his throat seemed to act like a starter pistol for the rest of my body. He snaked an arm around my waist, his giant frame enveloping me. This still wasn’t enough.

I pushed hard against his chest and climbed into his lap, straddling him. I pressed my chest to his, that arm keeping me in tight as I kissed him hard. His scent was intoxicating. I gasped for air, a whimper escaping my throat, when his large hand came to my neck before traveling down to my chest. He cupped my breast, the other grabbing my ass as he tweaked my nipple through my shirt and bralette.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.* It felt so fucking good.

Wordlessly, my mouth found his again, my hips starting to mindlessly grind into his lap. It was like I was possessed, my wolf howling—*singing*—in my veins as James touched me. I ran my hands through his hair, pulling on it as I traced my tongue along his jaw to the outer shell of his ear where I bit down. He growled again and pulled me back, our lips crashing together once more.

Then—somewhere—a glass shattered.

The moment broken, I pulled back, gasping for air. My lips felt swollen, and I was still in his lap, my entire body buzzing.

James looked like a man who’d just been hit by a bus. “Holy fuck,” he breathed. “That was… Do you always kiss like that?”

I opened my mouth like a goldfish, not knowing how to respond. No, I didn’t always kiss like that. What the hell was wrong with me? That kiss had been fucking *amazing*. I hadn’t felt like this since…well, since Xavier.

But…how was that even possible?

“Ava…do you feel it too?”

I looked up at him. “What?”

“This connection between us,” he said. He shook his head, still looking shell-shocked. “I thought I was crazy at first, but the second I saw you, my wolf reacted… I don’t know, I just have this weird feeling like we’ve…like we’ve been waiting for you.”

I stared at him, astonished. The problem was that I knew *exactly* what he was talking about. I wished more than anything I could believe he was just bullshitting me, but there was something about the way he was looking at me, like he had just found what he’d been searching for, that I couldn’t deny.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I feel it too.”

There was so much about this moment that scared the shit out of me. Could this man—this Rogue—be my…*mate*?

It felt impossible, but I couldn’t deny the feeling of hope threading through me.

I hadn’t felt anything like it in a long, long time.

A mate.

*My* mate?

James pushed a hand through his hair that I’d messed up and gave me a long, clear look. “Maybe we should take this a little slower then…” He reached out his hand to shake mine. “Let me reintroduce myself. I’m Jamie.”

**Episode 5846**

**Greyson**

***5 Months Earlier***

The Oregon clouds overhead made a nice change from the brutal Arizona sun. The border dispute I’d had to mitigate between two feuding werewolf packs in the middle of the desert had taken way longer than I’d expected, and I was glad as hell to be home.

When I’d won the Concilium Bellicus five months before, I knew I’d have to travel to various territories, but I just hadn’t realized I’d have to be away from Kendall so much. Or maybe I just hadn’t realized how hard it would be to be away from her.

I pulled into a gas station to fill up, and as I climbed off my bike, I felt my phone buzz. I pulled it out, and when I saw Lucian’s name on the screen, I swallowed a groan.

Ever since I’d become head of the council, the princeling had been relentless in trying to get me and the council to handle every little problem he created for himself. I thought about just ignoring the call, but I knew if I did that, I’d just be kicking that can down the road. Lucian wasn’t great at taking hints. It was always better to just get things over with when it came to Lucian.

“What is it, Lucian?” I asked brusquely, taking the call.

“I need a building permit,” he said without preamble. “I’ve bought some land in Azure Creek for my second home. We’ll practically be neighbors, Greyson! We’ll be able to see you and Kendall all the time.”

I grimaced. I hated the sound of that. If I never saw Lucian again, that would be fine with me. The idea of having the guy drop by anytime turned my stomach. And I knew that if *I* felt that way, Kendall would be even less thrilled about the idea.

Honestly, I wished it was Xavier or Colton buying land in Azure Creek. I wouldn’t mind seeing my brothers more often. But Lucian? *No, thanks*.

“Why are you asking *me* for building permits?” I asked, cutting him off mid-sentence. “I’m not the town hall, man. Call your municipality, not the werewolf council.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, Greyson,” he said. “I’ve called you because after this purchase, some might think the Vanguards are encroaching on other packs.”

