**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 5**

**Episodes 309-435**

**Episode 309**

The astonishment on Greyson’s face grew and I stared back at him, stunned. I had no idea what to say.

“It makes sense,” he said slowly, comprehension dawning in his eyes.

“What does?” I asked, swallowing hard, trying not to sound as scared as I felt.

“Everything,” he said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. That first kiss of ours, the way you broke up the fight between me and Xavier, the way you wiped Phil’s memory, and now the way you can heal wounds.” He gave me a long look, his eyes boring into mine. “You’re Fae.”

My heart dropped. “No, I’m not,” I lied. “I-I don’t—how did you even—don’t even know why you would think that,” I stammered.

He raised his dark eyebrows and held up his hand—which, while still covered in blood, was now almost completely healed. “I think you know *exactly* why I would think that.”

*You can never tell anyone*

My mother’s warning rang in my head. I took a deep breath, and, suddenly realizing I was still held tight in Greyson’s arms, pulled away. “The others are still fighting,” I said quickly, trying to gather my wits and what remained of my dignity. “We should go help them.”

Greyson chuckled darkly. “The others can take care of themselves.” His eyes glittered dangerously as he looked me over. “And I don’t feel like sharing you.”

*Dammit*. He was doing it again. He was playing with me, like I was a momentarily distracting toy. My hands balled into fists as a wave of frustration broke over me. I was mad at him, of course, but I was mad at myself, too. Because I *liked* it. I liked his games. I liked not quite knowing where I stood with him. I liked the weird language we had, just him and me.

It was disordered and toxic, but his presence was like a drug. The moment I stepped away I would swear to myself, *never again*. But when he was near, I just couldn’t stop myself from wanting him.

I pulled out of his grasp completely and scrambled to my feet. This was wrong, and I could already feel the guilt setting in. In the distance I could hear the howls and screams of the other wolves fighting. I glared at Greyson. “Well, it’s not a matter of *sharing* me, because you don’t *own* me.” I narrowed my eyes. “No one does, as a matter of fact.” I spun on my heel and stalked away, toward the sound of the battle.

*You’ll be back, love*.

I clamped my hands over my ears. “Stay out of my head, weirdo!” I screamed, not looking back. “Just stay away from me!”

As I ran around the side of the abandoned mansion, I saw a familiar wolf sprinting toward me. He shifted as he raced toward me, so by the time he reached me, Xavier was back to his human form. He pulled me close, his hands skimming my arms and shoulders. “You’re okay, right?”

“I’m okay,” I breathed. “You?” A cut near his eye was seeping blood, and it mingled with the dirt on his cheek. He had a bruise forming on his jaw and a long, shallow gash on his shoulder. I frowned. “You don’t look okay.”

“I’m fine,” he said, shaking his head. He was breathing hard, and his eyes looked like they were lit by fire.

I let myself accept his assurance and melted into him, glad to feel his arms around me.

Then I felt his whole body tense. “Greyson?” he snapped.

My stomach dropped. How could he—

I spun around to see Greyson approaching, his eyes fixed on Xavier.

Oh god, he wasn’t going to say anything, was he? *He* was the one who’d kissed *me*, for fuck’s sake. Why was *I* so nervous? *I* had just been trying to be a good Samaritan. Or… Was he going to say something about me being Fae? My mind reeled as Greyson drew closer.

He stopped in front of us, ignoring me completely as he locked eyes with Xavier. “Adra’s dead.”

I felt Xavier inhale sharply. “You’re sure?”

Greyson’s eyes flicked down to me for a split second. “I’m sure. We have to take care of the other mongrels.” He brushed past me and started sprinting toward the sound of wolf howls, shifting as he ran and dropping smoothly down to four paws.

I breathed a sigh of relief as he disappeared into the trees.

“What’s wrong?” Xavier asked, an edge to his voice.

I shook my head. “Nothing, I’m fine. It’s just…” I gestured vaguely. “All the fighting. I just wish it would end.”

“It will,” Xavier said bitterly, his mouth set in a grim line. He gave my shoulders a squeeze. “I need to get back in there, and you need to get back into the house. It’s not safe out here. I don’t know why you’re out here at all,” he added, annoyed, like he’d only just realized where I was.

My hands balled into fists. “If I were a wolf you wouldn’t be saying that to me. I could be out there with you. I could take care of myself. I could help you.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed dangerously. “I’m not talking about turning you right now, Cali. It’s quite literally the *definition* of not the time. Get back into the house.”

I’d just opened my mouth to argue further when he said, “*Now*!” in a way that made me shut up.

But this was *not* over, I swore to myself as I watched Xavier shift back and follow Greyson into the trees. With a sigh, I turned and walked back toward the crumbling house.

It loomed before me, terrifying in its own way. But as I walked, I heard the anguished yelps of a dying wolf somewhere in the distance and was glad to have something to focus on. It helped me not pass out from fear, anyway. However, standing before the house, I wasn’t sure why Xavier was so certain I’d be safer in here than outside. Apart from the fact that it looked like it was about to collapse, I’d already been attacked in it.

If I could locate the kitchen, maybe I’d be able to find another knife and go help out. Or, at the very least, protect myself.

As I started up the porch, I heard a pounding of feet coming toward me. My first thought was that it was Greyson, coming back to taunt me more. I spun around, ready to slap the smirk right off his stupid face, but when I turned, I gasped, and my hand fell to my side.

It wasn’t Greyson. It was a wolf I didn’t recognize. It might once have been brown, but now it was so matted with blood that it was impossible to tell the color of its fur. The blood was seeping from a gaping wound on its neck, but its red eyes were open and laser-focused on me.

Backing against the door, my instinct was begging me to scream for help, but the logical part of my brain was telling me *no sudden movements*. If the wolf reacted instinctively and lunged, I was royally screwed.

God, I wished I had powers. *Anything* would help right now. How had I never realized I was Fae? I’d wasted all this time when I could have been honing my powers for use in situations *just like this*.

In the end, I might as well have screamed for help, because the wolf lunged. It came at me like a freight train—three hundred pounds of sweating, bloodied fur. I tried to side-step, but the wolf was too fast and it barreled into me, crushing me against the door.

The door, however, was not up to that kind of pressure, and it gave way behind my back, sending both me and the wolf sprawling onto the debris-strewn floor of the mansion’s grand foyer.

The wolf reared back and came at me, jaws open, teeth bared. I screamed and fought for all I was worth, catching its jaws before they closed around my neck. I could feel the wolf’s breath hot on my face, smell the putrid stench of the blood and dirt. I was fighting, but I was losing. The wolf was so much stronger than me. It snarled, encouraged as my hands slipped and my arms began to shake. I couldn’t hold it off much longer. A terrifying growl erupted from deep in the wolf’s throat, and then, as if in response, I felt a sudden surge of energy move through my body.

This surprised the wolf, and I felt it hesitate for just a second. Then the floor beneath us began to shake. Moments later the whole house was shaking, causing cascades of choking dust to stream from the ceiling and the peeling walls. The shaking grew in intensity, and the wolf had just lifted its head to look around when the ceiling above us gave way with a sound like the earth tearing itself apart. It crashed down on us as the wolf let out an ear-splitting howl.

An instant later a blinding pain shot through my shoulder, and then all I knew was blackness.

**Episode 310**

XAVIER

The dying gasps of a Rogue were tapering off and I was spitting out bloodied fur when I heard a scream. The fur on my back rose. It wasn’t just *a* scream, it was *Cali’s* scream.

Clambering over the twitching Rogue and squeezing out its last breath in the process, I raced furiously around the crumbling mansion toward the sound. *Dammit!* I should never have sent her in there alone. I should have gone with her. I’d come back out to help the pack, but *Cali* was my responsibility, my priority. I should never have left her on her own. If anything happened to her, I’d never forgive myself.

My heart raced as I sprinted even faster. What the hell had I been thinking, sending a human off alone in the middle of a bloody werewolf fight? *Especially* a human like Cali. She was a fucking magnet for trouble. Somehow it just seemed to seek her out.

As I rounded the final corner before the front of the mansion and the source of the screams, I could see that the front door had caved in—ripped off its hinges, by the looks of it. My blood turned to ice as I leapt up the stairs and looked into the house. Utter destruction. It looked like the roof had caved in. There was dust everywhere, hovering in the air like a thick fog. Through it, I saw splintered planks sharp as daggers sticking up everywhere. A giant crystal chandelier had fallen—its skeleton was visible through the wreckage—and the broken glass was scattered across the floor, glittering like deadly diamonds. And there, beneath the chaos, I saw Cali’s feet, heartbreakingly small, covered in a thin layer of dust.

Hands were better than paws for digging, so I shifted back and started desperately pulling away the boards and sheets of plaster. “Cali! *Cali!* Are you okay? Say something, Cali!”

There was another sound, the gurgle of a death sputter, and I stilled, frozen in terror.

*It can’t be. Please don’t let it be her.*

The next moment, though, there was a growl, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Cali didn’t growl. I dug a little further and the situation became clear. There was a dying wolf on top of Cali. The broken arms of the chandelier had slammed right through it, as sharp and jagged as bayonets. I grabbed the iron frame and tugged, but Cali—barely visible beneath the rubble—began to scream in agony.

Her eyes flew open and looked around fearfully before focusing on me. “Xavier,” she breathed, a tear trickling down her cheek. “Stop. Please. It hurts so much.”

My stomach dropped. The chandelier had impaled the wolf, but it had gone through Cali as well.

I took a deep breath and tried to focus. She’d opened her eyes. She’d spoken. She was alive. But as quickly as they’d opened, her eyes fluttered shut once again.

“Cali, I’m here,” I said, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. “I’m right here. I’m going to get you out.”

The dying wolf, hearing my voice, gave one last pathetic growl that turned into a rattling gurgle before its body went limp. I ignored it and, clearing more debris, was able to climb closer to Cali. Her skin was terrifyingly ashen. “Cali, I’m here. I’m going to get you out. Can you tell me where it hurts?”

Her eyes opened. I scanned her and, moving a shard of plaster, found what I’d been looking for, but hoping not to find—a pool of blood under her shoulder.

It was spreading.

“Oh god,” I muttered, gritting my teeth. I knew what I had to do. I leaned in close and brushed a lock of hair from Cali’s beautiful face. “Caliana. Can you look at me?”

She met my gaze, but her eyes were strangely unfocused.

My stomach was tied in knots, and I had to take several deep breaths to calm myself. “I’m going to help you, babe, but it’s going to hurt.”

She looked confused, like she was seeing me for the first time. Her brows drew together, making a tiny pucker between her eyes. “Xavier?” she asked, her voice raspy.

The thought of what I was about to do to her made me feel sick, but it had to be done. I grasped the jagged iron spike. “Are you ready, Cali?”

She looked scared now, like she’d just remembered what was happening. It broke my heart to see her so vulnerable, so broken. I hated myself for doing this to her. Finally, with a look of intense concentration, she nodded.

“One… Two…” Sweat was pouring down my face. “Three!” I pulled with all my might and hauled the chandelier up, ripping the broken frame out of Cali’s body.

Her scream ricocheted through me like a bullet, destroying everything it touched.

I threw the destroyed chandelier and the limp wolf away and fell to Cali’s side, cradling her writhing body in my arms. There was blood everywhere, mingling with the dust and plaster. She was still partially buried so I dug with all my might, whispering her name, begging her to stay with me.

But her eyes had fallen shut again.

“Open your eyes, Cali,” I said, my voice harsh with fear. Her eyes fluttered open. But she didn’t look scared anymore. She smiled at me, a dreamy look in her eyes. There was something otherworldly about it, and it scared the living shit out of me. That distant look was worse than the fear, worse than the screams.

As clearly as if a movie had just started in my head, I could see her, standing in my room in the pack house on the day she’d first arrived. The way she’d looked at me, that foolishly hopeful look in her eyes… Though that had been before I’d spoken and scared the shit out of her. I hadn’t known it then, but she’d had me wrapped around her finger from that moment on. Looking at her lying in my lap, blood-soaked and dusty, I realized just how much I cared about her. How much I needed her. She was my mate—my true mate. I felt it. And I couldn’t let anything happen to her. She *had* to be okay.

I loved her too much to lose her.

There was a rumble behind me, but I didn’t turn. My focus was on Cali. I didn’t want to take my eyes off of her, not for a second.

Then, there was a growl.

“Fuck,” I muttered, turning at last.

The wolf, the one that was still impaled by the fallen chandelier, wasn’t dead. It rose like a hellish, blood-covered phoenix, the broken shards of the chandelier still running straight through it. I could see the blood-thirst in its red eyes as it looked at me.

I gave Cali’s arm a reassuring squeeze, then stood up, putting myself between the wolf and Cali before I shifted.

The wolf was going to lunge right, I would have bet my life on it, but I didn’t even give it a chance to get that far. I pounced first and locked my jaws around its throat. The wolf was already weak, so the fight was over before it began. I ripped the throat out first, then went to work on the rest of it, shredding the body, feeling its bones snap between my jaws, ripping out its heart, and still it wasn’t enough. I poured all my anger and terror into reducing that wolf to a pile of skin and bloody goo, and lost myself so fully in the release that it took me a moment to remember what I’d been doing a moment before.

*Cali!*

Throwing aside what was left of the Rogue with a growl, I moved back to her side and worked on clearing the debris that still covered much of her body.

Her eyes were fixed on me, but they were going in and out of focus. I moved a plank away from her shoulder and saw, for the first time, the source of the blood. There was a jagged wound in her right shoulder.

Was that a wolf bite? Had that fucking bastard bitten her? I bent, looking closely at the bloody edges. There was too much blood to tell for certain.

*Not a wolf bite.*

The answer came in my mind. Quickly, I looked up at Cali.

*It’s from the chandelier*,she said, her voice dim and echoey in my mind.

I huffed a sigh of relief and bent to lick the wound, hoping it would speed the healing.

Cali flinched and hissed with pain, but I kept licking. I could taste her blood on my tongue, and it was the sweetest I had ever tasted. Everyone tasted a little different, but Cali tasted like everything perfect about a summer night. She was rain and honey and sex, and I nuzzled close to her shoulder again. Loving her taste had to be a mate thing.

She’d closed her eyes again, so I nudged her face until she opened them. She smiled and ran a hand down the length of my nose. “I’m here,” she whispered, but it looked like every word was costing her.

She *was* here, but barely. If I’d arrived a second later, that wolf would have bitten her. If it hadn’t been for the chandelier, it would have killed her.

How could I live with that? I ground my teeth together. I hated to admit it—I didn’t even want to think about it—but she was right.

I was going to have to turn her.

**Episode 311**

Burning.

My shoulder was *burning*. I kept fading in and out of consciousness, and every time I woke up, it seemed to hurt worse than before. I tried to focus on Xavier at my side. When he shifted back to his human form, his face was pale and lined with worry. There was a strange look in his eyes, something I didn’t recognize, but I was too weak to ask what it meant.

“Keep your eyes open, Cali,” he growled, and I frowned weakly at his intensity burning in his gaze. Was he angry? “Stay with me.”

No. *Terrified*.

I hadn’t even realized my eyes were closing. But I was tired. *So* tired. All I wanted was to go to sleep, where the pain couldn’t find me. But I tried to stay awake, for Xavier. I looked around as best I could without moving my head. There was dust everywhere. Plaster, broken wood, and there, to the side, the mangled carcass of a wolf. I squinted at it, trying to piece everything together. That wolf had come after me—attacked me. We’d fallen into the house.

It had all happened so fast. But I knew one thing for certain: Xavier had saved me.

The hair on my arms stood up. Somewhere, in the distance, I heard a wolf’s mournful howl.

“Oh god,” I said, and tried to brace my hands in the rubble.

“What the hell are you doing?” Xavier asked quickly, moving to me.

“I need to get up. I have to help. Someone might be in trouble.” My hands scrabbled through the broken boards and shattered glass, trying to find purchase so I could stand.

“Stop,” Xavier said, putting his hand on my good shoulder and holding me down. “That was Colton. The battle is over.”

I struggled to process this. “It’s over?”  
 He rocked back on his heels and took a deep breath. “Yeah. It’s over.” He sighed. “I’m taking you home.”

I nearly cried with joy at his words. Then Xavier slipped his arms beneath me and lifted, and I cried because of the sheer agony.

“Cali,” Xavier said quietly, his voice ragged. “Stay with me.”

I leaned my head against his chest. “I’m with you,” I whispered.

He looked down at me and, after a moment, pressed a soft kiss to my lips. But when he looked at me, his eyes were dark and his voice hard-edged. “Never do that to me again.”

I tried to smile back at him, but it was too much effort, so I just leaned into him again.

As he made his way through the chaos of the decrepit house, it occurred to me that we’d communicated telepathically while he was a wolf. We were mind-linked. We really were mates.

As Xavier stepped back outside, I closed my eyes again. I could hear the general murmuring of the pack as everyone shifted back and started assessing injuries and swapping war stories. Over the din, I heard a raucous laugh. It was harsh in my ears, and I opened my eyes to see where it was coming from.

Gabriel was there, covered in blood, his head thrown back in laughter. His eyes were bright as stars as he looked around. “That was fucking *amazing!* Why didn’t y’all tell me you had so much fun around here?” He tossed back his head again and howled in delight.

As Xavier stepped out onto the lawn, Colton and Maya moved toward us.

“Where’d you disappear to, Xavier—” Colton started saying, looking annoyed, but he stopped short when his eyes traveled to my shoulder. “Oh shit.”

Maya was trailing after him, and, seeing me, her eyes grew wide. “Fuck, Cali. Are you okay?”

I nodded and tried to smile. “You should see the other guy—” I started, but the words died in my dry throat.

“Shhh,” Xavier said, adjusting me in his arms. “Just rest. You can tell your shitty jokes later.” For the first time since I’d come to, the ghost of a smile quirked up the corner of his mouth.

I would have shot back something snarky, but I was too tired. Where was that surge of energy I’d experienced when the wolf had attacked me? Or when I’d kissed—

“Greyson.”

Blood-spattered but still looking strong, Greyson strode up the porch steps with Joss as his side. He turned to face the pack. “The Manus Cruentae is finished. Thanks to all of you.”

There was a smattering of claps, and someone pumped a weary arm.

“What happened to Adra?” Rishika asked. “She’s their leader. If she’s not gone—”

“We took care of her,” Greyson said firmly. He glanced around and, finding me buried in Xavier’s arms, locked eyes with me for a fraction of a second.

*You’ll be back, love.*

His words from earlier echoed in my mind. I narrowed my eyes and tightened my grip around Xavier’s neck.

Greyson smirked, like he knew what I was thinking, and turned back to the pack. “We’ve got clean-up to do. Rishika, you start a bonfire to burn the bodies. Everyone else, start dragging them over. The sooner this is done, the sooner we can get back to the pack house.” He looked over as Xavier started to walk away, still holding me tight. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“I’m not on housekeeping duty tonight,” Xavier said shortly, without turning around.

“The fuck you’re not,” Greyson growled. “We all pitch in. That’s what a pack does, Xavier. I wish I didn’t have to remind you so fucking often—”

“I have to get Cali home,” Xavier said, annoyed, turning to face him. “She’s injured.”

Greyson’s eyes flicked down to me and did a quick scan. I saw them widen as he took in the blood and the shredded fabric of my dress. The change in his expression was tiny and gone in an instant. He looked back up at Xavier. “Go.”

Xavier walked me to the car and opened the door. His face screwed up in concentration, he placed me very gently on the seat.

“Thank you,” I said, putting my hand on his cheek, which was still bloody and mud-streaked. His complete focus on me made my heart feel too big for my chest. I was so lucky to have him.

He nodded and went to close my door, but I stopped him. I grabbed his hand and kissed his bruised and bloodied knuckles. “Xavier, thank you.”

His smile was taut with tension, but he moved his thumb to travel over my lips for a moment. “Let’s get you home.”

He climbed into the car, and I looked out my window as the pack started hauling the bodies of wolves and Rogues toward a growing bonfire. Rishika yelled something to Gabriel and he came over. Together they picked up a body so mangled I couldn’t make out a face and tossed it into the fire.

It was a strange world I lived in.

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When I sat up, I was naked. I looked around, panicking for a moment. I was back in my room in the pack house. I must have drifted off to sleep before we’d gotten back. Xavier must have carried me upstairs. I had a vague memory of him gently removing off my bloodstained clothes and tucking blankets around me.

I took a deep breath and waited until my heart rate returned to normal. In the quiet of the house, I could hear the distant sound of voices. I’d been asleep long enough that the pack had gotten back.

With difficulty, I pulled myself out of bed and hobbled into the bathroom. There had been a building collapse—that much I remembered—and my whole body felt bruised. I looked at myself in the mirror. My face was filthy. There was dried blood all along my jaw, and I had a long scratch from my eye down the side of my face. The blood from my shoulder had dried across my chest and there was more—probably the wolf’s blood—across my stomach and thighs. There was so much of it, it almost camouflaged my tiger stripes.

Tentatively, I lifted my shoulder. It hurt, but the pain wasn’t as blinding as it had been. I looked closer: the wound seemed to be smaller. It was already healing. I looked at the jagged edges. Was it Xavier’s touch that was healing it? Or did it have something to do with me being Fae?

I didn’t know the answer to that question, and just thinking about it made my head ache, so I turned and flipped on the shower. I waited until it was lava-hot before I stepped in. I hissed when the water hit me, but it felt good to scour the dirt and blood off my body. The sight of the blood swirling at my feet made me feel sick to my stomach, and I quickly looked away.

My thoughts returned to the battle as I closed my eyes and let the water run over my head. I thought about Adra, about my fall out the window. I thought about Greyson. I thought about our kiss.

I let myself dwell on this for a moment and found something else in my thoughts. There was the guilt of betrayal, of course. I’d felt that the last time we’d kissed, too. But there was something else. Something else was troubling me, but I couldn’t find the words to define it.

I put my hands in my hair and rubbed the grime from my scalp. Maybe it was the uncertainty of *due destini*. Or of being Fae. There were just so many things to be uncertain about right now.

But there was one thing I was sure of. I thought about the fairy tale of *due destini*. I knew how Cassandra’s story had ended. And if Xavier and Greyson were both my mates… The thought filled me with dread.

Were all three of us going to end up dead in a ditch?

**Episode 312**

When I woke up again, the room was empty. It was dusk, and the sky outside the window looked like it was on fire. Red and orange and pink clouds streaked the horizon, and the light in the room looked hazy. I lay still for a moment, listening, but there was nothing. No distant sounds of movement or talking. It was eerily silent.

So when the shower turned on in the bathroom, I jumped at the sound. Then I shook my head, laughing at myself. It was just Xavier. I wanted to talk to him, so I slipped out of bed and padded across the floor. I was still naked after my own shower, and I grinned as I thought about slipping in and joining him.

Even though the shower had just been turned on, the bathroom was already steamy when I entered. The mirrors and glass shower door were completely fogged. I stepped toward the shower and reached for the door.

My eyes traveled up to the shower head, where the clear water had become dark—turned to blood. Hot, steaming blood, spraying down on...

I stifled a scream as Greyson stepped forward, out of the steam. His eyes raked over me. “I told you you’d be back, love.” His voice reverberated through my head. There was blood streaming in rivulets down his naked body as he reached for me with his blood-soaked hand.

I took a step back. Then another, then another. I closed my eyes and screamed.

And then I woke up.

I was sitting up in bed, panting like I’d been sprinting, and my T-shirt was soaked with sweat. I sat still for a moment, waiting for my pulse to slow. “It was a nightmare. Just a nightmare,” I murmured to myself, but I was still clutching the bunched-up sheets.

I looked around the dark room. It was night and the sky outside was black, but the light from the lamp next to my bed glowed bright enough that I could see I was alone. I raised my shoulder, testing it. It felt even better than before. It looked better, too. The skin was knitting back together. Thanks to Xavier.

Speaking of Xavier, where was he?

Before I had time to feel properly annoyed that he wasn’t waiting at my bedside, my stomach growled loudly in the quiet room. I was starving. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d eaten, so I stood and grabbed my robe. My shoulder felt better, but my body was still stiff, so I moved slowly through the house toward the stairs.

I paused when I heard voices in the hall, and not just any voices. I heard Xavier’s low rumble and walked closer to the closed door.

“—I just want to know why the hell you’d do that, Gabriel.”

I heard Gabriel laugh. “Your girl needed a ride. I’m like a knight, man—I can’t leave a lovely lady in need. So I gave her a ride.”

“Yeah, you’re a real prince,” Xavier said, sounding annoyed. “Did she happen to mention that both Greyson and I had told her she couldn’t leave?”

“Well.” Gabriel laughed. “She did seem kind of secretive, but I don’t ask questions if I don’t want to know the answers. Anyway, I don’t get it. She’s your mate, right? Aren’t you supposed to trust her?”

Gabriel’s works sank into me like a punch in the gut. Xavier and I had just been arguing about this very thing. I took a step closer, wondering how he was going to respond.

He scoffed. “I don’t need a lecture about mates from you, Gabe. You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. You’ve never even had a mate.”

“That’s just because I haven’t met the right person yet,” Gabriel said, and I could practically hear his wicked grin through the door.

“Yeah, and you never will if you keep going the way you’re going.”

“Well,” Gabriel drawled, “I have to admit that my line of work tends to put a damper on romantic entanglements of the long-term variety.”

“Yeah, being a mercenary does that,” Xavier said, sounding faintly amused.

“You ever miss it?” Gabriel asked.

My stomach dropped. I took another step closer, straining to hear Xavier’s answer.

He didn’t say anything for a long moment. “Sometimes I do.”

Gabriel let out a barking laugh that made me jump back. “I knew it!” he crowed triumphantly. “Because it’s fun, right? I was watching you out there today, man. You enjoyed yourself. It was just like the old days.”

Xavier gave a reluctant chuckle. “It was pretty fun. Until Cali got hurt,” he added, sobering.

“But she’s okay, right? You said she was fine. And the Manus Cruentae is history, right?”

“What are you getting at?” Xavier snapped.

“Nothing, nothing,” Gabriel said in an innocent voice, but I wasn’t fooled. And neither, I suspected, was Xavier. “It’s just that I have a job and I could use an extra pair of hands. I was wondering if you’d join me.” He paused. “Unless, of course, you want to stick around here.”

Oh god. I practically pressed my ear against the door to hear Xavier’s response, but just at that moment the front door opened downstairs. The sound of a dozen people spilling into the house—talking and laughing and screaming—drowned out all other sounds.

“Dammit,” I whispered.

I leaned closer and really concentrated until I could finally make out some sounds.

There was a sound like a chair moving on the hardwood floor and Xavier said, “I’m going to check on Cali.”

I stifled a gasp and sprinted back to our room. Launching myself into bed, I pulled the blankets up just as Xavier appeared in the doorway.

“Hey, babe,” I said sleepily, as though I was just waking up. “Where have you been?”

“How are you feeling?” he asked, deftly avoiding my question. He walked to my side to get a look at my shoulder. My skin turned to gooseflesh as his fingers ran the length of the wound. “This looks better. How does it feel?”

“Better,” I said. I scooted over so he could climb in next to me.

He looked at the space on the bed for a moment, then climbed in, looking wary.

I thought of the conversation I’d just illicitly overheard and swallowed hard. “Are you okay? You look like your mind is somewhere else.” He didn’t answer for a moment. “What’s wrong, Xavier?”

He gave his head a tight shake. “I’ve just been thinking about what happened today. And what *almost* happened. And about where we’ve been.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He looked over at me, meeting my eyes with his level stare. “I think it’s time we took a break.”

“A break?”

He nodded. “A real break. One with some physical distance between us.”

I stared at him, uncomprehending. “Are you… breaking up with me?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I’m not talking about breaking up, Cali. I just…”

“You just what?” I asked when he paused.   
 “I think we need to get away from each other for a while. I think we need a chance to reset.”

“I don’t need to reset,” I stammered. My heart was beating so hard, it felt like a hummingbird was caught in my ribcage.

He gave me a long look. “I’m going with Gabriel.”

“*What?*” I demanded, moving away from Xavier on the bed. “Are you kidding me with this, Xavier? Gabriel is a *mercenary*—”

“And so am I,” Xavier added.

I bit my lip. “You can’t go,” I said, shaking my head and pulling the sheet tighter around me.

“Cali, don’t do this. Gabriel needs help on a job. And you’re safe here now.”

I chewed my lip. I didn’t like this, not at all. “When will you be back? *If* you’ll be back.”

He reached for me. I tried to pull away, but he was too fast and caught my hand, gently pulling me back toward him across the silken sheets. “You’re so theatrical, Cali. That’s the human in you. I’m *going* to be back.” He wrapped his arms around me and pulled closer. “And while I’m gone, Colton and Maya will look after you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, great. Was the pack of feral dogs that roams the woods not available on short notice? Anyway, I don’t need Colton and Maya to look after me. I don’t need babysitters, Xavier. I’m fine on my own, thank you very much.” Heat began to rise in my cheeks. “And maybe getting some physical distance is a good idea. Maybe I’ll go somewhere. The Bahamas are nice—”

“Cali, just listen,” Xavier growled, interrupting my tirade. “There’s something else.”

“What?” I demanded, crossing my arms over my chest.

“I’m going to be back before the next full moon.”

“Congratulations,” I snapped, and started to move away.

But Xavier held me tight against him. “Don’t you want to know why?”

A thrill of fear stilled me. “Why?”

His dark eyes glittered in the darkness. “Because when I get back, I’m going to turn you.”

**Episode 313**

I stared at Xavier, trying to process his words. “You’re going to come back to *turn me?*”

His steady gaze didn’t falter as he nodded.

Pulling my knees to my chest, I rested my chin on them, thinking hard. He’d been so great lately. So thoughtful and caring. He’d been treating me more like a partner—like a mate—which was certainly progress from where we’d started. I looked up into his eyes. The room was dark, but I could see him clear as day. I loved him, and he was going to leave me. The knowledge sucked the breath out of my lungs.

“You don’t need to go away. You can stay here. Turn me now,” I whispered.

But Xavier shook his head. “I think we need some time apart, Cali.”

“Xavier—”

He stood and started to pace the room. “I think it’ll be good for us.” He turned back to me. “I think it’ll make us stronger. Everything has been so… complicated lately. We can use this time to clear our heads. We’ll stand on our own two feet, and when we’re back together, we’ll be even closer. Like true mates.”

“I don’t need to get stronger,” I said in a small voice. “I’m strong now.”

Xavier gave me a rueful smile.

“I don’t want you to go, okay?” I said frankly.

He tipped his head and looked at me curiously. “Are you afraid to be here by yourself? With the other wolves?”

*Yes!* I thought, thinking of the dream I’d had about Greyson. In my mind’s eye, I saw a flash of his muscled shoulders and chest, streaming with blood. *Yes, I’m terrified*. But I shook my head. “I’m not afraid of the pack, Xavier. I’m afraid of what will happen to you if you go off bounty hunting with Gabriel. I like him, but he doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence.”

Xavier smiled and walked over, sitting next to me on the bed. “Nothing’s going to happen to me,” he said softly.

“Things might change,” I whispered, my heart beating fast.

“The only thing that’s going to change is our hunger for each other.” He leaned in and nipped my earlobe, his voice deepening. “I am going to eat you alive when I get back.”

Desire thrummed low in my body.

Xavier leaned back to look at me again, and his eyes burned into mine. “I don’t need your permission, Cali, but I want it. Let me do this,” he said, his voice low and husky. He squeezed my hands. “I need to do this.”

He didn’t need my permission—of course he didn’t—but as I looked at him, I realized he wasn’t telling me what he was going to do, he was asking me. I knew this was a big moment for him—for *us*—but I couldn’t hold back my tears. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him close. “I don’t want you to go.”

When I pressed my lips to his, it was like touching a match to dynamite. He pushed me roughly to the bed and covered me with his body, pressing me into the mattress. His kiss was hard and demanding and his tongue pushed past my lips, claiming my mouth, claiming my tongue, claiming my soul.

“I don’t need space,” I murmured as he moved his kisses to my neck. He pinned my hands to the mattress on either side of my head. “Can’t you see that? I need you.”

His tongue found the hollow just behind my ear, and I closed my eyes with a moan. The feel of his tongue flicking against my skin made me pant with pleasure. “This,” I murmured, “*this* is what we need.”

I could feel him growing hard against me as I writhed beneath him. He was holding my hands still, but I struggled against him.

“No, no,” he whispered.

“I want to touch you.” I gasped as he pushed his erection against me. “I need to touch you. Let me, Xavier. I want to—”

“All in good time,” he said, leaning back and giving me a wolfish grin. I groaned and he moved down my neck to my breasts. He nibbled on my nipples through the thin fabric of my T-shirt until it grew damp, then he blew on it, making my nipples harden in anticipation.

Heat was pooling below my belly button and I wanted to open my legs, wrap them around his waist, pull him into me, but the weight of his body kept me still beneath him.

“Xavier, please,” I moaned.

“I like it when you beg,” he said, his grin turning wicked. “Why don’t you tell me what you want, my tiger.”

The sound of my name on his tongue made my mind feel liquid. “I want you inside me.”

“Do you?” he growled. “How?”

“I want you to bury yourself in me.” I was out of my mind with want, saying anything that flickered across my muddled mind. “I want your hands everywhere. I want to touch you, I want to suck you, I want to—”

He covered my mouth with his, silencing me. But this wasn’t a kiss, this was domination. This was a claiming. He was showing me that I belonged to him. I didn’t even notice he’d let go of my hands until I found them tangled in his hair. But once I noticed, I made full use of them. I tugged his hair and freed one hand to drag my nails up his back. I felt him shiver beneath my touch, so I did it again. Harder.

“Cali,” he murmured against my lips, his voice a pleading rasp. For a moment, he didn’t seem quite so in control.

I took advantage of that, bracing my hands against the mattress and pushing myself up. He flipped over and I swung my leg across his hips to straddle him. He reached for my T-shirt, but I slapped his hand away.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” I said, smiling now that I was on top. “All in good time.”

He returned my grin and settled his hands behind his head, content to watch. I grasped the hem of my shirt and pulled it up slowly, revealing my skin inch by inch. Through his jeans I could feel him growing even harder, and I swirled my hips, sliding myself along his length.

By the time I pulled my shirt off and tossed it over my shoulder, he’d had enough. With a growl, he dug his fingers into my panties and pulled, shredding the black lace. He flipped me off him and back onto the mattress, then yanked off his T-shirt.

Desperate for him, I fumbled with his belt, but he brushed my hand away and made quick work of it. In a moment his pants were off and he’d rolled on a condom. Nearly delirious with anticipation, I spread my legs open for him and he buried himself inside me.

I sank into the mattress, my mind blank, the blackness behind my eyes alive with shooting stars. “Oh god oh god oh god…”

“The name’s Xavier,” he growled, moving slowly inside me.

“Fuck me, Xavier,” I said, wrapping my legs around his waist.

He didn’t need another invitation. He drove into me and I tightened around him.

“*Fuck*,” he said, closing his eyes. “Fuck, Cali, you feel so fucking good.”

He braced his hands on either side of me and we moved as one, our rhythm like a shared heartbeat.

“Xavier!” I screamed as he pounded into me, gripping his shoulders as I came apart, my fingernails digging mercilessly into his flesh as waves of ecstasy rolled through me like aching fire.

He panted above me, sweat gathering on his lip. In my own pleasure I tightened around him, and that pushed him over the edge. He drove into me as he came, his whole body hard and shaking. He groaned my name as he reached the peak and collapsed against me, still shivering with spent ecstasy.

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Afterward, we lay together for a long time, the quiet of the room like a blanket around our cooling bodies.

Turning in his arms, I looked at Xavier’s face in the dim light and asked the question whose answer I dreaded. “When are you planning to leave?”

“In the morning.”

“*Tomorrow?*” I asked, the surprise landing hard.

He nodded.

I bit my lip. I was trying to understand his reasoning, trying to believe him when he said this would be good for us, but I wasn’t happy about it. “I wish you could wait a few days.”

“Gabriel needs me now.”

“So do I.”

Xavier reached for me, his fingers stroking down a lock of my hair. “I’m still waiting for your permission, Cali. Will you let me do this?”

I looked into his dark eyes, and, fighting the tears in my own, nodded. Then I grabbed his shoulders. “But I need you to promise me that you’re going to come back. *Unharmed*. Everything here,” I said, my eyes ranging over him, “needs to come back in the exact same condition it left. Understood?”

When he pulled me against him, I could feel a chuckle rumbling through his chest. “Understood.” His eyes grew serious. “I swear to you, Cali. I’ll be fine.” He waited until I nodded, and then he got out of bed and reached for his jeans. “I need to talk to Colton.”

He probably wanted Colton to join him and Gabriel. I liked the idea of Xavier having someone else there to watch his back, but I couldn’t help but think that Maya wouldn’t be all too happy if Colton took off just now.

“How are things going between him and Maya?” I asked.

Xavier looked a little confused as he pulled his T-shirt over his head. “Him and Maya? I don’t think there’s really anything to go. I’m pretty sure they can’t stand each other.”

God, men were blind. “I think there’s more going on between them than you know.”

He shrugged and, now fully clothed, leaned down to kiss me. I slid out of bed and walked him to the door. Xavier reached for the knob and, kissing me again, walked out.

I laid my hand against the cool wood for a moment. Then, still haunted by my dream about finding Greyson in my shower, I flipped the lock. Climbing back into bed, I settled back against my pillow with a sigh. Xavier was leaving me. He was still in the house and I already felt lost. But, he had sworn that he’d come back and turn me—exactly what I’d been begging him to do.

But now I wasn’t so sure. Considering I was Fae, would it work the way it was supposed to? What if I only half-turned, like Lola, and ended up stuck in between like some kind of wolf-girl freak? I wished Xavier was here. There were a lot more questions I wanted to ask.

As if I’d summoned him, there was a knock on the door. I flew to it, pulling it open.

“Xavier!”

But it wasn’t Xavier. It was Greyson.

**Episode 314**

Greyson leaned against the doorway, his eyes traveling slowly over my naked body like he had all the time in the world.

I felt a flush heat my face and I scrambled back to the bed and ripped a sheet from it, wrapping it around myself like a toga.

“There’s no need for that,” Greyson said, smirking. Clearly he was enjoying seeing me flustered.

I glared at him as I yanked the sheet even tighter, tripping over it in my haste. “What are you doing here?” I demanded, struggling to keep my voice from shaking.

Greyson didn’t answer but stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him.

“Don’t come in,” I said. Instinctively, I took a step back, but I ended up backing into the bed and tumbling onto it. “What are you doing? Why are you here?” I asked again, my dream still fresh in my mind. I pulled the sheet all the way up to my neck and stared at him as defiantly as I could.

He grinned at me. “I’m here because you opened the door.” His hungry gaze traveled down the now-thoroughly-mummified length of me. “Pretty enthusiastically, too.”

“I-I thought you were Xavier,” I stammered. “Obviously.”

“Obviously?” he asked. He raised his eyebrows, tipping his head back toward the door. “I could go get him, if you’d prefer?”

“No!” My voice was louder than I’d intended, the thought of explaining this situation to Xavier making me feel sick to my stomach.

When Greyson grinned, he looked exactly like the wolf he was.

He wasn’t making any move on me, so my fear was draining away and I could feel the last of it hardening into anger. “What the hell do you want, Greyson?”

“Want?” he asked innocently. “What makes you think I want anything?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Unless you *don’t* want anything. God, is it possible you really just came in here to embarrass me? Do you really not have anything better to do?”

“I didn’t come in just to embarrass you,” he said. Then he added, with the hint of a smile, “But it *is* fun to watch you turn red. Did you know that when you blush, you blush *everywhere?*”

“Get the hell out!” I snapped, pointing at the door.

He acted like he hadn’t heard me. “I came to look at your shoulder. I was worried about you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure you were.” I clutched at the sheet around me. “It’s fine. I’m fine. Xavier licked it. It’s healing, so there’s no need for you to worry. Off you go.”

Ignoring me again, he took a step toward the bed and I shrank back. Closer now, he seemed massive. He towered above me, looming like a giant. His grey eyes flashed as he reached out his hand and brushed aside a corner of the sheet to expose the wound, lightly running his long fingers against the healing seam.

I gritted my teeth, trying not to shiver as an explosion of butterflies launched in my stomach. I cleared my throat. “See. It’s fine.” I looked up at him. “Was there anything else?”  
 His expression was unreadable. “I think there is.”

Oh god, the kiss. He wanted to talk about the kiss. Torment me about it, more likely. Well, that wasn’t going to happen. I set my jaw determinedly. I was *not* going to discuss that kiss with him. Not now. Probably not ever.

He lowered his huge frame to sit next to me and the mattress sank beneath his weight, tipping me toward him. I pulled my sheet even tighter around me and pulled away. But he was still so close I could feel waves of heat coming from him, which I did my best to ignore.

“How long have you known?” he asked.

I looked up at him, confused. “Known what?”