I rolled my eyes. “Lucian, build your damn yurt or whatever. You don’t need me for this.”

Lucian huffed. “It’s not a yurt, Greyson. It’s going to be a *chalet*.”

“Fantastic. Go for it,” I told him.

I ended the call, filled up my bike, hopped back on, and roared away, eager to get back home—and back to Kendall.

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Night had fallen by the time I made it back to Portland. I pulled the bike into the garage and headed into the building. I grabbed the mail from the lobby and—skipping the elevator—ran up the stairs. Inside the apartment, I kicked off my boots.

“Kendall?” I called.

There was no answer, but I could hear the shower running. I tossed down the mail. It looked like a mass of bills and credit card offers, but a thick blue envelope peeked out, catching my eye. I pulled it out and opened it up.

It was a save-the-date announcement for Cali and Xavier. June tenth.

I smiled as I looked at the aqua-colored card. It was about damn time. I couldn’t be happier for them. Kendall and I had been wondering when they’d set a date. They’d been throwing around ideas the last time we’d seen them for dinner, so it was good to see they’d finally settled on one.

My eyes scanned Cali’s name, and for a moment I remembered a time when I used to think Cali and I would be the ones getting married. I shook my head. That felt like a lifetime ago; it was crazy. It almost felt like I was recalling memories of an entirely different man. I loved Cali still, but it was a warm, platonic love now. I wanted the best for her and was happy that she was happy. I knew she felt the same way about me.

I dropped the card onto the table and turned toward the sound of running water. I headed into the bedroom to tell Kendall the news, and as I walked through the room, I caught sight of the half-read book and an empty water glass on the table next to her side of the bed. There was a neatly folded stack of clothes on top of her half of the dresser, waiting to be put away, and—next to the bathroom door—the clothes she must have pulled off just before she’d jumped into the shower. She’d gone to a yoga class from the looks of it.

I stopped and stared around for a moment. It had been five months, but it still surprised me that she lived here now. It surprised me that she and I—two stubborn, independent Rogues—had managed to make it work.

But we had. Because of all her success with the Night Stalker and Chessa, the MIB had approved Kendall’s transfer from her cover job at Central Cascades University. And because of my new position on the council, tensions with Agent Imamu and the MIB in general had become a lot less antagonistic.

At the door of the bathroom, I dropped my jeans and pulled off my shirt, leaving them on the floor with the other discarded clothes, so I could surprise Kendall in the shower. But as I slipped quietly through the door, she leaned out of the shower and grinned at me.

“Nice try, Grey, but if you’re trying to sneak up on me, I heard you the moment your bike pulled up outside.”

I laughed, the sound bouncing off the tiled walls of the warm, steamy bathroom. I didn’t even know why I bothered. I couldn’t remember ever being able to surprise this woman. It was probably her MIB training—it was hard to spy on a spy.

Water ran in rivulets down her body as she smiled at me, and she tipped her head, beckoning me in to join her. She didn’t need to ask twice, and I stepped into the huge, glass-walled shower, sighing with relief as the warm spray of the double-headed shower hit me.

She grabbed the bar of soap and slid it across my chest. “That ride back from Arizona was longer than you remembered, huh?”

My answer was an incoherent groan of pleasure as she spun me around and massaged the soap into my back.

When I remembered how to form words again, I gave my head a little shake. “I got Cali and Xavier’s save-the-date.”

She laughed. “About fucking time. I’ve never seen two people more sure they wanted to get married, and less sure about when.”

“You’ve got that right, viper.”

I smiled as I turned around, pulling her close to me. My hands were slick with the soap, and I let them slide across the planes of her body. The aches of my own body disappeared as my wolf began to howl with want—hell, forget want, with *need*.

I leaned down to kiss her as the hot water cascaded over both of us. She pushed herself against me, and I tangled my hands into her hair, then ran them down her face, her shoulders, the sides of her breasts, her ribs, and settled them on her hips, where I drew her tight against me.

“I missed you so fucking much,” I said.

“You weren’t the only one,” she said, glancing down at my growing erection between us.