He looked at me for a moment, his eyes ranging over my face, taking me in. Then he leaned forward and, when he spoke, he was so close I could feel his breath moving the strands of hair across my ear. “How long have you known that you’re Fae?”

Right. That. I took a deep breath. I’d promised my mother I wouldn’t tell anyone. When I’d left her, I’d intended to keep that promise, but… Greyson *had* figured it out on his own. I bit my lip, thinking. It probably wouldn’t be breaking the promise to answer his question. He wasn’t asking me *if* I was Fae, he was asking me how long I’d *known* I was Fae. “Since my last trip to Minnesota.”

He leaned back and blew out a breath, taking this in.

He was quiet for a moment, so I asked him the question *I’d* been thinking about. “How did you guess?”

He held up his hand, which was now completely healed. “Silver wounds don’t heal on their own, Cali. And they sure as hell don’t heal with human blood.” He shrugged. “I just connected the dots.”

Chewing my lip now, I looked at him nervously. “What are you going to do now that you know?” When he didn’t answer I added in a rush, “Please don’t tell anyone.”

His eyes flashed. “Does Xavier know?”

When I shook my head, his brows went up.

“I couldn’t tell him,” I explained. “My mom—she’s the one who’s Fae—she made me promise not to tell anyone.”

He nodded somberly. “Your mother is wise. It’s dangerous enough for you to be a human running with a pack of wolves, but now…” He trailed off, apparently lost in thought.

“What?” I asked, my anxiety rising. “Now *what?*”

He ran his fingers over his lips, looking agitated. “Witches, werewolves, vampires—they all have uses for Fae blood.”

Panic bloomed in my stomach . “Yeah, I’ve noticed. There was that vampire at the Renaissance faire, and this other one, Mikah, back in Minnesota. And Big Mac, of course.” I looked up at Greyson. “Are they all after my blood?”

He didn’t answer, but he took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. The pressure sent ripples through my body.

“I’ll protect you, Cali,” he said, and for once there was no glinting light of mockery in his eyes. “I hope you know that.”

Eyes wide, I nodded. I couldn’t speak.

He didn’t let go of my hand. “Tell me about your mother. Why is she living in our world?”

I looked down at my hand, still grasped between both of his, resting in his lap. “She fell in love with my father, who’s human.” I stopped, thinking. I didn’t know how much of my family history I wanted to reveal to Greyson. Not yet, anyway. “So she stayed.” I thought about how frail she’d felt when I’d hugged her before I left. How soft her voice had been. How much pain I’d seen in her eyes. My own eyes filled with tears. “I wish I could see her again,” I whispered.

“Cali, is something wrong?” Greyson asked. A line of confusion appeared on his brow. “You were just with her.”

Pressing my lips together to keep from crying, I shook my head. I would *not* sob. Not in front of Greyson. I took a deep breath and was finally able to speak. “She’s sick. We thought she was getting better, but she’s not.”

The line between his eyes deepened. “Your mom is sick? She’s Fae. How can she be sick? I don’t understand.”

I pulled my hand from his grasp and stood, holding my sheet tight. Why was I still wearing this? Where were my clothes? I stepped forward in search of them. “I don’t really want to talk about it right now, Greyson.” I bent to pick up my shirt. My panties were a shredded wreck, so I just kicked them under the bed.

“Cali—”

“You seem to know a lot about the Fae world,” I said, rounding on him.

He tipped his head, considering me. “I know a little,” he said after a moment.

What did that mean? I narrowed my eyes. “How little?”

“I’ve run into Fae before.”

My eyebrows shot up. “*And?*”

A muscle in his jaw flexed. “And it wasn’t a particularly pleasant experience.”

I looked at him, intrigued. He wasn’t joking—the mocking twinkle in his grey eyes was gone, and his mouth was pulled into a tense line. When he wasn’t a giant, bloodthirsty wolf, he was a giant, intimidating man. What could have had happened during his run-in to make the memory of it so unpleasant? How much did he know?

“Did you mean it?” I asked, curious.

The question seemed to catch him off-guard. “Mean what?”

I clutched my balled-up shirt in my hands. “When you came in, you said you were worried about me. Did you mean that, or were you just fucking with me again?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. Then, when he did, it seemed like the words cost him. “I meant it. I *am* worried about you.”

I was back across the room in two strides and I sat down, staring up at him hungrily. “Then tell me everything you know about the Fae.”

“Cali—”

“Everything.”

**Episode 315**

When Greyson sighed, the sound seemed to come from the deepest part of him. “Do you know what you’re asking, Cali?”

What was he talking about? “What are you talking about?”

“I’ll tell you if you really want to know, but I have to warn you”—he gave me a long stare—“some of it’s not pleasant.”

*Not pleasant*. Please. He was trying to scare me off. *Typical*. I rolled my eyes. “I’m not some weak little damsel in distress, Greyson. I’m perfectly capable of handling the hard truth.”

He leaned back, bracing his hands behind him. “You know I was Rogue for a while, right?’

I nodded.

“During that time I ran into a Fae.” He paused.

“And?” I asked when he didn’t seem inclined to go on.

He looked at me for a moment. “She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.” He shook his head. “It might have been her magic. I didn’t know for sure. Still don’t. I’ve heard Fae can perform glamour magic.”

I’d heard that, too. I didn’t fully understand it, but I wondered if this glamour was a spell I’d have to learn. I cursed my lack of knowledge. My mom had been so vague about everything. “What happened with her?”

His eyes were impossible to read, but, after a long pause, he leaned forward and pulled off his T-shirt.

I stood, clutching my sheet. “What the hell are you doing?” I demanded.

He didn’t answer, just pointed to a jagged scar across his torso. It crossed the architecture of his abdominal muscles in a diagonal line, but oddly, it was bright white, the color of a new star, a stark contrast to his golden skin. He raised his eyebrows. “*This* is what happened.”

I stepped closer, drawn back to him by the sight of that strange scar. It called to me in some mysterious way. Perhaps it was the knowledge that it had been caused by one of my own. I leaned forward, stopping about an inch away from it, looking at it through narrowed eyes.

“Go ahead.” Greyson chuckled. “You can touch it.”

I sat down next to him and brushed the length of the scar with my finger. It couldn’t be true, but I could have sworn I felt a faint zing of electricity coming from it, like an echo of the magic that had been used to create it. When I looked back up at Greyson, his eyes were dark.

“I’m lucky be alive.”

My eyes went back to his, and I could read the tense expression on his face. It held anger and worry, but fear as well.

He glanced down at his healed hand. “Not all Fae are good, Cali.”

My hand pulled away from his skin, curling into a fist. I’d heard that, too. Could *I* be bad? I didn’t *feel* darkness in myself, but perhaps you never could. How could I know? I was just trying to wrap my mind around that thought when Greyson spoke again.

“I have a question for you.”

“No way,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m the one who’s supposed to be asking questions here. I just found out I’m a completely different species than I thought I was. My questions first.”

He gave me a wry smile. “I get that, but there’s something that we need to talk about first.”

“What?” I asked, annoyed. Questions about Fae were cartwheeling through my brain. What could possibly be more important that that—

“That kiss.”

My brain shuddered to a halt. “*What?*”

“Cali,” he said, an edge to his voice. “We *need* to discuss it.”

Dammit. I folded my arms over my sheet, not having the slightest intention of discussingit. When he hadn’t brought it up when he’d come in, I’d thought we were both going to leave it in the past. And that was what I wanted to do. Just pretend it never happened. But I’d been a fool to think he’d let it drop. Not when it was such a perfect way to torment me. “What about it?” I snapped.

Greyson didn’t answer.

I met his gaze and stared back, pretending I wasn’t starting to feel uncomfortably warm beneath it. I didn’t mean to, but my mind flashed back to that moment out on the battlefield. He had been in pain—he’d thought he was dying. I’d smelled the blood and had been so scared. For him, for me. But all that had gone away when he’d pulled me against him and—

I pulled my eyes away from his penetrating gaze and cleared my throat. “Listen, it was an intense moment for everyone. What with the blood and the silver and the… whatnot.” *Whatnot?* I shrugged, trying to look as casual as possible. “Let’s not make too much out of it. I was worried about you and you got carried away. That’s all—”

“Do you kiss everyone you’re worried about?” he asked, voice low.

I swallowed hard. “Yep. Every single one. Takes up a ton of my time.” He tipped his head, a half-smile playing on his lips. He was messing with me. A wave of irritation flooded through me. “Anyway, *you* kissed *me*.”

His smile grew, like I’d said what he was hoping I’d say. He reached out a hand and brushed my wound lightly with his fingertip. I gritted my teeth and prayed my skin wouldn’t get goosebumps. “I don’t seem to remember you objecting,” he murmured. “And it wasn’t the first time, was it?”

“No,” I ground out. His fingers were still brushing my skin, soft as feathers.

He glanced up, into my eyes. “Ever wonder why this keeps happening to us?’

My breath was starting to hitch. “I think you’re doing it on purpose.”

That line appeared between his brows. “What do you mean?”

“I think you’re teasing me.”

But when he looked at me, I felt a shiver run through me. There was nothing teasing in his eyes. They were filled with pain and something that looked almost like betrayal. “You don’t understand at all, Cali. Can’t you see? This is just as hard for me.” He gave his head a small shake. “Maybe even harder.”

Before I could even begin to formulate a response to that, the door flew open. Both Greyson and I looked over to see Joss standing in the doorway.

Her eyes were blazing like twin suns. “What the hell is going on here?” she hissed.

Neither of us answered. Greyson casually removed his hand from my shoulder, looking not the least bit embarrassed about being caught like this.

Wait a minute. Caught like what? We weren’t doing anything wrong.

I didn’t make this argument to Joss, though, who was glaring at us with anger hot enough to melt steel.

Greyson looked at Joss, his expression unperturbed. “It’s polite to knock before you enter a room, Joss.”

If the situation hadn’t been so tense, I would have snorted. Like any of the Evers brothers ever bothered to knock.

Joss’s eyes flicked down from his bare chest to the shirt in his hand, then to me. I flinched back as fury radiated off her like waves of heat. She took in my naked shoulders and the rumpled sheet, and her eyes narrowed. She inhaled deeply, looking around the room, then turned back to me. “God, you’re disgusting. Isn’t one brother enough for you? You have to have both in one night?”

“*What?*” I sputtered.

Greyson stood and took Joss by the arm, leading her to the door. “We should leave Cali alone. She needs rest.”

Joss shook off Greyson’s arm and turned her death stare back on me. “She doesn’t need *rest*, she needs a goddamn shower.”

Stunned past the point of speech, I could do nothing but stare as Greyson grabbed Joss’s arm again and pushed her out the door. Then, without a backward glance at me, he followed her out, pulling the door shut behind him.

Like I’d just been reanimated from the dead, I jumped to my feet and leapt across the room to lock the door. I would have nailed the damn thing shut, given the opportunity.

“What the *hell* is going on with you?” I heard Joss snap at Greyson from beyond my door.

“Let’s just take a walk,” Greyson said, and I heard his footsteps heading toward the stairs.

The sound of Joss’s irate tirade faded as they walked away, and I leaned back against the door with a deep, deep sigh.

My shoulder tingled and I looked down at it, remembering Greyson’s gentle touch on the wound. I had no idea what was going on with Greyson, or what he’d meant when he’d said this was hard for him. *What* was hard for him? I knew what Joss *thought* was going on, and, while she was wrong, I also didn’t think her jealousy was completely unfounded.

Everything in my life felt chaotic right now, but there was one thing I knew for certain: Xavier was going away, and while he was gone, I had to stay the hell away from Greyson.

**Episode 316**

XAVIER

The sky was the eerie grey it got just before dawn as I moved around the room, opening drawers quietly, tossing jeans and socks into my duffel bag. Cali had stirred when I’d slid out of bed. She’d reached for me, but she’d fallen asleep again and I was trying not to wake her back up. I zipped my bag and opened the door, but stopped for a moment in the doorway and turned.

The light coming through the window was soft, falling across the planes of her sleeping face. She was so beautiful, sometimes it made me crazy just to look at her. I let my eye slip down the curve of her cheek to her jaw, to her neck and chest and then, finally, to the curve of her breast just visible above the sheet. The impulse to move to her, to reach for her, to climb back into bed and pull her close and never leave her was so strong I had to take several deep breaths to brace myself against it.

But I knew I had to do what I was about to do. It was for the best, I told myself again. For both of us. I threw my duffel over my shoulder and shut the door quietly.

Colton was in the kitchen when I came down. He looked up from his cup of coffee with a glare. “Nice of you to join me. After you *insisted* that I meet you before you left,” he added bitterly. “I don’t get to see enough sunrises these days.”

I ignored him, dropping my bag on the floor and pulling up a chair.

“So?” he asked, stretching his arms in the air. “Did Cali cry when you left? Fall at your feet and beg you not to leave?”

I poured a cup of coffee for myself. “She was asleep,” I said, without looking up.

Colton laughed. “Are you kidding me? You didn’t even wake her up to say goodbye? That’s cold, man. Ice cold.”

“Just leave it, Colton,” I said stonily.

“No,” he said, still chuckling, “it’s good. I’m just surprised. It’s kind of unlike you. Well, unlike the *new* you. And here I was, thinking she was making you soft.”

Not in the mood for jokes, I shoved him as I walked past to look out the windows.

He caught himself before he fell off the barstool, and he was still laughing as he mopped up his spilled coffee. “Touchy this morning, aren’t you?” he said, and, even though I wasn’t looking at him, I could practically hear the smirk in his voice. “So, you really are leaving.”

“Yep.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d really do it.”

“I am,” I shot back.

“And you’re not worried at all about leaving Cali behind? With Greyson?”

“Of course I’m worried,” I snapped, staring at the sun as it shot its first rays over the horizon. “And that’s exactly why I need to leave.”

Colton looked at me, confused. “I don’t get it.”

I shook my head. “It’s getting to me. All of this. I need to know that I can trust Cali, and this is the only way I can think to prove it to myself.”

“How long are you going to be gone?” Colton asked, no trace of laughter in his voice.

I shrugged. “Don’t know.”

He raised his eyebrows. “The longer you stay away, the more opportunities Greyson will have.”

“Yeah, I know that,” I said, turning to Colton. “And that’s why I need you to do me a favor.”

“What?”

“I want you to keep an eye on Greyson for me.”

Colton gave me a long look. Then he nodded. “Yeah, man. I’ll do it. He did okay with the Manus Cruentae, but even so, I just don’t trust him. Never will.”

“Yeah,” I said bitterly, “join the club. Thanks for doing that.”

“And what about Cali?” Colton raised his eyebrows, like he knew that I knew what he was talking about.

I shook my head, but that sick feeling was back in my stomach. “I’m trying to do the right thing here, Colton. I’m trying to trust her. I just need space to think.” I looked down at the coffee cup in my hand. “I just hope she understands.”

“Are you still planning on going Rogue?” Colton asked. “After this?”

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. There was so much I didn’t know. I thought about the coming full moon, when I’d told Cali I’d be back. “I’m going to turn her, when I get back.”

Colton’s eyebrows shot into his hairline. “*Whoa*. That’s… big. You sure about that?

I nodded.

Colton rubbed a hand across his eyes. “So you’re going to come back so you can turn her.” He nodded. “Yeah, that makes perfect sense, except for the part where it makes *no fucking sense at all*. What the hell are you talking about, man?”

“Going away is just something I need to do. But turning Cali?” I shook my head. “I owe her that.”

“How do you figure?” Colton was staring at me like I’d grown a second head.

“She could have been killed. She could have been killed a hundred times over, hanging out with this pack. She needs to be able to protect herself.”

Colton rolled his eyes. “I’m a little confused, brother. How about you just walk me through this. Are you and Cali breaking up? Are you staying together? What the hell’s going on?”

I felt my shoulders tense up. “We’re not together,” I growled. “At least right now.”

“So what was that last night? Like, break-up boning?”

I glared. “It could have been.”

Colton laughed. “Okay, man. Whatever.”

“All I know is that Cali and I need some distance to get our heads straight. So Gabriel’s timing is perfect.”

“Hope whoever you’re searching for feels the same,” Colton said ruefully.

“I need to get away,” I growled. “And Gabriel’s handing me the perfect opportunity.”

“Glad you think so,” Gabriel said, appearing at the kitchen doorway. He clapped his hands together with a grin. “You ready to roll? We’ve got appointments to keep.”

“Yeah,” I said, throwing him my duffel bag. “Give me a second, okay?”

Gabriel caught the bag deftly and rolled his eyes. “No lollygagging,” he said, shaking his finger like a schoolmarm.

I watched until he disappeared around the side of the house, then I turned back to Colton, remembering what Cali had said earlier. “By the way, what’s going on with you and Maya?” I smirked. “Am I going to come back to wedding bells?”

“Oh, god no,” Colton said, looking up, his face a mask of disgust. “What are you talking about? You know we hate each other. Nothing’s changed between us.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Does Maya know that?”

Colton glared. “I thought you were leaving.”

Chuckling, I shrugged. It was nice to be the one busting Colton’s balls for once. “Okay, okay.” I turned back, growing serious. “Don’t tell anyone what I told you, about turning Cali. Got it?”

“Got it,” he said, nodding.

“Okay. Take care, brother. I’ll see you in a few weeks,” I said as I walked out the door.

The sun was cresting the horizon as I walked toward the driveway. Gabriel was sitting astride his motorcycle pulling his black helmet over his wild hair. Standing in the gravel next to him was a second bike.

“Where’d you get this?” I asked, looking at the sleek black machine.

Gabriel shrugged innocently. “Just turned up last night. Lucky, huh?”

I opened my mouth to ask where it had really come from, but then I closed it, changing my mind. With Gabriel, the less I knew the better.

“Let’s hit the road,” he said, tossing me a ring of keys. He turned the key on his own bike and revved the engine, filling the quiet morning air with a thunderous roar.

I hopped on the second bike and flipped the key. It’d been a while since I’d ridden a bike of my own, but the rumble of the engine beneath me brought me right back. It felt great. I didn’t know how Gabriel had done it—and I didn’t want to know—but the bike fit me perfectly, and the throttle felt like an extension of my hand.

Gabriel gave me a thumbs up—speaking over the roar of the bikes would have been impossible—and pulled out onto the tree-lined road, tires squealing beneath him.

He disappeared into the cover of the trees and, about to follow him, I turned back for one last look at the pack house. My eyes went right to the window of the room I shared with Cali, and my breath caught. There she was, in the window, her face like a pale shadow behind the glass. She’d wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and, when she saw me looking up at her, she placed her hand flat against the window, like she wanted to reach for me. She gave me a sad smile and nodded, just once. I kicked the bike into gear and, with a shower of gravel, took off down the road.

**Episode 317**

After Xavier disappeared down the road, I stood at the window for a long time. The quiet road stretched away from the pack house, vanishing into the trees in either direction. I knew it led to a few towns on either side and eventually to a highway to the west, but from my vantage point it just… disappeared. It felt unresolved and uncertain—just like our future.

Sighing, I turned away. Why did Xavier have to look so goddamn hot on that motorcycle? I toyed with the corner of the duvet wrapped around my shoulders. Maybe I could get him to teach me to ride when he got back. Wheneverthat was. I threw the blanket back on the bed and padded to the bathroom, flipping on the hot water in the shower. While I stood under the spray, I replayed his arguments. *I think we need some time apart.* I aggressively worked shampoo through my long hair. *We’ll be stronger.* I scrubbed my face hard. *We’ll stand on our own two feet. When we’re back together, we’ll be even closer.* I stared down at my feet and watched the water pouring down the drain. *Like true mates.*

If the goal was for us to get closer, wasn’t distance the last thing we needed? I yanked a pair of clean jeans from my drawer and pulled them on with a sigh. How much space did he need? He’d kept things annoyingly vague. Would a week of space be enough? A month of space? He’d said that he’d be back before the full moon, but that was ages away—

I gave my head a firm shake. I’d told him he could go. He’d asked, and I’d told him I was on board with it. And now he was gone, so I was just going to have to accept that.

By the time I pulled on a clean T-shirt, I’d almost convinced myself that was possible, which was progress, at least. I looked up when I heard laughter coming from downstairs. The rest of the pack must have started to get up. I turned to the door and tried to fix a smile onto my face. Maybe this would be my chance to get to know everyone in the pack—and give them a chance to know me.

Besides, I hadn’t seen Lola since the battle. Someone would have told me if she’d been hurt, so I wasn’t worried about that, but I wondered if she’d had any trouble shifting back after all the fighting. I pulled the door open and headed downstairs to find her.

As I’d suspected, the pack was waking up and wandering into the kitchen for coffee and breakfast. Lola was at the kitchen table when I walked in, and she gave me a giant smile. She was sitting with Jay and Rishika, who both offered good-mornings, but I only managed a tight smile in return. I was still working on the cheerful part of acceptance.

Feeling tense and jumpy, I looked around the kitchen. With a jolt, I realized I was looking for Greyson, worried that he’d be here. Or was I hoping he’d be here? I shook my head, irritated with myself. I couldn’t let myself be scared of him.

Of how I felt around him.

“Cali,” Lola said, pulling out a wooden kitchen chair for me. “How are you?”

“I’m okay,” I said, sitting. “I was hoping I’d find you here.”

Lola grinned. “I heard you had quite a day yesterday. A fall, and a couple of kills.”

“Yeah, something like that,” I said, rubbing my head.

Lola raised her eyebrows. “Heard you also had a close encounter with a wolf and a chandelier. Any truth in that, or is that just gossip?”

I rolled my eyes and pulled my shirt off my shoulder to show Lola the wound.

Jay and Rishika leaned forward to look at it too, and Jay gave a low whistle.

“Gnarly,” Lola said, looking at it closely. She looked up at me, confused. “You just got this yesterday?”

The wound was nearly a scar now, so I understood why she was asking. I nodded. “I’m a fast healer.”

“I’ll say,” Lola said, leaning back in her chair again and studying my face. “Pretty legit, Cali.”

“Yeah, now I’ve got my first battle scar,” I said, pulling my shirt back up hastily. “But the real question is, how are you?”

“Great,” Lola said with a bright smile.

“Really?” I asked, slightly surprised at her upbeat tone.  
 She nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah. I’ve never felt better.”

Lola was being bright and weirdly casual, like I was asking her about the success of a new skincare routine instead of a life-and-death situation that had nearly killed her a couple of weeks ago. I looked at her carefully.

“You’re sure?” I asked skeptically. With everything she’d been through—the Manus Cruentae and her problems with shifting—I didn’t understand her attitude.

Like she’d guessed what I was thinking, Lola laughed. “If you’re worried, Cali, my shifting worries are over!”

I looked at her, stunned. “They are?”

“Yep. Shifting is great. Perfect, in fact.” She grinned. “I’ve never felt so alive.” I must have looked confused because she shook her head. “You don’t get it. If you were a wolf you’d understand.”

Now I was even more confused. “But,” I started, “you’re a hybrid. Isn’t that dangerous?”

Lola waved an airy hand. “I think that’s been way overblown. I used to think so, and look at me now!” She spread her arms. “I’m fine. Never felt better. Isn’t that great?”

She looked at me like she was waiting for an answer.

“Great,” I finally managed. I was a bit concerned about Lola’s enthusiasm, but couldn’t quite say why. So I shelved my concern for the moment and got up to fetch a cup of coffee. “Did everyone sleep okay?”

“Best sleep I’ve had in a while,” Rishika said, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

“Yeah?” I asked.

She nodded. “It’s nice to be part of a pack again.”

“I’ll bet. Safety in numbers.” I walked to the fridge for some milk.

“Yeah, it’s that, but not *just* that,” Rishika said. She shrugged and looked around. “Yesterday, working together and everything? It’s just nice, feeling like part of a family again.”

I smiled over the rim of my cup. “I’ll bet.”

“After Ryker attacked my pack,” she said, her eyes growing dark, “I thought I’d never find another home. But…” She trailed off and looked around, a contented look dawning on her face.

I looked around, too. I didn’t want to, but I was looking for Greyson, and *almost* asked about him, but managed to stop myself just before the words came out. This was not the time—and certainly not the crowd in which to bring him up.

“So,” Rishika asked, turning to me, “I’ve heard a little about your record, Cali. How *did* you manage to survive all the attacks?”

“Heard about my record from who?” I asked, bristling slightly.

She nodded across the table. “Lola was telling me about you.”

“Oh,” I said, glaring at Lola, who just shrugged. I looked back at Rishika. “You know, this and that.”

She laughed. “Come on, Cali. You have to give me more than that. What’s your secret? I mean, it has to be something. You’re human. You’re extra vulnerable.” She put her hands up at my expression. “I don’t mean that in a bad way!”

*I’m not human*, I thought to myself, but kept my mouth shut. “I fight like everyone else, I guess. I’ve just gotten lucky.”

“She’s right,” Lola said, laughing. “She has been insanely lucky.”

I rolled my eyes at Lola, then turned back to Rishika. “But sometimes I wonder if my luck isn’t running out. I should probably learn some self-defense.”

“No way!” Rishika said, her eyes lighting up. “I was a martial arts instructor.”

“Seriously?” I asked.

“And a UFC champion, three years running. I can train you.”

“Oh, wow, Rishika, that’s amazing, but I couldn’t—”

“No charge,” she added, grinning wider.

I was about to tell her it wouldn’t be necessary because Xavier had promised to change me. But what if he just didn’t come back? What if he did come back, but changed his mind? Or, even if he did try to turn me, what if my Fae blood stopped the process? There were a lot of unknown variables, and learning martial arts would be like insurance. Just in case something—or everything—else went wrong.

Besides, Rishika was really nice to offer, so I returned her smile. I was about to accept her offer when my phone rang.

“It’s my dad,” I said, standing and walking into the hall. “Hey Dad.”

“Cali, hi.” I could hear the tension in his voice.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my stomach plummeting to my feet.

He sighed. “It’s your Mom, honey. She’s taken a turn for the worse.”

**Episode 318**

I clutched the phone to my ear. “What?” I asked, my whole body growing cold with fear. “What happened? I was just there! What are the doctors saying? How is she? What—”

“Caliana,” Dad said, his tone soothing. “Calm down, hon. I probably could have phrased that better. She had kind of a drop in energy and her numbers went way down, so we admitted her to the hospital just to keep an eye on her.”

“Okay,” I said, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. “And how is she now?”

“The doctors have stabilized her—”

“*Stabilized* her?” That didn’t sound good.

“I didn’t call to panic you, sweetheart,” Dad said. “I just knew you’d want to know what was going on.”

“Yeah,” I murmured, “I do, thanks.” I thought about what Mom had told me, about how Dad didn’t know that she was dying. My stomach churned at the thought, and I felt like I was going to puke. “Can I talk to her?”

“I’m sorry, Cali,” Dad said, “but she’s sleeping right now. She’s been pretty tired.”

“Oh god—”

“She’s stable,” Dad said firmly. “Okay?”

I dragged in a deep breath. “I’m going to come back out. I’ll try to fly out tonight. I just need to figure out a ride to the airport, and—”

“*Cali*,” Dad said loudly, talking over me. “Mom knew you’d say this. She told me that you don’t need to come. You were just out here, and she doesn’t want you to feel like you need to come again so soon.”

“I’m coming,” I snapped, anger replacing a little of my fear.

“No, Cali. Mom wants you to be out there living your life, not sitting in a hospital room.”

“Dad, that’s not fair. I should be there!” I said, sounding petulant even to my own ears.

“Sweetheart, this is just a little blip. She just needed some fluids, and someone to keep a close eye on her blood pressure and white blood cell count. It’s nothing. I just didn’t want to keep you in the dark about things. I promise, if it turns into anything else, I’ll fly you out myself.”

“Dad—”

“Please don’t argue, Caliana,” Dad said, sounding strained for the first time. “It’s what your mother wants.” He sighed. “I was just headed to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee. I’ll call you later.”  
 “Okay, Dad. But you have to promise me that you’ll call if anything changes. The *minute* anything changes. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Promise.”

He sighed again. “I promise, Cali. Bye, sweetheart.”

The call ended and I looked down at the screen. Would having him make that promise to me *force* him to call, even if he didn’t want to? He was so protective of me—they both were. Thatwas why I’d only just found out about *why* my mom was sick—and just how sick she really was. It was why I’d only just found out I was Fae. My mom was more concerned with protecting me than telling me the truth.

And now I was going to lose her.

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“Okay,” Rishika said, beckoning me toward her. “Try again.”

Still breathing hard, I dropped down, resting my hands on my knees. “Just give me a second.”

Rishika smiled. “Okay. Now remember, when you strike your opponent, you want to use your elbows and go after his softest, most vulnerable parts. Eyes, throat, stomach, groin.” She grinned. “*Especially* the groin, actually.”

I returned her grin. Rishika was being really nice. She was explaining things slowly, and when I screwed something up, she never ridiculed me. It made a nice change from literally everyone else in the pack.

“Okay,” she said, clapping her hands, “enough rest. Let’s talk about how to defend yourself from a kick. Kick me.”

I stood up straight and looked at her warily. “I don’t want to kick you, Rishika.”

“Come on,” she urged.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

Rishika laughed. Hard. She shook her head. “Um, trust me, Cali—you’re not going to hurt me. Come on!”

With a sigh, I braced myself and moved to kick her stomach as hard as I could. But I never made contact. I kicked air, and, before I had time for another thought, Rishika had grabbed my raised foot with her hands and kicked my standing foot out from under me.

I was on the ground staring up at the sky before I even registered what had happened. I lay there panting for a moment, trying to piece together the last few seconds. “What the hell just happened?”

Rishika laughed and held out a hand to help me up. “That was one of the first moves I ever learned. It’s an easy way to disarm your opponent, and it gives you the advantage while they’re on the ground. I’ll teach it to you.”

I let her pull me to my feet and brushed the dried grass off the back of my jeans. “Why’d you start learning martial arts, anyway?”  
 The smile faded from Rishka’s face and her dark eyes grew darker. “My family was killed by Ryker.”

I blew out a breath. “Oh god.”

She shook her head. “I swore to myself that I’d never be that vulnerable again, so I found a teacher who agreed to help me. And that was it.” She smiled a hard smile. “As it turned out, I had a natural ability.”

The clearing was quiet as the grave. A distant bird sang, but the silence around Rishika and me was complete. I swallowed hard. “I’m so sorry about your family, Rishika.”

She glanced at me, like she’d forgotten I was there. “Thank you.” She shrugged, like she was trying to rid her shoulders of some burden. “Anyway, I know what it’s like to feel helpless, and if we keep working on this, you’ll never have to feel like that again. So kick me again.”

I was bracing myself to try again when I heard footsteps behind us. I turned to see Greyson and Joss coming around the house, clearly just back from a run. Joss was looking down at her watch and Greyson was wiping his face with the hem of his T-shirt, showing off his sculpted chest and abs.

“Um, Cali.” Rishika’s voice floated to me, as though across a long distance. “You’re going to need to focus your attention on me. Kick, girl.”

I gave my head a firm shake and turned back to her. “Sorry.” I took a deep breath and tried again, concentrating on being faster than Rishika.

It may have been faster than my first attempt, but nowhere near fast enough. I found myself on the ground again, staring up at a flock of birds crossing the sky.

“Dammit.”

Rishika stepped closer and looked down at me. “That was better,” she said kindly. “How about I get you some water?”

“Okay,” I agreed, letting her help me up again. I got to my feet and started to pull dried leaves out of my hair. I glanced up and found Greyson looking at me. Our gazes locked for a long moment.

He glanced away, his gaze flicking to Joss. “I’m going to take a shower.”

I watched him climb the porch steps and disappear inside. I looked away when I heard Joss’s derisive laugh, but she was coming toward me.

“Keep dreaming,” she said, her voice mocking. “He’s all mine, human. *I’m* the Luna, and no amount of pathetic training is going to change that.”

My mind was a blur of expletives and colorful threats, but I was too angry to articulate any of them, so I spun on my heel and stormed off into the trees. I had to get away from Joss, from Greyson, from everything.

God, I wished I were a wolf. I’d take on Joss in a heartbeat. I’d wipe that smirk right off her face, just before I ground it into the dirt.

I was too angry to pay attention to where I was going, but a tiny voice in the back of my head warned me not to go too far. It had taken me a while to learn that lesson, but it was an important one. I stopped at the top of a small rise and, breathing hard, looked around. The sun was starting to go down, and I was reminded that darkness fell quickly in the woods. I sighed, turning around to head back to the house.

My pace picked up as I went back down the rise, but just as I started down the path, I stopped again. I looked around. I *thought* I knew where I was going, but it looked like I’d gotten a little turned around.

I chewed my bottom lip as I looked around. This would have been a fantastic time for a wisp to show up and lead me back to the house. The sun was sinking fast now. I knew I shouldn’t be out here alone.

My heart beat hard as I started down a path I was *almost* certain was the right one. I had to get out before darkness fell. I knew what lurked in the woods.

But I stopped in my tracks when a shadowy figure stepped out from behind a tree.

**Episode 319**

I leapt back, my heart pounding in my chest. I balled my hands up into fists and held them out in front of me in what I hoped was a defensive position. I wished Rishika had spent less time asking me to kick her and more time telling me how to kick someone else.

What was it with me and these woods?

Then I heard a familiar chuckle, and the dark figure stepped forward.

“Mikah?!” I cried out, recognizing him instantly.

There was no way he hadn’t known he’d scare me by pulling that creepy shit. I felt anger coiling in my belly as I took in his all-black outfit, complete with a very expensive-looking leather jacket.

“Caliana Hart.” He smirked. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“What the hell are you doing in Oregon?” I asked, planting my hands on my hips.

Mikah cocked his head, like I was an amusing baby animal learning to walk, and I felt even angrier. None of this would be happening if I were a wolf. Were other Fae constantly underestimated and talked down to, too?

“I did tell you I’d see you again, didn’t I?” Mikah leaned against a tree. “Looks like I kept my word.”

As much as I wanted to rush forward and get in his face, I stayed where I was. Keeping my distance seemed smart. I couldn’t trust Mikah. In fact, Maya would probably freak out if she knew I was doing anything other than turning and running the other way from the bloodsucker.

I watched as Mikah tilted his head up and inhaled deeply, his eyes closing in concentration. His brow furrowed as he took another sniff.

Before I could ask what he was doing, Mikah’s eyes snapped open. I shivered under the weight of his stare.

“I smell death,” he told me, his voice low. “What happened here?”

Bloodstained memories of the battle in the woods came rushing back to me. The feeling of the saw rattling to life in my hand. The limp bodies of the wolves who’d died on both sides of the fight…

“You should stop sneaking up on people,” I told him, refusing to answer. “It’s creepy.”

He raised an eyebrow. “To be entirely fair, you’re not just any ordinary ‘person’, are you?”

This was my chance to ask him more about Fae. But he hadn’t been much help the first time. And could I really trust anything he said, anyway?

Mikah took my silence as an invitation to keep talking.

“So that’s the pack house, huh?” He nodded over my shoulder.

I glanced around. I wondered if Rishika would come back—and what she’d do if she saw me talking to a vampire. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. Mikah was a dick, but he didn’t deserve to die. At least as far as I knew.

“The pack is here, and I doubt they’ll be happy to see you,” I told him, hoping I sounded confident and threatening. I was already on thin ice with Greyson and Joss—I couldn’t afford to be the girl who brought a vampire to the pack house.

“Forgive me if I don’t cower in fear.” Mikah shrugged. “I can handle myself.”

But something still hung in the air between us. I knew Mikah wanted something from me, and if it meant ratting out my friends, then I was determined not to give it to him.

“I told you back in Minnesota that I wasn’t going to help you,” I told him, praying he’d listen. “I haven’t changed my mind.”

“And as heartbroken as I am that you won’t collaborate with me,” Mikah said, sticking his lower lip out in an exaggerated pout, “I’m not worried. I don’t need your help.”

What did that mean? Did he already have evidence pinning everything on Xavier? Was he here to carry out the justice he’d mentioned before? My mind raced. When Alex had gone free, I’d thought my time making hard choices over Tony’s death was over.

But what if it was only just beginning?

“He’s not here,” I blurted out.

“Xavier?” Mikah asked, amused. “I know.”

I shook my head, confused. “But if you know he’s gone, then why are you here?” I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans.

“Maybe you’ve never watched the numerous television shows about my profession,” Mikah said condescendingly, “but allow me to explain. Being a detective requires extensive research. I can know who committed a crime. But that’s different from having *proof*. I’m short a few pieces of evidence, you see.”

“And what will you do once you have that evidence?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

“Serve up a little justice.” He let a slow smile spread across his face and I felt my heart sink. That couldn’t mean good things for Xavier.

“Why are you so obsessed with getting Xavier?” I asked, unable to keep my mouth shut and play coy. “What did he ever do to you, anyway?”

Mikah got a faraway look in his eye. I could tell he was remembering something difficult. It was strange to see someone who’d given me nothing but trouble looking so vulnerable.

“This might not be easy to hear,” he said, his eyes boring into mine, “but your mate is a reckless werewolf who killed an innocent human.”

“How do you know he’s my mate?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“Cali.” He sighed, exasperated. “I’m a *detective*. There aren’t too many non-werewolf mates around. And a mate-bond would explain why you’re so protective of him.”

“Then you know I’ll never help you,” I shot back, angry.

Mikah took a step toward me. I tensed, but held my ground.

“I disagree.” His voice was soft, almost seductive. “The way I see it, I’m in a position to either hurt you or help you. And you get to choose which one it’s going to be.”

He grinned, revealing his fangs. I felt my mouth go dry. Maybe I should have run when I’d had the chance.

I took a step backward into the low shrubbery. I reached behind me, feeling for a tree branch I could snap off. Then I’d have a stake. That would turn the tables.

My hand closed around a small branch, and I tightened my grip.

“Step any closer and I’ll stake you,” I growled.

Mikah’s eyes widened and he threw his hands up in front of his face.

“Please!” He cowered, and I felt a surge of victory. “Don’t hurt me!”

I felt pride swell in my chest. I wasn’t so bad at taking care of myself. But how could I keep the upper hand?

Before I could say anything, Mikah let his hands drop to his sides and laughed at me.

“Sorry,” he said between laughs. “I’ve just never heard of a vampire being killed by a limp shrub.”

I looked behind me and saw that he was right. The droopy branch I’d grabbed wouldn’t hurt a fly. I felt my cheeks flush.

“You’re welcome to give it a try, though.” Mikah spread his arms, presenting his chest to me.

Pissed, I tugged at the shrub, not knowing what else to do. But it wouldn’t give.

“Cali, please stop.” Mikah looked down his nose at me, like he was embarrassed on my behalf. “I didn’t come all this way to hurt you.”

His fangs retracted and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“If I wanted to hurt you,” he said, “I had ample time to do so back in Minnesota. But to be honest, I don’t really like Fae blood. Even though it’s sweet as honey. Fae can be difficult and dangerous, even if they’re as ill-prepared for a fight as you. And with your werewolf backup, it’s just not worth the trouble.”

I gritted my teeth, not sure that insulting me was necessary here. But at least I was learning a bit more about my ancestry. I knew I had to take what I could get, but he didn’t seem very willing to help. Besides, I had Greyson now. Maybe we could figure out more together.

“I’m going back to the pack house,” I told him defiantly. “I’ve had enough of your shit. If you follow me, you will run fangs first into my ‘werewolf backup’, and I promise you you won’t like it.”

Mikah sighed.

“I get it, Cali.” His expression softened. “I know what it’s like to want to protect someone you love.”

He hesitated, suddenly unable to make eye contact with me. He looked open in a way that touched something inside of me. Almost like he was worried he was already revealing too much.

I opened my mouth to press him, but he spoke before I could.

“I’ll stop pushing you about Xavier,” he told me. “You seem like a good person, and I’m sure you know the right thing to do.”

I considered him for a second. Would it be stupid to believe he was telling the truth?

I took a step backward, toward the pack house, and Mikah made no move to stop me. Maybe he really wasn’t lying.

But if I could trust him on this, maybe I could trust him on something else. He’d been around, and he seemed to know a lot about the supernatural world. And I needed that right now.

“Mikah,” I started, voice small. “You don’t owe me anything. So I would totally get it if you didn’t want to help me. But I wanted to ask—”

“Out with it, Cali.”

“Can you tell me how to get to the Fae world?”

**Episode 320**

Mikah chuckled at my request.

“What, no luck with Google Maps?” he mocked.

I shook my head, feeling a blush paint my cheeks. I never should have asked.

“Don’t waste my time.” I pointed at him accusingly. “If you don’t want to help, just say so.”

“When did I say I didn’t want to help?” he asked, unhelpfully.

I groaned, resisting the urge to literally stomp my foot in frustration.

“But what’s in it for me?” he continued. “How do you plan on making helping you worth my while?”

I thought on it. What did I have that was valuable? I doubted he wanted to peruse my collection of cheap jewelry.

“I could trade some of my blood,” I offered, watching carefully to see if he was fucking with me.