I snorted, and she giggled. But soon enough, we were kissing again, her hands roaming all over my chest and arms. My body was electrified by our closeness, but there was something nagging at the back of my brain. She smelled different. Good, but different. Just as she raised herself on her toes to bring me closer, I pulled back to look at her, frowning.

“Did you switch shampoos?”

She stared at me, confused. “What?”

I shook my head, trying to figure out what the hell I was clocking. “I don’t know, something’s different about you.”

“What do you mean? Different how?”

“It’s not bad,” I quickly clarified. “But did you buy a new perfume or something?”

“No.” She narrowed her eyes. “Are you feeling all right? Did you get enough sleep while you were gone?”

“No, but that’s not what’s going on. There’s something about you that’s different—” I leaned close and buried my face into the crook of her neck, breathing deeply.

Whatever it was, it definitely had something to do with her scent.

“Did you get us new soap?”

“No, nothing,” she said, still looking baffled. “I’ve barely had time to get all my work done let alone buy us new soap, Grey.”

I racked my brain, trying to figure it out—and then it hit me.

“Holy shit—you’re pregnant.”

Kendall’s startling purple eyes went wide. “What did you say?”

I leaned in again, breathing deeply. I was sure now. That’s what this was. Another scent mingling with her own. “You’re pregnant, Kendall.”

I watched Kendall’s expression, feeling suddenly nervous. How the hell was she going to take this information? How was I supposed to explain that I just…instinctively *knew* this?

The look in those wide purple eyes changed from shock to wonder…and then to pure joy.

“Really?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean, we can take a test to be sure, but I can smell that your body’s changing…”

Her face broke into a brilliant smile, and she threw her arms around me.

“Oh my god, Grey!” she cried, jumping into my arms and wrapping her legs around my waist. “We’re having a baby?!”

I held her tight as waves of shock and joy hit me in succession. I couldn’t believe this was happening. We had talked about it—about having children. We both wanted it, but I didn’t think it would happen so fast. But as the reality sank in, I realized that the overwhelming feeling I was left with was pure happiness.

“Yeah, we’re going to have a baby,” I breathed, barely believing the words as they came out of my mouth. “Holy fuck. I’m going to be a father.”

Kendall laughed, then sobered as she extracted herself from my arms. “Hang on, Greyson, don’t get too excited.”

My stomach tightened as she stepped away from me. “Why not?”

She tipped her head. “What if the baby’s not yours?”

For a half-second the words echoed in my head, but then I saw the teasing sparkle in her eyes and the smile curving her beautiful lips.

I shook my head as I backed her against the tile of the shower. “Oh,” I said in a low growl, “I’m pretty sure it is.”

“Yeah, but how can you be *sure*?” she pushed.

I pressed myself into her. “We both came into this with pasts, Kendall King, and that’s fine, but what I know for *sure* is that I belong to you, and you”—I ran my hand around her hip, hooking her leg up around my waist and grabbing her ass before I slapped it—“belong to me.”

Her eyes were locked on mine and she drew a sharp breath as I massaged and squeezed her supple skin.

“Yes,” she breathed, and arched up to kiss me.

Her kiss seemed to reach into my soul and lit it on fire. When she broke away from the kiss, I looked down at her, my heart aching with the crush of feelings coursing through me.

“I love you so damn much,” I said gruffly. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.”

She smiled up at me. “I love you, too, Grey. So damn much.”

The hot water of the shower was turning cold, but I barely felt it as I kissed Kendall again. We were going to have a baby. A fucking baby. We were going to become an even bigger family.

I could never have plotted the path that had led me here—to this place, with this woman, but I was so glad for everything that had guided me to this moment. It hadn’t been without pain and uncertainty, but now here I was, living a life full of the kind of happiness I hadn’t ever thought could be mine.

I didn’t know if I believed in happily ever afters, but if they were real, they looked like this.

**Episode 5847**

***Present Day***

It wasn’t as though Xavier and I had never slept together, but somehow tonight felt so different. Maybe I was still buzzing from the thrill of the wedding ceremony and being able to call Xavier not just my mate, but my *husband*.

As I looked around the bedroom, I smiled at the decorations that Torin and Lola had added to make the room more romantic. Yeah, they were a little over the top, but everything Torin or Lola touched was a little over the top.

Take, for example, the lingerie that Lola had bought for me and insisted that I wear tonight. It was black lace and revealed a hell of a lot more than it covered up. It was kind of a one-piece, with a thong and just enough to cover my nipples, but nothing else. It was going to show basically all my stretch marks, but I knew Xavier would like that—he still called me tiger.

I smiled at that as I pulled on the delicate lace. I was just adjusting the straps when there was a knock at the door.

“Cali,” Xavier said, opening the door. He stepped inside, then stopped, his eyes growing wide as he looked me up and down.

I felt my cheeks heat and was tempted to cover myself but managed to resist the urge.

“Fuck. You look incredible, baby,” he breathed.

My heart pounded as he closed the distance between us. He slipped his arm around my waist and pulled me close.

“You’re so fucking hot, Caliana Evers,” he said, purring into my ear.

I moaned but pulled back. “Caliana *Hart*-Evers,” I corrected him.

He smiled as he ran his hand down the side of my body, caressing the curve of my breast. “I like the way that sounds. It’s about damn time.”

“I like it too,” I confessed.

“Good. Because you’re going to have that name for the rest of our lives.” He paused. “Wait—I forgot something.”

“What?” I asked, frowning.

He let me go and started toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Come on,” he said, reaching back to grab my hand.

Baffled, I stepped after him, and shyly followed into the hallway, looking carefully around.

“Xavier, what are we doing? What if someone sees me? I’m basically not wearing anything—”

Before I could say more, Xavier reached down and swept me off my feet and into his arms.

“What are you doing?!” I yelped in surprise.

“What I should have done before,” he said with a grin. “I’m going to carry you across the threshold.”

And with that, he carried me back into the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind us. Once inside, he laughed and tossed me easily onto the bed.

“Xavier!”

“What? We’re married now,” he said, his gaze taking all of me in. “Also, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we are woefully behind on Evers babies and need to catch up.”

I laughed. “It’s not a competition.”

We’d discussed kids plenty of times, especially after getting engaged. Maren’s son Fenrir, who was half-werewolf, half-Fae, was blossoming—especially with Mace as his new stepfather. Even though I was only half-Fae, my magic was strong, so we felt good about the chances of our future kids being healthy and happy without any shifting problems.

He shrugged, not taking his eyes off of me. “It could be. We should put in all the effort we can, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” I breathed as I watched him pull off his clothes. God, my mate—my *husband*—looked *so* good. “You already have names picked out, too?” I teased.

“Of course,” he said without hesitation. “Jasper for a boy, Ivy for a girl.”

I gaped at him. “Those were names I told you I liked, like six months ago,” I said. “As a hypothetical.”

“What you like, I like. And I like you quite a lot, Mrs. Hart-Evers.”

Then he climbed in after me. His blue eyes blazed as he neared me, rising up on his elbows over me. He leaned down and slowly kissed my neck.

It felt amazing. Between Xavier’s kisses and the soft mattress, I had never felt so relaxed, so comfortable, and so secure.

Which might have been why I yawned.

“Oh god, I’m sorry,” I said quickly, clapping my hand over my mouth.

He chuckled, then yawned himself. “I guess it *has* been a long day.”

I nodded. I wrapped an arm around his waist and closed my eyes as he leaned down to kiss me…

When I opened my eyes again, the room was pitch dark. My head swam, and I sat up, confused and unsettled. There was a low rumbling sound nearby, and after a moment’s wonder, I realized it was Xavier, snoring.

We had both fallen asleep—on our wedding night!

I shook my head. I couldn’t believe it. I would never be able to face Lola if she found out about this.

Wondering what time it was, I felt around for my phone, but my movements made Xavier stir.

“What’s up?” he asked blearily.

“We fell asleep,” I muttered.

Xavier was awake in an instant. He grabbed his phone and checked the time. “Shit. We have to get to the airport! Now!”

I was on my feet in a second. I pulled off the lingerie and grabbed for the comfy matching set I had planned to wear for travel.