“I’m a vampire,” Mikah reminded me. “I can take your blood whether you want to give it to me or not. Admittedly, it is easier if you offer it, but…”

“But I’m Fae,” I said, finishing his thought. “And we can be a handful.”

“I don’t want your blood,” Mikah told me. “What else you got?”

“Cali!” I heard Rishika call from behind me.

Shit. I couldn’t be seen talking to Mikah.

“Be right there!” I called over my shoulder.

When I turned back to tell Mikah to scram, all I saw was trees.

“Mikah,” I whispered, annoyed that he’d left without giving me a way to contact him.

But no one answered.

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes, eyeliner be damned. I needed a way to get to the Fae world. My mom was dying, and I didn’t know how much time I had left before it was too late to save her.

I heard leaves crunch as Rishika sidled up next to me.

I turned and saw her sniffing the air, her nose wrinkling.

“Yuck.” She looked at me. “What’s that smell?”

I shrugged, giving her an innocent smile. “I don’t have a Wolf Nose. Couldn’t tell you.”

“I thought I heard you talking, but there’s no one here.” She narrowed her eyes. “Does physical exertion ever make you delirious?”

“No,” I answered, too quickly.

I needed to be casual. Casual people spoke slowly. And in a normal octave.

“I just like to…” I struggled to come up with something. “Sing. When I’m alone in the woods, I get freaked out and singing makes me relax.”

Rishika offered me a bottle of water from her backpack and smiled.

“I do that too, sometimes,” she admitted, and I thanked my lucky stars that she’d bought it. “I sing Billie Eilish when I’m stressed. C’mon, let’s go.”

She nodded toward the pack house, swaying her hips as she opened her mouth and sang the chorus from Bad Guy. We both chimed in on the ‘duh!’ Laughing, I followed her. I was really lucky to have someone like Rishika with me.

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A few songs later, we were almost at the house. By the time we reached the steps, Rishika and I were singing a bad rendition of 7 Rings. But as we got closer, I lost the ability to speak when I locked eyes with Greyson. His muscles rippled as he approached us, a stern look on his face. God, did he ever wear a shirt?

And was I really complaining about that?

I wished I could duck back into the woods, or go on singing with Rishika and start a dance party with Lola and Maya. Anything but deal with him.

“Cali,” he barked, making my entire body tense. “Where the hell is Xavier? He left this morning and hasn’t come back.”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly.

“Did he go Rogue?” Greyson asked, getting in my face. I stepped back, but he followed me until my back hit a tree trunk and I was stuck.

“No.” I shook my head, realizing I’d have to tell the whole truth. “He went with Gabriel. On some job.”

Greyson’s brow furrowed. He watched me carefully. Was he looking for a tell, to see if I was lying? Or was he wondering how I was doing with Xavier gone? Was he thinking about our kiss? Wondering if this was a perfect time to move in on me? Or did he just feel bad for me?

“When is he coming back?” he asked, his voice gentler.

For some reason, the fact that he was being nice to me made me want to cry.

“He wanted a break,” I replied, my voice small. “From here. From… me.”

I looked down at my shoes, not wanting to see him pity me.

“He left you?” Greyson asked, his tone unreadable.

I could only nod. I knew that if I opened my mouth I would cry.

“I’m gonna go clean up,” Rishika said, seizing the chance to scurry away.

Not wanting to be alone with Greyson, I tried to head after her, but Greyson grabbed my wrist. I tried not to flinch, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of unnerving me. Or seducing me—whatever his goal was this time. It was always hard to tell.

“Xavier left,” he repeated, almost as if he couldn’t believe it. “He left you here alone? In the pack house.”

I really couldn’t understand whatever game Greyson was trying to play with me. If he wanted to make me feel abandoned, he was doing a great job.

“I mean, I’m not totally alone,” I mumbled, trying to shrug it off. “Colton and Lola are here.”

“But they’re not your mate, are they?” Greyson asked, his eyes flashing. He was so close, I could feel his breath tickling my cheeks. It was impossible not to think of our kiss. *Kisses*.

“I thought you’d be happy to see him gone,” I shot back, wanting to put him on the defensive.

Greyson studied me, crossing his muscular arms over his bare chest. And yes, okay, I looked at his muscles, but I didn’t *want* to be looking.

“Why would you think that, Cali?” I could feel his grey eyes on me, like a weight.

*Because you want me all to yourself.*

But I couldn’t say that. Because even if it were true, he’d never admit it. He liked toying with me too much.

Heat crept up my neck as I watched him run a hand through his hair. It looked soft. I forced myself to look away from him before I could imagine what it would feel like to run my hands through it.

“Because you hate him,” I told my shoe.

Greyson reached out and traced the line of my jaw. It was so intimate I almost couldn’t move. His touch sent vibrations through me that I really didn’t want to examine.

He took my chin in his hand and tilted my face up until we were looking at each other.

“I don’t hate my brother,” he murmured, his voice husky.

I swallowed, my mouth dry as the Sahara. I needed to get away from him. I couldn’t take this. Xavier hadn’t even been gone a day and Greyson was stroking my face!

And I was letting him!

I slapped his hand away, pissed at myself and at Greyson.

“I don’t know where he went,” I snarled. “But I do know that he’ll back before the next full moon.”

Concern flashed across Greyson’s face. I grinned, straightening up to my full height, refusing to cower. Our connection went both ways—if he could exploit it, so could I.

“Did he say why?” Greyson was clearly trying to sound casual, but his voice was strained.

I considered telling him that Xavier was intending to turn me. I knew it would feel good to rub it in his face. I was dying to see his reaction. But I also knew it wouldn’t be smart to let that information out. So instead, I stalked past him and headed toward the pack house.

I wanted to look back over my shoulder, but I *didn’t* want him to think I wanted to see him again. So I just quickened my pace.

I passed a glowering Joss, who looked ready to rip my hair out. I skirted around her and practically ran up the stairs to my room. I shut the door behind me, locking it before letting out a sigh of relief as I looked at the empty room.

‘Empty’ being the important word.

Xavier had really left. I touched the unmade bed, where he’d slept with me just last night. It could be ages before I saw him again. It looked like I was back to sleeping alone.

I sighed and headed for the bathroom. I drew a bath, getting the water as hot as I could, and squeezing in some body wash so there would be bubbles. Shockingly, the pack house didn’t have bath bombs.

I sank into the water, my sore muscles already starting to loosen. I closed my eyes, and all I could see was Greyson’s face when he’d heard Xavier had left me.

Had his eyes been flashing in anger? Or was he pleased I’d been left alone? And for the love of god, why didn’t he have a shirt on?

Being around him was going to be much more difficult than I’d thought. I wanted to stay true to Xavier. Even if I was a *due destini*, *he* was the mate I’d chosen. Right?

Before I could ask my phone to play some calming bath music, I heard a loud rapping sound. I looked to the door. Hadn’t I locked the bedroom?

“Hello?”

But the rapping continued. And it almost seemed like it was coming from behind me. But how was that possible? I turned around and almost screamed when I saw Mikah, right outside the second-floor window.

**Episode 321**

I shrieked, ducking under the bubbles and letting the water muffle the sound. So much for pampering myself a little bit! Seriously, I should have known something like this would happen. I clearly needed to start carrying a silver knife and a stake with me at all times, because nowhere was safe.

Why the hell was Mikah watching me take a bath? Was he a pervert like Edward Cullen?

Tired of holding my breath, I peeked out from beneath the bubbles, sucking in air.

Not deterred in the slightest by my freak out, Mikah rapped on the window again.

“Are you going to let me in or what?” he asked impatiently, like we’d planned to meet for lunch and I’d kept him waiting.

“Fuck no,” I spluttered, craning my neck to look him in the eye. “I’m taking a bath!” I was glad that the window, which was open just an inch, had a lock.

“Yeah, I noticed,” Mikah replied dryly. Did vampires not have boundaries or something? Were they just as super cool with nudity as werewolves?

Maybe Fae were prudes and that was why I couldn’t stop being shy about this stuff.

I groaned, sinking back behind my bubbles. It really felt like this could only happen to me. With my luck, vampires probably had some kind of creepy X-ray vision that let Mikah totally see through the bubbles.

“I just want to talk,” Mikah offered, still sounding annoyed.

I let my head hit the back of the tub with a thud, hoping it might smack a good idea into me. I did know this—if we kept calling to each other through the window, one of the werewolves was going to hear us. And then I’d be caught talking to a vampire. And then Joss would put a scarlet V on my chest and everyone would think I was a traitor or something.

“Fine,” I growled. “But I’m not getting out of the tub while you’re still standing—or floating—there. Meet me at the bedroom window.”

“Much obliged.” Mikah rolled his eyes and floated toward the bedroom. From my point of view, it looked like he was on one of those moving sidewalks at the airport or something. It was bizarre.

I tried to lean out of the tub to see if he was lingering nearby. But the coast looked clear. Plus, if Xavier was going to turn me then I was going to have get used to being naked in front of people anyway. Why not start now?

Comfortable or not, I hoisted myself out of the tub, wincing as I thought of the wasted hot water and bubbles. I toweled off as quickly as I could, wiping the bubbles off my face and the mascara from my cheeks.

I looked at myself in the mirror as I slid on my robe. Was this the outfit I would have chosen for speaking to a vampire about my Fae ancestry? No. But it would have to do.

I ducked into the bedroom, trying to remain as composed as I could while wearing a fluffy pink robe.

Mikah smirked at my outfit choice and gave me a wave from the bedroom window. His mouth was moving but I couldn’t really hear him. I shook my head and pointed at my ears so he’d know.

Mikah rolled his eyes and pointed at the obvious solution. The window.

But I wasn’t exactly eager to open it for him.

“I’m waiting,” he mouthed, and I realized I had no choice.

I hurried over and opened it the tiniest crack. Mikah rolled his eyes.

“You know, it would be a lot easier if you just invited me in,” he whined.

If Maya hadn’t liked me inviting Mikah into my mom’s car, she would absolutely lose her mind if I invited him into the pack house.

“I’m not stupid,” I snapped. “You’re fine where you are.”

“Can you at least open the window a little more so we can actually talk?” he wheedled.

I wanted to ask him how he could float like that. But I knew I needed to save my questions for the answers I actually needed.

“Promise you won’t come any closer?” I asked.

“A Fae promise?” Mikah asked, eyebrows lifting.

I nodded, grateful I could finally use something about my Fae ancestry to my advantage.

“Fine,” he said, shrugging. “I promise.”

I threw open the window as quickly as I could before stepping back to a safe distance.

“What’s so important you had to perv on me in the bathroom?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest and wishing I’d been able to put on a bra.

“I wasn’t perving on you,” Mikah scoffed. “Trust me, I’m not interested. I want to talk to you about a deal.”

“I’m listening,” I offered coolly. I had no idea if I could trust him. But it couldn’t hurt to hear him out.

I took a step closer as a show of good faith. Also so I could peek out the window and see if he was using a ladder. Which he wasn’t! He was floating—like, *actually* floating. That hadn’t been in *Twilight*.

Mikah laughed when he realized what I was doing.

“Haven’t you seen vampire movies?” Clearly, he couldn’t help himself. “We can levitate. You should try it sometime.”

He flashed his fangs at me and I rolled my eyes.

“I’ve seen bigger fangs on Rogues,” I snapped. “Now, wow me with your deal.”

“I know you want to find the Fae world.” Mikah placed his hands on the windowsill. “Maybe I can help you with that.”

“You can?” I asked, incredulous. It couldn’t be that easy.

“Why not?” Mikah shrugged, smiling in a way that made my stomach churn.

“What’s the catch?” I asked. “There’s always a catch.”

“Clever girl.” He smirked. “Of course there’s a catch.”

I took a step back, goosebumps erupting across my exposed skin.

“I’m not inviting you in,” I told him, hoping I sounded firm. “So you can forget about biting me.”

“Not that.” Mikah shook his head. “I’m willing to make a trade.”

I sighed with relief and tried to contain the excitement building inside me. If I could get to the Fae would, I’d be able to save my mother *and* learn about my powers.

“Cali?” I heard Lola shout as she hammered on my door, jolting me out of my train of thought. “Don’t tell me you’re trying to wax your legs again. We all know how that went last time, babe.”

Mikah raised his brows and I felt my face turn bright red. Fucking Lola. She was conveniently forgetting that the whole leg-waxing debacle had been her idea.

“Shut up,” I whisper-screamed at him.

Mikah held his hands up in a gesture of peace and I turned my back on him to look at my door.

“Hang on,” I called back. “I’m… Um, I’m naked!”

I heard Lola laugh through the door.

“Right.” I could hear her grinning from ear to ear. “Playing with your vibrator again? You know Xavier’s only been gone a few hours, right?”

“Yeah,” I stammered, embarrassed. “I mean, no. Give me a sex—a sec, okay?”

I whirled back round to face Mikah, who was still waiting patiently at my window. He shot me an infuriating smirk, which I ignored.

“What’s the trade?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

“I’ll help you find the Fae world,” he told me. “But in exchange I want a favor.”

Lola knocked on my door again. “Cali, I gotta pee,” she whined.

I ignored her. She could hold it.

“What favor?” I asked, not wanting to trap myself into something I couldn’t get out of.

“I don’t know yet,” Mikah admitted. “But when the time comes, I’ll come back for it.”

“And if I don’t like what it is you want?” I asked, worry seeping into my voice.

“Then we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Mikah said. “In the meantime, if you’re looking for the Fae world, what you need to know is that finding it is like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“What?” I asked, louder than I should have.

I clapped a hand over my mouth and waited to see if Lola would yell again. But I didn’t hear anything.

“What kind of information is that?” I asked Mikah, keeping my voice quieter.

“You’re a smart girl.” Mikah smirked. “You’ll figure it out.”

Lola pounded on my door again and even though I loved that girl, I considered telling her to fuck off.

“OKAY LOLA!” I screamed. “I’m coming! God!”

I turned around, but Mikah was gone.

Figured.

I poked my head out the window. What would I see? Mikah lurking around a corner ready to pull me out with him? A bat flying away? But I didn’t see anything.

I slammed the window shut and stomped over to the door to open it.

“Fucking finally!” Lola screeched, running past me and making a beeline for the bathroom. “It’s about time.”

I threw myself onto the bed, only half-listening to her as she berated me for making her wait.

What had Mikah meant, ‘a needle in a haystack’? How was that supposed to help me?

And what would he want in return? My blood? Information on my friends? Me to point the finger at Xavier for Tony’s murder?

Lola barged out of the bathroom, a ball of energy.

“Slap some clothes on, babe!” She grinned at me, her eyes glinting devilishly. “We’re having a girls’ night!”

**Episode 322**

XAVIER

The bike rumbled beneath me as I sailed across the pavement. I had to admit, I’d missed riding motorcycles. I’d missed a lot of things. But hopefully, this trip would change that.

I heard the roar of Gabriel’s bike as he accelerated so he could pull up next to me. He pointed at a speck on the horizon that was starting to look vaguely building-like.

“Food and fuel ahead!” he shouted.

I nodded. Riding felt good now, but I knew from experience it would get tiresome if we didn’t take breaks.

The closer we got, the more the truck stop started to take shape. A neon sign advertised a 24-hour diner, and I found myself eager to take a load off.

I eased off my bike and took a look around, never wanting to be caught unawares. There were only a few cars and trucks in the small lot, but a cluster of motorcycles on the other end of the lot caught my eye. We had company.

Gabriel beckoned me forward and I followed him into the Greasy Spoon. The place was quiet. A few bleary-eyed truckers nursed black coffees at the bar. The put-upon wait staff looked kind enough. Oldies blared from a jukebox. And in one corner, half a dozen bikers were drinking and carousing.

“Awesome, right?” Gabriel turned to me. “Just like old times.”

I gave him a tight smile, humoring him. This place honestly sucked. It smelled like stale grease and burnt food. Everyone here was road weary and dreaming about being somewhere else. But that was the life I was reentering. This was what it looked like. Truck stops, seedy motels, and dive bars. Places that were easy to blend into and let me remain anonymous.

And Gabriel blended in better than anyone I knew. In his black jeans and dark jacket, he looked like he could fit in with just about anyone here.

A tired-looking hostess caught my eye and pointed to a few booths that lined the wall.

“Sit anywhere,” she grunted. “I’ll be right with you.”

“Two beers when you can,” Gabriel called out with a grin, sliding into a vinyl booth by the window.

I noticed a few of the bikers glancing our way, their chests puffed out. I sighed. I really didn’t need to get into a fight over some macho bullshit posturing. With any luck, these guys would be all bark and no bite.

“We’re getting eyeballed,” I told Gabriel, my voice low. “Keep an eye on those guys. I really don’t want to deal with assholes tonight.”

“Come on.” Gabriel gave me a conspiratorial grin. “It’d be a little fun to kick some biker ass, you gotta admit it.”

I shrugged. “Maybe some other time.” I leaned back in my seat, trying to make the most of my time off the bike.

“I’ve been here before,” Gabriel told me, sliding me a menu. “The burgers aren’t bad.”

“Fine.” I nodded, but the truth was, I wasn’t hungry. I should have been, but since I’d left Cali this morning and had seen her looking down on me from our bedroom window… I hadn’t had an appetite.

What was she doing now?

“What’ll it be?” the waitress asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“What’s your favorite, darling?” Gabriel asked, turning on the charm. “I could use an expert opinion.”

I had to struggle not to roll my eyes. Apparently, getting back into this life meant reacquainting myself with Gabriel’s shameless flirting.

“Breakfast burger’s good.” The waitress smiled, straightening up a bit. “We use hash brown patties instead of buns, add a fried egg and bacon.”

“Decision made.” Gabriel grinned, passing her his plastic menu. “Appreciate the help.”

“Just a burger and fries for me.” I stacked my menu on top of Gabriel’s, uninterested in watching their banter.

“You got it, boys.” The waitress turned on her heel and headed toward the kitchen, and Gabriel turned to watch her leave.

After he’d gotten his fill, he looked at me and took a sip of his beer, watching me over the rim of the bottle.

“What’s the deal, X?” he asked. “You seem distracted. I know it’s been a while, but you do remember we gotta be zoned in when we work, right?”

I shrugged. “I’m fine,” I lied, not in the mood for a lecture.

But Gabriel wasn’t buying it.

“You can’t lie to me, dude.” He pointed at me accusingly. “Are you still pissed at me for giving your girlfriend a ride to the airport? Isn’t that usually a nice thing for a guy to do for his buddy’s girl?”

“No, I’m not mad,” I answered, grabbing my beer and looking out the window. “And you’re the one who keeps bringing that up, not me.”

I could see Gabriel smirking at me out of the corner of my eye. He leaned forward across the scratched table.

“Is it her, though?” he asked. “Are you missing Cali?”

*Yes. So fucking much.*

I shrugged. I did not want to talk about this. And I really didn’t want to talk about this with Gabriel. There was no chance he’d understand.

“It’s complicated,” I mumbled, hoping he’d leave it at that.

“Then explain it to me,” Gabriel implored. “Help me understand.”

I hesitated, looking at him from across the table. He looked sincere, but his job was to lie, cheat, and steal to achieve his goals and get paid. Looking honest was easy, I’d learned. *Being* honest was much more difficult.

“If you don’t believe I’m asking as your friend,” Gabriel said with a sigh, “then remember that as your… *co-worker*, I need you to be in this, one hundred percent. Because you know what could happen if you aren’t. So whatever it is, get it off your chest so we can get to work.”

Gabriel was right—the last thing I wanted was to be distracted while on the job. Things got dangerous out there. Being off your game for even half a second could get you or your team killed. And I had enough unnecessary deaths on my conscience.

“Being with a human is harder than I thought it would be,” I admitted. “Cali doesn’t understand our world. And I keep forgetting that she doesn’t understand the most basic things about me. Things that have always been a given for me are new to her. She’s always questioning our traditions, our rules, our way of life. It’s like she wants me to be a different person.”

What I didn’t tell Gabriel was how it felt to constantly feel like I was disappointing her, just by breathing. What it was like to wonder if we’d be together at all if we weren’t mates. What it was like to worry that the only thing we had in common was loving each other as much as we did when things were easy.

Gabriel nodded, eyeing me for a second.

“She’s human,” he reminded me. “She needs time. She needs you to give her a break while she adjusts to things. I doubt all the crazy shit that follows you and your brothers around has made it easy on her.”

“I know what she needs.” I took another drink. “But on top of all that, I’m having trouble adjusting to being with her. I’ve never really been around humans like this before. And seeing her face every time she learns something new about me, something she doesn’t like… In the heat of the moment, when stuff gets stressful, I forget she’s new to it all. I forget what this must all look like to her. And I lose control and I snap. I’ve got a temper.”

Gabriel huffed out a laugh. “That’s not really a secret, dude.”

“Yeah, I know.” I hung my head a bit. “Other wolves get it, though. A lot of us run hot like that. But Cali…”

“Did you hurt her?” Gabriel asked, his voice quieter.

I nodded, feeling something stirring in my chest. Something angry and sad and guilty.

“I did,” I admitted. “I didn’t mean to. I forgot she’s not like Ava. She’s human, she’s—I didn’t even realize I *did* until I saw the bruises.”

I took a breath, but all I could see was the hurt in Cali’s eyes. My gut churned with guilt and I felt queasy. I couldn’t be like this on a job. It wasn’t safe—not if I wanted to get back to her.

“She told me she kissed Greyson,” I explained. “And I just saw red. I apologized later, but… I’ve regretted it ever since.”

“Did she forgive you?” Gabriel asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “And that’s what’s messing with my head. I just don’t know what she thinks about me anymore.”

*I’ll never hurt her again,* I thought, clenching my fists.

“I’ve seen the way the girl looks at you.” Gabriel said. “I’m pretty sure she’s crazy about you.”

I nodded. That was a comfort. But it didn’t come close to fixing everything.

“Look, you’re right to be upset,” Gabriel told me. “As bad as I am—and I think we both know I’m a real piece of shit—I’d never hurt the people I love. Just know, you can’t change the past. But you can make damn sure you don’t repeat it. Just focus on that.”

“Thanks, man.” I offered him a small smile. “I’ll try to put it to rest so we can do our job.”

“Good.” He laughed. “Because you’re turning into a real drag.”

I laughed some more and let out a tense breath. It felt good to talk. My mind felt clearer, and I appreciated Gabriel pushing me.

But my relief was short-lived.

“Hey,” a voice grunted from behind me.

Gabriel and I turned to see one of the bikers.

“You’re sitting in our booth,” he growled.

I looked at his friends in the corner, who were all glaring at us. I knew it. They were assholes.

I sighed before looking over at Gabriel, who had risen from the booth.

“You know I love a good fight,” he told me, a gleam in his eye.

And then he clocked the guy in the jaw.

**Episode 323**

“I cannot believe you’re drinking pink wine right now.” Maya rolled her eyes as I poured Lola and myself another glass of rosé. “How does it feel being this much of a cliché?”

“Well it *tastes*…” Lola paused to take a delicate sip. “Like citrus with notes of red fruit.”

Playing along, I swirled my wine in my glass, like I’d seen my dad do at fancy restaurants.

“And do I detect…” I took a sniff. “A floral bouquet?”

“Yes, I believe you do.” Lola held out her glass to clink it against mine, and I obliged her. “*Some* *people* just don’t appreciate the finer things in life.”

Maya frowned at us, but Rishika and her friends Sage and Zainab both laughed. I was really glad they’d agreed to join us for girls’ night. I was excited to get to know them.

“That’s like, a seven-dollar bottle of wine,” Maya snarked, but there was a teasing note in her voice.

“Sorry, Miss Expensive Tastes.” Lola snorted. “How much do you think that beer cost?”

Maya cracked a grin and I couldn’t help but smile too. Sure, Lola and Maya were bickering. But it seemed like it was all in good fun. It felt good to be welcoming these girls into our pack. It made me feel like a part of something. For once, I didn’t feel like the lone human in a sea of werewolves. I just felt like one of the girls.

What would my old friends back in Minnesota think of me now?

“We’re not being too loud, right?” I asked Lola.

“No.” Lola shook her head. “I talked to Violet and she appreciated the invite, but she’s gonna sit this one out. When I looked in on her a few minutes ago, she was totally passed out. I think she really needs the rest.”

I nodded, feeling a pang of sympathy in my chest. Hopefully, this would become more of a regular thing and Violet could hang out with us next time. I wished there was something I could do to ease her pain. To make her ready for this kind of thing immediately. But I knew only time would help.

With enough space and support, she’d be able to figure out how she wanted her life to look now that Lilac was gone. I hoped we’d be able to help her make it a happy one.

“Ladies.” Lola thrust her glass in the air in a dramatic toast. “Now that we’re welcoming some new members to the Redwood Pack, I think it’s time we all get to know each other a little better!”

Rishika, Sage, and Zainab all grinned, thrusting their glasses into the air as well.

Maya, of course, groaned loudly.

“Can this *please* not turn into group therapy?” she pleaded. “Some of us just want to get drunk in peace.”

“I think that’s why we’re all here,” Lola pointed out, laughing.

I cheered, and so did the others.

“Would you rather we braid each other’s hair?” I teased.

“Or we could make friendship bracelets?” Lola piled on.

“How about two truths and a lie?” Rishika suggested diplomatically. “That’s not too heavy or too girly, right?”

Maya groaned again and I thought I heard her mumble something about this feeling like a middle school sleepover. But she didn’t leave, and that was a start.

“Sorry, what’s the game?” Sage asked.

Rishika looked over at Sage fondly. The girl was all elbows and knees. At nineteen, she was younger than me and Lola, and covered in freckles all over her white skin. She was the kind of person you wanted to protect. She and Zainab—a strikingly beautiful girl with dark skin and long dreads—were dating, and they made a really cute couple.

“It’s super fun,” I assured Sage. “Everyone says three interesting things, two of which are true facts about yourself, and one of which is a lie. And then everyone has to guess which one is the lie. So the key is to make your lie really believable and your truths surprising.”

“But not so much so that you tip your hand,” Lola added. “It’s a good game for getting to know people better. Like, tonight you’ll learn firsthand that Cali is a terrible liar.”

Everyone laughed, and I stuck my tongue out at Lola. But she just smiled at me sweetly, batting her eyelashes.

“I’m gonna get you this time,” I vowed. “You’ll see.”

I had a lot more interesting experiences under my belt by now. It should be easier.

“I’m in.” Zainab leaned forward eagerly. “But who goes first?”

We all looked around, giggling. Wondering who would be the first to step forward.

“I’ll bite.” Rishika stuck out her chest. I should have known. She was totally braver than me.

“I’m a Gemini.” Rishika put up a finger for each fact, her voice smooth. “I’ve never traveled outside the US, and I hate the color blue.”

“Yawn,” Maya said, rolling her eyes. “You’re *wearing* blue. And talking about star signs is *boring*.”

“Classic Scorpio,” Zainab deadpanned.

Maya barked a loud laugh, evidently shocked that someone had successfully made a mean joke at her expense.

“I like this one.” Maya pointed at Zainab, grinning.

“Why don't we dig a little deeper?” Lola asked, keeping the mood light. “We can talk about stuff that’s a little more meaningful. And then we can bond and do trust falls, which Maya will love. And then we’ll get matching tattoos.”

Maya gave Lola the finger and Lola gave it back, smiling sweetly. The girls laughed.

“I think I’ve got it,” Sage piped up, grinning.

“Why do I suddenly feel a deep and horrible sense of dread?” Zainab asked, visibly steeling herself.

“Zainab slept with me on our first date,” Sage offered proudly.

Everyone oohed, and Zainab smacked her girlfriend on the arm, scandalized. “Sage!”

“I’ve killed a human,” Sage continued undeterred. “And I own a chest full of sex toys. Guess away!”

Zainab smacked her again and Sage just giggled, grabbing her hand and kissing the back of it.

“I hate you,” Zainab grumbled.

“You really don’t,” Sage teased.

“That better, Maya?” Lola asked, eyebrows raised.

“Definitely not boring!” Maya took a swig of her beer.

“I think of you as a little sister,” Rishika mused. “So a lot of what you just said is pretty disturbing to consider.” She pulled a face.

“Honestly, I’m just shocked that you were willing to admit to two of those things.” I blushed, turning the same color as my drink. “You’re braver than me.”

“Let’s see…” Maya mused. “Sex on the first date… is Zainab the type? What do you guys think?”

Zainab squealed with embarrassment, and Sage put her out of her misery. “Alright, alright. I’ve never killed a human, okay?”

Zainab leaned against her, burying her head in her girlfriend’s unruly mane to hide her face. I wondered if it was the sex toys or the sex on the first date that was keeping her from making eye contact with the rest of us. Either way, I was starting to seriously regret agreeing to play this game.

“I don’t know if you can top what we already know about you,” Lola teased me. “But it’s your turn next, Cali.”

I downed my entire glass, grimacing at the taste. When you drank it that fast, it *did* taste like it cost seven dollars. I grimaced, realizing Lola’s comment meant that everyone knew I’d kissed Greyson. Well, that was one fact I wasn’t going to be able to use.

“And we already know you’re human,” Maya piled on. “So that’s shot. Got any hidden talents we don’t know about?”

*Other than my secret Fae ancestry, not really. Unless you count my pretty solid Kermit the Frog imitation.*

“How about this?” I offered, just wanting this to be over with. “I cheated on a spelling test in fifth grade when I forgot to study the night before…”

I searched my mind for three other similarly believable facts while the room fell silent.

“Maybe try again, Cali.” Lola patted my arm sympathetically.

I clumsily refilled my wine glass, wishing I’d suggested we play Monopoly instead. “Umm, Xavier’s the first guy I ever slept with,” I told my wine, not wanting to look at anyone.

“Oooh, now *that’s* actually interesting,” Maya said, perking up.

I glared at her while I racked my brains for a good lie. Lola was right. I was a terrible, terrible liar. It was why I’d basically never kept anything from my parents growing up. Maybe it was also why I’d never done anything worth confessing to. This game was supposed to be about having secret tattoos and going skinny dipping. But I just didn’t do stuff like that.

“My first boyfriend’s name was Alex,” I offered as my lie, trying to keep my voice even.

*And I’m struggling with feelings for my boyfriend’s brother.*

*And I don’t know if my boyfriend is really even my boyfriend anymore.*

*And I made a deal with a vampire so he’d take me to the Fae world.*

*And my mom told me to never give anyone my blood, and I’ve already done it twice.*

They looked at me, bored and pitying. And for some reason—probably all the pink wine—I just wanted to impress them. To show them I wasn’t boring.

I took another gulp of my drink.

“And I’m a *due destini*.”

**Episode 324**

At the words “*due destini*” everyone—including Lola, who ALREADY KNEW ABOUT IT—gasped audibly. I guess I’d surprised them. Wasn’t that what Maya and Lola had wanted?

My throat was drying up, so I took another generous gulp of wine.

“Did you really just say that?” Maya looked at me like I’d just swallowed a sword or something.

“She’s human.” Rishika shook her head. “Maybe she doesn’t really get what it means.”

“The thing about Xavier being her first is the lie!” Lola yelled over everyone, trying to cover for me.

It was sweet of Lola to try, but the damage already seemed done. The entire mood had shifted. Things were tense and fraught now. And it was all my fault.

“You don’t get to answer for her,” Maya told Lola. “Cali, why were you talking about *due destini*?”

They all looked at me, eyes wide and jaws slack. I really, really should have just mentioned the time I’d gotten an all-pink sleeve of Starbursts. Or when I’d gotten my period wearing white cutoff jeans at summer camp. Really, anything but this.

“I thought it was just a fairy tale,” Sage murmured, staring at me like I was Cinderella come to life.

“The story always used to make me cry as a kid,” Rishika admitted. “When Cassandra’s two mates find out about each other and start to fight and she tries to get in between them. The way she begs them to stop because it feels like two halves of her heart are at war. And when she tries to put her body between them and they accidentally tear her apart—”

“WHAT?” I squeaked. That was *not* the version I’d heard.

Rishika just nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“And then,” she said, taking a deep breath to steady herself, “her mates are so ashamed by what they’ve done and so lost without her that they burn themselves to death in a fire.”

I turned to look at Lola, my head spinning. And not just from the pink wine.

“That’s *not* what you told me,” I choked out. As if the images of flying over a cliff hadn’t been nightmare fuel enough. Now I had THIS to worry about too?

“Actually,” Zainab interrupted, her brow furrowed. “In the version I was told, Cassandra—forced to choose between her two mates—finds the choice so unbearable that she drinks poison and dies in their arms. Then her matesare so traumatized by her death that they rip each other’s eyes out and *then* leap to their deaths.”

Rishika shook her head and Sage mumbled something about wandering into the ocean with rocks in your pockets.

I didn’t really like any of these other versions. Especially because there was a chance I was living one of them with Xavier and Greyson right now.

I closed my eyes and saw Greyson lunging for Xavier and slashing my throat instead. I saw fire consuming Xavier as he screamed in agony. Greyson without eyes. Xavier walking into the ocean.

“Maybe someone else could go now?” I looked to Lola, begging for her to try and rescue me again. I didn’t know how much longer I could go without completely losing it.

But she was too busy arguing with everyone else to help.

“I can’t believe none of you have heard the real version.” Lola gestured widely with her hands, like she always did after a few glasses of wine.

“You guys, this is dumb!” I shouted, and everyone practically snapped their necks turning to look at me.

Their eyes were expectant. They wanted me to wrap this all up in a bow and make it make sense for them. But how could I do that? It didn’t even make sense to me!

“I mean,” I shrugged. “The whole story makes no sense. Why don’t the three of them just sit down and talk about it, you know? If they’re all adults, they should be able to work something out, right?”

Maya laughed. “A wolf would *never* agree to share their mate.” She rolled her eyes at me, like it was *so* obvious. “We’re not wired like that. Not when it comes to something so important.”

Everyone murmured in agreement, and I felt the pit in my stomach grow.

“*Especially* guys.” Sage giggled as she turned to me. “They get so possessive and crazy when it comes to mates. Like, imagine if you were mated to Xavier *and* Greyson. I don’t think there’s a talk you could have with them that would solve everything.”

I swallowed. Was Sage a freaking mind reader?

“Yeah.” Rishika took a sip of her drink. “I doubt either of them would be into sharing you. Can you imagine?”

Oh, I could imagine. I could do more than imagine.

I knew what it was like to ride on your boyfriend’s back, trees whipping around your head, your fingers dug into his fur, and to hear his *brother’s* voice whisper in your mind.

But I couldn’t tell them that.

So I just stared into my wine glass, hoping the conversation would just kind of die.

“Yo, Xavier.” Sage jumped up to her feet and pulled her girlfriend up. “I found out we’re both mated to the same girl. You’re good to share, right?”

“Who, me?” Zainab puffed out her chest, affecting Xavier’s steely demeanor. “Sure! Sounds good. Look over there for a minute, will you?”

Zainab pointed over Sage’s shoulder and she spun around, pretending to look the other way. The girls giggled, watching their little play.

Sage pretended to rummage around behind her for a weapon. She held her fist like she was carrying a rock and then bashed it over ‘Xavier’s’ head.

Zainab tackled her girlfriend and the two of them wrestled while the girls laughed. But I felt like throwing up. Especially when the girls tangled their hands around each other’s throats and pretended to squeeze the life out of each other until they both died of asphyxiation. Their eyes closed and they stuck their tongues out as they lay on the floor.

“You okay?” Lola whispered to me. I hadn’t realized she’d been watching me.

I forced a smile, even though images of my horrific fairytale death were flashing before me. Stones, hanging, drowning, burning to death… All of it was making it hard to breathe in here.

“I think I’ve had too much to drink.” I shrugged. “Why doesn’t someone else go?”

“Wait.” Sage pointed at me. “So if the *due destini* thing is the lie… Who’s Alex? Is he cute?”

Lola must have seen me turning green, because she butted in again.

“He’s super hot,” Lola lied.

Maya snorted, but thankfully didn’t say anything.

“Why don’t you go next, Maya?” Lola asked, looking a little frantic.

Maya leaned forward and grabbed a bottle of wine from the center of our circle. Instead of pouring herself a glass, she just took a long pull straight from the bottle and smacked her lips.

“Okay,” she thought on it for a second. “I have a sister, my mate is a dick…” She paused dramatically, her eyes glinting. She tilted her head back and took another long gulp from the bottle. And then she smirked. “And my mate *has* a big dick.”

Everyone fell silent for a second.

And then they all burst out laughing. It was like a bubble had burst, and now that I was no longer the center of attention I felt myself relax. And the second I was able to think of something other than my tragic death, I realized—

“DID YOU AND COLTON HOOK UP?” I shrieked.

Maya just mimed zipping her lips, her eyes gleaming.

“Hmmm, which one’s the lie?” Sage mused.

“It’s gotta be the sister,” Zainab guessed.

“I mean we’ve seen everyone naked,” I pointed out, feeling the wine making my lips looser than they should be. “Including Colton, so we should be able to tell.”

“That has to be the lie, then,” Rishika shrugged. “I haven’t noticed anything… overwhelming.”

“Really?” I asked, hiccupping a little. “As far as I’m concerned, none of the guys are lacking in that department.”

“Oh my *god*.” Lola gaped at me before dissolving into giggles. “Are you just staring at everyone’s dicks whenever we shift?”

Everyone cackled. Sage was actually wiping tears from her eyes.

“I don’t *stare!”* I felt myself blushing. “It’s just hard not to notice when everyone’s naked so often. None of you have ever looked?”

Rishika looked like she was biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

“Wait.” Lola held her hands up. “We’ll talk about how Cali’s a total perv in a minute. Maya doesn’t have a sister! That’s the lie. I’ve never heard her talk about having one.”

Maya grinned. “Nope. Definitely got a sister.” She shook her head gleefully.

“Seriously?” Lola screeched, at the same time I yelled, “How did we not know about this?”

Maya just shrugged. “You never asked.”

“Did you always know Colton was your mate?” Rishika asked Maya.

“Let me answer that for you,” Lola interjected. “She did *not.* They’re not even together!”

“But that doesn’t mean we don’t all notice they have chemistry,” I said, sloshing a bit of wine onto the floor. “It’s totally obvious, Maya’s just pretending not to be into him.”

Maya turned to look at me, all the laughter gone from her expression. I felt my stomach clench. I knew then and there that I’d crossed a line.

So much for the bonding we’d done in Minnesota.

Maya leaned toward me, her voice cold as ice. “Why don’t you tell everyone who else *you* have chemistry with, Cali?”

**Episode 325**

GREYSON

He shouldn’t have left like that. Without any explanation. Without my *permission.*

Whether Xavier liked it or not, he was in *my* pack and he needed to act like it.

Especially now.

I wandered into the kitchen, not sure what I was even looking for.

What I found was Mrs. Smith sipping something delicious-smelling out of a steaming mug. She fiddled with her iPad, adjusting the volume on the news she was watching.

“White chocolate mocha?” she offered, raising an eyebrow.

I shook my head, not wanting to make her get up.

“I prefer beer,” I told her, walking over to the fridge to grab one.

I twisted the cap off, took a long draw, and felt myself relax a bit. I needed this. Anything to cut the tension.

“So.” Mrs. Smith seemed to stare right through me. “You’re our new Alpha. We’re no longer being actively threatened by an enemy pack. What’s your plan for us?”

I shrugged, feeling uncomfortable under her gaze.

“Try to keep everyone safe,” I offered.

“By keeping everyone in the dark?” she asked.

I clenched my bottle reflexively, then blew out a breath, reminding myself not to shatter it.

So, she was bringing it up. The thing we’d both known was coming.

“Forgive me.” She gave a polite smile. “But that seems like your way of doing things. Keeping secrets.”

I tried to hide my annoyance. The truth was, I’d always had a strange fondness for Mrs. Smith. But letting her know that would only encourage this kind of behavior. Questions. Questions could lead to insubordination. And I wasn’t going to let my pack go without a fight.

“Why don’t *you* tell them?” I asked her, letting it hang between us still. The secret we both kept.

“Because I’m not the Alpha,” she answered simply. “It’s not my place.”

I sat down beside her at the scrubbed kitchen table. She was the only person I could talk to. And while I didn’t want her to know she had that power, we needed to have a discussion.

“They’re not ready,” I told her.

“Maybe they’re not.” She sighed. “But you know you can’t keep lying. Lies turn people against their leaders. And telling one lie usually means having to tell others to cover up the first one. And then the lies multiply until you don’t share a single real thing with the people you swore to protect. And I don’t think that’s the kind of leader you want to be.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her.

The rest of the pack hadn’t really welcomed me. Mrs. Smith was the first person who didn’t seem to question my reasons for wanting to be in charge. She seemed to believe that I could be good at this. And it made me feel like there was just a little less weight on my shoulders.

“Thanks for the wisdom,” I told her. “But I have to handle this my own way.”

I raised my beer to her in a toast. She obliged me, clinking her mug against my bottle.

“To making it this far,” I said, before taking another drink.

I’d never liked being told what to do. Even advice usually felt like a lecture to me. But talking with Mrs. Smith was different. Probably similar to what talking to parents felt like, for most people.

I heard a gale of laughter from upstairs. Mrs. Smith grinned at me.

“Sounds like they’re having fun,” she mused.

“You weren’t invited to girls’ night?” I asked, wondering why she’d chosen to be here instead of with them.

“I was, but it’s not really my kind of thing.” She paused, contemplating her mug. “Plus, I think they’ll bond a little better without me looking over their shoulders. Don’t you think?”

I nodded, understanding. Part of me wanted to ask if putting other people first all the time ever got lonely. But I didn’t have to—I already knew the answer to that question.

“Joss didn’t join them,” she noted, pursing her lips.

I sighed. Joss was the last thing I wanted to talk about right now. Well, it was a long list. But Joss was close to the top.

“She’s the Luna.” I shrugged. “Maybe she feels the same way you do.”

“Oh, I know she’s the Luna.” Mrs. Smith let her smile widen. “She makes that *very* clear.”

I laughed, and Mrs. Smith looked proud of herself.

I took another drink. “I’ll admit that she doesn’t play well with others…”

“But she’s who you chose,” Mrs. Smith finished diplomatically.

*But I wanted to choose Cali.*

In another life, maybe I could have revealed that to Mrs. Smith. She was definitely trustworthy. But when push came to shove, I couldn’t trust her with a secret like that. I could barely trust myself with it.

What would things have been like if I’d said ‘fuck it’ to all the complications and just chosen her? Would I be happier? Would she be happier? Or would I be so scared I’d put a target on her back that I wouldn’t be able to enjoy being with her? Or would she have just flat-out rejected me?

I could tell that she felt the attraction between us. But what if she only wanted me as an option? Maybe as an actual partner, I’d disappoint her.

I decided to address it—knowing Mrs. Smith was smart enough to know what I was thinking. “If you’re talking about Cali, she’s not a wolf. Joss is. That, among other things, made the choice for me.”

“Sure.” She nodded kindly. “Makes sense.”

But I could tell she was letting me off the hook. We let silence fall between us until a Local Bulletin appeared on the news on Mrs. Smith’s iPad. She set down her mug and peered nervously at the screen.

There was footage of what looked like a truck stop diner. Police cruiser lights were flashing as they arrived in the lot. Yellow crime tape littered the scene, and the windows of the diner were smashed.

“Several bodies were found,” I heard a reporter explain. “Some too torn apart to identify. No witnesses have come forward, and the police are baffled.”

The video cut to a local cop talking to a camera. “In all my years,” he said, shaking his head, “I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s like they were attacked by wild animals.”

Mrs. Smith turned to me, her expression grave. “I wonder where Xavier is.”

She switched off her iPad, both of us having seen enough.

I downed the rest of my beer, feeling any calm that had settled over me shatter.

“This is exactly why I didn’t want him running off with that mercenary,” I growled.

Xavier was smart enough to know this kind of thing could happen if he ran off with Gabriel. And he’d done it anyway. That fool.

“Are you going to go after them?” Mrs. Smith asked me.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. “No. If I go after my idiot brother, he’ll just run off again. Being the Alpha fucking sucks.”

Mrs. Smith huffed out a little laugh. “Heavy is the head and all that,” she murmured kindly.

“Thanks for the chat,” I told her, hoping she knew that I meant it.

I walked out of the kitchen and into the living room, where the guys were watching football.

Colton and Jay had invited Alberto, one of Rishika’s guys, to join them. I watched them for a minute without them noticing. The atmosphere seemed light. I was happy to see everyone getting along. The pack had grown under my rule, and it seemed like it was for the best.

I wondered why Colton was still here, instead of off with Xavier? Weren’t they close?

Maybe it had something to do with Maya. Perhaps he liked her more than he was letting on.

I went upstairs, deciding to employ the same logic Mrs. Smith had used and not make the guys feel overly observed by me. But in the hallway, as I was walking by Lola’s room, I heard whisper-yelling.

“It’s really not that big of a deal,” one voice snapped.

“How can you say that?” the other voice warbled. Both definitely sounded drunk.

Before I could listen any further, the door burst open and Cali stumbled out. Loose limbed and pink cheeked, she was definitely drunk. So much so that she tripped over her own foot and barreled right into my arms.

I wrapped them around her, lifting her up so she could get back on her feet. I could smell the alcohol on her.

“Been drinking, love?” I murmured in her ear.

I shouldn’t tease her. I knew she hated it. But it was impossible to resist. The more I teased her, the pinker she got. The more she bit her lip until it was red, swollen, and absolutely bitable.

“I—well, umm,” she stammered, looking up at me with glassy eyes. “I had some wine.”

Suddenly, I realized that she’d planted both her hands on my chest. They felt so delicate and warm against my skin. In an instant I was overcome with the urge to sweep her up in a kiss.

But then she wobbled, and I realized she wasn’t in a place for me to do that now. So I bent at the knees and scooped her up in a bridal cradle, heading for her room.

Once inside, I shut the door behind us and laid her gently on the bed. Her eyes fluttered shut, and for a second, she was just like Sleeping Beauty. Heartbreakingly beautiful to watch at rest.

I moved to step back, but she quickly looped her arms around my neck. Like she was greedy for more physical contact.

I felt the air leave my lungs when she put her lips to my ear and whispered, “Stay.”

**Episode 326**

I stared up into Greyson’s eyes. They were like an endless cloud of mist, just begging me to wander inside and get lost.

Xavier was gone, but Greyson wasn’t. He was here and close and solid and present and *warm*. If I wanted, this could be my chance to explore this whole *due destini* thing.

And I wanted. There actually wasn’t a part of me that *didn’t* want him. I was all out of reasons to stay away.

Closing my eyes, I clasped my hands behind his neck and pulled him down to me, eager to feel his lips against mine once more.

But all I felt was the tip of his finger against my mouth. I let my eyes flutter open, confused.

“You’re drunk.” Greyson shook his head gently. “We can’t do this.”

But I didn’t want to hear another reason why we shouldn’t do this. It was all I’d thought of for so long. I wanted to give up. I wanted to give *in.*

“Kiss me,” I whispered, not caring if I sounded desperate. It was what I wanted.

I reached between us, trying to push his hand away so I could lean forward and close the distance between our faces. But Greyson didn’t like that.

Before I knew what was happening, he’d pinned my wrists above my head in one of his big hands. I struggled, trying to wriggle my hands out of his grasp. But it only made him smirk.

I felt his breath tickling my cheeks. There was no logical reason he needed to hold me this close, pinning my body to the bed under his. If he really didn’t want me, he should have left. If he really didn’t want me, why was he staring down at me with an intensity that made me want to rip all of his clothes off?

“Why are you fighting this?” I asked, my voice breathy and desperate with need.

“I told you.” He sighed, exasperated but gentle. “You’re drunk.”

I wriggled in his grasp, but he only held me tighter. Like dumping gasoline on a fire, it only made me need him more. I wanted his bare skin against mine. There was too much fabric between us, and I groaned impatiently.

“Okay,” I conceded. “I’ve had some drinks. But you’re not playing fair.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed with something. Anger? Arousal?

“‘Playing’ implies that this is a game.” Greyson’s voice was smooth and dangerous. “Are you playing a game with me, Cali?”

I sighed, spreading my legs slightly and letting Greyson sink into the cradle of my hips. I wanted to play whatever game he’d let me.

“Maybe,” I admitted, biting my lower lip and watching his eyes dart to take in the image.

“Then tell me the rules,” he murmured, and I felt everything inside me melting.

“You’re supposed to stay away from me,” I explained. “Or I’m supposed to stay away from you. Either way, we can’t be alone together. It’s the only way to get through this.”

Greyson swallowed, and I watched his Adam’s apple bob. Was I affecting him?

“And what are we getting through, Cali?” he asked, his voice getting huskier.

His eyes bored into mine, and I felt naked under his gaze in the best and worst way. Completely stripped. Why not be honest? It was the only thing I hadn’t tried.

“Your infatuation with me,” I told him, wishing I could run my finger along the line of his jaw. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. The reason you run this hot and cold. It’s because some part of you doesn’t really want me.”

He shook his head, and something like a growl escaped his lips.

“Am I wrong?” I asked. “You kissed me, but you picked Joss. Do you want me or not?”

He took a deep breath. “Right now, I want you to go to sleep.”

I groaned softly, pulling against his grip again.

“I don’t want to sleep,” I whined. “I want you. I want to try—”

“You might feel differently in the morning,” he told me, his eyes flitting to the door. He was going to leave.

My heart sank as he leaned in. Was he going to kiss me?

His lips brushed against my forehead and I sighed. So that was what being honest got me.

“Get some sleep, love,” he murmured into my ear before standing up.

I pushed myself off the bed, trying to follow him. Of course, since it was me, my feet tangled in the sheets and I fell to the carpeted floor.

I looked up just in time to see Greyson start laughing. I gazed up at him, my cheeks blazing with embarrassment.

“What am I gonna do with you?” he murmured as he looked down at me.

I pushed myself up until I was sitting on the bed. I flipped my hair, hoping I looked at least somewhat alluring, but knowing I’d just gotten some strands stuck to my lip gloss. But he hadn’t left. And that was something.

“Didn’t you say you dreamed about me?” I asked, looking up at him through my eyelashes.

Greyson stiffened, and I cursed myself for bringing it up. But he had told me that, at the pond. Had I pushed him too far? Or had I found just the right button?

“What did you dream about?” I asked, more insistent.

Greyson hesitated. His eyes were full of something sad. Regret?

“There’s no point in hiding it from you.” He sighed. “You won’t remember anything I tell you in the morning, anyway.”

I wondered why he was trying so hard to hold himself at arm’s length.

“Are you scared?” I asked, thinking about the *due destini* fairy tale and what it said our future could look like.

“Scared?” he asked, clearly a little annoyed at the implication.

“About the *due destini*,” I explained. “Are you worried that exploring this means you’re gonna fall off a cliff?”

“That’s a fairy tale.” Greyson shook his head. “And if we’ve reached the point in the night where we’re talking about that, I really should go. Goodnight, Cali.”

“I’m not tired,” I insisted. “Stop making excuses.”

Greyson turned back to look at me, his hand on the doorknob. His gaze hardened, and I felt a shiver go down my spine.

He stalked toward the bed, and I found myself scrambling backward. Despite my Fae blood, I suddenly felt very, very human. And very, very vulnerable.

“In case you forgot,” he said, stopping at the edge of the bed, “I’m the Alpha here.”

He leaned forward and grabbed me by the chin, angling my face so I had no choice but to look up at him. I felt like a moth drawn to a flame—unable to deny how beautiful and terrifying he was up close like this.

“And I don’t argue,” he told me, deadly serious. “I give commands. Do you understand?”

I tried to nod, but he was still holding my jaw. I wrenched out of his grasp and fell onto the bed, the air rushing from my lungs.

“I understand,” I answered, like I was in a trance.

The look in his eyes scared me. And then I felt anger stir up inside of me when I realized I recognized that look. I’d seen it on Xavier’s face, too.

It was a look that part of me liked very much. Part of me was *addicted* to that look.

I swallowed. “I know who you are,” I said, holding his gaze, refusing to back down.

“I wonder if you do.” His voice was soft, but cold. “Because you’re acting like you need a reminder.”

And as much as I wanted to know how he intended to remind me, something held me back. Was I ready for this? Ready for *him?*

There was something hard in his grey eyes. Something that made me wonder if I was better off not opening that door.

Greyson leaned in close. My heart was hammering inside my chest. I wanted him to touch me so, so badly. But the idea of reaching out and grabbing him myself seemed impossible.

“When I take you, Cali,” he whispered. “I want you to be able to remember everything I do to you. I want you to blush under every touch of my lips, I want the feeling of my hands on your skin burned into your memory. I want you to remember that you are and always will be *mine*.”

I shivered. I could tell my lower lip was trembling, and all I wanted was for him to take it between his teeth. For his hands to tangle in my hair. To feel him between my legs.

But instead, he just stared at me.

And somehow, that was the most intimate thing I could share with him right now. It was like he was seeing into my soul. Daring me to disobey him. To question him.

I considered saying something, telling him I was ready *now.* But I honestly didn’t know if I was. I knew I wanted him, but would I regret it?

Maybe Greyson could sense my hesitation, because he stood up to his full height and turned his back on me.

I closed my eyes and lay back on the bed, knowing I was doomed to a night of wondering what could have been. Then I heard the door open and close, and I knew I was alone again.

**Episode 327**

After what felt like ages, I took a breath. It wasn’t until I heard the ragged gasp tear out of my mouth that I realized I’d been holding it in.

I squeezed my eyes shut as tightly as I could, willing the room to stop spinning. I tried to replay what had just happened in my head. Had I just made a complete and utter fool of myself?

Or had he wanted me as much as I’d wanted him?

I heard the click of the door opening and sat up, trying to compose myself.

My jaw dropped when I saw Greyson striding through the door he’d just walked out of, his eyes wild.

“What are you…”

But he cut off my train of thought when he shut the door and stared at me, his chest rising and falling like he’d run a marathon in the five seconds he’d been gone.

“I changed my mind,” he growled, tearing off his shirt. “I can’t wait any longer.”

He made a beeline for me, and my body wanted to cheer. But my mind hadn’t quite caught up.

“But you just said—”

Greyson covered my mouth with his hand, silencing me. And he was right to. My question was stupid. We had a million reasons not to do this. But there was a much bigger and better reason *to* do it. The one Greyson must have chosen, out in the hallway.

We should do it because we both really, *really* fucking wanted to.

He gazed at me hungrily. A challenge. He was daring me to stop him. To say I didn’t want this. Part of me wanted to stop him. To talk more. I wanted to ask what had changed for him after he’d left. Why now? What about Joss? What about Xavier? What would we even *be* to each other if we went through with this?

*Xavier left you. For once,* a voice in my head pleaded with me, *stop getting in your own way. Stop worrying about what* might *happen, and just let yourself have what you want.*

Greyson traced my jaw with his fingertips, painting a hot white stripe down the side of my face, down my throat, back around to the nape of my neck. He let his fingers tangle in my hair and pulled me to him.

He captured my lips with his, his kiss softer than I ever could have imagined it being. I melted into his arms, leaning all my weight into him. Letting my head loll back into the cradle of his hands.

Needing more, I tentatively licked his lower lip. I just wanted to taste him, to let him know how much I wanted him. I felt a rumbling in Greyson’s chest as if a dam had burst inside him, and he pushed me back onto the mattress and pinned me to the bed underneath him. I could barely breathe, he was so heavy on top of me. But still, we weren’t close enough.

He pressed his palm flat to my chest to hold me in place. I wondered if he could feel my heart hammering inside my rib cage as he kissed his way down my neck. His hot, feverish mouth made me whimper with pleasure. Pleasure I could feel from the top of my head down to my toes.

Greyson had been right. Every touch felt like it was searing itself onto my mind and into my memory. I was burning alive and drowning all at the same time. I felt consumed by him. I wanted him to leave nothing behind.

He unbuttoned my shirt, letting his lips ghost over my flushed skin. I took advantage of the fact that my hands were free, and clamped one over my mouth to keep from crying out as he let his teeth brush against one of my nipples through the thin lace of my bra.

“I want to hear you, Cali.” He wrenched my hand away from my mouth.

I moaned as he pushed his knee between my thighs, spreading them wide.

“Can I—”

But before I could finish asking, he pressed his hips against mine and rocked forward. Once, twice, three times. He established a torturous rhythm, just a bit slower than I wanted. It worked me up into a mewling, needy mess, but gave me no release.

I clawed at him, letting my fingernails rake down his back. I hoped I left marks. He deserved them for teasing me like this.

“Is this what you wanted?” His breath was hot against my neck.

“I want,” I panted, “*more.”*

“So needy,” he crooned softly as he popped the front clasp on my bra and pushed the cups aside. “So beautiful,” he murmured. “Absolutely perfect.”

“Greyson,” I whined, nuzzling into his throat.

“Be patient, love,” he ordered gently. “You want this to last, don’t you?”

I nodded eagerly as he stripped off my jeans and my panties, leaving me stark naked on his brother’s sheets. I reached for him and, for once, he obliged me and dove back onto the bed. He used the momentum to roll us so I was on top.

I pushed the curtain of hair out of my face, eager to see him looking up at me—

“You’re so fucking beautiful, baby,” Xavier sighed from underneath me.

I shook my head, dazed.

What was Xavier doing here? Where had Greyson gone?

“Xavier—”

“Shh.” He pulled me down and silenced me with a steamy kiss. He nibbled on my lower lip until I let my lips part so his tongue could slide into my mouth.

I could feel his hand splayed out across my back, pushing my chest against his. I shuddered at the feeling of his naked skin against mine. So warm, so right, so… him.

“Cali,” he whispered against my lips.

And that was all I needed to hear.

Xavier wrapped my hair around his hand. He pulled me up so I was sitting on his lap, legs straddling his hips. I felt pain tingle through my scalp, the slight burn delicious when paired with his lips on my neck and his thumb working my clit.

I opened my eyes to see him staring adoringly at me, and couldn’t help but let a small giggle escape my lips. He was actually here! He was back. I knew I’d missed him, but I hadn’t realized just how much until now.

As he eased inside me, I completely forgot why he’d even left in the first place.

“Fuck, you’re so perfect,” he groaned into my neck, pulling my hips down until they were flush with his.

I kissed him, hard, our bodies writhing as we both tried to consume each other. I rolled my hips and he bit down on my collarbone, making me cry out.

“Please don’t stop,” I begged, bouncing up and down on his dick, leaning back so he could keep stroking my clit.

“I won’t, baby,” he promised, pushing his hips up to meet mine over and over again.

I felt pleasure licking up my spine and knew I was close. My legs were turning to jelly, but I knew I couldn’t stop.

Understanding what I needed better than I did, Xavier grasped my hips as tightly as he could. He pushed and pulled me onto him. Burying himself deeper inside me than he’d ever been.

Each thrust took my breath away until finally…

“Right there,” I cried, throwing my head back as I came.

Xavier rolled us so I was on my back. So he could hold me through my first orgasm. I clung to him, giddy and tired. He kissed my lips, my cheeks, my eyelids…

“Can I keep going?” he asked, his voice gentle.

“Please,” I breathed, hooking my ankles together behind his back.

Xavier brushed my hair out of my eyes and for a second, I remembered the first time we’d had sex. How nervous I’d been. And how safe I felt now, in his arms.

He cupped my face with one hand, but interlaced the fingers of the other with mine, holding my hand as he pushed deep inside me.

A new kind of hunger built inside me. I felt so intimate, so bare. Every touch was perfectly designed to meet my needs.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” Xavier got out through gritted teeth, almost like he was reading my mind. “Are you close?”

I nodded, surprised to find that I was.

Xavier rolled his hips, making me groan at the places he stroked inside of me. He did it again, and again and again, until we were both crying out as we came.

I felt a perfect, soaring feeling in my chest and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to hang onto it for as long as possible.

When I opened my eyes, I was shocked to realize it was morning. I wasn’t underneath Xavier anymore. Or Greyson.

But there *was* a warm sleeping body pressed against me. I sat up, leaning over to get a good look at his face, and sighed when I realized it was Xavier.

I lay back down on the pillows, wrinkling my nose in confusion. Wasn’t he supposed to have been gone longer?

And wasn’t I supposed to have waited more than 24 hours before I started to dream about fucking his brother?

But before I could cover my face with my hands and berate myself for being a terrible mate/girlfriend/person, I felt a hand on my stomach.

I spun around and almost screamed when I saw Greyson in bed on my other side, his chest rising and falling gently as he slept. He wasn’t awake, but he was murmuring something.

Against my better judgement, I leaned closer so I could hear him. I put my ear to his lips and heard him whisper, “You have to find the haystack to find the needle.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I demanded.

Greyson’s eyes snapped open, but before he could answer I was opening my eyes again.

I was still in my bedroom, but this time I was alone.

**Episode 328**

I groaned as sunlight streaming through the curtains hit me directly in the face. I rolled over, my head throbbing as I pulled the covers over me.

My first thought?

*Pink wine is a liar. It promises you a fun time, and then where does it leave you?*

My second thought?

*What the hell was with those dreams last night?*

‘You have to find the haystack to find the needle’, Greyson had said. Mikah had said that finding the Fae world would be like finding a needle in a haystack. Clearly my brain wanted me to get back on track.

As much as I wanted to spend my time recounting… other things from last night’s dreams—Greyson’s lips against mine, the way he’d gripped me so tightly it verged right on that dizzying edge between pleasure and pain, Xavier intertwining our hands as I cried out—I didn’t have time to worry about Greyson and Xavier. I had to focus on my mom. Her time was running out. She was only getting worse.

I felt guilt pierce me when I thought about all the time I’d wasted. Every time I let myself get distracted, I was letting her down.

I pushed myself off the bed, wiping drool from my cheek as I hobbled over to the bathroom. After downing a couple Ibuprofen, I took the quickest shower I could, got dressed, and packed a small bag.

When I opened my bedroom door, I could hear plenty of sounds from downstairs. People were making breakfast, chatting about their nights, channel surfing on the living room TV. I felt my body tense. There was no way Greyson would let me go. He was definitely going to try and stop me.

If I tried to sneak out, I was sure to get caught. If only I could levitate like Mikah, then I could just leap out my window and be gone. But I wasn’t a vampire. I was Fae. A Fae who didn’t even know how to use her powers.

So I squared my shoulders and psyched myself up as I set my sights on my only remaining option: being direct.

But before I could do that, I ducked back into my bedroom and took another look at my closet. What did one wear to visit the Fae world, anyway? My mind went to Tinkerbell, to barely-there dresses with handkerchief hemlines. I wondered if that was stereotyping.

As I threw a few more shirts—and yeah, one cute but casual dress just in case—into my bag, I reminded myself that Greyson wasn’t even going to be my biggest obstacle on my journey. Big Mac was going to be the real problem. When had dealing with her ever been straightforward?

And how likely was she to help me without getting more of my blood in return?

As satisfied as I could possibly be with my bag, I opened the door to my room again. I could smell the coffee Jay had probably burned coming from the kitchen. At the top of the stairs, I stopped and took a deep breath.

I could do this.

I *had* to do this.

If I didn’t do this, my mother would die.

And that just couldn’t happen.

I bounded down the stairs and waded through a sea of slightly hungover werewolves, all shoveling cereal into their mouths. A few of them grunted at me, but I didn’t have time to chat.

Eventually, I found Greyson outside in the yard, doing push-ups.

Without a shirt.

Because of *course* he was.

A few flashes of last night’s dream came back to me. His teeth digging into my neck, his hips grinding against mine, the way he’d growled…

*I can’t wait any longer.*

I shook my head, forcibly pushing the images from my mind. Mentally, I cursed his stupid shirtless push-ups. Why did he have to do that? It was so extra. Was he trying to make my life more difficult? It really wouldn’t have surprised me.

When he saw me, he stopped mid-push-up.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked.

“I’m going to Big Mac’s.” I tried to focus on his face and not his massive biceps that I definitely didn’t want to touch.

Greyson rose slowly to his feet, forcing me to wait for his answer with bated breath. He wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his forearm, and I tried not to think of how deliciously salty his lips would taste right now.

“We were just there,” he told me, like I was an idiot. “Why do you want to go back?”

I hesitated, not sure how much I could reveal. Sure, Greyson knew I was Fae, but the more we talked about it, the harder it would be to keep it a secret.

“I need to speak to her,” I said, resolving to keep my reasons to myself if possible. “Am I your prisoner, or am I allowed to come and go as I please?”

Greyson’s jaw clenched, and I could tell I was getting to him.

“You still haven’t told me why you need to see her,” he reminded me, not budging.

I looked around to make sure we were alone. I even took a step closer to him so that I could lower my voice as much as possible—even though the last thing I wanted was to be closer to his glistening, naked torso.

“It’s about the Fae thing,” I whispered, all in one hushed breath.

“That’s a bad idea, Cali.” He shook his head, his voice grave. “She’s a witch.”

“No shit,” I snapped, unable to keep the frustration from my voice. “That’s exactly why I need to see her. I could have snuck out, but I chose to be honest with you instead. Don’t you appreciate that?”

Greyson sighed. “I do,” he admitted. “I honestly do, but why Big Mac? What do you think you can get from her?”

“She can help me find the Fae world,” I said.

If he didn’t let me go, and I couldn’t sneak out, my mom would die. I’d never been claustrophobic before, but I was starting to understand the feeling of it now. The walls of time were closing in on me. I felt breathless and out of control and desperate to do something to make it all stop.

“My mother is dying,” I admitted, trying to keep my voice from shaking. “She’s sick because she left the Fae world. I think returning her to it, or at least returning a part of it to her, could save her. It’s my only hope.”

Greyson nodded. His hand twitched, like he was going to reach out to me but thought better of it.

“Are you sure there’s help for her there?” Greyson asked, his voice gentle.

“I honestly don’t know,” I said, wanting to lie down on the ground and cry but refusing to give up. “But it’s the only thing that I haven’t tried. And yeah, maybe if I go there, I’ll come back empty-handed. But maybe I’ll find something that can help her.”

“Or maybe you’ll find more danger.” Greyson looked over my shoulder, into the trees beyond me.

I was losing him. And I couldn’t lose him now.

“Unless you kill me right here, right now,” I told him, my voice low and fierce, “you can’t stop me. I’m going.”

Apparently unsurprised by my ballsy-ness, Greyson’s expression softened.

“I’m really sorry about your mother,” he told me, sounding genuine. “But a journey to Big Mac’s is more dangerous than you think.”

“I don’t get it.” I shook my head. “The Manus Cruentae is finished. The Lupo Finale is done. I’m no one’s Luna, and I’m not really even anyone’s mate. There’s no reason for anyone out there to target me. So what’s the problem?”

I looked at him, waiting for a response. But none came.

“Unless…” I felt so foolish I could barely get the words out. “Unless it’s just that you don’t want me to leave?”

I felt naked when I said it. Like I was showing him something private, vulnerable. He could shoot me down right here. Make me feel like an idiot.

“You think the Manus Cruentae is the only threat out there?” His words were angry. “You’ve got no idea what you’re up against, Cali.”

He wasn’t rejecting me, but he wasn’t accepting me either. And on top of that, he was refusing to help me.

So I just shrugged.

“I don’t care,” I told him. “My mom’s life is more important. You can’t scare me into staying here.” I got angrier and angrier as I kept talking. Greyson started to shrink back a little as I continued. “I’ve faced down everything this fucked-up werewolf world has thrown at me.” I balled my hands up into fists. “And I’ll do all of it again if it means I can save my mom. So I guess this conversation is over and I’m on my own. Which is fine by me.”

I pushed past him toward the woods, ready to make my way.

But Greyson grabbed my wrist and stopped me in my tracks.

I tried to twist free like Rishika had shown me, but I couldn’t shake him.

“You can’t stop me,” I insisted, refusing to look back at him.

Greyson spun me around to face him, and I braced myself for his anger. For the yelling and the insistence that *he* made the decisions around here.

But instead, he let me go. He let me go, and just looked at me. Studying my face, like the key to why I was so stubborn might lie somewhere in my expression.

“You’re right,” he said simply. “I can’t stop you.”

“Thank you,” I fired off, and started toward the woods again.

His hand on my shoulder stopped me again.

“What now?” I barked, spinning around.

“I’m coming with you.”

**Episode 329**

“I’m coming with you,” Greyson said.

“Um, how about *no?*” I scoffed, batting his hand away. He was all grabby hands lately, all touchy-feely with me. It was driving me nuts.

“This is not up for debate,” he said seriously. “Either I come with you, or you stay here.”

I gasped. “How dare you?”

He snorted. “I’m not going to allow a repeat of you sneaking off to Minnesota. It’s just not going to happen, Cali.”

I wanted to grab a stick and poke him in the eye with it. Sometimes, violence totally *could* be the solution.

“This is a control thing, isn’t it? Because you’re a control freak,” I snapped. “I wonder if you’re trying to stop me just to prove that you can, or just to prove that you’re the Alpha. Either way, it’s a dick move.”

Greyson narrowed his—unfortunately very beautiful—gray eyes at me. “I don’t think you understand the dangers, Cali. It’s very—”

“Don’t try to scare me again,” I said, smacking him on the chest accidentally. Or on purpose. “I need to do something to save my mom, and I’m not going to let anyone or anything stop me.”

Greyson glared. “I understand you’re worried about your mom, but you should ask yourself how she’d feel if her only daughter died trying to save her.”

How could he say that? How could he ALWAYS find just the right words to make me feel like shit?

“Well,” I sniped, “my mother didn’t leave me much of a choice. She kept me in the dark for so long that now the shit has hit the fan.”

The second the words rolled out of my mouth, Greyson’s severe expression softened. It was jarring to witness, the way his mood could change so quickly. I gulped, looking up at him.

“I understand how you feel, more than you realize,” he said in an even tone. “I’ve got my fair share of parental baggage.” He took a couple of steps closer to me, his gaze pinning me down. I couldn’t stop myself from staring at him, taking in the intensity and sincerity in his expression. Everything about this felt so intimate. “Are you willing to die to save your mother, Cali?” he whispered.

I didn’t hesitate to nod. “I’m willing to do anything for the people I love.”

He made a move to touch me again, but that would be too much for me right now. *I think we’re done here*, I thought to myself, ignoring my racing heartbeat.

“Okay, good talk. Goodbye now!” I pushed past him and headed toward the car, throwing my bag in the backseat before getting behind the wheel.

At the same time, I heard the passenger door open.

“What are you doing?” I glared at Greyson as he casually slid in.

“What do you think I’m doing, love?” he asked innocently.

He needed to stop calling me that. It made me feel certain things! *Bad!*

“I think I just told you goodbye,” I said flatly.

He gave me a smug smile. “And I think I just told you that you’re not going anywhere without me.”

I rolled my eyes. This was the WORST, but maybe it wouldn’t be entirely horrible to have a massive werewolf—an *Alpha*—traveling with me as a bodyguard. Even if said werewolf was my stupid-hot Alpha who I had mixed feelings about. Besides, Greyson was so stubborn that there was no way I was going to change his mind.

“Cali?” Greyson spoke up again. “Do you actually know how to hot-wire the car?”

I got my shit together and focused on the now. The now, and my mom, were what mattered the most. And if Greyson had to be part of ‘the now’, then so be it. I accepted my fate and dangled the keys in front of his face. “Don’t need to hot-wire anything.”

He snatched the keys. “Maybe I should drive.”

“Hah, no,” I said. “I have my license; I can drive. Just because you’re the Alpha, that doesn’t make you a better driver. And you’re not the boss of me, either.”

Greyson rolled his eyes, handing me the keys.

Our fingers touched for a fraction of a second, but a familiar warm sensation spread through me—that same electricity that always flooded me whenever our skin made contact. I tried to shake it off. I had no time for this nonsense now—I had to find Big Mac and save my mother.

“Are you gonna start the car?” Greyson asked, rudely interrupting our staring contest.

“Shut up,” I said, starting the engine and pulling out of the driveway.

He leaned over me then, clearly having decided that putting his massive muscles in my line of vision was a great idea. I flushed as he reached across me, the smell of him filling my senses. He was so. fucking. close.

“What are you doing?” I huffed, shoving him. “What the hell?”

“Safety first,” he said with a smirk, putting my seat belt on for me.

“You are *so* annoying,” I mumbled, blushing all over as he settled back in his seat.

“I said I’m coming along to protect you, didn’t I?” He shrugged, a lingering smile on his face.

Trying not to fucking crash into a tree or something just because he was looking at me like that, I broke our eye contact.

“Stop smiling,” I said under my breath, ignoring his quiet chuckle.

We drove in silence for a while, long enough for my pulse—and certain other bodily functions—to settle down. I opened the window too, so I didn’t have to smell Greyson’s aftershave in an enclosed space.

*Does he bathe in it?* I thought, scowling. *Is this supposed to be attractive? Like, who would want to roll in that scent and lick it off him? Oh my GOD, this is already a disaster—*

“So, do you know where you’re going?” Greyson asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I glared at him. “Big Mac’s. I already told you.”

“Right,” he said dryly. “But do you actually know how to get there?”

I paused. Cleared my throat. “Um, I have no idea.”

He chuckled, *again*. “Take a left at the next road.”

“I knew that,” I lied.

“Right,” he replied, still smirking. He really was infuriating. But I was kinda mad at myself too right now—why did I feel the need to prove myself whenever I was around werewolves? And why did Greyson always have to be so smug about everything?

I wanted to smack that smirk right off his horrible face.

Stewing, I made the turn.

“Go straight for ten miles,” Greyson said.

Still frowning, I did my best to keep my eyes on the road. I didn’t want to look at him. I didn’t need to look at him. Why the HELL was he so close to me?

*He’s in the passenger seat, Cali,* I reminded myself.

Oh, right.

After what seemed like an eternity, Greyson broke the silence. I had no idea when he’d become such a chatty Cathy. “I’m taking a big chance allowing you to drive. I hope you don't make me regret it.”

And of course, when he spoke, it was just to piss me off.

I huffed, but okay—in retrospect, Xavier would probably never have let me drive. Maybe Greyson believed in me more than he let on? Or was this just more of the manipulation that he seemed to be so good at? But I had to admit, it looked like he was back to the Greyson I’d been getting to know before the Lupo Finale—cocky and infuriating, but not *entirely* evil.

“We’re getting close,” Greyson said.

Up ahead, the road turned from asphalt to gravel, and the woods were getting thicker. I recognized where we were.

“I know this place!” I grinned. “Big Mac’s house should be just ahead.” But as I brought the car to a stop, I realized that, just like last time, I couldn’t really see where it was.

“The house isn’t visible, and I can’t sense it,” Greyson said, like he could hear my thoughts. Maybe he could. “You’ll have to be the one to find it, Cali.”

I nodded, and we got out of the car. Greyson glanced at me and then turned his attention to the forest, like he was getting ready for anything. Despite the baggage between us, I had to admit, it did feel comforting to have someone as powerful as Greyson here with me.

Of course, I’d never admit that to him.

Taking a deep breath, I moved forward, searching for clues. Only a moment later, I saw sparkles floating in the air.

“Found it,” I said, sticking my hand through the shimmering shield like I had last time. I felt at ease as I walked through it, but then… I came to a sudden stop. The house looked like I remembered, but the door had been broken down, torn into a million pieces.

“*Shit*,” I said under my breath. This didn’t look good. In fact, this looked really, REALLY bad.

“Big Mac?” I called.

Nothing.

Holding my breath, I walked inside, only to see that Big Mac’s home had been ripped apart.

**Episode 330**

“What’s going on?” Greyson called from behind me.

Creeped out and intimidated, I backed up, hurrying through the house’s shield. “Oh my god!”

“Cali?” Greyson scowled, taking in my expression. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Big Mac. Her house, it’s… It’s been destroyed!”

His expression dark, Greyson moved past me and stepped through the shield, blinking out of sight. “Where is it?” I heard him say. “God damn it, the witch’s spell is hiding the house from me. I can’t even see it.”

“Seriously?” I asked incredulously. Right now, I was more frustrated and scared than amused by Big Mac’s antics.

“Yeah,” he grumbled. “And if I can’t see the house, I can’t help you figure out what happened.”

Big Mac was a serious badass, honestly. She had to be a very powerful witch to pull off this kind of thing, so the idea that someone had destroyed her house freaked me out even more. A noise from the forest startled me, and I let out a squeak, stumbling through the shield and reaching blindly for Greyson.

Stupid hot Alpha or not, he was pretty hard to kill, and I also wanted to stay alive today.

“Come here.” He took my hand, pulling me closer. His tone was almost gentle, and that startled me even more. There was a shimmering surge of energy as he reappeared, along with Big Mac’s house.

“Damn,” he said under his breath, looking at the residence’s broken entrance. “I can see it now.” He turned to me. “Maybe this is happening because you’re Fae? Or part human? And it’s your touch that allows me to see, so I’m going to need you to keep holding onto me while we’re inside.” He looked at our intertwined hands. “Don’t let go.”

Oh god. Had Greyson just gone all Jack from *Titanic* on me?

No.

Was I an absolute jackass for thinking about romantic tragedies right now?

Yes.

He gripped my hand harder, making my pulse race in ways that had nothing to do with fear or adrenaline. “Did you call for Big Mac?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, swallowing roughly. “But she didn’t answer.”

He frowned. “Let’s go in.”

I nodded, and we stepped through the doorway. I was aware of his firm grip, but the devastation around me distracted me from anything else. This was horrible.

What the hell had happened to Big Mac?

Who even had the power to hurt a badass like her?

Also, how the hell did this part Fae thing work? How come Greyson could only see the house when I touched him?

Ignoring all those questions, I asked Greyson the only question that mattered right now. “What do you think happened here?”

He paused and motioned for me to be still. He inhaled deeply, and I watched him. He looked so focused that it was strangely daunting.

“Do you smell something?” I whispered. Maybe another werewolf had attacked Big Mac.

Greyson’s eyes narrowed for a moment before he exhaled. “We should get out of here.”

It didn’t escape me that he hadn’t answered my question.

*He’s probably hiding something*, I thought. *They always do*. This whole thing was so spooky that cold sweat had gathered at the base of my spine.

“What did you smell, Greyson?” I asked. “Who could have found Big Mac while she had her house cloaked?”

Greyson gestured to the damage. “Something supernatural, for sure.”

“Thanks, Captain Obvious. The question here is, was it another werewolf? A witch? Vampires?” As my panic grew, I unconsciously moved to remove my hand from his. He stopped me before I could, moving both his hands to my shoulders. He squeezed gently, holding eye contact. His expression was so severe that I didn’t know what to do with it.

“Whatever did this, it’s clearly powerful,” Greyson said. “And angry. But for me to figure out exactly what happened, you have to keep your hands on me, okay? I literally can’t see without you.”

I didn’t have a snarky reply for that. “Okay.”

To my absolute shock, he murmured, “Thank you.” And then he took my hand again, starting to lead me back to the front door.

“Wait, we’re leaving already?” I asked. “There has to be some sort of clue here about what happened!”

Greyson shook his head. “Big Mac is a witch, not Fae. Is there something here that you think is gonna help you?”

“I don’t know,” I said stubbornly. “I just want to look around.” That was what I said, but on the inside, I was freaking out. There was a big part of me that wanted to run. “But, I mean…” I looked up at him, sniffling. “What if we find Big Mac’s body?”

He squeezed my shoulders again. His touch felt heavy but calming, just like his tone. “I would definitely smell Big Mac. She’s not here—living or dead.” He glanced around. “Whatever did this, though, could still be around. If you still want to look, we should do it quickly, and then get out.”

I was struck silent for a moment.

*He’s right,* I thought frantically. *How do we know that whoever did this isn’t waiting to attack? Someone got through Big Mac’s magic once, and they could do it again…*

I pushed the fear aside, hoping that if we were attacked, Greyson would be able to fend off the attacker.

“Okay, you’re right,” I said. “And you’ll protect us if anything happens.”

He arched an eyebrow. “To think that you didn’t even want me to come with you.”

“Oh my god, shut *up*,” I hissed, clutching his hand tighter before I started exploring.

I cautiously stepped through the debris—smashed potion bottles, books, glasses—and Greyson followed. I paused by Big Mac’s desk. The drawers were smashed, and books were lying everywhere.

“They were looking for something,” Greyson said.

“Do you have any idea what that something was?”

“Do *you*?”

Ugh! He kept turning the tables on me. “No. That’s why I asked.”

“Well, I don’t know,” he said. “We’re both equally clueless, so you don’t have to feel inadequate. Happy now?”

Rolling my eyes, I ignored him and kept searching through the mess. But then a familiar tingling sensation drew my attention. From the corner of my eye, I saw a greenish glow.

“There!” I gasped, looking down the hall.

Greyson frowned. “A wisp?”

“Yes! My friends the wisps are back!” I pulled Greyson toward the glow, which disappeared up the stairs.

“Excuse me?” I yelled at the wisp. “Come back here! Don’t you run away from me!” I made a move to run toward it, but Greyson held me back like a massive anchor. He looked at me like he thought I was insane, but also very cute.

*Wait, what?*

“I’m not going to run after some weird light, Cali,” he said. “It’s not smart.”

“But it’s a wisp!” I exclaimed, tugging at his hand. “It’s telling me something!”

Greyson scoffed. “It’s *telling you something?* Like what? The fastest way to die?”

I huffed. “Trust me, okay?” I raised an eyebrow. “If you’ll recall, the last time you trusted me, I saved your life. For the second time.”

That seemed to give him pause. He followed me upstairs. “I’ve saved your life a bunch of times too, you know. You don’t have to keep rubbing that in my face, it’s not very—”

“There it is!” I said, interrupting his quiet grumbling. The wisp was halfway down the hallway, entering a room. I hurried to it, dragging Greyson along, and paused by the doorway.

The wisp hovered above a pile of books before flying out the broken window.

“Now what?” Greyson asked.

“Shush!” I waved him off, approaching the books. “This has to be some kind of clue,” I mused.