“Make sure you take that with you,” Xavier said, pointing to the black lacy heap. “I fell asleep on you, but I plan on taking full advantage of that look when we get to the Amalfi Coast.” He grinned. “I have every intention of taking it off of you with my damn teeth.”

“*Xavier!*” I said, feeling my entire body heat.

“What? I’m making this a honeymoon to remember.”

I rolled my eyes, giving him a playful shove. “Is that a promise?”

He pulled a shirt over his head, then grabbed me and kissed me, quickly and firmly. “That’s a fact, tiger. Now come on, let’s go.”

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The view—even from the passenger seat of the car—was breathtaking, and I leaned my arm on the rolled down window and gazed out at the bright blue water as Xavier drove us along the road along the Amalfi Coast.

The convertible we’d rented at the airport zoomed along the winding road and the wind coming off the water was just enough to cut through the heat of the bright sun overhead.

“It’s so beautiful,” I breathed, looking over at Xavier.

He smiled at me. “I thought you would like it—but the best is yet to come. You have no idea what I have planned.”

He slowed the car and turned off the main road. We drove along a stone path that climbed upward until he came to a stop before the steps of a stunning hilltop villa.

I stared up at it in shock. It looked like something out of a movie—the house itself was the color of the sunset, and it was covered with flowering vines that climbed all the way up to the third-floor windows.

I looked over at Xavier. “We’re sleeping here?”

He gave me a devilish grin. “Who said anything about sleeping?”

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When I looked out at the view from the house’s terrace, I saw the Mediterranean stretching out before me, as blue as Xavier’s eyes. After we’d settled in and I’d had a chance to look around, I’d seen that the house itself was astonishing—though it looked classically built, it was filled with modern conveniences, including a hot tub that overlooked the ocean view.

I took a deep breath as the warm breeze curled around me. I couldn’t believe that it was only yesterday that Xavier and I had exchanged vows in Oregon, and now we were here in Italy. I’d always wanted to come here, and being with Xavier felt so perfect.

“Well, what do you think?” Xavier asked quietly, stepping behind me and softly kissing my neck.

My breath hitched as his kisses brushed the sensitive skin just under my ear. “I think it’s beautiful,” I told him. “And I want to see everything that the Amalfi Coast has to offer.”

He paused. “Right now?” he asked, moving his kisses down to my bare shoulders. “Don’t you think we should freshen up from the plane before we go exploring?”

I moaned as my nerves began to fire with pleasure. “I guess so, but I don’t want to wait. I’ve never been to Italy before. I want to see everything.”

“I promise you,” he said, moving the strap of my dress aside so he could kiss the skin beneath it, “we will have plenty of time to explore the old cities, to see all the art, to eat all the pasta and gelato.”

I laughed as I turned around to face him. “This is amazing, Xavier. Thank you for planning all of this.”

He smiled. “Anything for you, Cali. You know that.”

“I know,” I said. “But thank you all the same. I’d do anything for you, too.”

“Anything?” he asked, raising a cheeky eyebrow.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Maybe,” I teased. Then I rose up on my tiptoes and kissed him.

He slid his hand around the back of my neck, tipping my head back and deepening the kiss. I opened my mouth to him, pressing my hands against his chest. Then he bent and slipped his arm beneath my legs, lifting me easily into the air.

Wrapping my arms around Xavier’s shoulders, I clung to him. His kiss was so hot and my body was so alive with the feeling of it that I barely even noticed when he walked us back inside. Before I knew it, he was laying me down on the bed. It was when he pulled my dress off and let out a choked laugh that I remembered what I was wearing beneath it.

A pained look broke over his face. “You’re fucking kidding me,” he said, groaning. “You’ve been wearing this the entire time?”

I blushed furiously, but let his eyes rove over my body, dressed in nothing but the lacy black lingerie we hadn’t gotten to enjoy on our wedding night. I’d worn it under the dress as a surprise. At the time in the airport bathroom, it had felt like a risk to strip fully down out of my leggings and his sweatshirt in favor of the lingerie and dress, but now I was so glad I had.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

He brushed his hand along my ribs. “My wife’s so fucking sexy,” he said, his fingers ghosting over my skin. He took my chin in his hand, tilting it up to look at him. “I should keep good on my promise, huh? Is that what you want, baby?”