“The books?” Greyson asked.

“Yeah. But I’m not sure which one of them is the clue.” I scowled, my frustration escalating. “I don’t have the time to read all of these right now!”

Greyson raised his eyebrows. “You really think the wisp wants you to take a reading break?”

“I don’t know, maybe it wants me to get ahead on my Goodreads challenge!” I huffed out. “Why else would it lead me to a pile of books?”

“Cali,” Greyson said patiently. “You said that the wisps are your friends. That they usually help you. What’s going on here?”

“I mean, not like *friends*, friends. More like frenemies. Or that one friend you keep running into and say, ‘oh, we should go out for coffee sometime!’ and then you never do it because you don’t actually like them that much.”

Greyson looked like he couldn’t be any less impressed.

“Oh my god!” I groaned in frustration. “Thanks for nothing, wisp!” I yelled, and accidentally knocked over the entire pile of books.

“Great,” I scoffed. “This is just great, I’m just—”

“No, wait,” Greyson said, his eyes widening. The books had toppled over, but there was something on the floor underneath them. Markings? What the hell was that? Bending forward, his hand still in mine, Greyson pushed the books and other debris away, revealing the biggest clue we’d found so far.

Greyson looked up at me, eyes gleaming. “It’s a trap door.”

**Episode 331**

“It’s a trap door,” I repeated Greyson’s words, way too hyped up to keep my cool. I knelt down next to him, vibrating with adrenaline. “We should—”

I was reaching for the door when Greyson said, “No, Cali!”

Startled, I turned to him.

“It might be a trap,” he told me carefully.

I paused. He was right. But *still*.

“It could be,” I said. “But the wisp wanted me to find this, and the wisps have never caused me harm.” *So far at least*.

“I thought you said the wisps were your annoying frenemies?”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t trust or admire them. You really have no idea how female friendships work, do you?” I asked. “We’re going in.”

Greyson shook his head, but fell silent. I took a deep breath, opened the trap door, and reached inside.

“If something eats your hand…”

I squealed, both because of his words and because of the fact that there were freaking cobwebs in there. *EW! GROSS!*

“*Stop it!*” I hissed at Greyson, who was laughing quietly. SERIOUSLY. I hated spiders! If a spider crawled on my hand right now, I would DIE! Thankfully, all I found was the leather cover of a book. I carefully pulled it out. It was old-looking, and really dusty.

“What’s on the cover?” Greyson asked, hovering over my shoulder. He was so close I could feel his breath on the back of my neck, which was very inconvenient.

*Don’t think inappropriate thoughts right now, Cali!* I scolded myself.

“Nothing,” I replied, fighting to keep a grip on myself. I opened the book, unsure of what to expect. There were symbols and languages I didn't recognize. Probably Latin—it seemed to be the popular choice among supernaturals, which made sense, seeing as it was a dead language. At least a large percentage of them were dead inside, too.

“Do you think this is Big Mac’s spell book?” I asked.

“Could be,” Greyson said, tracing the pages as he flipped through the book. “I have no idea. I don’t recognize the language or the symbols.”

“And here I thought you were the all-knowing Alpha.”

He ignored my jab. “Whatever the hell it is, I think we’ve already spent enough time here.”

“True.”

Greyson stared. “Did you just agree with me?”

“Don’t get used to it,” I scoffed as he stood up, pulling me up after him. I held the book against my chest, realizing that this was a definite small victory, despite everything. This book had to have some clue inside—we just needed to figure it out.

Maybe Mrs. Smith would know?

As Greyson led me through the chaos left behind by whoever had trashed this house, I realized that Mrs. Smith needed to be told about this whole situation anyway. She deserved to know what had happened to Big Mac—whatever their relationship was.

“You okay?” Greyson asked when we got downstairs.

I nodded, squeezing his hand. I’d never say it out loud, but having him literally hold my hand through all this had been the biggest comfort.

We stepped outside and I led Greyson back through the shield.

The car was parked only a few feet away.

“I think we should check out the book right now, before it gets darker,” I said, but Greyson paused.

He was still holding my hand.

“Get in the car,” he ordered, in a low voice.

I realized that the forest was entirely quiet, but I shrugged it off. All the squirrels and birds had probably freaked out because Greyson the Big Bad Wolf was around, apex predator that he was. *Rawr* and all that.

I rolled my eyes. “Wait a sec—”

“No,” he snapped, letting my hand go to push me forward. “Go and start the car. Right now, Cali.”

I was about to protest, but then I saw his face. The urgency in his expression made me shut up. A chill ran down my back, and I was suddenly certain that I shouldn’t argue with him right now. I rushed toward the car, hopping in. Nervously fumbling with the keys, I started shaking.

Why wasn’t Greyson getting in the car, too?

Was there something out there? Was that why he was acting this way?

I started the car and turned to look back at Greyson. He turned toward me, but the second he saw me, all the color drained from his face.

“NO!” he screamed, racing toward me.

A low, menacing snarl came from behind me, and I whipped around.

There was a fucking wolf in the backseat!

“OH MY *GOD*!” I screamed. “WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

The monster lunged toward me and I kept screaming, ducking to the side and knocking the car into gear as my foot slammed down the accelerator. I squealed and the car jerked forward, knocking the wolf back. It won me two seconds to gather my bearings, fight to get control of the car, and also not get eaten.

“GREYSON!” I shouted hysterically. “WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?”

*To think that I didn’t want him to come with me!!!!!!*

Behind me, the wolf growled, and I was about to jump out of the goddamn car when I heard a loud thud that made the whole car shudder.

The side window shattered.

Greyson, my wonderful best friend, had arrived, and he was in wolf form. He smashed his way into the car and attacked the wolf, thank *GOD!* But my relief was short-lived. I looked straight ahead and saw that we were heading straight for a tree. Gasping, I spun the wheel and the tree rudely knocked off the car’s side mirror.

I was shaken to my core as the car careened from the impact, barreling toward one of the hot springs for a lovely fucking bath. Torn between screaming and crying, I braced myself as the car hit the spring and I got a mouthful of airbag.

*BOOM!*

“Oh my god, GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY WAY!” I yelled at the airbag as I fought to get out of the car. I knew it meant well, but it was being totally overbearing—much like my parents could be.

*My mom!* I thought frantically. *I need to get out of here and save her!*

The wolf behind me had been knocked out, but seemed to be coming to his senses, which was bad news for everyone involved. Empowered by the thought of my mom, though, I reached for the door handle. But then there was a loud tearing sound, and the roof above me was torn open as if by a can opener.

*“CALI! Get out!”* Greyson. Greyson was in my head. Greyson had opened the car to help me out, but I needed to do the rest by myself. I grabbed Big Mac’s book, fighting to get out. But the door was jammed, and hot spring water was starting to pour in.

In the meantime, the wolf behind me had come to its senses completely.

“Leave me alone!” I shouted, hitting the wolf on the head with the book. It roared at me, but when Greyson snarled at it, it yelped. It now seemed pretty preoccupied with the huge Alpha doing his best to murder it. As they fought, I took the opportunity to crawl out over the windshield. Landing on the hood of the car, I fought to keep my balance, but that was fucking unlikely. I threw the book toward the shore seconds before I fell backward from the car and into the water.

*SPLASH!*

The hot water stung my eyes and I fought to resurface. I made it just in time to see Greyson rip the attacking wolf’s throat out.

“Oh my god!” I choked out, floundering about in the water.

Greyson tossed the dying wolf aside and leaped over the car, shifting before he hit the water beside me. The water was warm, but I was shuddering, shivering with fear and relief.

Greyson grabbed me the second he resurfaced, hauling me into his arms. “Did he hurt you?” he demanded.

I was stunned to see actual terror in his eyes.

His hands moved all over me—my head, my shoulders, my chest, my sides… He settled his hands on my waist, pulling me even closer until I was flush against him. “Did he fucking hurt you, Cali?”

I was so overwhelmed by what had happened and by Greyson himself—his closeness, his worry, his power—that I could only shake my head.

“Jesus *Christ*,” he breathed out in relief, wrapping his arms around me in an embrace so tight it could have been called suffocating. I just felt safe, though. I felt like crying but also smiling, so elated to be surrounded by him, his ferocious body a shield between me and the world.

*To think I didn’t want him to come with me!* I thought for probably the third time today, fighting not to burst into hysterical laughter.

“I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you,” Greyson whispered into my hair before pulling back to face me. His hands moved to the back of my neck, and I felt so protected that it was overwhelming.

I felt protected and *wanted*.

He glanced at my lips, and suddenly…

Suddenly, I was acutely aware that he was 100% naked.

His eyes were like molten silver. Captivating. He rested his forehead against mine, our panting breaths almost synchronized, and his lips…

His lips were just an inch away from mine.

**Episode 332**

GREYSON

How the hell could I have let this happen?

Why hadn’t I sensed that Rogue sooner?

Cali looked up at me, clinging onto me for dear life, shivering but *alive*.

She was alive, but if anything had happened to her, I would never have been able to forgive myself. This was all my fault. I hadn’t noticed the Rogue; I’d been too distracted by having her so close in that damn house. Her scent, the flush on her cheeks, the way she’d looked at me with those pretty doe eyes, her round ass swaying as she walked in front of me… Everything. The whole fucking thing. It had been *torture*.

It still was.

Cali looked up at me, her grip on my arm so tight it would leave marks if I were something closer to human. Her sweet breath fanned over my face, over my lips, as she stared, and I wondered if she knew.

I wondered if she suspected it was taking every ounce of my self-control not to rip her clothes off and devour her right now. I wondered if she realized that my skin wasn’t hot because of the spring, but because of her touch. That my heart wasn’t hammering because we’d just escaped danger, but because she’d placed her palm against my chest.

I wondered if she realized how hard I was right now, my body on fire at her proximity.

Containing myself and ignoring temptation was not my usual method of operation. And I was getting fucking good at it.

It would’ve been so easy to lean forward and capture her pretty pink lips in a kiss. Maybe she’d let me brush up against her and touch her all over, touch her tits and that goddamn ass. If she let me, I’d spread her legs and nestle in between as she squirmed against me. I’d be nice to her if she asked me to, nice and extremely fucking obliging, just for her. *I’m a saint!* And all that bullshit. I wouldn’t even try to take her clothes off unless she asked.

I’d never been a gentleman before, but I could be one for her.

Ironically, though, the biggest problem seemed to be that Cali didn’t actually need me to be a gentleman. I hadn’t expected her to try to seduce me in her bedroom the other night. Not in a million years. With her begging for me, I’d been ready to burst at the seams.

I had felt like fucking *dying*.

God, if she hadn’t been drunk, I would’ve been a goner. In so many ways, I already was. I wanted her more than I’d ever wanted anyone. Anything. I wanted her so much that it terrified me.

And she had no idea.

She was staring at me now, her lips parted as her breathing evened out, and she had no idea that I would break this world apart for her. And she *couldn’t* know—not until the danger had passed.

There was so much danger in just being an Alpha’s mate.

I had to deal with one problem at a time. Right now, I needed to help her find the Fae world, and keep her alive while I was at it. What had just happened with the Rogue had been too close a call. I couldn’t let my guard down again, which would be pretty difficult, considering I was in a constant state of arousal every time she laid eyes on me.

It was ridiculous.

*Torture*.

“… okay?”

I blinked slowly, fighting to focus. Cali’s hair was wet, glued against her forehead. I wanted to push it away, kiss her forehead and her flushed cheeks, kiss and lick every single inch of her face and body. She’d probably melt under my mouth.

“Greyson?” she asked, louder this time, pulling me out of my trance.

“Yeah?” My voice was breathy. What a joke.

“Are you okay?” she asked, clearly puzzled.

I was losing my goddamn mind.

“Sure,” I said, forcing a smile. “Are you okay?”

She looked a little confused—and as bratty as ever. Why was she so cute? It was fucking annoying sometimes. It made things even harder for me. Pun intended.

“I’m fine,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“I’m glad,” I said, and dislodged her hands from my arms. She had quite the grip, all tight and demanding. I didn’t allow myself to think how hard she would hold onto me while I fucked her, while I put my mouth between her thighs…

Yeah, I was definitely no saint.

“We gotta get going,” I muttered. It pained me to move away from her, but we were in the middle of the forest and danger seemed drawn to the both of us. I started moving toward the shore, but then I felt her touch my hand.

She didn’t say anything, but she looked so vulnerable—so different from her usual general outrage at literally everything that had to do with me—that I felt gut-punched. I knew I shouldn’t be doing this, but her touch felt too good to let go.

I could never let her go.

Taking a deep breath, I helped her to the shore, shaking off my dirty thoughts as I stepped out of the spring. She squeezed the water out of her hair, turning to face me. “You know, maybe it wasn’t that bad an idea for you to come with me. It’s like—OH MY GOD!”

Her eyes went wide before she quickly shielded them and turned away.

I frowned. “Something wrong?”

She sounded like she was choking. At a loss for words. That rarely happened.

“What…” I trailed off before looking down at myself. I was naked and sporting a raging hard-on.

Fucking hell.

“Shit,” I cursed under my breath, stumbling back into the water. “I, uh, sorry, that’s—” Now *I* was at a loss for words. I cleared my throat. “I’ll go grab some clothes from the trunk.”

“I’ll go grab the massive er—*Book*!” She covered her whole face with her hands, shaking her head. “I’ll go grab the book. It’s a big book. The book that we got from Big Mac’s house, I mean.” And then she moved away, mumbling under her breath, “*Oh my god, Cali, shut up*!”

I’d laugh if I weren’t the one stuck in this situation.

Inhaling and exhaling deeply while fighting to get a hold of myself, I turned toward the car. There was no hope in trying to get it out of the spring—the top was gone, the mirror was knocked off, and one of the windows was shattered. I smiled, imagining how baby brother Xavier was going to react when he found out his car had been destroyed. He would be so upset*.* Devastated, even.

How *sad*.

Smirking, I tore open the trunk of the car—no need to be careful now—and checked out the inside. My bag was wet, but some of my clothes were still dry, and Cali’s bag seemed to be entirely dry. I moved my stuff into hers and zipped it up. I held the bag above the water and waded out of the spring, emerging at a spot far away from Cali, where I could get dressed in privacy.

No need to make this situation any more awkward than it already was.

As I got dressed, I watched Cali as she looked through the book. She seemed focused on it, but my first instinct was to take her back to the pack house to protect her. But then again, I understood why she wanted to do this for her mother. I would do the same… For her.

I would risk everything to save her.

Truth was, I hadn’t thought much before joining her on her quest. But right now, as I wrapped my head around what was happening, what had just happened, I grew more and more troubled. Finding the Fae world would be a challenge for both of us, but what would happen when we *did* find it?

Would Cali come back to the pack house afterward?

Was there a chance that I could lose her?

Could I go with her into the Fae world? And if I could, would I be able to protect her there?

I knew I’d give my life for her, but what if my life wasn’t enough?

Frowning while these questions made my head throb, I walked up to her. She was so absorbed in the book that she didn’t notice me. I stood behind her, watching as water dripped from her hair, fighting the urge to touch her…

“Greyson!” she said excitedly, startling me. She was pretty loud in general. I loved it.

“I’m right here,” I said.

She swiveled around to face me. She checked me out before her gaze settled on my face. Her cheeks were still flushed. *Delicious*.

“Why did you creep up on me like that?” she demanded. “How long have you been standing there like some sort of Greek statue that—Oh my god, that’s not the point right now!”

I smirked. I couldn’t help it. “So what *is* the point?”

“This.” She didn’t look at me as she placed the book in my hands. She was blushing. “Look at this.”

She’d opened the book to a strange-looking map, and now pointed at one particular area.

“We’ve found it.” She smiled now. My favorite damn thing. “We’ve found the needle in the haystack!”

**Episode 333**

I looked up at Greyson, beaming, but he seemed confused. Why wasn’t he as excited as I was?

“What are you talking about?” he asked, meeting my gaze.

He still looked… like *that*, all gorgeous, but at least he was clothed now. No nakedness in sight, fortunately. Or unfortunately—depending on how you looked at it.

*I* had looked straight at it.

*You know what IT I’m talking about…*

It wasn’t a big deal, okay? I’d seen penises—*cocks*—before. I could say ‘cock.’ I was a big girl. Werewolf and non-werewolf cocks. I’d seen erect ones too, on the internet. Many of them! (Usually because of Lola showing me something with terrible ads.) Also Xavier’s, which was also a great one, but then there was Greyson, who…

Had been really, really turned on earlier.

*Did I do that?* I wondered. *Did I make him like that?*

Not going to lie, it had been an ego boost. But then again maybe he’d gotten aroused from fighting that Rogue. Who knew what got werewolves off? They certainly had a funny relationship with violence.

The flash of a murky memory—Greyson and me in my bedroom, me telling him to stay—vibrated inside my mind. I still felt flushed all over. I still felt like yelling *thank you for saving me!* at him and smothering him in kisses, but that wasn’t going to happen. No way.

The important thing right now was that I’d been making progress with the book, even though it was written in a dead language and had weird symbols. Which brought us to the point of my entire inner jabber, which was that I was relieved that Greyson had gotten dressed, because I couldn’t have him parading around looking so… Alpha-ish right now. We needed to focus, here!

“Look!” I said, gesturing at the map. “It says Haystack Rock.”

Greyson shrugged, because he didn’t know anything. “It’s on the coast,” he said. “What about it?”

I wanted to yell at him about the importance of this clue, but then I realized that Greyson didn’t know about Mikah. He had no idea that I’d talked to a vampire detective, which reminded me that I probably shouldn’t tell him about that, because he wouldn’t approve. He might even worry that Mikah was tricking me. Not that I trusted Mikah, but Greyson would’ve been prejudiced against him either way. After all, werewolves and vampires didn’t mix.

Clearing my throat, I reined in my frustration. I was eternally mad at Greyson for various reasons—valid and non-valid—but this wasn’t actually his fault. “It’s something my mom said,” I explained with a lie. “That finding the Fae world is like finding a needle in a haystack.” I nodded toward the map. “And I found it!”

Greyson remained skeptical, because he was *annoying*. “What makes you so sure?”

*My interviews with a vampire!* I wanted to tell him. But I stopped myself.

“I’m not one hundred percent sure,” I said. “But I *was* led to this book by that wisp.” Now that I thought about it, Mikah’s clue had been beyond obvious. If only I had more knowledge of the general Oregon area. Damn you for betraying me, high school geography!

“What are you planning to do? The car is useless,” Greyson said. While I ran on literal fairy dust alone, he was always so practical. His attitude was irritating, but also unfortunately sexy. Ugh! Why was he like this?!

“I don’t care,” I said stubbornly. “We’re going to Haystack Rock.” I shoved the book into my bag, which Greyson had brought to me after saving it from the wreckage. That had been pretty thoughtful, actually.

When had he become a gentleman?

*It’s probably a trick, for whatever reason*, I thought, while heading toward the road. *Unless he’s all out of tricks? What is UP with him anyway?*

The image of his naked lower body flashed through my head, and I choked on nothing.

“You okay?” he asked, easily keeping pace.

“Yup,” I squeaked. Then I cleared my throat, reminding myself of the importance of this mission.

*This is for mom. To save her*, I thought.

My resolve heightened instantly.

“Where are you going?” Greyson asked.

“I’ll get an Uber,” I said, determined. I pulled out my phone from the bag, ready to start typing, but then Greyson burst out laughing.

“Seriously?” he scoffed. “An Uber? Out here?”

I scowled. “Well then I’ll hitchhike,” I said, sticking out my thumb.

Sighing, Greyson oh-so-casually wrapped his hand around mine. “Cali, stop.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why?” I turned to face Greyson and gaped when I saw him.

“What are you—*What?*” I spluttered when I saw that he was getting *undressed*. *AGAIN!*

“Why the hell are you taking off your pants?” I demanded, almost pissed off at this point. This guy was out of control!

“Isn’t it obvious?” he deadpanned.

I’d never been more incredulous in my life. And that said a lot about my life, and probably myself in general. “You’re going to strip, right here, on the side of the road?”

“Yes?” he said, still extremely casual about the madness of it all.

“Why? Hoping to pick up some driver that way?”

He just laughed at me. *LAUGHED!* I turned away from him the second he reached for his pants, flinching. My face had heated up, and it had nothing to do with the sunny day. I needed to force myself to keep looking away—a feat that was getting harder and harder to achieve. I still hadn’t fully recovered from feeling ALL of him in the spring.

*This isn’t the time!* I thought to myself, scolding. *Not. The. Time!*

“Will you just tell me why you’re stripping?” I demanded, turning to face him again without thinking about what I was doing. It was like I couldn’t help myself. He was down to his boxers and even that was too much for me.

*UGH!* I thought, blushing big time as I shielded my eyes.

He mercifully didn’t comment.

“Haystack Rock is over 250 miles away, through some rough terrain,” he said. “There’s no way you can walk it, and there’s no way in hell I’m going to let you hitchhike or get an Uber.”

Swallowing thickly, I lowered my hand, forcing my eyes to stay on his. “So what am I supposed to do?”

Greyson gave me one of his infuriating cocky smiles, but this time, it somehow didn’t bother me that much. He shifted in the blink of an eye. Startled, I squeaked, jumping back as I took in the large, silvery wolf before me.

He wanted me to get on his back so he could take me to Haystack Rock.

I had to admit it was better than being groped by a creepy driver, but I still wasn’t happy. “I wish we had a car,” I grumbled.

The wolf snorted, staring at me.

“What?” I frowned, looking down at myself. I realized my clothes were still kind of damp, even though I’d been lounging in the sunshine. “Seriously?” I mocked. “I’m not allowed to get on Your Majesty’s back if I’m still wet?”

The wolf looked at me like I was an idiot.

“Forget it, buddy. There won’t be any more stripping today, you insatiable nudist,” I said, huffing. The wolf snorted again. Grabbing his clothes and making sure the book was inside my bag, I zipped it up. Then I climbed up onto his back, damp clothes and all, slinging the bag over my shoulder before I wrapped my arms around his neck.

Even after having ridden on werewolves’ backs before, I was stunned by how tightly I needed to grab onto Greyson to stay seated. He moved with so much power and speed… I’d forgotten how strong he was, which was dumb, considering he was an Alpha.

As the ride continued, though, I found it harder to keep my grip. Greyson might have been all powerful or whatever, but I was getting tired. I didn’t even know how long we’d been traveling through the woods. *Are we there yet?* I wanted to ask, but stopped myself. He was my only method of transportation at the moment, and I wanted to get to Haystack Rock ASAP.

The sun was starting to set when Greyson finally came to a stop on the fringe of a clearing.

“Oh my god, finally,” I muttered, as he crouched for me to dismount.

When I looked around, though, I realized that we weren’t at our destination. “We’re not there yet,” I said, puzzled. “Why did we stop?”

Greyson shifted back, and I instantly looked away. I reached into my bag and threw him a pair of jeans, grateful that he’d brought several extra pairs. *No more naked time for you today, mister!* But why hadn’t he answered my question?

“Greyson? What are we doing?” I asked again, still looking away from him.

“We’re stopping for the night,” he said. From my peripheral vision, I could see that he was pulling on his jeans. Thank heavens.

“Here?” I asked. “On the side of the road?”

Greyson chuckled, pointing to a cluster of buildings in the near distance, just beyond a highway. “No, we’re getting a motel.” He smiled. “Sound good?”

**Episode 334**

I didn’t like the smirk on the motel clerk’s face one bit. “What do you mean there are only rooms with a single bed?” I demanded.

The still-smirking clerk shrugged, looking knowingly between Greyson and me. “There’s a home-brewing convention in town. You should have booked early.”

Okay, but home brewing was gross, much like beer was gross. Why did this motel accept these people and support their super hipster habits? But maybe it wasn’t a beer convention—maybe it was a moonshine convention. If it was anything like Big Mac’s moonshine, then I was in. Fully acceptable. I’d invite Big Mac, too.

*But Big Mac is probably dead,* I thought, which was pretty sad. I didn’t think I’d fully processed the fact that she was gone, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. On the one hand, she had threatened me multiple times. On the other, she was pretty cool.

*And Mrs. Smith likes her, so she can’t be all that bad,* I thought. *Maybe—*

“... no other alternative.” Greyson’s voice startled me. I realized that I’d zoned out, stopped paying attention. He was talking with the clerk. “We’ll take the room.”

Wait, WHAT?

“Um, excuse me?” I asked, just as Greyson grabbed the key. “I don’t remember agreeing to this.”

Greyson ignored me and grabbed my arm, pulling me away. The smirking clerk raised an eyebrow at me, and I stuck my tongue out at him. He seemed shocked, and I was pretty pleased about that.

It was the only thing I was happy about.

“Okay, wait!” I snapped, yanking my arm away from Greyson as we headed to the room. “We’re not doing this! I don’t want to do this.”

Greyson shot me an unreadable look. “What are you talking about?”

*What* was *I talking about?*

Well, I didn’t trust myself to sleep in the same bed as Greyson. Especially after what had happened earlier at the spring. Xavier, even though he’d basically fucking dumped me, would explode if he ever discovered all the questionable things that had happened between me and Greyson over the past couple of days, and also—what if Greyson slept naked? People did that, didn’t they?

I had seen exactly how, um, *excited* he could get around me, and I didn’t need that in my life. Or maybe I did need it, and that was the exactly the problem. He couldn’t keep showing off the goods, almost kissing me, and then just casually walking away. At this point, all his nakedness was borderline teasing, and I would NOT stand for it.

“What do *you* think I’m talking about?” I snapped.

We stopped in front of our room, and Greyson looked at me. “What are you afraid of? Aren’t you the vampire slayer who also took on a couple of Rogues? Spatula girl?”

I glared at him. “What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m just saying that if you can do all that, surely you can handle being with me in an enclosed space for a few hours.”

I did not like the snarky glimmer in his eyes. AT ALL. He was challenging me, and everybody knew that I didn’t respond well to challenges.

*Honestly, how dare he? Like, in general?* I thought, scowling.

“I’ll sleep in the tub,” I declared.

He shrugged—clearly he WANTED me to smack him—and opened the door. I was faced with my worst nightmare, which was a full-size bed. I’d at least hoped for a queen. Greyson was massive and I wasn’t so tiny either. There would be no way to sleep on that without bumping into each other.

“I’m definitely sleeping in the tub,” I said.

He shrugged. *Again*. He was really getting on my nerves. “You can sleep wherever you want.”

I ignored the urge to flip him off and headed to the bathroom, which didn’t have a tub. Just a shower.

*Spectacular!* I thought bitterly. *THANKS FOR BETRAYING ME, SHITTY MOTEL ROOM.*

Scowling, I returned to the room. Greyson was taking off his shirt, naturally. It had been, what, ten minutes since I’d last seen him naked? God forbid he went a whole hour fully clothed.

I was going to die tonight.

“So which side of the bed do you prefer?” he asked.

Images of him—dripping wet and glistening, his hard-on thick and demanding and pointed in my direction—made my cheeks heat up. And other areas. I felt hot all over, and he just looked mildly amused.

*The asshole.*

“If you were a gentleman, you’d sleep on the floor,” I informed him.

This made his face twitch in a weird way. “Too bad I’m not a gentleman.”

Ignoring his bemused look, I moved past him—

Only to trip over my bag andcareen toward the floor. He grabbed me as I fell into him, because apparently I hadn’t been sufficiently punished by Lady Luck tonight. His grip on my shoulders was firm but soft, his eyes mischievous as he took me in. “Are you hungry, Cali?”

That question felt like a double entendre, that I of course fucking ignored.

Gulping, I nodded. He picked up a bag from the nightstand. “Cheese sandwich. Picked it up from downstairs while you were spaced out. It was their last one. It didn’t smell funny or anything, so I’d say we’re good.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’ll get in trouble with Lola if you try to poison me, you know.”

He rolled his eyes. “Eat the damn sandwich, Cali.”

I downed the thing in three bites. “What about you?”

He waved me off, not even listening. *Ugh*. I hated it when he did that. I grabbed my bag, moving away from him. The other side of the room didn’t seem far away enough, though, and the space suddenly seemed really, really small.

This was going to be a super long night.

“How much further it is to Haystack Rock?” I asked, organizing my bag. Not looking at him. “I want to leave as early as possible. No time to waste, here.”

From my peripheral vision, I saw him move toward the bed. He sat on it, facing away from me. His short silence was unnerving.

“Greyson?”

His shoulders hunched slightly. “I’m envious of you, you know,” he muttered.

I blinked in shock. “What? Why?”

He paused. He still wasn’t looking at me. In a way, I was glad that I didn’t have the force of his eyes as a distraction. It felt like whatever he was about to say was important.

“Sometimes I just wonder what it’s like, to love your mother so much that you’d die to save her.”

That was the last thing I’d expected him to say.

There was an instant change in the atmosphere of the room—mainly because there’d been a change in *him*. There was a quiet hurt in his voice that shocked me. The urge to approach him, to comfort him, was so strong that it felt electrifying. I wasn’t sure why it was so strong, but either way, it was impossible to refuse.

I approached him carefully, not sure if I should touch him.

It was a losing battle, though. I gently placed my hand on his bare shoulder. The second our skin made contact, I felt him shiver slightly. A moment later, though, he seemed to relax, starting to breathe more evenly.

*Did my touch really have such an effect on him?*

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked cautiously.

He didn’t answer. In fact, he went instantly rigid, to the point where I was abruptly certain that I shouldn’t pressure him. I was about to remove my hand when I felt his own cover it. A rush of emotion overwhelmed me as he stood and faced me, still holding my hand.

I knew I had to pull away for a million reasons, but I couldn’t.

When he faced me, the force of his gaze was so compelling that I felt like looking away.

“I tried to find my mother, you know,” he said.

“Why’d you stop?” I asked.

“I realized that she could have tried to find me. And she didn’t. I guess that says a lot, doesn’t it?”

The hurt in his eyes made my stomach twist into knots. This time he was the one who looked away, and seeing him so vulnerable made me feel lightheaded. Unable to help myself, I pulled him closer.

He didn’t resist.

He seemed unable to.

“Come here,” I whispered, wrapping my arms around his bare torso. I fought to comfort him, and he let me, and he felt so good against me that I wanted to keep squeezing him and never let go. His chest pressed against mine. My breath caught, and his scent called to me in a way that made my whole body ache.

He held me, and my body ached with need.

He was so fucking warm that I felt feverish too, suddenly. Heartbeat rising, I looked up at him, and when our gazes locked…

His dropped to my lips.

**Episode 335**

XAVIER

I stared at the peeling paint on the motel room’s ceiling. The pattern reminded me of a cloud. I checked the time—Gabriel had been gone for just a few minutes, and here I was, waiting for him like a doting wife. Bored out of my mind already.

I’d been so pumped up on the ride here, especially after the fight with the bikers. It had been a while since I’d felt so… *alive*. Fighting for the sake of it, not because my life was in danger. Originally, I would have preferred to have avoided the violence. That was what I’d told myself, anyway. But once it had started, I had to admit that I’d enjoyed it. Maybe not as much as Gabriel had—his lust for blood was borderline crazy—but it was freeing not to have to worry about Cali, about protecting her in the middle of the chaos.

I smiled to myself, imaging what she would have done. She probably would’ve grabbed a plunger or something and tried to whack people over the head with it. And then, weirdly, she would have succeeded. If nothing else, her antics in dire situations were not only amusing, but effective. I missed that.

*Fuck, I miss her so much…*

The wolf rumbled in my chest, whining. I was wondering what Cali was doing right now when my phone rang. Colton.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey yourself,” Colton said. He always sounded just a little bit amused at everything. “Saw the news report about the bikers. Having fun?”

I snorted. “Sure. But it threw me and Gabriel off our schedule. We’re lying low in a motel outside Portland now.”

“Is he there with you right now?” Colton asked.

“No, he’s out getting food.”

“And you’re waiting for him? You guys have always been so domestic, taking care of each other and shit. A mercenary bromance.”

I rolled my eyes, scoffing.

“I’m glad you got out of the biker situation without any trouble,” he said. His tone suddenly got more serious. “Don’t do that again, though. It’s not smart.”

Gabriel wasn’t known for his great decision-making, and I wasn’t known for saying no to bullshit, so we’d have to see about that. I kept my tone casual as I changed the subject. “How’s Cali?”

There was a pause. “Not sure. I was out with Jay.”

“Oh.” I swallowed. No further comment. Because I wasn’t supposed to care right now. This was no big deal. I was just asking.

Colton didn’t comment on my question or say anything else, because clearly he knew what was good for him. “Anyway,” he said. “Stay in touch. Talk soon.”

He hung up, and I was left staring at the phone.

Wondering how Cali was.

Shaking my head at myself, I got off the bed, looking around at the empty motel room. Seriously, where the fuck was Gabriel? At least when he was around, I had live entertainment. I should have insisted on ordering delivery, but Gabriel had insisted on checking out the neighborhood.

In retrospect, letting him go out by himself probably hadn’t been a good idea.

I really hoped that Gabriel wasn’t going to get into any more trouble. He was the most reckless wolf I’d never met, which was saying a lot. And I was bored out of my mind without his nonsense to distract me.

Grunting, I grabbed the remote. Maybe there was something interesting on TV. Hopefully the news about the biker brawl had died down, though. Just as I was about to turn it on, I heard a door open and close. Probably in the adjacent room. The walls here were paper thin—this motel was as shitty as could be. I’d definitely be insisting on a better place next time we needed to stop.

Though at least we’d been lucky enough to get a room with two beds. The clerk had said ours was the last one. I definitely didn’t want to share a bed with Gabriel—for a whole list of reasons. Primarily because he hogged the covers and then denied it whenever I confronted him about it. It was like speaking to a very angry violent wall.

Turning the TV on, I was flipping through the local news channels when I heard moaning. I frowned. It had to be the TV from next door. They were probably watching porn so they could get in the mood.

Great.

I heard another moan, and then there was a bang against the wall behind my bedframe. The cheap, framed oil painting that hung over my nightstand fell to the floor. What the hell? I stood up to pick up the painting, but then there was another bang against the wall, and then another.

I realized that the people next door weren’t just watching people fucking on TV—they were the ones doing the fucking.

And I was going to have to listen to the whole thing.

Groaning, I shook my head. This place was a real shithole. Dropping onto the bed, I grabbed my pillow to cover my ears, but the banging kept going and going. I grabbed the extra pillow from the closet and tried to suffocate my hearing under both of them, but it was still no good.

This was a nightmare.

I lay there stewing until I remembered how Colton used to joke with me about the noise Cali and I made during sex. It wasn’t my fault, though. It was hard to be conscious of anything else when I was with Cali. Everything always felt explosive, even the very first time. I remembered how tentative I’d been that night, how afraid I’d been of hurting her. She’d seemed so fragile, so delicate, but still so needy for it. For me.

Being with her had been incredible from the first second, and our last night together had left me reeling. She’d been so eager for me, kissing and touching and grabbing onto me like she loved me and didn’t want to let go. Leaving her the next morning had been unbearable. The way she’d made me feel that night, in those moments, had made me reconsider my decision to take a break…

But she needed space.

*I* needed space.

If we couldn’t survive a few days away from each other, then we probably wouldn’t survive anything else. Besides, the problem between us had never been the sex, at least later on. The constant danger was just taking a toll. Cali was right. I needed to turn her. And then there was the whole Greyson situation…

It was too much to handle.

*You’re a coward for leaving*.

The wolf had his own thoughts on things, and his thoughts weren’t fucking helpful. I cared about Cali, I really fucking did. She’s brought me and my wolf back from the brink. That meant something to me. But there was still way too much other shit.

And if all that wasn’t enough, my head was getting bumped against the wall because of the banging of the fuckers fucking next door.

I could no longer think about Cali.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” I snapped, pounding the wall. I had to make sure to keep my strength in check, otherwise my hand would have gone right through the paper thin barrier. “Keep it down!” I yelled at whoever was causing all the ruckus.

Silence from the room next door. That would show them.

I turned the TV volume up, just in case they decided to ignore me. It was a show about true crime. I wanted to commit a crime right now, actually—rip those assholes next door apart for bothering me. But I couldn’t do that. If they started making noise again, though, I would knock on their door and tell them in person to shut the fuck up. Seeing me usually did the trick with humans. Or werewolves. Or anyone, really. Just looking at me when I was pissed off proved to be effective most of the time for getting people to back the hell off.

There was no law that said I wasn’t allowed to put the fear of god into people.

Or was there? Either way, I wouldn’t kill them. Considering my track record, they should be grateful for that.

There was a knock on the door, interrupting my thoughts. For a second I thought it was the assholes from next door, demanding explanations for the cussing out they’d received. They had to have a death wish.

I reminded myself that murder was not an option. What would Cali say? She’d be upset. I hated upsetting her.

Instead of my irritating neighbors, though, it was Gabriel on the other side of the door. He was grinning widely, all teeth.

There was a spray of blood on my friend’s cheek.

“What the hell happened?” I asked, frowning.

Gabriel held a bag of fast food in one hand. Still grinning, he held it up for me to see. “Got the burgers! Extra fried pickles for you.”

And then he raised his other hand.

“Oh, and I made a new friend,” he said, holding up a severed head.

**Episode 336**

I could hardly breathe with Greyson’s face so close to mine.

I closed my eyes, ready to just give in.

Fighting this thing between us had been exhausting, draining everything from me. I needed him to do it. I wanted him to.

*Just kiss me*, I thought, hopefully loud enough for him to hear*. Please.*

I knew I should resist him, but this was torture.

The images of him in the hot spring, in the bedroom, in the pond… They flooded me, bubbling up to the surface in a way that was explosive. The look on his face when he’d seen me naked with Xavier was playing on a loop in my head. We were no longer at the pack house, which made it so much harder to put the brakes on whatever was happening between us.

We were alone, in a remote motel, with nobody else around.

Just the two of us.

*Then why won’t he kiss me?* I mused, frustrated. My thoughts had a twinge of hysterical despair in them, because I was ready to combust. When I opened my eyes, though, Greyson didn’t look like he was about to move closer to me. He just reached past me…

And grabbed a fucking pillow.

A *pillow!*

He wasn’t supposed to grab a pillow, he was supposed to grab me and sink into me on this old mattress. WHY WOULDN’T HE GET THE MEMO?

*No!* I thought. *No, this is good, actually. This is better. I don’t need Greyson. I shouldn’t have him at all anyway.*

I wasn’t fine.

I was part outraged and part relieved. At this point, internal conflict had become one with my personality. I felt like grabbing and shaking him, forcing him to face what I knew we were both struggling to deny.

But would it be worth it?

Would one night with Greyson be worth all the drama that would erupt with Xavier?

Yes, Xavier had left, but I’d vowed to stay away from Greyson. Being with him would still be a betrayal, regardless of the *due destini* thing… Wouldn’t it? But either way, I couldn’t let the Greyson situation cloud my judgment right now.

I needed to stay focused on my mom, not a couple of stupid boys. I had to get to the Fae world, not get drawn into a complicated relationship and/or love triangle that would only cause trouble. It was too much of a risk—no matter how much I wanted it. No matter how maddening dancing around like this with Greyson had been.

*When will it end, though?* I screamed inside my head. *This can’t keep happening with him! Someone have mercy on my hormones!*

Holding my breath, my cheeks still heated, I watched as Greyson dropped the pillow on the floor and stretched out his long, muscular body on the carpet.

“Goodnight, love,” he muttered. “I’m exhausted after the ride I gave you today.”

Well, wasn’t THAT phrasing just fucking *great?*

Flustered, I said, “I know I said you should sleep on the floor, but that was BS, you don’t need to—”

“This isn’t about being chivalrous,” Greyson said, cutting me off. “I’m a wolf. I’m used to sleeping in all kinds of places.”

That explanation made me feel… something. I didn’t know what, but I accepted it.

“Okay,” I said, swallowing thickly. “Thank you.”

Just as the word came out of my mouth, I realized I’d never thanked him for saving me from the Rogue today. But had he ever thanked me for the times I’d saved him? Was expressing gratitude even necessary under the weird circumstances that we found ourselves in, day in, day out? Saving each other seemed to be the new normal. And in a way, I was glad I could contribute.

Feeling lighter, I headed to the bathroom to brush my teeth and clean up. Even though I closed the door behind me, I couldn’t help but feel that he was in the room with me.

I took a while in the shower, hoping that when I came back out Greyson would be asleep. When I finally finished up and got dressed for bed, I stepped out of the bathroom. The main room was dark. I could just make out Greyson’s prone figure on the floor beside the bed.

Taking a deep breath, I slipped beneath the covers. As I settled down, I heard him breathing. But was he asleep?

Why the hell did I care?

Why did it matter?

What the hell was I *doing?*

Huffing, I turned away from him, but it didn’t do me any good. I could still hear him breathing, and just existing over there, being all… Alpha-y and Greyson-y. *Ugh!* I tossed around a bit, hoping to find a comfortable position. Then I heard his voice in my ear—a soft, soothing voice that made chills run up my spine.

*Try counting sheep.*

My heart started hammering. I turned toward him. “Does that even work?” I wondered out loud.

“I have no idea,” he muttered. He sounded grumbly. Sleepy. “But that’s what people say.”

People also said to face your problems head on and address the elephant in the room.

All these close calls with Greyson had been driving me out of my mind, and now he’d just decided to speak inside my mind. Who’d given him the right to initiate something so intimate with me? This was a never-ending cycle that I could no longer deal with.

“We should talk about this,” I said. My voice was low but even.

Greyson, of course, fell quiet.

“We both know it’s wrong,” I added.

He sighed. “I’ve told you before, it’s not wrong. It’s just… complicated.”

Well, that helped.

I scoffed. “It’s way beyond complicated, Greyson. But why *wouldn’t* it be wrong? Especially considering the Xavier factor.”

He paused for a moment in the darkness. “I won’t ever apologize for kissing you.”

This man was the most frustrating man to ever walk this earth.

“Um, *excuse me?*” I sat up. “Then why do we even have to go through this? You say you won’t apologize about kissing me, but do you feel bad about it?”

“Yes. But not for the reasons you think. So I don’t regret it.”

“Then what’s your reasoning?”

He, of course, fell silent.

“So we kiss and we feel bad, and we almost kiss and we feel bad, and we don’t kiss and we feel bad—either way, we feel bad! And I feel guilty, but you almost never seem to.”

He snorted. He actually *snorted*. “I have nothing to feel guilty about.”

I groaned in absolute frustration. “Then what’s holding you back?” My question sounded like a demand. Mainly because it was one.

“It’s… complicated,” he said.

“You keep saying that, but you never explain it!” I grabbed a pillow and threw it at him. He caught it easily. “Greyson, fucking seriously, this is just—”

“What’s holding *you* back?” he asked.

I glared at his dark form. I couldn’t see him, but I was sure he could see me because of his werewolf-ness. “You KNOW what’s holding me back! It’s Xavier, *obviously*.”

Greyson didn’t say anything. I couldn’t stop myself from barreling through, though. This talk had been a long time coming.

“It’s so confusing to me that I feel this pull to you, that I ​want ​you even though I already have a mate. A mate who I love. I love Xavier, Greyson.”

He inhaled sharply. I hesitated, unsure how to proceed, but then Greyson spoke again.

“If you love him, then why are we even having this conversation?” He sounded quiet, dejected.

I couldn’t *stand it.*

“I don’t know, that’s what I’m telling you!” I snapped. “This werewolf mate nonsense is supposed to be something you guys know about, so if Xavier’s my mate, I shouldn’t be feeling so strongly about you, right? It’s a glitch! And it hurts me so much whenever it seems like you don’t care about me.”

“Cali—”

“No, I’m not done,” I said, sniffling. “Like at the Lupo Finale, when you chose Joss and not me. Can you even imagine how that made me feel?”

Greyson sounded beyond incredulous. “But you didn’t *want* me to choose you.”

“I don’t care!” I declared. “That’s not the point!”

“What *is* the point, then?”

My voice was shaking. “I don’t know what I want anymore.”

He paused for a moment. “We’re going in circles. Go to sleep, Cali.”

The silence in the dark became deafening. My heart was racing, on high alert after our conversation. We’d ended up at yet another dead end, and it was making me so anxious and scared and uncertain that it felt like something was gnawing on my stomach.

It was horrible.

Greyson hadn’t moved since we’d stopped speaking. I couldn’t believe that he’d fallen asleep, though. I refused to believe it. I refused to believe that Greyson didn’t give a shit about me—not when he had repeatedly shown me that he did.

I could feel something between us. Something so strong that it scared me sometimes.

“Greyson?” I whispered tentatively into the dark. “Are we mates?”

**Episode 337**

GREYSON

Cali was waiting for a response.

I knew she was, but my lips were sealed shut. I wished I could tell her the truth—that she *was* my mate. That *due destini* was real, and it had decided to fuck with us all. But admitting something like that to her would endanger her, and I couldn’t allow that.

Keeping her at arm’s length made me feel like a fucking bastard, but it was better than the alternative. I hated lying to her. It made me feel weak, the bond we shared vibrating with indignation every time I pulled this kind of shit. I struggled to come up with a credible answer for her—something that would settle her down.

*Greyson, are we mates?*

She’d sounded so vulnerable that it broke my heart. It was a pretty fucked up heart, and I was someone who didn’t blink twice when it came to lying, cheating, deceiving—just fucking name it. But when it came to her…

When it came to her, I struggled to keep up the façade.

“Xavier’s your mate,” I muttered. It wasn’t a lie, but it made something in me thrash around with jealousy and possessiveness. The constant thought that *Cali is mine*.

Sometimes, I wanted her to be mine in ways I could barely fucking grasp.

“That’s not what I asked,” she said, huffing. Her frustration used to be endearing. Now that she was confronting me, it felt like a jab, a constant reminder of the mess we were in. “I didn’t ask if Xavier was my mate; I know he is. The question is, are *you and I* mates?”

I paused.

I heard her hold her breath.

And then, I lied.

“No,” I said. “We’re not mates.” My voice sounded distant in my own ears, as if I was removed from reality. Saying it out loud made my chest physically ache. The energy between us vibrated in protest. I had to ignore it.

Bracing myself, I waited for Cali’s reaction.

The silence was deafening. And then she finally whispered, “What about *due destini*?”

She really was clever. And stubborn, and passionate, and fucking amazing.

And I lied to her again.

“Maybe you are caught up in *due destini*. But you also have to remember that you’re Fae—or part Fae. Nobody can predict how *due destini* will affect people like you.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

She really wasn’t going to let this go, was she? I sat up, facing her in the dark. She stopped speaking the second I moved. I could feel her eyes on me. “I know how frustrating this must be,” I said, then quickly changed the subject. “But right now, we need to get some sleep and get this crazy trip over with.”

“It’s not crazy,” she said sharply. “It’s my mother’s life.”

Jesus fucking Christ, lying to her was exhausting.

“I get that,” I said. “But, as demonstrated by the attack at Big Mac’s, it’s not safe to be away from the pack. This whole thing just isn’t safe, Cali, and I don’t want either of us to die during this trip. Okay?”

She paused before saying, “Okay.” The second the word was out of her mouth, she shivered. Turning her back on me, she mumbled, “Goodnight.”

I lay back down on the floor, wishing I could just stop this whole charade. But if Cali was three seconds away from dying now, without the entire world knowing that he was my mate *and* part Fae, I couldn’t imagine what would happen if the truth came out.

I watched her on the bed, the longing in my chest so strong it was gnawing at my fucking insides. She shivered once more, and it made me wince.

I couldn’t help but ask, “What’s wrong?”

She let out a small sound, half snort, half sniffle, and I hated it. I hated how vulnerable she sounded. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

“Oh my god, Mr. Bossy! I’m cold, okay? This blanket is like tissue paper. Be useful and turn up the heat instead of bugging me.”

I scoffed. “These places are cheap for a reason, Cali. There’s no thermostat.”

“Fucking werewolves,” she grumbled. “I’m aware that you guys are rich, you know. I bet you store your money somewhere, like deranged squirrels. Next time we get a hotel, I expect Egyptian cotton sheets and a tub the size of a football field. If I survive tonight, that is.”

I sighed. “Cali, this was the closest motel available. I wouldn’t—”

“I don’t care. Leave me and the snowflakes gathering in my hair alone,” she said, turning over.

“No,” I said simply.

“Huh?”

I got to my feet and lay beside her by the bed.

She huffed. “What are you doing?”

“I’m only here to keep you warm. Don’t get any ideas,” I warned. Mostly because I didn’t trust *myself* not to get any ideas. I didn’t know what I’d do if she tried to kiss me right now.

In the meantime, I could actually feel her roll her eyes.

“Right,” she said, snorting. “Because you’re the dark object of my desire and I just can’t resist—”

“Can you please shut up and go to sleep?”

“You started it,” she grumbled. “And keep your pants on. The exhibitionist routine is getting old.”

I chuckled. I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d had so much fun just being around someone. She shivered again, and I carefully put an arm over her, moving up close behind her. I made sure to keep my crotch far away from her ass, but I framed her body with mine in a way that would keep her warm. Sliding under the covers, I moved my feet closer to hers and winced.

“Shit!” I hissed. “Your feet are like popsicles!”

“I can’t help it, okay?” she whined, elbowing me in the gut. It actually hurt, but I couldn’t help but find it cute. She’d said she was cold, but I was getting hotter and hotter by the fucking second.

“You’d better pick a better motel next time,” she ordered. “I wasn’t joking, earlier.”

“I will, I promise,” I said automatically, and I sounded like a whipped fucking boyfriend. “It’s too late to switch motels now, though, so we’ll have to deal with it. I’m going to pull you closer to me, okay? Just to keep you warm.”

“I hate you.”

I chuckled quietly, shaking my head as I pulled her tighter to me. She smelled incredible, and she felt so good against me that it was sure to drive me crazy. My temperature moved from warm to a fucking furnace in seconds. I continued to keep my crotch away from her ass, which required a lot of goddamn effort.

No way was I getting any sleep tonight.

I tried counting sheep, but the truth was I’d much rather eat them. All the sheep did was remind me that I was hungry, too. Because I’d given her the last sandwich. If that wasn’t a mate thing, I didn’t know what the fuck was.

A few moments later, as I was imaging how great a pizza would’ve been right now, I felt Cali’s body slowly relax. I breathed out, realizing I was so tense that I’d been holding my breath this entire time. The only reason I hadn’t passed out was because I was a werewolf. I closed my eyes, determined to get through the night. For fuck’s sake, I had experienced things that were pretty close to war. This shouldn’t be so hard.

But then Cali pressed herself against me, and this was… *hard*. Goddamn it all. This was possibly the hardest thing I’d ever done, and that said a whole fucking lot. Seriously, what the hell was wrong with me? What was happening to me?

I was supposed to be an Alpha.

My constant struggle to show some goddamn restraint around her wasn’t very Alpha-like.

I was supposed to be constantly in control, but I could feel myself slipping, the reality of the situation throbbing in my brain, in my gut. I couldn’t stop obsessing over the fact that, clearly, the feelings between us were mutual…

If things were different right now, I would take her.

I would lean forward and kiss at her neck, let my hands roam all over her before I rolled on top of her, devouring her mouth, taking her clothes off, and pinning her down under me. She would be my Luna, we would be mates. Normal mates. But also Mates who fucked 24/7 because there was no way I’d ever get her out of my system.

I loved how Cali could make me laugh, but I was such a mess right now that it wasn’t even funny. It was bad, actually—this sleeping situation was really fucking bad. I was terrified that she’d move backward and realize that the hot spring situation was back, and I was hard as rock.

I couldn’t do this.

Carefully, I tried to distance himself, slowly removing one arm and edging away from her. I needed some distance. Keeping her warm without going crazy was going to be a lot more difficult than I’d thought. Maybe I could turn into a wolf? No, there wasn’t enough room on the bed.

I hated everything.

“Greyson?”

My heart dropped. She was awake, but the whole situation felt like a dream. She sounded like she was talking to me in a dream, her tone feathery. She turned to face me, her nose suddenly brushing against mine.

“There’s something I should tell you,” she whispered. I held my breath all over again. “Xavier and I broke up.”

**Episode 338**

I woke up, and everything around me was so warm and cozy that it felt like heaven.

Greyson’s arm was heavy around my waist. My stomach dropped at the contact, his proximity making my throat dry. But at the same time, I felt so comforted and elated…

Even though Greyson had told me last night not to get any ideas.

I glanced over at him. The sunlight bathed his sleeping face, making him look like a Renaissance painting. It wasn’t fair that I couldn’t just… *have* all that. I understood why I shouldn’t have it, have him, but I still wanted him.

I wanted him so much that it hurt, sometimes.

That was probably what had compelled me to tell him that Xavier and I had broken up.

What had I been expecting him to say, though?

It was maddening how Greyson kept me at arm’s length. I kept trying to open up to him, and he just closed up like a clam, acting like he wanted me one second and like he couldn’t care less the next.

It felt so cheap to think that this could be another game to him, but Greyson had made it pretty hard to trust him. All the mixed signals were infuriating. Like, why did he have to cuddle me? Was he just being a good Alpha? *Ugh*, this was so frustrating.

His eyes had stayed closed when I’d told him the truth about Xavier and me last night. At least, I thought they had. Maybe he’d fallen asleep and hadn’t heard me? Or maybe he was as conflicted as I was and hadn’t known what to say? But why was he so conflicted? Because he thought we weren’t mates? But how was that possible when I felt like this?

*UGH!*

I watched him silently, aching to just lean in and kiss him. Hard. I would kiss him so hard, if I could. I’d also touch him all over—everywhere I wanted. I wanted to touch him so badly that my fingers were twitching, and I just couldn’t deal with it. With any of this.

How bad could a little touch be?

His hair was tousled, framing his forehead. Tentatively, I gave in to my ridiculous, barely controlled urges and reached out to brush it away. It felt so soft I wanted to cry*. I should’ve grabbed onto it when we made out the other day*, I thought to myself.

My brain and good sense had clearly flown out the window.

His silver eyes opened, slowly focusing on me, and I froze. He watched me for a moment, his gaze so intense it made my heartbeat race. Then he closed his eyes again, but I still felt on edge. I just couldn’t stop feeling like this about him. Perhaps it had nothing to do with *due destini*. Perhaps it was just plain old human horniness. But I’d had no idea, NO IDEA, that human desire could be so strong.

I moved to touch his hair again, but then he opened his eyes.

“What are you doing?” he asked, gripping my wrist softly. To stop me.

God, WHY did he have to open his eyes? Why did he have to stop me? I was so damn embarrassed. *WHY, GOD, WHY?*

“I’m just, um—” I sputtered, flustered. “I’m just waking you up. We have to go.”

He raised an eyebrow, all smug. He really was an asshole. “Is that how you wake everybody up? Grooming their hair?”

I bristled, fuming. He was mocking me. Here I was, almost melting because of him, and he was *mocking me*.

“I wasn’t grooming you,” I scoffed, moving away. “I was just getting ready to smack you.”

“You shouldn’t do that to Alphas while they’re asleep. Our instincts are sharpened. It could be dangerous.” He sat up, the blanket sliding off his body. I eyed his chest, all that muscle, and okay. Perhaps he did look dangerous.

“Your wolf would never hurt me,” I said, meeting his eyes in challenge.

He snorted. “What makes you so sure?”

“I think he would’ve done it by now. But he knows I’ve saved your ass multiple times, and has realized how great I am.” I turned around, looking away from him. “Even though you don’t.”

I heard his feet hit the ground. He wasn’t going to respond to my last comment. My aggravation rose. “Did you hear what I told you last night?”

When I turned to face him, he seemed frozen in place.

I had to *know*.

“I told you about me and Xavier breaking up, and you said nothing,” I said, my heart beating hard in my chest. “Were you asleep?”

His usual indifferent expression had returned. He shrugged. “No, I heard you.” He grabbed his T-shirt and pulled it on, then rummaged through his things, all casual.

The anticipation was killing me, and he was SAYING NOTHING.

“*And*?” I pressed, feeling the urge to scream.

He shrugged. Again. “And what? What did you expect me to say? It’s not my business.”

I wanted to punch him. To scream in his face. How could he be so cold after what had happened at the hot spring? How could he be so cold after last night? How could be so cold, PERIOD? Why was he LIKE THIS? Why was *I* like this? Why did I even give a shit about him?

I should stop giving a shit, but that was easier said than done.

*Damn it all to hell*, I thought bitterly.

“How about some breakfast before we get going?” he asked.

I glared at him. “Fine.”

“I noticed there’s a diner just next door.”

“Whatever.”

“You’re chatty in the morning.”

“You bring it out of me.”

Chuckling—*chuckling!*—he headed to the bathroom. *Jerk*. I rose from the bed, wincing as I realized how stiff I was after spending so much time on Greyson’s back the day before. God, word choice.

*I’m not doing that again today*, I thought to myself.

There had to be a better way to get to Haystack Rock, and I was going to find it.

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At the diner, I got a breakfast burrito and a cup of coffee.

Greyson ordered three eggs, an omelet—which was basically just more eggs, but squished—bacon, sausage, and pancakes. The waiter placed the plates in front of us. I stared at him, horrified, as he started devouring everything. He ate quickly, but thankfully neatly. No spills.

He grinned at me. “This is just fuel for the journey.”

I suddenly understood the expression ‘hungry like the wolf’.

“You don’t need this much fuel,” I said. “I’m going to rent a car.”

He knitted his eyebrows. “Why?”

“Because I’m sore,” I said, pointing out the obvious, “and I’d be a lot more comfortable riding shotgun in a car than on your back.”

Greyson shrugged for what felt like the millionth time that morning. “Okay. Anything to make your journey a pleasant one.”

I sneered at him. “Thank you.”

He sipped on his Earl Grey like he was some sort of British lord. “What’s the plan, then?”

“What plan?”

“Assuming we find the Fae world—what exactly are you planning to do when we get there?”

I paused. “Uh. Well.”

Greyson arched an eyebrow. “Cali.”

“I don’t really know, okay? I’m not good at planning.”

“What, really?” he said dryly.

I ignored him. “I just figured I was going to wing it. I’m better at that.”

He glared at me. “That’s quite the plan. Very organized.”

“I leave organization to control freak Alphas.”

“How do you even plan on getting in, though?” he asked, huffing.

“Well, it must be like in the movies and books,” I said. “There’s got to be some kind of entrance—maybe another shimmering wall like at Big Mac’s. Or maybe a woodland creature will show me the way.”

He almost spat out his tea. “A woodland creature?”

“Yeah,” I said defensively.

“What, like a friendly raccoon?”

“Why are you hating on raccoons?” I demanded. “What’s your problem right now?”

“*My problem* is that this is insane, Cali. I should’ve asked you about this sooner, before we left the house. How can you not have a plan? I thought your mom told you something!”

“Can you not get so hung up on the details?” I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure I’ll figure it out.”

“But *how?*” he asked. “What were you thinking? That Tinkerbell was gonna show up and tell you which way to go?”

“Of course not! Tinkerbell isn’t real, everybody knows that.”

He looked like he wanted to burst out laughing, despite being angry at me.

“I’m telling you, I’ll figure it out,” I repeated. “In the meantime, I’m going to rent a car.”

He took a deep, long-suffering breath. And then he went back to eating his food in silence. I was surprised he wasn’t arguing about the car thing. Just as I picked up my phone to do a Google search, it vibrated. Lola.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey, babe, how are you? Miss you! Where’ve you been?” Lola said. She was speaking a lot faster than normal.

“I’m okay, we’re—”

“Okay great! Is Greyson there with you?” she asked urgently. “We have a situation.”

**Episode 339**

My brows drew together in confusion. “If you need Greyson, why didn’t you call Greyson?” I asked.

“I tried,” Lola huffed out, “but there’s no answer. It just goes to voicemail. Do you know where he is? Because if not, we’re going to have to—”

“He’s right here,” I said, handing the phone to Greyson, ignoring the loud “WHAT” I could hear from Lola on the other end. “What’s wrong with your phone?”

He shrugged. “Got dropped in the water. Hasn’t turned on since.” He took the phone from my hand. “Yeah?”  
 I could hear the murmur of Lola’s voice and Greyson was nodding. “Yeah, I figured they would. Okay. Tell Joss to go in my place.” He ended the call and handed my phone back to me.

“What was that about?” I asked, slipping the phone back into my pocket.

“There’s going to be a council meeting.”

“A council meeting?” I asked, confused. “For what? And what council?”

“To address the instability in our world.” He shrugged. “Aftermath of the Manus Cruentae. I figured they’d want to talk about it. There’s still some shit to deal with.”

“Who goes to these meetings?” I asked, intrigued.

“The leaders of the packs. But, as I’m on babysitting duty,” he said, smirking, “I’m sending Joss to represent us. That’s what a Luna does.”

I ground my teeth so hard my jaw ached. “You know,” I reminded him, “anytime you want to leave, you’re more than welcome. I didn’t ask you to tag along, if you’ll recall.”

This just made his smirk stretch into a grin.

I stood from the booth. “I don’t need a babysitter,” I snapped. I looked out the window. “I need a car.”

There had to be a rental car place around here somewhere. Intent on finding one, I stormed out of the diner and down the street. There was a travel agency—closed, from the looks of it—a pizzeria, and a hardware store. I stopped at the intersection and shaded my eyes against the sun. Across the street was a gas station with—thank god—a row of likely looking cars parked along the side.

I could sense rather than hear Greyson behind me, following from a distance, but I ignored him. “Hello!” I called, waving at a man in mechanic’s coveralls inside the garage.

He walked out into the sun, wiping his hands on a greasy looking rag. “Hello,” he said slowly, his eyes traveling up and down my body.

“Can I rent one of those?” I asked, tipping my chin toward the row of cars.

“Rent?” he asked, apparently baffled.

“Yeah, rent.” I took a deep breath, reminding myself to be patient. “I need to rent a car. How about one of those?”

“Don’t rent ‘em,” he said. His eyes traveled down my body again, stopping to rest at my chest.

I sighed, crossing my arms. “Is there a place around here that does rent cars?”

He shook his head slowly. “Nope. But I could sell one to you, little lady.”

*Little lady? Gross.* “Sell one?”

He nodded toward a small car that had probably once been white, but was now so rusted it looked pink all over. “She’s not much to look at, but she runs good.”

“Fine,” I said. I didn’t care what the car looked like. I didn’t need a showpiece. All I needed was something that would get me to Haystack Rock in one piece. “How much?”

He looked me over again. “How about a grand?”

“That piece of shit’s not worth more than five hundred,” Greyson said, stepping beside me.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” the mechanic said, and I noticed he’d managed to look away from my chest now that I had Greyson at my side. Classic men.

“Two-fifty,” Greyson countered.

“A thousand is fine,” I said, stepping forward and pulling Xavier’s credit card out of my back pocket. He had a lot of money, so it was fine. The mechanic took it with wide eyes and I turned back to Greyson. “I don’t care about the price. I just want to get out of here.”

Greyson glared as the mechanic ran the credit card and handed me the keys. He kept glaring as he slid into the passenger seat and I started up my new car.

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“I like it,” I said, after ten miles or so. I patted the peeling vinyl of the dashboard. “It’s got a nice lived-in quality.”

Greyson looked disgusted. “If by *lived-in* you mean it looks like someone lived in it until they died, then yeah, I agree.”

I jumped as the car backfired. Again. It had been doing that every mile or so. Greyson just shook his head. There was no power steering and my hands, damp with sweat, were slipping on the sticky steering wheel. The whole car rattled, too. It felt like riding around in a tin can. But I kept my eyes on the road. I could feel Greyson looking at me with that knowing smirk, and I couldn’t bear to look at it. I was afraid I’d be tempted drive us both into a tree just to wipe the smug look off his face.

“Having fun?” he asked, his voice teasing.  
 Without looking at him, I shrugged. “Still easier than riding you.” It came out different than I’d intended, and I pressed my lips together, feeling my face growing hot. Why, oh WHY, did I keep saying that?!

He chuckled. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Cali. We’re not there yet.”

“God,” I said, shaking my head. “What is it with werewolves? Are you *all* this arrogant?”

Greyson leaned back leisurely on the ripped vinyl seat. “Is it still considered arrogance if you’re right? Because in that case, I think it’s just called being right.”

I groaned. “Isn’t it exhausting?”

“What?”

“Working so hard to keep people at a distance? Covering up your feelings?” I asked. “Being a know-it-all?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him wink at me. “What makes you so sure I have feelings?”

“God, you’re such a dick,” I said, shaking my head. He chuckled, but the smile slid off his face as I kept talking. “You sounded a bit different last night when you were talking about your mom.”

I could feel the temperature in the car change. Greyson’s face turned stony and he looked determinedly out the window.

“You can go somewhere else up here,” I said, tapping his temple softly, “but physically, you’re still going to be in the car with me. Why don’t you just talk about it?” He stayed quiet. “We still have at least a couple of hours to go. It’s going to feel a hell of a lot longer in total silence.”

He was quiet for so long I was certain he was never going to say anything. Then, finally, he shrugged. “There’s not much to tell. My father took my mother from me when I was young.”

“How young?” I asked quietly.

“I was just a baby,” he said, his eyes still on the passing trees. “I never heard from her again. I don’t even know if she’s still alive.”

There was something in his voice—a pain so old and so deep I responded instinctively and reached for his hand. “I’m sorry, Greyson.”

I didn’t even know if he saw me reaching for him, but he moved his hand away, into his lap. “I don’t even think about her anymore.”

“Never?” I asked.

“What’s the point? I’ve moved on.”

Judging by the look on his face, I doubted that very much. Was it even possible to move on after a loss like that? I thought about my own mother—how weak she’d been when I’d left. I thought of her in the hospital, hooked up to machines that had no idea how to fix what was wrong with her. They couldn’t, even if they tried. My stomach twisted at the thought. I could lose her.

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes and I punched the gas, urging the little car to go faster.

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The posted speed limit was 55, but I was going 70. I would have gone faster, but 70 miles an hour was as fast as I wanted push the little car. Greyson hadn’t said anything since I’d asked about his mother and, as I’d suspected, it had been a long two hours. But I wasn’t surprised. I didn’t even mind the silent brooding. It was an Alpha trait, and I’d had some experience with it.

The car backfired again and I jumped, gripping the wheel as the steering column began to shake. “Shit,” I muttered, as a plume of smoke erupted from the hood like a volcano. I steered the shaking car to the side of the road where it began to sputter. “Come on,” I said, patting the dashboard. “Just a little farther.”

But my pep talk fell on deaf ears. The little car gave a final pop and died, its whole system going suddenly—and completely—still. I leaned my head against the steering wheel with a groan. “Shit.”

With a sigh, I popped the hood and got out of the car to investigate. Smoke poured out as I lifted the hood, and there was an acrid burning smell so strong I coughed and spat onto the ground, trying to rid my mouth of the taste.

“I love watching your plans come together, Cali,” Greyson said, appearing next to me, his smirk back in place. “What do you think it is? Feel like replacing the transmission?”  
 “God, shut up!” I cried, rounding on him. “Can you stop being a jerk for like, a minute, so I can think? We need to flag down a car and find a garage or a tow truck or something.”

Greyson shook his head, laughing. “You can’t just jump into someone’s car, Cali. This is the Pacific Northwest. There are murderers everywhere.” He raised his eyebrows. “There might even be one standing right next to you.”

I ignored the thrill of fear at his words and pulled out my phone.

No signal.

I squinted my eyes and peered down the road. There was a small building with a rusted, faded sign swinging slightly in the breeze. I could make out a few letters—*C, V, N, I, N, C, E*. “Convenience!” I shouted. “That’s a little store down there. They have to have a phone.” I started walking down the empty road.

“Cali—”

“If you want to suck a little less, you can just shut up and come with me,” I yelled, without turning around.

He followed, but his heavy sigh told me it was reluctantly.

The convenience store was a small, lonely building, the wood washed grey by the elements. There were no cars in the small lot outside, and the door was closed.

“It’s abandoned,” Greyson said as we drew closer.

He was probably right, but I had to make sure before I gave up. I climbed the porch steps and reached for the door. As I touched knob, a volt of power shot into my hand and through my body. I screamed as I shot backward, tumbling down the porch steps.

**Episode 340**

The force of the violent shock sent me flying back, and I only stopped because I slammed into something warm and rock-hard. Greyson. He wrapped his arms protectively around me, preventing me from crumpling to the ground.

“Are you okay?” he asked, pulling me upright and looking into my dazed face.

I nodded, though I wasn’t entirely sure it was true. “I’m okay,” I said, carefully letting my feet take my weight again. “What *was* that?”

“No idea,” Greyson murmured, looking warily at the small building. “What did it feel like?’

I shrugged. “Like a shock or something. Like the door was electrified.”

Greyson shook his head, his expression dark. “I don’t think it was electricity, Cali.”

My white hand was now red and shiny, like it had been burned, and there was an ache that went all the way up my arm. “Do you think it’s some kind of security thing?”

Greyson opened his mouth to answer, but stopped when the door opened. We both looked over.

An old black woman with iron-grey hair and a sour expression poked her head out and glared at us. “What do you want?”

For a moment, all I could do was stare at her, stunned. The little building looked so rundown and lonely, I had resigned myself to the idea that it was abandoned. I hadn’t been expecting the door to open. Finally, I recovered myself and took a step forward. “Our car broke down. We just wanted to use your phone to call a mechanic or a tow truck.”

The woman narrowed her eyes and slammed the door shut.

“What the…” I said, and started toward the door. “There’s no need to be rude! We just want to use the phone!”

Greyson grasped my arm and pulled me back. “Hang on,” he said in a low tone. “Don’t go any closer. Something’s not right about this place.”

“Let me go,” I said angrily, pulling my arm free and starting up the porch steps. I was about to pound on the door when it opened again and the woman stuck her head back out.

“Go away!” She pointed at me. “No Fae.” She moved her withered old finger to point at Greyson. “No werewolves.”

I gaped at her. “How did you know that?”

“Don’t worry about the details. Just go away!” she said again, moving to shut the door.

“No, wait! Please! We’re not here to hurt you,” I pleaded, moving closer. “Our car really did break down. We really just need to use the phone.”

The woman peered at us through rheumy eyes. “I’m warning you, girl. Go away—”

“Please?” I said, surprised to find tears in my eyes.

The woman paused. “What would you do if a Fae and a werewolf showed up on *your* doorstep? Would you let them in?”

I bit my lip. “I can see where you’re coming from with that,” I admitted. “It doesn’t sound great on paper, but…” I shook my head. “Anyway, how can you even tell what we are?”

The woman grimaced, like she was pained by my ignorance. “I can read your aura. His, too,” she said, tipping her chin toward Greyson, who was standing back, eyeing her warily.

“She’s a witch,” he said, a warning in his tone.

She gave him a simpering smile. “Very good. So you know why I want you to leave.”

But when she began to shut the door again, I stepped forward and held it open, careful to keep my hand away from the knob. “I’m friends with a witch,” I said quickly, unwilling to give up so easily. “So I’m not afraid. Maybe you know her. I don’t know if you all have an organization or something? Like Facebook for witches? Her name’s Big Mac. Do you know her?”

The witch rolled her watery eyes. “Is MacKenzie still calling herself that? She always was an ass.”

So this witch knew Big Mac, but I couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or a bad thing. I swallowed hard. “My name’s Cali—”

“I know who and what you are,” the witch said, cutting me off. “Which is why I want you to leave.”

“Big Mac trusts me. Sort of,” I explained. “Why can’t you?”

The woman snorted. “I don’t even know you. You could be light Fae, sure. But you could just as easily be dark Fae. Either way, you need to leave.”

“What’s are light and dark Fae?” I asked, looking at the woman in confusion.

My question seemed to confirm whatever the woman had been thinking, and she shook her head. “If you don’t know, girl, then you can’t be a very good Fae, can you?”

Maybe her comment hit a nerve, because I pushed harder at the door. “Listen, lady, all we want is to use the phone so we can get our car fixed and get the hell out of here. It’s a matter of life or death, okay?”

The grey-haired woman eyed me with great suspicion. “And why should I care about that?” The question must have been rhetorical, because she didn’t wait for me to answer before she started to close the door.

“Wait! I’ll trade you!” The witch paused. “I’ll give you some of my blood.”

“Cali,” Greyson said sharply, moving swiftly to my side. “Don’t do this. I’ll shift and carry you. We can get there without the car.”

I didn’t answer him, just kept my eyes on the witch, waiting.

After a long moment, she opened the door. “Come in, then. But watch out for the doorknob, unless you liked your little shock.”

I stepped into the building after her, careful to avoid the door. “What’s the deal with the knob, anyway?”

“It’s made of iron, to ward off Fae,” she said. “The light and the dark. Well, come in.”

I stepped into the store. Just like Big Mac’s tent, it was much bigger inside than the small building had looked from the road.

“I’m Nneka. And you’re Cali, yes?”

“Yeah,” I said, still scanning the building’s surprising inner dimensions.

Greyson stepped into the building, but he wasn’t looking around. His eyes were focused on Nneka. “I’ve dealt with your kind before.”

Nneka waved a withered hand as she walked deeper into her store. “Such a werewolf thing to say. I’ve dealt with *your* kind too, you know.”

I turned to Greyson, who was glaring at the witch. We needed help, and I was desperate for Greyson not do anything that would make Nneka change her mind about the trade. “Could you please just chill, Greyson?” I implored. “For once in your life?”

He just glowered at me.

“How do you know MacKenzie?” Nneka asked.

I spun around, stepping in front of Greyson. It was useless, though; he towered over me and there was no way I was blocking his death stare. “I was introduced to her by a member of my pack.”

Nneka had just stepped behind her dusty counter, but she looked up at me, surprised. “You’re a member of a wolf pack?”

I felt Greyson tense behind me, and I looked at up at him for a moment, then back to Nneka. “It’s complicated.” I cleared my throat. “I’ve actually been looking for Big Mac. Do you have any idea where she might be?”  
 Nneka looked up sharply. “What do you mean?”

“It looks like there was an attack on her house, and now she’s nowhere to be found. I’m worried about her.”

And I was also worried about my mom, but… This was *Big Mac* we were talking about. She was a little rough around the edges, but she’d always helped me when it counted. I couldn’t just let her be missing and do nothing.

Nneka took this information in. “I can do a location spell, if you want.” Her eyes narrowed shrewdly. “But that’ll cost extra.”

“That’s fine,” I said quickly. “Whatever you want is fine,” I added, ignoring Greyson’s grunt of protest.

Nneka looked at me for a moment, then reached beneath the counter. She extracted a scroll of paper and unrolled it across the dusty counter. It turned out to be a map of the world, so old the paper looked soft and the edges were frayed. She pinned down the edges of the map with a couple of old books and then moved her hands over the map, an inch away from the paper. I watched, transfixed, as thousands of pinpoints of light appeared beneath her hands. They dotted the map like stars in the sky.

Nneka closed her eyes and began to speak, though I couldn’t make out any words. She was murmuring what sounded like another language, and her eyelids were fluttering as though she were dreaming.

What the hell was she doing? I glanced up at Greyson, but he looked just as surprised as I felt.

Transfixed by the sight, we watched the witch as she continued to move her hands above the map, her face lit by the pinpoints of light on the paper. Then, as suddenly as she started, she stopped. She dropped her hands to the counter, opened her eyes, and looked straight at me.

“MacKenzie is dead.”

**Episode 341**

“*What*?” I gasped, staring at Nneka. “What are you talking about? Big Mac isn’t dead!”

Nneka pointed down at the map, stretched across the counter. “Did you see the little pinpoints of light?” I nodded mutely. “Every one of them represents a witch, and their location. Every witch in the world is represented here, and MacKenzie isn’t among them.”

“I can’t believe this,” I breathed out, shocked.

Nneka gave me a sharp look. “You and MacKenzie were good friends?”

“Not really,” I said, shaking my head. “But still, it’s a shock. I wonder who could have done it. Her body wasn’t in her house.”

Nneka shrugged. “Anyone could have done it.” She tipped her chin toward Greyson, who was standing beside me. “Maybe it was one of your werewolf friends.”

Greyson shook his head, clearly annoyed.

“I’m just saying I wouldn’t be surprised,” Nneka said, rolling up the map. “Always said MacKenzie had her fingers in too many pies.”

I stared at Nneka, stunned. “How can you be so callous?”

Nneka seemed unbothered by my question. “All that wheeling and dealing she was always doing finally caught up to her.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true.” She pointed to the old black rotary phone on the counter. “Wolfman can make his call. You’re coming with me.”

“Be careful, Cali,” Greyson said in a low tone. He picked up the phone’s receiver, but kept his eye on me as I followed Nneka through a swinging door to a small room behind the counter.

“Come in, come in,” she said, waving me further into the small, crowded room. The walls were lined with shelves, and on those shelves were row after row of glass jars. They held dried herbs, seeds, and feathers, and one of the rows of jars just held stones, separated by color. There were also bottles filled with liquids, and dried flowers and herbs strung from the ceiling with twine. Though it was the middle of the day, the sunlight was struggling to stream through the small grubby windows, and Nneka moved around, lighting candles.

Finished, she blew out her match and moved to a worktable cluttered with branches and feathers and crumpled paper. She pulled open a drawer, and from it drew out a knife. It was small, and the silver blade flashed in the candlelight. I hoped it wasn’t iron…

“Well, come on, then,” she demanded, beckoning me closer. I walked over and she grabbed my arm, pulling it straight. She put the knife to the crook of my elbow and held a small glass vial just below it.

I braced for the sting of the cut, but it didn’t come. I opened my eyes to find Nneka staring at my neck.

“Where’d you get that?” she asked, pointing with her knife.

I looked down and found her pointing at the pendant around my neck. “It’s from my mother,” I said, covering it protectively with my hand.

Nneka kept her eyes on my hand for a moment longer, then looked down and sliced through the tender skin on the inside of my elbow. I hissed with surprise, then pain as she squeezed my arm. Blood streamed into her vial. She kept squeezing until the vial was full.

“Okay,” she said briskly, stoppering the vial with a cork. “That was for the phone call.”

She handed me a small cotton square and I accepted it, gratefully, holding it to my stinging arm. The fabric was bright white and clean, which surprised me, given how grubby everything else in the shop was. I watched my blood bloom like a flower on the cotton.

“Now,” Nneka said, “your payment for the location spell.”

I figured she was going to grab another vial for more of my blood, so I was surprised when she reached for my pendant.

“Give me that,” she said, pointing.

I took a step back. “What? No way.”

“That’s the payment.”

“My necklace was never part of the deal,” I said, closing my hand over the pendant again.

Nneka gave me a shrewd look. “You accepted the deal without ever asking the terms. Very foolish, because that means the terms are mine to determine. And I’ve determined that I want that pendant.”

“No,” I said firmly. “Take more blood if you want it, but there’s no way I’m giving you my mother’s necklace.”

Nneka took a step forward. “Has no one ever told you it’s unwise to cross a witch?”

I took another step back as Nneka advanced. I looked around, assessing my exit options. I eyed the door, hoping Greyson would appear, but I didn’t dare call out. Nneka’s eyes flashed dangerously, and I wouldn’t have put it past her to cast some kind of dark magic on me. I took a deep breath, trying to think. I was scared, but I was angry, too. Who did this witch think she was? The necklace was a gift from my mother, and there was no way I was letting her take it from me.

The question was, how was I going stop her?

Nneka kept advancing and I kept retreating, but the room was small, and I soon found myself backed against the wall. My hands slid up the dusty paint on either side as I looked for something to defend myself with, but there was nothing.

Nneka’s eyes flashed dangerously and, without warning, she lunged for the pendant around my neck. I dodged at the last moment and the witch hit the wall. I skittered away and sprinted for the door. I’d almost reached it when something sent me flying forward. Nneka had tackled me from behind.

I tried to scream, but the wind had been knocked out of me and all I could manage was a strangled gurgle as she slammed me to the rough wooden floor. She was on top of me in a moment, her withered hands clawing at my neck. For an old woman, she sure was spry.

“I want that necklace!” she screeched as I batted her hands away.

Struggling under her, I tried to push her off, tried to get a breath, but nothing was working. How could this old witch be so freaking strong? For a moment I managed to unseat her, but then she regained her balance and came for me, her hands aimed at my throat.

Fear coursed through me—she was going to choke me—and I pushed at her with all my might. A surge of vibrating energy pulsed through me. There was a flash of light and Nneka was thrown across the room. She slammed into the shelves along the far wall, shattering about a hundred glass bottles, and a shower of broken glass and herbs fell to the floor as she slid down the wall.

Greyson appeared at the door as I was struggling to my feet.

“Cali,” he said, coming to my side and grabbing my arm. “Are you okay?” He pulled me close as he looked around the room. “What happened?”

“She attacked me,” I gasped out, leaning on Greyson for support.

We both looked at the old witch, slumped against the wall. She was still, but looking at us. She looked dazed, but seemed unharmed. I moved to step toward her, but Greyson grabbed my hand.  
 “We have to go,” he said, pulling me through the swinging door and toward the front of the store. “Watch out for that doorknob,” he said, kicking the front door open.

Stepping into the fresh air outside revived me, and I dragged in a deep breath. “Did you call a mechanic?” I asked, looking around, trying to order my thoughts.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Greyson muttered. “We don’t have time for that.” He pulled me across the street and back toward the car, grabbing my bag out of the back seat. “I’m going to shift and carry you to Haystack Rock.”

“Greyson—”

“Cali, you were just attacked by a witch. We don’t have time to wait for a mechanic. We have to get out of here. The faster we get there to Haystack Rock, the better.”

He was making some solid points. I looked back at Nneka’s shop, then at Greyson. I nodded. “Okay.”

He shifted. Grabbing my bag, I hopped on his back.