“Yes,” I said, my body thrumming.

“Show me,” he said. “Spread your legs.”

I did as I was told, whimpering when Xavier leaned down to kiss me, fitting his body between my legs at the edge of the bed. The kiss was slow, lingering, and his hands made their way to my hips, pressing me into the bed. Then his mouth broke away from mine, his teeth deliciously scraping down my neck as he worked to the strap of the lingerie.

“It’d be such a shame to rip this,” he said, the fingers of one of his hands slipping underneath the fabric.

“Xavier, this was expensive—” I started.

Before I could continue, he bit down on the strap, the lace snapping instantly with his werewolf strength.

“*Xavier!*” I said, not sure if I was scolding him or asking for more.

“I’ll buy you a new set,” he said, his lips brushing against my bare shoulder.

With that, he moved to the other strap, snapping it easily just like the first one. Next, he worked to the dainty lace covering my nipples, taking one into his mouth, sucking and biting. As he released my sensitive breast, he grabbed onto the lace with his teeth, pulling it down my chest until both my breasts were free. Then with one quick tug, the bra was off, broken on the floor.

“That’s better,” he said. But he didn’t stop moving down my body. He licked his way down my stomach, pressing me back into the bed. He positioned himself between my legs, nipping at my hip and the thin strap of the thong I wore.

“Xavier,” I whined.

He pulled the thong aside and slipped his fingers through my wetness. “So ready for me,” he said, teasing me with his fingers until I was gasping. “What a good wife I have. I’m the luckiest man alive.”

“I want you,” I said, reaching for him as my heart raced. “I need my husband.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll have me,” he said. He snapped the thong’s strap on my hip. “Let’s get rid of this first.”

Gently, he bit down on the thong and started dragging it down my legs, holding me down as I squirmed. I needed more. I needed *him*.

He leaned back, the thong between his teeth before he let it drop to the floor. He took me in on the bed, fully naked. “That’s better.”

“You’re still dressed,” I breathed.

“Am I?” he asked, a teasing note to his voice.

I nodded and started to sit up, reaching for his pants.

When I’d gotten his clothes off, he stood looking at me. He palmed his cock, spreading the precum all over. It was clear that he wanted to torture me into a puddle, but enough was enough. I wanted to touch him—to taste him—so I sat up and pulled him into my mouth.

He shuddered and moaned with pleasure. “*Cali*,” he breathed, threading his hands into my hair.

I hummed in appreciation against him. I loved the way he felt and tasted, but all too soon Xavier pulled away. He pushed me back down onto the mattress, climbing on top of me exactly the way I wanted him to.

“It’s our honeymoon, and you’re coming first,” he growled, his blue eyes blazing at me.

“But I want you to come,” I said, arching into him as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“I thought it wasn’t a competition,” he said. I didn’t have a retort to that as he grabbed his cock and dragged it through my slick wetness. A deep moan escaped my throat, and I gasped when he pushed my knees apart and entered me, filling me to the hilt so fast and so hard it made me cry out with pleasure and pain.

I held onto him tighter, already shaking.

“Oh *god*,” I mewled. “*Xavier*.”

Then he moved, easing out of me slowly, teasing me with his cock the same way he’d teased me with his mouth. His hands moved to my breasts, kneading and pinching and twisting. I locked my legs around his hips, arching to meet his every thrust. Soon, my muscles contracted around him, and I cried out, high-pitched as my orgasm blasted through me, his name on my lips. It must have pushed him over the edge, too, because he dug his fingers into my skin as his orgasm hit.

“Fuck, Cali,” he moaned, not stopping his movements. “Baby—*fuck.*”

We were both slick with sweat as we collapsed onto the bed. Still panting, Xavier pulled me under the covers and into his arms.

I smiled up at him. “I love you, Xavier.”

“I love you, too,” he whispered, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face before pressing a sweet kiss to my lips.

Then I snuggled into him—my husband, my mate, my everything. “I hope every day of this trip will be this amazing.”

Xavier chuckled as he kissed the top of my head as he laughed. “Baby, it’s going to be like this for the rest of our lives.”