As he began to run, I held on tight, my mind going a million miles an hour. I was replaying the fight with Nneka, wondering what the hell had just happened. I wasn’t sure, but it felt like I’d managed to summon my Fae powers in my moment of need.

Greyson was running like he was being chased by the hounds of hell, and I tightened my grip on his fur. I didn’t know what was making him move so fast, but I was glad to be putting distance between us and Nneka.

This ride was no more fun than the last. My whole body ached with the effort of holding on as Greyson sprinted. My hand, still sore from Nneka’s doorknob wards, burned and stung with the effort. But after a long, long time, I felt my ears perk up. Underneath the sound of Greyson’s paws in the brush and his heavy breathing, I could hear the distant sound of the ocean. It reminded me of being at Thor’s Well for the Lupo Finale and though I wasn’t cold, I shivered at the thought.

Greyson leapt over a fallen tree and then, suddenly, we emerged from the trees. I gasped. There it was—I could see it, off in the distance, sitting on an expanse of dark sand. Haystack Rock.

We’d made it.

**Episode 342**

MAYA

What I wanted to do was attack. To jump up and end everyone and this stupid fucking misery. But that wasn’t ladylike, now was it? Jay laughed and the urge to attack surged back, and I suppressed it into an eyeroll.

“Are you seeing this, Maya?” Rishika called to me, pointing at the cookie tower Jay was building next to hers. “That can’t be legal. He’s sticking the middles together. That’s like using glue, man—this is supposed to be about engineering.”

*How the fuck did I end up here?* I’d been pissed when I’d had to come back to the Redwood Pack, but at least there had been a goal to pursue. We’d all been under threat from the Manus Cruentae, so it had made sense to band together. But now? *Now* I was a cookie Jenga referee, for fuck’s sake.

I looked around the living room. Aside from the three of us, the room was empty. I didn’t know where anyone else was, except for Joss. She was getting ready to leave for the council meeting. A fact I happened to know because she hadn’t stopped talking about it. She’d been impossible since Greyson had taken off, trying to act the leader in his absence. I’d seen some shit Alphas in my time, but she was the worst leader I’d come across—condescending, short-sighted, full of herself, and about as pleasant as a mattress full of bed bugs.

There was a bitter taste in the back of my mouth, and I swallowed it down. I would have made a *much* better Luna than Joss. An old couch would have made a better Luna than Joss. Not that I wanted to be with Greyson. *Or* Nolan.

Gross. Just the thought of him made me shudder. I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. Nolan had been such a last resort move.

The truth was, there weren’t a lot of Alphas I’d *want* to be Luna with. Even if Colton were Alpha…

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the thought. There was a lot Colton and I would have to figure out before…

*Before what?*

The thing was, Colton was hot as hell. And I wasn’t happy to admit it. He knew it, too. And that—along with basically everything else about him—made my blood boil.

Rishika, laughed and I looked over at the two of them. Jay’s cookie tower had toppled off the coffee table and he was staring at it, crestfallen, as Rishika giggled.

God, I wished I was back in the fight. The Manus Cruentae had been dangerous and deadly, but fighting them had been a breath of fresh air. It had been so invigorating to be back out there, fighting, the taste of blood on my tongue. And I was damn good at it. It was what I was best at, actually. Sitting around like this was a goddamn waste of my skills.

Suddenly, I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin if I sat still for another moment, and I hopped to my feet. I strode out of the living room and headed outside.

The morning clouds had burned off and the sun was shining and, as I walked onto the porch, I saw Colton sitting on a deck chair, his eyes closed against the sun. Shirtless.

*Dammit.*

I hated the way my stomach lurched at the sight of him. It was this weird combination of fear and attraction and excitement, and it made me sick. He was such an ass, but I was still attracted to him, which probably made me an ass, too.

I stood there too long and, sensing someone near, he opened his eyes. Then his eyes widened, and that smug smirk spread across his chiseled face.

“Hey there,” he drawled.

I was going to fucking murder the butterflies in my stomach.

“What?” I snapped, irritated with both of us.

“Just getting some sun, too?” he asked casually. He picked up a bag of tortilla chips and held it out. “Snack?”

I growled and spun on my heel, racing down the porch steps. The land surrounding the house was massive, but I was only halfway to the trees when I stopped. I spun around to face Colton, who’d followed me. “What?”

He stopped in front of me, his eyes amused. “Nothing.”

“I don’t recall inviting you for a stroll,” I shot back.

He shrugged, looking around the yard. “I didn’t realize I was trespassing on your land, Maya. I thought this land belonged to all of us.”

“There has to be someone else you can annoy, Colton,” I said, narrowing my eyes.

“Oh, I’m sure there is,” he said lightly. “But I have one question for you before I go.”

I rolled my eyes. “What is it?”

He didn’t ask right away, just looked at me, his gaze assessing. “Why are you still here?

This stopped me. “What?”

“Why are you here, with us? You had to come back because of the Manus Cruentae, but you made it very clear that you were doing that against your will. And now it’s over. The Manus Cruentae is no more.” He paused and gave me a searching gaze. “So why are you still here?”

He looked at me like he was expecting an answer, but I didn’t give him one. The truth was, I didn’t have one.

“Why, Maya?” he asked, looking genuinely curious. “You’re free to go. Free to head back to your stupid Samara pack.”

This elicited a snort of disgust. “I could, but I don’t have any desire to be associated with that loser Nolan. He was completely pathetic in the Lupo Finale.”

Colton grinned, flashing his movie star smile. I looked away from it, like I’d look away from the sun. “Greyson did kick Nolan’s ass, didn’t he?

“Yeah, exactly,” I said. “Why would I want to return to an embarrassing pack like that?”

Colton’s eyes ranged across my face, and his expression darkened. He took a step forward and, when he spoke, his voice was lower than usual. “I know exactly why you’re here.”

I swallowed, trying to ignore the goosebumps I felt springing up on my skin. “Do you?”

“You could go anywhere you wanted, but here you are.”

“And you think you know why.” I said, loading my voice with derision.

He nodded. “It’s obvious.” His gaze flicked down, then back up to my eyes. “I see the way you look at me.”

I glared at him. “Like I want to kill you?”

He smiled. “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

“God, you’re such a dick,” I growled, anger bubbling to the surface. He was too close, and it made me feel too much. I planted my hands on his chest and shoved him back. “Just stay the fuck out of my way, Colton.”

He stumbled back a few steps but came forward again, a blazing look in his eyes. “Don’t fucking push me, Maya,” he said, shoving me back.

My anger was on a short fuse, and he was waving around a match. I stepped forward, getting into his face. “Or what? What are you going to do?”

We stared at each other, our gazes locked, our eyes dark with fury. My whole body tingled, waiting for him to make a move, ready to attack if he moved so much as a pinky finger toward me. My wolf was crying out to fight his.

“Hey!”

Spell broken, we both looked over as Jay ran toward us across the grass.

“What?” Colton snarled.

Jay pulled to a stop, clearly surprised by Colton’s tone. “I just need to talk to you, man.” He glanced at me. “Hope you don’t mind if I borrow him, Maya. It’s pack business.”

“I literally wouldn’t mind if you ripped out his fucking throat, Jay,” I snapped. “But if it’s pack business, you can sure as hell talk about it in front of me. I may not officially be part of this pack, but I’ve fought alongside all of you. I’ve proven myself.” I glanced at Colton. “At least in the eyes of the people who matter.”

Jay held up his hands. “Fine with me. I just don’t want to get stuck in the middle of your dysfunctional…” He looked around, like he was searching for the right word to describe what Colton and I had. “*Whatever’s* going on between you two.”

“Well what is it?” I snapped. “What do you want to say?”

Jay cast a look over his shoulder and took a step closer. “I wanted to ask a question, actually. How much do either of you trust Joss?”

I rolled my eyes. “About as far as I can throw your shitty car. Why?”

“Greyson still hasn’t named a Beta or an Omega. Without him here, Joss is all we have as far as leadership goes. And now she’s going to go represent us at the Council? By herself?”

Colton nodded. “Yeah, I see your point.” He thought for a moment. As if that was a thing he was capable of. “What do you think we should do? This is kind of new territory for us all. This is our fucking pack, not hers.”

“I think we should send someone with Joss,” Jay said. “Just to make sure she doesn’t screw us all over.”

Colton passed a hand over his eyes, suddenly looking tired. “I’ll do it.”

Jay looked relieved. “I was hoping you would. I’d offer to go myself, but Lola’s been acting kind of weird lately. I’d hate to leave.”

“Oh, Jay you old softy,” Colton said, punching his friend’s shoulder. “I’ll go.”

Jay smiled. “Great,” he said, and headed back toward the house.

Colton nodded and turned to leave. He’d only taken a few steps when he turned back to me. “I know you’re going to follow me, little wolf,” he said. “So why don’t you just come with?”

**Episode 343**

We had finally arrived at Haystack Rock. I slid off Greyson’s back into the soft, wet sand, then took a step forward and looked up, up, up. The rock was so much bigger than I’d imagined. Behind me, I heard Greyson shift back and handed him my bag, where he’d stashed his clothes.

“I didn’t know it was going to be so big,” I said, looking at the giant stone formation in wonder. It jutted out of the sand like an enormous sea monster. It was like nothing I’d ever seen before. “Where do you think the cave entrance is?”

“What cave entrance?”

I looked back at Greyson, who was pulling on his T-shirt. “What do you mean?”

“What do you mean? What made you think there was a cave?” he asked.

I suddenly felt about two inches tall. “I assumed there’d be a cave,” I said in a small voice. I looked back at the rock. “How else am I supposed to get in?”  
 Greyson stepped next to me, shaking his head. “No way. A cave would be too easy. Anyone could stumble across an entrance like that.” He shouldered my backpack. “Maybe there’s not an entrance. Have you considered that this may have just been a wild goose chase, Cali?”

I ignored him. The entrance had to be here. This *had* to be the needle in the haystack. It just had to be. There was no way I’d come all this way for nothing. And Mikah didn’t really seem like the type of guy to lie… Ugh. I didn’t know anymore.

My whole body was aching from the ride here and my hand had started to ooze blood, but the tide was out and the time was now so I took a deep breath. I started out toward the giant rock. The wind that blew off the water was cold and damp, and I shivered as I strode across the damp sand.

“You’re not dressed warmly enough,” Greyson said, his voice annoyed. “How do you even know this is what you’ve been looking for?’

But I didn’t answer him. I just walked until I reached the rock, then started walking the perimeter, looking for a way in. The wind slapped at me, and I pushed my hair away from my face. This would have been a pretty great time for a wisp to appear and show me the way in. I even looked around, but no wisps appeared. Of course they didn’t. That would be too easy, and nothing about this journey had been easy. Every step had been hard as hell—why would anything change now?

“Cali,” Greyson started, his voice a warning. “Where do you think you’re going?”

I kept walking, looking for the entrance.

He could be as pissed as he wanted, but I wasn’t going anywhere until I’d found the way in. I ran my fingertips along the cold, rough stone, thinking hard. Then I took a step back and looked up. “Maybe I should climb up. Maybe the entrance is on top, so no one can find it.”

Greyson looked up. “Well, that would be effective, considering this thing looks pretty well impossible to climb. That wet stone is slippery as hell.”

I took another step back so I could see higher up. This close, Haystack Rock seemed to stretch into the sky. “It sure is tall,” I said, a nervous feeling in my belly. Climbing wasn’t exactly my strong suit. I turned to Greyson. “Feel like giving me a boost?”

He gave a long-suffering sigh. “I assume I don’t need to remind you that you do have a tendency to fall from heights?”

“You don’t,” I snapped. And he didn’t. I remembered every one of my falls perfectly without a reminder. “Now, are you going to help me or not?”

He eyed me for a moment. Then he sighed. “At your service, love,” he said with a teasing smile. Then he laced his fingers together.

I stepped onto the cradle of his hands and he pushed me up.

“Don’t look at my butt,” I said, quickly getting self-conscious.

“Kind of hard not to like this,” he mumbled. Then he moved almost too fast lifting me up, like my weight was nothing to him.

“Hold on,” he said, and I grasped the slick rock face, my fingers feeling for a handhold. “There’s a spot at your right foot—you’ve got it.”

I followed his instructions and pulled myself onto a little plateau of the rock. It was freezing cold and—as Greyson had predicted—wet and slippery. I stood, using every ounce of core strength I possessed to keep my balance. The distant crash of the surf seemed suddenly less distant. The tide had to be coming back in. Now was the time.

The air was damp, and so sharp with salt it stung my nose. But I gulped in a deep breath and took a cautious first step. The rock *was* slick, but it felt as though the ground moved under my feet as I stepped and I slipped, landing hard on my butt and sliding back over the edge of the rock, scraping my hands and face on the way down. I tumbled to the ground, landing hard in a tide pool.

“Dammit,” I cried, snatching my raw, bleeding hand out of the salt water.

Greyson was at my side in an instant. “Are you okay?” he asked, his face lined with worry.

I closed my stinging hand and looked up at the stupid slippery rock. “I’m okay.” Truth be told, except for my hand, I was more humiliated than hurt. I hated that I’d fallen in front of Greyson. *Again*. But, as I rose unsteadily to my feet, I started to wonder if something *was* wrong. The ground under me felt slanted, and I took a steadying step.

“Cali, what is it?” Greyson asked, stepping closer.

“I don’t know,” I murmured, steadying myself against him. “It feels like something’s throwing my balance off.”

“More than normal?” Greyson asked, with the ghost of a smile.

I glared. “Yes. It feels like something’s pulling me or something.” I looked around, searching for the cause, when my hand brushed against my pendant. I stopped. Touched it again. There was a strange sensation around the pendant—like that buzzy pulse you found around powerful magnets. Almost as if the pendant had its own magnetic field.

Looking down, I saw the pendant move away from my chest, lifted by some unseen hand. My heart raced. “It’s leading me,” I said excitedly.

Greyson looked worried, but I let the pendant lead me out of the tide pools and around the curve of the rock, until I came to a small crevice in the rock’s face. The pendant dropped down to my neck and I examined the rock. The crevice I’d been led to was barely more than a crack and I stared at it, thunderstruck.

“Is this it?” I asked. “How the hell am I supposed to get through there? There’s no way that’s big enough.” Greyson stepped beside me and I looked up at him. “Can Fae get smaller?”

He shrugged. “Hell if I know. But unless you can, there’s no way you’re getting through here.” He ran his fingers along the seam of the rock. “What makes you think this is it?”

I put my hand to my pendant, which felt warm against the coolness of my skin. “It led me here. This has to be it.” I stared at the rock, willing it to open for me. “Maybe I can use my Fae powers to get in.”

Standing in the dark, wet sand was like standing in quicksand—we kept sinking into it. Greyson shifted his feet, his expression skeptical. “I don’t know, Cali. I know you have powers, I’ve felt them myself, but…” He shook his head. “You’ve never been able to control them before. Why do you think you can do it now?”

He was right. I bit my lip to keep the tears welling in my eyes from falling. “I don’t know,” I said, looking back at the dark, unmoving rock. “This is just all so confusing.”

“I know,” he said, his voice gentle.

“I don’t know what I expected,” I said, gesturing to the rock, “but a tiny fissure in a giant rock sure wasn’t it.”

Greyson caught my hand and pulled it closer. “Cali, you’re bleeding,” he said, using his shirt to stem the seeping blood. I hissed in pain and he tightened his grip. “We should go.”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. Frustrated and angry, I wrenched my hand from his grasp. This threw me off-balance and I put my hand out, steadying myself on the rock, my hand landing right over the tiny crack. Then I pulled it back with a cry of surprise.

Because where the rock had just been, there was now shimmering air. The air was dark and roiled like the sea, churning and crashing.

Then it drew back, revealing an opening in the once solid rock.

**Episode 344**

Drawn like a magnet to the opening in the rock, I took a step forward, only to be yanked roughly back. “What are you doing?” I demanded, looking up at Greyson.

“What are *you* doing?” he snapped.

“What the hell does is look like I’m doing? I’m going in.”

Greyson stared at me, shock written all over his sharply angled face. “You can’t just walk in there. You have no idea what’s on the other side.”

“Um, I’m pretty sure it’s the Fae world, Greyson,” I said. “That’s kind of why I’m here, in case you missed that part.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “Even if it is,” he ground out, “that doesn’t mean you have any idea what kind of danger it holds. Did you ever consider that there’s a reason why it’s hidden?”

My stomach did a kind of flip-flop as he said this. He wasn’t wrong. I shivered, half from cold, half from fear. “I know,” I said firmly, as much to myself as to him, “but this is the reason I came here. I’m going in.” I looked up at him. “You did your part, Greyson—you brought me here safe and sound. You can go back to the pack if you want, but I’m going in.”

I started moving again, but again Greyson pulled me back.

His hands were at my hips and he was gripping hard. “I didn’t bring you all this way to lose you to some hidden world,” he breathed. This close, I could see how scared and stormy his eyes looked.

I swallowed hard and tried to pull free. “I *have* to save my mom, Greyson.” I fought hard, but his grip on me was strong and he wasn’t letting go.

“Cali, stop,” he said, struggling to find his footing. The tide was starting to come in, making the stones beneath our feet even slicker.

“Let me *go!*” I cried, trying to free myself from his grip. I gave one wild twist and felt my feet slide out from under me. I slammed into Greyson and he slipped too. He threw his arms around me, clasping me tight, and we both pitched forward toward the crevice and the shimmering air.

There was a roll of wind all around us—it felt like being underwater as a wave crashed over you—and we both slammed to the ground. I groaned, feeling the impact through my body, but Greyson was on his feet in an instant, lunging back in the direction we’d come from. I looked up just in time to see the rock growing back where the shimmering air had been, sealing us inside. But it didn’t look like a rock wall anymore. Instead, there was a panorama of sheer cliffs. I blinked hard, trying to make sense of what my eyes were telling me.

I stared in disbelief. There, cliffs rose up before us, thrusting into the dark sky. They were jagged and rocky, and had a strange moss growing in the crevices. It was green, but, as I turned my head slightly, I could see that it was actually shining—luminescent, like the brightest moonlight. Baffled by our surroundings, I turned around and slipped, stumbling backward into Greyson. He caught me easily in his strong arms and held me close as he looked around.

Ahead of us was a dark, dense forest. It was huge, and the trees towered over us. It looked as though the light disappeared about two steps in. It was a fairytale kind of forest—the kind naughty little girls got lost in.

*But*, I reminded myself, *this* *is what I’m here for*. I took a step forward.

Greyson grabbed my hand. “What’s your plan, Cali?”

I looked back, surprised. “What plan?”

He groaned and ran a hand through his hair.

I rolled my eyes. “My only plan is to save my mom.”

“But why,” he said, “is your first instinct to stroll right into the heart of that fucking forest like you’re Little Red Riding Hood?”

I raised my eyebrow. “Asked the Big Bad Wolf.”

He didn’t look amused. “Why there?”

I looked around, gesturing widely. “There’s nowhere else to go.”

He glanced over his shoulder, back the way we’d come from, and I could practically see steam coming out of his ears. “Okay,” he started, in what I was sure he *thought* was a reasonable tone. “Say you find whatever it is you’re looking for. How do you intend to get back?”

Not having considered this, I thought quickly, then pointed over his shoulder to the cliffs we’d just fallen through. “We’ll come back here.”

“*And?*” he prompted.

“And figure it out from there,” I said firmly. “Now, you’re welcome to stay here, but I’m going.”

His eyes were stormy again. “There’s no chance in hell I’m leaving you alone in this world.” He looked around, his mouth pressed into a thin, irritated line. “There’s a stream,” he said, pointing. “We’ll follow that. It’ll make it easy to turn around if we have to. I’ll scent-mark as we go, so we can find our way back.”

I watched as he walked to the creek bank and crouched down, rubbing his forearm over the top of a low rock. It was a good plan, and I was annoyed I hadn’t thought of it myself. What else hadn’t I thought of?

Some of my worry and confusion must have shown on my face, because when Greyson walked back to me, he looked like he was trying to be calm. “I know this is urgent, Cali. I know how worried you are about your mom. I just want you to be careful, okay?”

“I’ll try,” I said, nodding. I smiled to myself as I turned toward the forest. Greyson was impossible most of the time, but it was still nice to know he cared about me.

He stepped up beside me and took my hand, his eyes on the forest ahead. “Let’s get this over with.”

It was hard to miss that he was tense and annoyed, but I still smiled as I felt the familiar warmth of his hand around mine. We walked forward until the trees swallowed us up. The luminescent light from the moss dimmed, but somehow, it felt like I could see better than ever in the dimness. I could also feel the same buzzing energy I’d felt around my pendant, but here it was everywhere.

In the distance, I watched a bird land on a branch. I could hear the scratch of its talons against the bark of the tree. There was a stirring to my right, and I looked over to see a butterfly take flight. I could hear the steady beat of her wings as she took to the air. The air within the trees was rich with the smell of wet, green earth, and every sound—every vibration—seemed to reach me.

“What’s up?” Greyson asked, looking at me, a tense edge to his voice.

“I can hear everything,” I said. “I can smell everything.”

“You feel okay?’

I nodded. “I feel… *strong*. Alive.” I looked around, marveling. “Is this what it’s like for you in your world?”

“Yeah,” he said, bemusedly. “Something like that. But I don’t feel like that at all here.”

He sounded worried—shaky, even—but I was too filled with new energy to pay much attention, and I pressed forward, following the stream deeper into the woods. Greyson stopped periodically to rub his scent on a rock or a tree, and I kept my eyes open, taking in the minutia of the forest around us. After another hour or so—time seemed to slide in funny ways here—the air began to change. It turned cooler and damper, and the light—already low—dimmed. I wrapped my arms around myself as I shivered, wishing I’d packed my jacket.

“You’re shaking,” Greyson said, looking over at me. “Maybe we should stop here, set up camp for the night, figure out a plan.”

He was pointing to a small clearing a little way back from the stream. I didn’t want to stop, but I knew he was right. We needed to rest. “Okay,” I said, holding myself tighter as chills ran up and down my spine.

Greyson cleared the ground of sticks and brush and laid a bed of dried leaves beneath a tree. He lowered himself with a groan and I came to sit next to him.

My teeth were chattering, and I couldn’t stop shivering. What had happened to that amazing feeling I’d had when we’d first started? I leaned my head back against the tree, and my eyes dropped closed. I was so, so tired.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked.

My teeth were chattering so hard it was difficult to speak, but I nodded. “Just cold,” I managed.

I opened my eyes when I felt Greyson stand. He quickly stripped down and, with that bone cracking sound, he shifted.

“What are you doing?” I asked, surprise pushing some of the fatigue away.

He didn’t answer, of course, but lay down behind me, warmth coming off him in waves. It drew me in, and I snuggled close, letting his heat warm my bones.

*I’ll keep you warm and safe, Cali.*

Hearing his voice in my head, I lay down and let my body relax into him. I was just starting to drift off when I felt a tickle on my nose. Annoyed, I brushed it away. It was a piece of hair or some of Greyson’s fur or something.

But then it came back, tickling incessantly. I opened my eyes, annoyed, but my breath caught when I saw what was hovering an inch from my nose.

“A wisp!” I whispered, sitting up. My heart beat hard. *Finally.* This wisp was going to show me how to save my mom.

Then, to my absolute astonishment, the wisp looked up at me, opened its mouth that I didn’t know it had, and spoke.

*“Turn around and go back.”*

**Episode 345**

XAVIER

I stared blankly at the severed head dangling from Gabriel’s hand. Blood dripped steadily from the rough stump of the neck, making a small puddle on the ground near Gabriel’s worn black boots.

“What the *fuck* did you do?” I finally managed. “We’re supposed to be keeping a fucking low profile, man! I don’t know if you know this, but cutting people’s heads off doesn’t exactly fit that bill.”

Gabriel chuckled and gave the head a little shake. “Well, lucky for us, my new friend wasn’t exactly a person.” He stepped past me into the room. “We should eat our burgers and hit the road,” he said, tossing the brown paper bag of food onto the small table.

I cast one last look at the puddle of blood on the sidewalk outside, then followed him into the room and shut the door. “We’re not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell is going on.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Come on, Xavier. Chill out.”

“Did you just tell me to *chill out?*” I asked, incredulous. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” I shook my head. This whole project was starting to feel like a huge mistake. “How am I supposed to trust your judgement, man? First the bikers, and now this? Whatever the hell *this* is.”

Gabriel took a giant bite of his burger, ketchup spilling onto the waxed paper. “You’re losing your touch and getting soft, dude,” he said around the food in his mouth. “Can’t you smell it?”

“All I smell is this nasty motel room and the pickles on your burger,” I snapped.

This made Gabriel laugh. “The demon, Xavier. You can’t smell it?” He reached past his fries and grabbed the head off the table. He held it up by its stringy black hair. “He’s a demon. Or *was*, I guess.”

Brought up short, I stared at the head swinging from Gabriel’s grip. Was it a demon? Could I really not smell it? *Was* I losing my touch? I concentrated hard and took a deep breath. *There*. There it was. Past the old cigarette smoke from the carpeting and the grease from the burgers, I could smell the flat, rotting stench of the demon. “I can smell it,” I admitted, annoyed that I hadn’t smelled it right away. Now that I’d finally noticed it, it was all I could smell. “So explain to me why you brought back the souvenir?”

Shrugging, Gabriel dropped the head back onto the table. It landed with a wet thump. “I had a contract to take care of this guy. He was super bad, even by demon standards.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Gabriel shook his head, looking uncharacteristically sober. “Trust me, man, you don’t want the details.”

There was something in his eyes that told me this was probably true. Frustrated, I turned and paced the length of the room. “That still doesn’t explain why you brought his fucking head with you.”

Gabriel took another bite of his burger and grinned at me. “You’ve got to see the big picture.” He picked up a french fry and used it to point at the greying head. “He’s our ticket in.”

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When we reached the gravel drive, I killed the engine and swung myself off my bike. Gabriel pulled up next to me and hopped off, swinging the sack containing the demon head casually over his shoulder. He stepped up next to me, and together we looked up at the rundown warehouse. It sat alone on a large plot of land, fenced in on all sides.

“Guess they don’t want visitors,” I muttered, my eyes on the razor wire that topped the fences.

Gabriel laughed.

There didn’t seem to be anyone around, but there was a collection of luxury cars and motorcycles parked next to the warehouse’s loading dock. My eyes skimmed over the sexy lines of a candy-apple-red Lamborghini and a shining black Yamaha Road Star. I was no stranger to luxury, but this was something else.

“So, explain the head to me again,” I said, keeping my voice low and my eyes on the warehouse entrance.

Gabriel grinned and held up the burlap sack. “This fella was a very special little demon.”

“How so?” I asked. “Apart from the shit haircut?”

“He happened to be the sworn enemy of our actual target.”

“*And?*” I prompted.

“*And*, when we present our little gift, we’ll win big points with the target. We’ll win his trust.”

I snorted. “And why do we need that asshole to trust us?”

Gabriel shook his head. “Trust is everything. We get his trust, we get access to him. We get access, we get a chance to finish him off. *Voila*.”

I rubbed a hand across my eyes. I’d have preferred a more direct approach, but this roundabout, backdoor approach was classic Gabriel. He’d always had a taste for more… adventurous methods. Over the years, a few of them had worked, a few had gotten us into a hell of a lot of trouble, and most of them had been pretty damn fun.

And, while walking right into the target’s home turf didn’t seem like the wisest of choices, I couldn’t help but feel the old buzz of excitement. It was nice to be in the game again.

“Okay,” I said bracingly. “Let’s do it.”

As we approached the warehouse entrance, a burly man as wide as I was tall appeared from behind the door. He had the build and the steely glare of a bouncer. He watched us get closer, his face expressionless.

“What do you want?” he demanded. “Who invited you?”

“We’re here to see the Milkman,” Gabriel said.

The bouncer looked us over, his black eyes cold. “That so?”

“We have a gift for him,” Gabriel said, holding up the bag. “A little early birthday present.”

The bouncer’s eyes flitted from Gabriel’s smirking face to the blood-stained bag. Something must have impressed him, because he stepped back, pushing the door open with a ham-sized fist.

“Brilliant,” Gabriel said, strolling through the door.

I walked in after him, but I could feel the eyes of the bouncer following me as I stepped into the warehouse. There was a distant part of me that kind of wished the bouncer would come after me or try to stop us. A guy like that… Well, it would have been fun to take him down. But all those thoughts disappeared as we entered the warehouse

I’d been expecting an actual warehouse—boxes, crates, maybe a workshop or something. But this was more like a club. There was house music playing, a bass beat thumping. People were walking around the space, most of them tough-looking dudes. There were tables set up near the back with groups of people—more tough-looking guys and a few women in short dresses—gathered around, drinking and playing cards. I scanned the crowd of people, taking in the faces.

“Which one’s the Milkman?” I asked Gabriel, keeping my voice low.

Gabriel tipped his chin toward a pale man. He was sitting on a chair placed on a raised platform, like a small stage. There were guards on either side of the platform, like he was the fucking president or something. I looked at the small man, sizing him up. “You sure that’s him?” I asked.

Gabriel nodded, his daredevil grin in place. “That’s him.”

It was hard to believe this was the guy we were looking for. This glass of spoiled milk was the murderous, child-trafficking demon Gabriel had been hunting? I guess it took all types.

Before I could stop him, or even ask what the fuck he thought he was doing, Gabriel strutted toward the platform.

The Milkman looked away from the tables and toward Gabriel as he drew close. “Gabriel!” His voice was thin and strangely high-pitched. “What in the world are you doing here?”

Gabriel didn’t answer, but his grin ratcheted up. He held the bag aloft and then dropped it onto the raised platform. It landed with a sickeningly squishy thud and the head rolled away from the burlap, stopping right at the Milkman’s feet.

The Milkman and his guards looked down at it, transfixed. Everyone at the tables had stopped talking. A tense silence fell over the space. I’d just crouched down, ready to shift and pounce, when the Milkman looked up, his watery eyes shining.

“You got Triple X Bob?” he cried, clapping his hands.

Gabriel shrugged. “Are you kidding? Of course we did.”

“*Oh*,” he breathed, picking up the head and looking at it, his eyes filled with admiration, “I *love* it, Gabriel. I was just saying the other day that no one brings me gifts anymore. Wasn’t I just saying that, Rocco?” he asked the bodyguard on the right.

Rocco, a beefy man in a black T-shirt, nodded. “He was just saying that.”

“Oh Gabriel,” the Milkman said, turning his shining eyes to Gabriel. “You have been so lovely to me. What can I do for you?”

Gabriel looked back and motioned me forward. When I stopped next to him, he threw an arm around my neck and grinned up at the Milkman. “We’re here to play.”

**Episode 346**

Had that wisp just *threatened* me? I stared at the golden light hovering just above my face. This couldn’t be normal wisp behavior. They were mischievous, but were they dangerous? I’d never been this close to a wisp before, never seen one so clearly. Maybe this wasn’t a wisp at all. Maybe this was a dream. Maybe I was hallucinating.

“*This is not a dream, Calliope.*”

My brows drew together in confusion. “You’ve got the wrong number, Tinkerbell. My name’s Caliana.”

The little voice was high pitched but deadly serious. “*We do not make mistakes. We know your name, Calliope.*”She shook her tiny head.“*But do not tell it to anyone else!*”

“What?” I whispered.

“*Get out, Calliope! You shouldn’t be here!*”

I leaned forward, closer to the wisp, irritated now. “I’m not going *anywhere* until I find a way to save my mother.”

The wisp zoomed a couple of feet up, then back down, as if in frustration. “*Calliope won’t be able to save anyone if she is dead.*”

Confused, I watched the golden whisper of light zoom back and forth. “Why are you trying to scare me? I’m Fae. This is my world, too.”

The wisp gave a tiny, irritated, snort. “*You are part human. You do not belong here.*”

I looked around. I was deep in the forest, freezing, snuggling with a werewolf. And now, to top it all off, I was being harassed by a golf ball of glowing light.

“Listen,” I snapped, “I’m not planning on buying real estate here, okay? I’ll leave as soon as I can, but not until I’ve found what I came for. Either help me, or leave me alone.”

I glanced back at Greyson, but he hadn’t moved. Even if he couldn’t hear the wisp, I wasn’t bothering to keep my voice down—why wasn’t he reacting to any of this?

“*You were warned,*” the wisp said threateningly. It hovered in front of my face for a moment more, then flew up and forward, fading quickly into the cool, thick darkness of the forest.

*Follow it,* a voice in my mind called. *See where it leads you*. But I didn’t follow it. I stayed still. I was so tired and cold, and Greyson was so warm and comfortable, that I just couldn’t bring myself to stand. I lay back down and, after watching the forest for a moment more, my eyes fell shut once again.

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The ground was hard beneath me when I woke, but Greyson was warm and I pressed back into him, drawing his arms more tightly around me.

Wait a minute.

*Arms?*

I opened my eyes and looked down. Yeah, his arms. His regular, human arms. No wolf paws or fur or claws in sight. He’d shifted back to his human form at some point during the night. I reached back to touch him—to double check—and all I felt was skin. Smooth, warm skin.

Spooning all night with Greyson’s wolf form was intimate in its own way, but it sure felt a hell of a lot different to find myself spooning with Greyson—warm, *naked*, human Greyson. My mind fluttered back to the motel room. We’d been so close then too…

My heart beat a funny pattern as my mind, still sleep muddled, tried to decide what to do. I *should* get up, I knew this. I should do… *something*. But he was so warm, his skin so soft, his body so muscled. And he was so, *so* naked.

Behind me, Greyson stirred, and I felt a sleepy sigh rumble through his chest where it was pressed against my back. “Good morning, love,” he murmured. “Were you warm enough last night?”

There was something about his voice that unwound the knotty thoughts in my head, and I relaxed into him. “Yeah, I was. Thanks to you.”

He sighed in response and ran his fingers lightly up and down my arm.

*Was this a dream?* I’d had enough dreams about Greyson to be wary, and I did a quick check on my consciousness. I could feel hard, cold ground beneath me, and that seemed real. I could smell the wet earth around me. That seemed real. And, more than anything else, I could feel every inch of Greyson pressed against me. Every. Inch. And that seemed pretty fucking real, too.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, I turned to face him.

His grey eyes were half-closed and heavy-lidded with sleep, but they ranged over my face. When he met my eyes, he gave me a small, intimate smile I’d never seen before. “You’re something else, Cali.”

My breath hitched. “Am I?”

He nodded. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

Heat rushed to my face and I felt my pulse quicken. My eyes dropped to his mouth—to his lips, still sulky with sleep. In my head, there was a distant warning to resist, but it was easily ignorable. It was so far away, and Greyson was so, so close. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

A bolt of sensation vibrated through my body as his lips responded to mine.

*Is this wrong?*

An instant later, however, those questions were wiped from my brain, along with every other conscious thought. My body hummed next to Greyson’s and everything was replaced with a wide, gaping hunger for more.

More Greyson. Without stopping.

He pressed his tongue to the seam of my lips, and they parted willingly, anxious for more. His tongue ran the length of mine, exploring with a leisure our previous rushed, furtive kisses had never allowed. It was almost maddeningly slow.

My hands were everywhere on him, mapping the landscape of his naked body. My hands ran the length of his hip over and over, marveling at the meeting of muscle and bone. As I ran my fingernails along the path, he drew away with a hiss.

His face was contorted, like he was in pain. “*Fuck*, Cali.” He breathed hard, his nostrils flaring, obviously trying to get control again. “That’s almost too much, love.”

His words washed over me, but the look on his face—pure, hungry pleasure—nearly did me in. I gripped his waist and kissed him, hard.

He responded in kind and pulled me closer still, dragging me beneath him. One hand was braced next to my shoulder, but the other moved down, exploring. His fingers counted down the bones of my ribcage until he reached my belly, then they dipped beneath my shirt, playing softly across the sensitive skin of my stomach.

Shivering beneath his touch, I pulled him down on top of me, wanting more of him on me. He wasn’t close enough. Not nearly. I couldn’t shake the dream-like quality of this moment, and I wanted the solid weight of him pressing me into the earth to prove me wrong.

His kiss moved away from my mouth and tracked along my jawline until he reached my ear. When he nibbled my earlobe, I nearly cried with the pleasure of it. His hand traced up the center of my belly and he ran this thumb under the curve of my breast, making me gasp. It was a barrage of sensations and I was barely keeping up, but it felt *so* good. Everything felt good and right and I wanted more, more, *more*.

“Why did this take us so long?” I murmured, dragging my nails lightly up his back. “Why are my clothes still on?”

Greyson’s response was a low chuckle. “Patience, love,” he said, and he moved back to my mouth, claiming me with a deep kiss that seemed to come from the depths of his soul. I moaned into his mouth, pressing my hips up toward his—*greedy*.

My hand was moving down to cup around his perfect ass when I heard voices.

We broke away from each other, looking around, alarmed.

“What the fuck is that?” Greyson growled.

There was more than one voice. And there were booted feet, too. Running along the forest floor, crunching the underbrush. They weren’t taking any pains to be quiet and—worst of all—they were getting closer.

*Turn around and go back. Get out! You shouldn’t be here!*

That was what the wisp had told me. Was *this* what she’d been warning me about? Should I have listened to her? Was there someone coming for us? For *me?*

I sat up, scanning the trees, every sense on high alert.

A tiny breeze stirred the leaves above us. A ladybug scurried away as Greyson sat up next to me. The bird singing in the tree behind us quieted as the voices grew nearer still.

The energy I’d felt when we first entered this strange world was back—in full force—and I was ready to use it. I could feel its power surging within me.

Two figures emerged from the thicket of trees to our right. They were dressed like medieval knights and—my stomach tightened—carrying swords.

They moved toward us as a unit and, without thinking, I jumped to my feet and stood in front of Greyson, blocking him from their advance.

**Episode 347**

Everything about the moment reminded me of the Renaissance faire. But, I reminded myself, that *wasn’t* what this was. The faire had been strange and scary in its own way, but funny and silly, too. That had been nothing but humans dressing up as book characters. Aside from a single vampire, there had been few real threats there.

But here… Here, *everything* felt like a very real threat. This was no Renaissance faire with fake knights and kings. This was much more dangerous.

Greyson jumped up next to me, naked as the day he was born. I watched the swordsmen pull to a stop. They stared at him for a moment, then exchanged uneasy glances.

The moment stretched, tense and uncertain. Were they stopping because of Greyson’s general hulk and threatening gaze, or was it because I was standing—fully dressed—with a stark-naked man? Either seemed possible. Both scenarios would’ve been enough to stop most people in their tracks, but this was an unknown world.

“What are you doing here?” one of the swordsmen barked, recovering himself.

“And why is he so… *unclothed*?” the other asked, pointing his sword at Greyson.

“For god’s sake,” I hissed at Greyson. “Put some clothes on!”

“Cali—”

“I’ve got this,” I said in a low undertone.

“You’re trespassing,” the first swordsman stated, and he and his companion both raised their swords threateningly. “You have no right to be here.”

“I can explain,” I said, trying to make my tone easy and non-threatening. I gave them what I hoped was my most winning smile and took a step toward them. A shaft of light filtered down through the trees and, as I stepped into its beam, it caught the pendant around my neck and the light reflected like a searchlight into the faces of the swordsmen.

Their eyes went wide at the sight of it. One swore under his breath and took a step back. They looked at each other, then dropped to their knees, heads bowed.

I stared at them in stunned surprise. What the hell had just happened?

“We are sorry, your ladyship,” the first swordsman said, his eyes downcast. “We did not realize who you were.”

“Please, your ladyship, do not seek to punish us too harshly,” the other one added.

I looked back at Greyson questioningly, but he just shrugged, looking as baffled as I felt.

“Why are you kneeling?” he asked the men, pulling on his jeans.

The first swordsman, the leader of the two, maybe, finally lifted his eyes. “My lady,” he said, addressing me. “Why are you out here, without protection?”

“I’m her protection,” Greyson growled, stepping up next to me, finally fully clothed. His body tensed, like he was preparing to attack.

Something told me these two were not a threat, so I put a hand on Greyson’s arm. “Relax.”

The eyes of the two swordsmen went to my hand on Greyson, then they gave each other a speaking look.

I dropped my hand to my side. Whoever these two thought I was, it was clear that they now thought I was sleeping with my guard. Which wasn’t NOT what I’d just been trying to do, to be fair. But it was a little more complicated than that… I cleared my throat, trying to salvage the situation. “What are *you* doing here?”

“We’re out on our rounds,” the second man told me, though his eyes darted away from mine, clearly uncomfortable.

“We certainly didn’t mean to intrude,” the first one said. “But perhaps you should go back to the village. It’s not safe to be out here, in the open.”

A wild thought occurred to me and, lacking other options, I ran with it. I drew myself up as regally as I could. “If it’s not safe, perhaps you will escort us back.”

The effect of my words was instantaneous: both swordsmen looked unspeakably relieved, and they sheathed their swords.

“Of course, my lady,” the first said, putting his hand to his heart and bowing his head. “We would be honored.”

“Just this way,” the second one said, pointing back the way they’d come.

“Well played, love,” Greyson said, leaning in to speak into my ear.

I grinned as I turned to grab my bag. I *had* played that well. And now, maybe these two would lead me to the answers I was looking for.

Together, Greyson and I followed the swordsmen out of the clearing, away from the stream and deeper into the forest. Greyson continued to mark the path as we walked, rubbing his arm on trees as we passed. When I glanced at him, he gave me a grave nod, and I understood what he was doing. Whatever happened, we’d still need to find our way back to the Haystack Rock portal eventually.

“Keep your eyes open,” he breathed, keeping his eyes trained on the guards. “And trust no one. The Fae love their tricks.”

We walked for what felt like an hour, though it could have been less. With no sun to watch, time confounded me here. Finally, we found ourselves on a well-worn path that morphed into a gravel road as it emerged from the forest. Ahead of us, a town appeared, and in the distance, I could see the roofs of small houses and buildings. This had to be the village they’d spoken of.

As we walked closer, we passed what looked like a small market. There was a knot of people clustered around a wooden stall selling herbs and roots, and they all looked at us as we passed. I could feel their curious eyes on me as we walked on and, distantly, the murmur of their hushed discussion.

Were they curious simply because we were new faces, or was it the honor guard jogging ahead of us that had caught their attention? I looked around as we approached the village. There were cottages lining each side of the path. Each had a little garden in front of it. Grass and wildflowers grew in tidy lines in some, and in a riot of color in others. I looked at each, curiosity burning within me. What would life be like in a Fae village? Was it like growing up in a small town, like what I’d experienced in Minnesota? Did everyone know everyone else?

I looked at the inquisitive faces peeping out at us through windows as we passed. Were some of these Fae children? Did they go to school? Did they have junior proms? Did they get crushes on the wrong Fae boys? Were there Fae bars? Fae shopping malls?

I had nothing but questions as I walked next to Greyson. As we walked on, cottage doors began to open and people stepped out to get a better look at us. The women were beautiful—every one of them—and dressed in long, colorful dresses. The men—stunning in their own right—wore pants and shirts in every color of the rainbow. And every single face was wide-eyed as they watched us pass.

Whoever they thought I was, it had to be someone important. I could tell from the nervous way the swordsmen kept looking back at me. But who was it? Who did they think I was?

We moved out of the cottages and into what looked like the downtown of the village. There was a little shop, like a general store, with pictures of vegetables carved into a wooden sign over the building. Next to that were a cobbler shop and a dress shop. There seemed to be no movie theatre, so that answered my question about Fae film.

When we reached a pair of tall, intricately carved wooden gates, the guards turned to look at me, their expressions satisfied, as if they were grateful we’d arrived at our destination in one piece. I looked above them and gasped. Beyond the gate, a graceful palace rose from a beautifully landscaped park. It was made of white stone, and it glittered in the strange light that suffused the Fae world.

“We are sorry for the misunderstanding, my lady,” the first guard said, bowing low. “And we are grateful that you have given us the honor of accompanying you this far.”

“My lady,” the second guard said, bowing low.

Then both turned sharply and walked away.

I wanted to call after them, to ask them what this place was and why they’d brought me here, but I stopped myself. They assumed I knew, of course.

Turning back to the gates, I looked up at the palace once more. “What the hell do I do now?” I asked myself.

There seemed to be no answer in sight, and I was on the verge of swallowing my pride and calling the guards back when something caught my eye.

It was the crest on the very top of the gate. I took a step backward, craning my neck to stare up at it, trying to make sure I was looking at what I thought I was looking at.

“What is this place?” Greyson asked in wonder, looking up at the palace.

I reached down for the pendant around my neck—the one that bore the same crest that was emblazoned on the gate. “I think it’s my family home.”

**Episode 348**

I stared at the gate, my heart racing. Was this it? Was this where my mother grew up? Was this where her parents lived? My *grandparents?*

My mom had told me she’d been banished for leaving—for the unforgivable sin of falling in love with a human. I swallowed, hard.

“Are you going to go in?” Greyson asked.

“Yes. This is what I came here for.” I paused. “I think.”

Taking a deep breath, I pushed at the heavy wooden gates, which swung open at my touch. There was a long gravel road leading to the palace, like the one in the village. Except this one wasn’t paved with charcoal-grey gravel—this gravel was pure white and, like the stone of the palace, sparkled like diamonds. There were grassy fields on either side of the pathway, and the grass grew tall and silky and swayed in the light breeze. It was so beautiful it was nearly painful, and I strained my eyes trying to drink everything in.

We reached the massive oak doors faster than I would have thought possible, but maybe I was just worried about what came next. The doors were about ten feet tall, and the familiar swirling crest was engraved on each of them. I stopped in front of them. Should I knock? Was there a doorbell? The crest on the doors felt as familiar as my right hand, but it didn’t seem right to just walk in.

The problem was solved for me when the doors swung open. Startled out of my thoughts, I jumped. Greyson put a steadying hand on my arm and, together, we stepped inside.

The hall beyond the door was *massive*. The floors and walls were white stone, marbled with a silver grey that shone like stars. The ceiling, made from the same stone, sailed high overhead, at least thirty feet above us. The place was quiet, and our footsteps echoed until we stepped onto the long rug that ran the length of the enormous hall. It was silver and embroidered like a tapestry, depicting what might have been a coronation. A beautiful white woman wearing a long blue dress stood before a kneeling man, his eyes downcast. She was holding a crown in her hands, and appeared to be about to place it on his head. The scene was arresting, but what caught my eye was the audience depicted beyond. There was a young girl illustrated there who looked astonishingly like my mother. *Was it actually her?*

I tore myself away from the scene and glanced at Greyson, who was looking around in wide-eyed wonder. I followed his line of sight to the magnificent grand staircase just before us. The steps were white marble, and the banisters shone like polished silver. The stairs soared upward to a stone plateau, then branched off in two directions, leading to the upper floors. It was the kind of staircase I’d always seen in my mind’s eye whenever my mom read me the story of Cinderella. I could practically see the princess hurrying down these magnificent steps, leaving a shoe behind in her haste. The whole place felt like that; like stepping into a fairytale.

But *this*, I reminded myself, was real.

There were doors ranging all along the main hallway, and I looked over as one opened. A woman stepped through—a beautiful, willowy woman with dark hair that fell to her shoulders in tight ringlets and white, porcelain skin—and walked toward us.

“Welcome,” she said softly. Her smile showed a row of perfectly white teeth. She waved for us to follow. “Just this way.”

I looked over at Greyson, who shrugged. Lacking a better plan, I followed the Fae deeper into the entrance hall. We walked past the staircase and then dozens of doors, all of them closed tightly.

“Where are we going?” I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

She smiled again. “I’m taking you to where you need to be.”

My heart beat harder.

She turned down a hall beneath the staircase that stretched on, far past the line of my vision. And then she stopped before an ornately carved wooden door. “You’ll find her in there. She’s expecting you.”

My stomach tightened. “Who?”

The beautiful Fae smiled her dazzling smile and walked away, leaving Greyson and me staring after her.

“*Who’s* expecting me?” I called, though I didn’t really expect her to answer. I turned to Greyson. “I can’t make any sense of this. *I* didn’t even know I was coming here. How can anyone be expecting me?”

“I don’t know,” Greyson said, eyeing the door warily.

“Could it be my grandmother?” I asked, and the word felt strange in my mouth.

Greyson shrugged again, clueless. I looked around. On the wall opposite us was another tapestry, this one depicting some kind of festival. Children dotted the scene, and happy adults were handing them fruit from baskets. In the center of the scene a knot of young girls held hands, dancing and laughing.

Was this where my mother had grown up? What must it have been like to be surrounded by such history and beauty? It made sense though, if I thought about it. My mother had always seemed a little… different. Not of our world. I remembered watching people staring after her as she walked through the supermarket, looking at her like she was a celebrity they didn’t dare approach. It didn’t matter where she was—she moved through every situation with poise and grace. *Like a princess*, I’d always thought. I shivered, thinking how close to truth I’d been.

“Are you okay?’ Greyson asked, his voice tight with worry.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” I said, looking down the length of the hall.

“I guess,” Greyson said gruffly.

“You *guess?*” I asked, surprised.

He shook his head. “I don’t like it here.”

“Why not?” I asked, baffled.

“It doesn’t feel safe.”

I stared at him. “What are you talking about? Look at this place. It’s beautiful.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s not dangerous,” Greyson growled. “You just need to keep your eyes open, Cali. I can’t protect you here—not against the Fae. I don’t have enough experience fighting them. You have to be careful.”

His eyes were everywhere, like he was trying to ferret out the hidden dangers, so I stepped in front of him and stared until he met my eyes.

“I’m not afraid,” I said boldly. “And I don’t want you to be, either.”

Greyson looked at me for a long moment, then looked up as the door before us swung open.

I glanced at it over my shoulder, then up at Greyson. “Let’s do this.”

He nodded and, together, we stepped through the door.

But as soon as we crossed the threshold, there was a roar of protest and six sword-wielding guards surged toward us.

“*STOP!*” they thundered.

I gasped and drew back. “What the hell? What are you doing? We were *brought* here! She told us to come in!”

“Seize him!” a guard yelled, breathlessly, coming to a stop before us. He grabbed Greyson roughly by the arm.

“What?” I cried out.

Greyson shook his arm free from the guard’s grasp. “Keep your fucking hands off me.” He stepped in front of me. “And don’t you dare lay a hand on her.”

The threat in Greyson’s growling voice could only mean one thing, and my heart thudded at the thought.

“We are warning you,” the first guard said, pulling his sword from its scabbard. “We don’t want any trouble.”

Greyson advanced on the guard, batting the sword out of his hand and sending it clattering across the stone floor. “And *I’m* warning *you*. Back the hell off.”

The five other guards drew their swords but, as they surged forward, Greyson shifted.

“Oh my god,” I gasped, instinctively stepping back. “Greyson—”

But it was too late. He’d shifted and dropped down to four paws, his growls echoing off the polished floor, making them sound twice as loud and twice as terrifying. The guards looked terrified, but quickly gathered themselves and advanced forward.

Greyson leapt in front of me, knocking down a guard in the process. He fell hard, his sword clattering to the ground. Greyson reared back just as a pair of guards advanced, trying to slash at his vulnerable underbelly.

“Greyson, *watch out!*” I screamed.

He dropped back to the floor and lunged, but the first guard—the one who’d lost his sword—grabbed onto Greyson’s silver fur. Then, the guard who’d been knocked to the ground scrambled up and placed his hand on Greyson’s back. Greyson fell to the floor. Quickly, guards began to pile on him.

“*Stop!*” I screamed. “You’re hurting him!”

“Silence her!” the first guard yelled, and two more rushed forward, pulling lengths of thin silver rope from their uniform pockets. Greyson reared up, shaking them, but they piled on again.

*I don’t want you to get hurt, love.* Greyson’s voice entered my thoughts. *Get out,* now*!*

I watched as Greyson stood his ground, the guards circling up on him, the rope around his shoulders, his legs. He fell down to the ground.

*What?! What are you doing?* I thought franticly. Was he letting them take him?! Why?

“Stop!” I shouted, running after them.

The guards began to drag Greyson from the room, slamming the door behind them. I stood alone, tears streaming down my face, my heart racing. What were they going to do to Greyson? I turned and looked around the massive room, large as a ballroom. What were they going to do to *me?*

I spun on my heel and wrenched the door open. I had to find Greyson. I had to get him out of here.

But as I stepped out of the room, the Fae with the ringlets stepped in front of me. She was holding a knife. *Shit.* “You should not leave. She is expecting you.”

“*Who?*” I demanded. “*Who* is expecting me?”

The Fae, calm as ever, pointed over my shoulder.

I wheeled around and there, standing in the middle of the room, was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She had grey hair that hung down her back, shining like silver. Her light blue eyes seemed to glow from within. Everything about her, from the way she stood to the graceful lines of the wrinkles on her face, was regal and queenly. Even the air around her seemed different, almost shimmering.

She fixed me with a piercing stare. “Who are you, and what are you doing with my daughter’s necklace?”

**Episode 349**

The woman I was staring at—well, okay, *gaping* at like an idiot—looked exactly like my mom. But I knew I couldn’t let the striking resemblance throw me off. This was the woman who’d abandoned her own daughter, who’d abandoned my mother.

But still, it was bizarre seeing her here, this carbon copy of my mom in a magical setting. Well, almost a carbon copy. These days, my mother was paler and skinnier, and had dark bags under her eyes. And I was looking at the root of her illness right now. The woman who’d banished her because she’d chosen to love someone outside this world.

And for that, I wouldn’t let myself trust her. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

“Where’s Greyson?” I stuck my chin out, defiant. “The man—the wolf—I came in with. I won’t answer any questions until I know he’s safe.”

I felt worry coiling in my chest, like a boa constrictor crushing my heart. Why had Greyson stopped fighting? Had it been to keep me safe? Or because he’d known it would be no use?

“You’re hardly in a position to bargain.” Her voice was cold and regal. “You have come to my home and you will abide by my rules. Now answer me—where did you get that necklace?”

*My mother gave it to me. You remember her, right? Your daughter. The woman you sent away and condemned to die because she didn’t follow your rules? Well, would you consider changing your mind completely and helping me save her life? And as a family favor, could you give me back my werewolf friend?*

Something told me that laying out all my cards would be the wrong move. But I had to say something.

“I’m not telling you a thing until you bring Greyson back.” I held my ground, hoping it was the right decision. If I budged now, she’d think I was a pushover. Maybe, if I was smart, I could at least convince her that Greyson meant no harm.

“Werewolves are not welcome here.” She grimaced as if the very word ‘werewolf’ offended her. “Nor are they welcome anywhere in the Fae world. He broke our rules by coming here, and if you brought him here, that means you are in violation as well. But if you cooperate…”

She let herself trail off so her vague threat could blossom in my mind. If I hadn’t already been intimidated by her, I definitely would have been now. I shifted uncomfortably under her gaze, now understanding why my mother didn’t want to come back to her family—not if this was the kind of welcome she could expect.

It was clear I had to answer her question. But what if I told her the truth and she killed me for being a cruel reminder of her daughter? Or for being a half-Fae abomination? Or whatever other crazy prejudiced nonsense she might spout? The truth was off the table, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t give her an answer.

“The necklace was a gift,” I answered cautiously.

The woman approached me, her dress rippling out behind her like water. Just like my mother, she was strikingly beautiful. But where my mom had always been soft and warm, this woman was hard. Angular. Cold.

Her eyes flitted between the necklace and my face. I tried to compose my expression, going for ‘respectful but not to be messed with.’ But I had no idea if I was pulling it off. For a moment, her gaze softened as she looked at the necklace.

And in that fraction of a second, she *was* my mother. And it took my breath away, how much I missed her. How much I would do—and had done—to save her. In that second, there wasn’t a thing I wouldn’t give if it meant I could be six years old again and in my mother’s arms. I could practically feel her arms around me, smell her hair, hear her singing to me like she used to when I was little…

Before I knew it, the woman was looking at me again, and I remembered where I was. I blinked away my tears, not wanting her to see my moment of weakness. She surveyed me carefully, her eyes hard and her mouth in a tight line.

“A gift,” she repeated. “I wonder if that’s true. Perhaps you’re a thief *and* a liar.”

Scared and pissed off, I clutched the pendant. My mother had given it to me. It was mine. I squeezed it in my fist, letting the cool metal poke into my hand and distract me from all the panicked thoughts racing through my brain.

Who was she to accuse me of stealing?

She’d stolen my mother’s life. Her health. Her time.

“I am not a thief,” I told her through clenched teeth.

“And do you have a name, *thief*?” she asked, mocking me further.

I remembered that the Fae were protective of their names. I wondered if she was testing me. Trying to prove that I was an outsider. So I answered her question with another.

“What’s yours?” I asked, squaring my shoulders.

“What do you think you’re doing here, showing up in the Fae world with a werewolf?” she asked, her tone growing impatient as she ignored my question—just as I’d ignored hers.

“Tell me where you took Greyson,” I demanded.

I knew I wasn’t in a position to negotiate, but I had to try. I couldn’t let him get hurt for helping me. Especially after things had finally started to thaw between us.

I remembered the way he’d held me when he’d kissed me. That had only been hours ago. I couldn’t lose him like this.

“He’ll be dealt with in the manner we deal with all werewolves.” Her voice was like ice.

Something told me they didn’t immediately provide werewolf guests with champagne and send them right to the fantasy suite. I wondered what exactly she meant when she said ‘dealt with.’ But I didn’t want to let her know she’d rattled me.

“If you are not going to answer any questions,” the woman said, looking down her nose at me, “then you are welcome to leave.”

“I told you,” I insisted. “I’m not going anywhere without Grey—”

A tall, burly guard appeared at my right shoulder and wrapped his hand around my arm. I struggled, trying to break free. But even though his grip wasn’t firm, I couldn’t shake him.

He pulled me away and out, not even looking at me. I stumbled along, trying to stand my ground but also not wanting to faceplant.

“This isn’t over!” I shouted over my shoulder. “I won’t give up until Greyson is free!”

The woman smirked, clearly finding me amusing.

“I appreciate your spirit,” she said dryly. “I look forward to seeing you try… whatever it is you plan on doing.”

And with that, she turned to leave. I continued to hobble out of the room alongside the guard, back through the hall, and out of the palace.

Once we reached the threshold, the guard finally turned to me and spoke.

“You should consider yourself lucky, miss,” he told me. “Unwanted guests are rarely, if ever, allowed to leave.”

I opened my mouth to ask what usually happened to them, but before I could he shoved me square in the chest and slammed the door shut.

“What the—” I spluttered, just barely saving myself from falling into the mud.

I ran up to the door and pounded on it until my hands ached. I yelled and threatened, not knowing what else to do. But after a solid minute, I gave up. It was no use.

I took a few steps back from the palace, craning my neck to take it all in. It was huge, a fortress. I wasn’t getting back in unless I was invited.

My mind raced.

What was happening to Greyson? How was he being ‘dealt with’? Was there still time to rescue him? And if there was, how would I even do it?

I paced, glancing up at the palace every now and then.

Could I climb through a window? But the windows were too high to reach. Plus, I didn’t even know where Greyson was being kept. So getting back into the castle would just have to be part one of a multi-part werewolf heist.

I took a breath and closed my eyes, trying to focus.

He was still here. I could feel it. I could just tell.

I wished I could send him a message. Let him know that I was here, that I wasn’t going to give up on him. That I’d do whatever I could to save him.

I felt a prickling at the back of my neck. Someone was approaching me from behind. I tensed, knowing that couldn’t be good. But it would be better to get the drop on them than just stand here waiting to be attacked.

I spun around and bumped right into a tall, muscular man with a menacing look in his eyes.

“Back off,” I growled at him. “I’ve had a *day*, and I’m in no mood to deal with jerks. I have had it up to here with feeling threatened, so steer fucking clear.”

I shoved him for good measure, hoping that this would be enough to scare him off.

Instead, he reached out lightning quick and grabbed my wrist, looking me dead in the eye.

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

**Episode 350**

I pulled my hand free of the tall man’s grasp, my heart racing with fear and anger. Was it not enough that I’d been kicked out of a Grand Fae estate and separated from Greyson? Now I had to deal with this guy? Why couldn’t anything I do be—not even *easy*, just less fucking hard?

And what the hell did it matter to this guy if I was here, anyway?

I took him in. He was dressed in a relatively normal-looking pair of brown pants, dark worn boots, and a black leather vest over his white shirt. His hair was unkempt but not dirty, and he looked like he hadn’t shaved in a few days. His hands were rough and calloused, so it was clear he did some form of manual labor for a living. But beyond that, I couldn’t tell.

Why would he tell me I shouldn’t have come here? Why would he grab me? This seemed like pretty typical shady dude behavior. And shady dudes could smell fear. So I had to be brave.

“Yeah,” I scoffed. “I got the impression I wasn’t welcome here. But I don’t scare easily, so I’m gonna hang around for a while. Does that offend you?”

The man eyed me closely, clearly wary. I wondered why. He was the huge one.

“You’re the one who brought the werewolf.”

It wasn’t a question. It seemed news traveled fast in the Fae world.

“Yeah, I did,” I admitted, taking a small step back to put some more distance between us. I looked at his long, thick arms and knew I was still within snatching distance. I had to be slow and deliberate.

I wondered if the hatred for werewolves was so bad around here that the people would want to punish me just for being associated with one. Had Greyson known this place was going to be so dangerous for him? And could I have stopped him from joining me if I’d known?

But rather than threaten to burn me at the stake for bringing a wolf into their midst, the stranger’s eyes lit up and he gave me a crooked smile.

“I knew it! How’d you manage that?” he asked, clearly thrilled. “Werewolves are dangerous, and yet you walked right into Wrenthorn’s with one. That takes serious guts!”

My jaw dropped. Who the hell was this guy? Some kind of werewolf fanboy?

“Were you scared?” he asked, voice reverent. “Of the wolf? Weren’t you worried he’d try to eat you? Why didn’t he? Did you use a silver collar or something?”

I paused. This guy seemed weird but harmless. Surely it couldn’t hurt to speak to him. Maybe he’d be able to help me.

“He’s my friend,” I explained. “And—”

“Friend?” His eyes widened as he cut me off. “Friends with a wolf? A little thing like you? That’s incredible!”

I smiled in spite of myself, warmed by his praise. I wasn’t used to getting praise for holding my own with a bunch of wolves. I was used to everyone pointing out everything I’d done wrong. Or always being a million steps behind—which I still was. But this was kind of nice.

“Um, yeah.” I felt myself blush a bit. “I guess it’s cool or whatever. I’m mostly just concerned with getting my friend out of here before they do… whatever it is they do to wolves. They wouldn’t say. Which you know, leads me to believe it’s not good.”

He snorted a goofy little laugh, and I tried not to be annoyed.

“Well, that’s not gonna be easy,” he told me, still wearing that affable smile that made his size look infinitely less menacing.

“Yeah, I already figured that part out myself.” I sighed, trying to be patient. “Do you know what they’ll do to him now that he’s in there? Will they hurt him?”

“Nah, I doubt it.” He shook his head. “Werewolves are a valuable commodity around here.”

I felt a wave of dread wash over me. A commodity? That didn’t sound promising at all. I couldn’t waste any time. I had to get Greyson out of there.

I was in a whole new world. I knew no one, and all I had was a backpack full of clothes and a necklace that seemed to put a target on my back. I was wracking my brain for a way to do this alone, but I couldn’t find one. I needed someone I could trust. But how could I trust anyone in this strange place, full of rules and customs I didn’t know?

“Can you help me?” I asked the stranger, going for broke. Right now, this odd but apparently friendly stranger was looking like my only option. I could always keep an eye out for someone more stable or trustworthy.

He looked me up and down, his lips pursed.

“No one in their right mind would take on the Wrenthorn family,” he mused.

My face fell. If everyone was too scared to help me, I’d fail all on my own and Greyson would die or get turned into a chair or whatever it was they did to wolves.

But then the burly stranger laughed, placing his hands on his round belly as it jiggled.

“But no one’s ever accused me of having more than half a brain anyway.” He showed me that crooked smile again, and I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Then you’ll help me?” I asked, hoping I didn’t sound too desperate. Even though I *was* desperate.

The stranger shrugged.

“I could do with a bit of adventure today,” he told me. “Why not?”

I turned to face the mansion, with its high stone walls and intimidatingly thick door.

“So what do we do?” I asked, looking up at what seemed to be an impenetrable fortress.

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me roughly in the other direction.

“We get some more help,” he explained. “And that help gets us inside, to where they’re keeping your friend. And then, if we’re lucky, we get out alive. Sound good?”

I looked up at him, bewildered, as he led me away. Within moments of meeting me, he’d admitted he wasn’t in his right mind. And now he was taking me to a second location?

“Where are we going?” I asked, trying to keep the worry out of my voice.

“To get help,” he answered. “And food—I’m feeling peckish. Two birds and all that.”

I sighed, realizing I couldn’t really be picky about *how* he helped me. If I was going to get Greyson out of there, I needed an ally. And this was the one the universe had provided me with. So I took my hand back and followed him through the winding cobblestone streets.

I looked around, marveling at the picturesque scenery and saturated colors. It felt like living in a cartoon. A little Disney village, full of squat little shops and houses. It would be incredible if every second I spent here *weren’t* another second Greyson was being imprisoned.

We stopped at a place called The Drunken Unicorn Tavern, if the sign was to be believed. I steeled myself. There was no way this wasn’t going to be weird.

My ally opened the door for me. How chivalrous.

“Whatever you do,” he murmured, “don’t make eye contact with the bartender.”

“Sure thing…” I trailed off, not knowing what to call him. “Could you tell me your name, please?”

He guffawed.

“I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “You can call me Torin.”

“I’m Cali,” I told him, assuming it was okay to share my name if he’d given me his.

“Cali,” he mused, looking at me more carefully. “Good name. Follow me.”

He walked into the tavern, and I ducked in quickly after him. The place was dark, lit only by candles and full of boisterous-looking customers who were whooping and spilling their drinks on the stone floor.

A gruff-looking bartender was filling orders with a distinct lack of customer service. I averted my eyes, not wanting to break the only rule Torin had given me. I wondered what would happen if I did look at him, but maybe it was better not to know.

The deeper we walked into the tavern, the more nervous I started to get. Was I being a complete idiot, following some stranger into a rowdy-looking bar? Without Xavier or Greyson to protect me?

*Greyson.*

I needed to be *his* protector now. I was the one who’d brought him here, even though he’d told me it would be dangerous. And now he’d been captured, and I was his only hope. I couldn’t let him down. So I had to act quickly and be ready for anything.

And if that meant trusting Torin, that was what I’d have to do for now.

Torin steered us toward a table in the back corner.

“Take a seat.” He nodded to the carved wooden chairs. “I can get you some nectar, if you like. I know the bartender looks like a cranky bastard, but he makes a mean elderflower cocktail.”

I shrugged, not sure I really wanted a drink right now. And I really didn’t want to sit alone.

“What are we doing here?” I asked, nerves threatening to eat me alive. “We’re supposed to be freeing my friend.”

“And we will,” Torin assured me. “But first you have to convince Gregg the Giant to help.”

**Episode 351**

XAVIER

What the hell was Gabriel thinking? I knew this all had to be a part of his approach, but I was struggling to catch up. I thought we wanted to get the Milkman alone so we could finish him off without getting his bodyguards involved, but now Gabriel wanted to play poker? With a dangerous fucking human trafficker, in front of his inner circle? What the hell was the upside here?

Gabriel shot me a look, clearly sensing my apprehension. The message was clear: *follow my lead.*

“Let’s play a few hands,” he suggested, affable.

“Sure.” I nodded, playing along even though I hated not knowing exactly what was going on.

We took our seats around the card table, shooting the shit. But I was worried. I’d never liked demons, and now I was sitting in a den full of them. Every instinct told me to get the fuck out of there.

But this was Gabriel’s job, and I’d play by his rules. I tossed down some cash and bought in, glancing at the Milkman as I did. To me, he just looked like your standard paunchy old white guy. It was hard to believe that he was as nasty as Gabriel had said he was.

But I wasn’t going to be fool enough to underestimate him.

The tallest of the crew—a guy I thought I’d heard someone call ‘Slim’—was dealing the cards. I hoped that I wasn’t going to lose too much money on whatever stunt Gabriel had planned. Or that he’d reimburse me for whatever I ended up losing. But I doubted it.

“All right, Gabriel.” The Milkman grinned conspiratorially. “You’re among friends so tell us, how’d you get to Triple X Bob?”

Gabriel smirked at the table, lounging in his chair. He didn’t have to pretend to love being the center of attention. I only hoped he wouldn’t let the Milkman butter him up so much that he made a mistake.

“Come on.” Gabriel laughed, spreading his hands magnanimously. “A magician never reveals his secrets.”

A few of the guys chuckled at Gabriel’s very obvious love for himself. I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help but smile just a bit. Gabriel was made for moments like this—bonding with other guys over cards, steering them just where he wanted them. For now, I was along for the ride.

“But I could be persuaded to disclose a few secrets,” Gabriel added. “In a more private setting.”

The Milkman laughed, a high-pitched giggling wheeze that turned my stomach. I tried not to flinch at the sound, even though it made my blood run cold.

“I like it.” The Milkman clapped his hands in glee. “You don’t let your guard down—that’s smart.”

“And that’s why I always get the job done.” Gabriel grabbed his cards off the table and looked at them, his expression remaining confident.

I checked my cards out. Three of a kind. A middle of the road hand. Three Queens.

They made me think of Cali.

Colton and Gabriel would both kick my ass if they knew how sentimental I was being right now. Here I was, sitting at a table with demons and werewolves… and all I was thinking about was how I’d explain the situation to her.

*You’re playing CARDS with the guy you’re supposed to KILL?* Cali would screech, her nose wrinkling up in horror.

*I’m following Gabriel’s lead,* I’d tell her, probably too gruffly.

I’d be worried about her safety around these creeps. Which was weird, because I wasn’t even that worried about mine. What would it be like to be relaxed with her here? To give her the benefit of the doubt that she knew what she was doing?

Honestly, she’d probably fit in great. I smiled as I put in my bet, thinking of Cali holding her own with all these criminals. Maybe she was a total card sharp. She’d surprised me in bigger ways since I’d met her.

“Shit, X!” Gabriel cried out when my three of a kind turned into a full house.

“What can I say?” I smirked at him, trying to play my part. “I was blessed with luck *and* good looks.”

But the laughs I got for that were muted. As I reached for my winnings, I noted some angry stares from the other players. A couple grumbled shit under their breath about the “fucking new guy.”

But Gabriel just slapped me on the back. “Good hand.”

“Maybe that should be it for us,” I suggested, trying to get up from the table. “I should quit while I’m ahead and we can all talk like we said—”

But Gabriel pulled me back down into my seat, his hand tight around my arm.

“Nah man.” His voice was casual, even though his grip was almost painful. “You can’t just win one hand and walk away. Where are your manners? You gotta give these boys a chance to win back some of the money you just took from them.”

“You raised by wolves or something?” The Milkman joked, and everyone around the table laughed uproariously like it was the funniest joke they’d ever heard.

“Something like that.” I nodded, trying to smile bashfully as I settled back into my chair.

I leaned in close to Gabriel, unable to keep my mouth shut any longer.

“What the fuck are we waiting for?” I asked him, my voice as low as I could make it. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Come on, man.” Gabriel patted me on the shoulder. “We got the time. Might as well make a few bucks, too. We’re here for the money, right?”

I nodded, trying not to let it show how frustrated I was. I focused on the cards in Slim’s hands as he dealt them out. I willed myself to ignore the alarm bells ringing in my ears, telling me to get out of there ASAP.

And then I smelled it. The acrid antiseptic scent of death warmed over. I turned to Gabriel to warn him. But Gabriel had already clocked him.

The vampire took a seat next to me, making all my hair stand on end. I knew I shouldn’t overreact in mixed company, but my teeth were on edge.

“Who invited you in, Mikah?” Gabriel asked. His voice was casual, but his eyes were hard and flinty.

Mikah? Gabriel was on first name basis with this guy?

I turned to look at the guy. Dressed all in black, he looked like he’d been in his late twenties when he was turned. But something in his eyes was much older. It was always eerie, looking a vampire in the eye. Plus there was something familiar about this guy that added to his unsettling vibe.

Gabriel turned to the Milkman before Mikah could answer.

“Thought you had a no-fangs policy,” Gabriel said, and I could practically smell the anger boiling up inside him.

“What fun would that be?” The Milkman smirked, clearly feeding off Gabriel’s shift in mood.

“Fair enough, Chief,” Gabriel gave him a fake salute and pushed down whatever was going on in his head.

“Xavier, this is Mikah.” He nodded to us. “Mikah, Xavier. Mikah’s a private dick. And a public one too.”

“Pleasure to see you again,” Mikah answered smoothly, not even flinching at the insult. “This is going to save me the trouble of having to track you down.”

And that was when I remembered where I knew him from. I’d seen him back in Minnesota. He was the one investigating Tony’s murder.

Suddenly, I was thankful I already had my poker face on. I hid behind it as I wondered if I should signal Gabriel and get us both the hell out of there. Maybe we could try to get the Milkman another time. It wasn’t worth getting collared for something else.

I peeked at my cards, knowing I had a facade to keep up. I had a shit hand. Which made sense, given my luck at the moment.

“You’d better be here to play cards, bloodsucker,” Gabriel said genially.

“Why else would I be at a card table, Gabriel?” Mikah replied slyly.

I could feel the tension radiating off them both. More than ever, I wanted to run.

“Don’t worry about this guy,” Gabriel whispered in my ear. “He’s just a nuisance.”

“I’m not so sure,” I muttered back. “How do you know this asshole?”

“We crossed paths after Vancouver,” he admitted, shrugging. “He was a complication I didn’t tell you about.”

I fought to keep the surprise off my face. Gabriel usually murdered ‘complications’ in cold blood. It was rare that one survived.

We tossed in our bets. I bet a little more than was wise—both to keep the scent off my bad hand and to get some cash back to the angry demons who were still glaring daggers at me.

And all my money went to Gabriel, who celebrated much louder than I had.

“Hell yeah!” he whooped. “Sorry boys, I just don’t know how to lose.”

If I thought these guys had been pissed when I’d won… Well, they were openly glaring at Gabriel. Fists were clenched and teeth were gritted as he continued to celebrate.

We couldn’t afford to keep attracting this kind of attention. We’d only make the Milkman comfortable if we fit in, and that wasn’t what we were doing right now.

As good at Gabriel was at what we did, he’d always been more reckless than me. Generally, it was my job to watch him and make sure he didn’t fuck up.

We played a few more hands. Gabriel won them all. And I was sweating bullets, because he was only getting louder and louder every time he won.

Eventually, my glances and throat clearing must have gotten to him, because Gabriel stood up to cash out after a few more hands. I followed quickly.

When Gabriel handed his chips over to Slim, he was greeted with a grim look. Slim roughly grabbed his hand and turned it over. He must have seen something he didn’t like, because he snarled.

“You’re cheating!” he yelled in Gabriel’s face, spittle hitting him.

And that was when I realized we were surrounded.

**Episode 352**

CALI

“A *giant*?”I squeaked out. “Like… a real giant?”

But Torin just turned and headed for the bar, leaving me to my thoughts. All I could think of was my dad telling me the story of “Jack and the Beanstalk” when I couldn’t sleep. Of hiding under my covers when he did his giant voice and called out ‘FEE FI FO FUM!’

How could a giant even fit inside this place?

My eyes darted around, taking in the clientele. There were some fairly big guys in here. Maybe it was a playful nickname, and one of them was Gregg?

I shrank into my chair, not wanting to draw any attention. Especially if that attention could be from a giant. I reminded myself that it was unlikely anyone would bother me if I didn’t bother them first.

But I was still rattled when someone bumped into my chair. I turned and saw a drunk guy smiling bashfully at me.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, his eyes glassy.

And then he let out a loud—and very disgusting—belch. I stared at him for a beat, extremely grossed out. He looked me up and down, his brow furrowed. I tensed up, not wanting trouble.

He opened his mouth like he was gonna say something. But then his eyes lost focus and he turned around to go back to his drink.

I wrinkled my nose and turned back to my table only to see Torin heading my way with two drinks—one that was an iridescent shimmering champagne color, and another that was a cloudy blue and bubbled like it was full of dry ice. He offered me the champagne-looking thing and I took a sip without even asking what it was, desperate to take the edge off.

“Oh wow,” I couldn’t help but exclaim. “That’s really nice.”

The drink was crisp and floral. Sweet, but not too much. And very bubbly, like freshly popped champagne—not that I’d had much of that before. It was better than beer and pink wine combined (not literally).

I took another sip before I could worry about getting drunk. I needed to pace myself and stay alert while I was here. I was supposed to be getting Greyson back. not singing karaoke and demanding tacos like I usually did when I was drunk.

“Why so nervous, Wolf Girl?” Torin asked, taking a generous gulp of his blue drink.

“Honestly?” I squeaked.

“I asked, didn’t I?” He elbowed me gently in the ribs.

“I’ve never met a giant before,” I admitted. “I guess I’m a little nervous.”

*And I have no idea if I can trust you or anyone in this entire realm. And that friend of mine who’s trapped in the palace? He and I just made out for the first time even though I’ve been dating his brother for a while. It’s possible they’re both my magical soulmates. And even if I do rescue him and get him back home, there’s every chance he and his brother will tear each other apart and I’ll die a horrible cliff/poison/ocean-related death. So yeah, it’s just those things that have me worried, really.*

“Gregg’s a good guy,” Torin said, giving me a strange little grin. “Or rather, he’s not nearly as mad as people make him out to be. Just don’t piss him off. Because if you do, good luck. He can hold a grudge.”

He guffawed again and I swallowed, resisting the urge to down the rest of my drink to soothe my parched throat. How was I supposed to know what would and would not piss off a giant?

“Hey.” I recognized the voice of the drunk guy behind us. “Why’d you bring her in here?”

“Mind your own business,” Torin grunted at him, and I had to admit my heart warmed a bit when I realized he wanted to protect me from this guy. I’d picked my ally in this world well.

“I don’t like the way she dresses,” the drunk guy insisted, slurring.

As much as I wanted to tell him I didn’t like his table manners, I held my tongue. Who knew if this guy was dangerous? So I settled for glaring at him. What the hell was wrong with my jeans? I’d gotten them at Nordstrom Rack, and they were really nice.

One of the drunk man’s buddies patted him on the shoulder, trying to de-escalate the situation. His eyes flickered nervously between me and Torin.

“Let’s not mess with these guys.” He nodded at Torin. “He’s friends with the Giant.”

Drunk Guy instantly went pale as a sheet, and I swelled with pride at the effect Torin had had on him.

“Sorry,” he mumbled for the second time in five minutes, before turning away from us to face his friends.

“Thanks for that,” I told Torin, smiling appreciatively.

“S’nothing.” Torin shrugged it off, his cheeks turning a bit pink.

“So everyone’s pretty scared of your friend Gregg, huh?” I asked, wanting to prepare myself for meeting him.

“If they’re smart, yeah,” Torin conceded.

I heard a low thumping sound and shuddered.

*Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum…* I heard the words in my memory, even though I didn’t want to. That was a story. I wasn’t Jack, and I didn’t have to scurry around the thunderous feet of a giant threatening to turn my bones into bread.

At least I hoped I didn’t.

The thumping continued, and people around the bar began to stir, turning their heads, murmuring to each other, concerned. I hoped I hadn’t been crazy to put my trust in Torin.

Our table began to shake, and I leapt to my feet.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” I blurted out, my nerves getting the better of me.

But Torin placed a reassuring hand on my arm and gave me a small smile.

“It’s just Gregg,” he told me, his voice calm.

And then he looked over my shoulder and waved.

I sucked in a deep breath, preparing for the worst—an enormous being with ropes of saliva hanging from its jaws, eager to devour me...

I turned to look. And I saw… nothing?

“Where is he?” I asked, confused.

And then I looked down and saw a tiny man approaching. I felt my heart leap up to my throat. What if the giant didn’t see him and stepped on him? We had to do something.

But then Torin bent down and grabbed the man, hugging him tightly to his chest.

“Hey Gregg!” Torin cried excitedly.

“Torin!” Gregg cried, seemingly fine with being scooped up off the ground.

THAT was Gregg?

“Seriously?” I murmured under my breath.

Torin set Gregg down, and there was another boom when his feet touched the floor. I blinked, completely at a loss. Gregg took a seat across from us.

“Sorry,” he said in a deep voice that seemed at odds with his small stature, gesturing toward his feet. “I’m breaking in a new pair of shoes and they need softening up.”

I had no idea what to make of this guy who inspired terror with his loud shoes, deep voice, and confusing name. But Torin had told me he was my only shot. So I had to impress him.

“Gregg, this is Cali,” Torin pointed at me. “She’s a very brave girl and even though I’ve only just met her, I think she’s an impressive person. With an interesting situation.”

Gregg seemed just as fond of Torin as I was—if not more—because that introduction made him relax into a small smile.

“Any friend of Torin’s is all right with me,” he said with a decisive nod.

I sighed, relieved. So much for having to jump through hoops to impress this guy—or keep my bones from being turned into bread.

“Hi, Mr. Giant.” I waved, trying to be polite. “When Torin and I met, he told me that you could maybe help me with a situation I’m dealing with. You see, I came to the Fae world with a friend of mine. Greyson. He’s a werewolf. When we got here we were brought to this big house and they took him hostage. I have to save him. Would you be able to help me break him out?”

Gregg’s eyebrows lifted.

“You weren’t kidding, Torin.” He rubbed his hands together. “That *is* interesting. We don’t get a lot of werewolves here. Pixies, sure. Sprites, yeah. Nymphs, of course. And sometimes the occasionally satyr. But werewolves… I like it. I want to see him with my own two eyes.”

I beamed, and resolved to do whatever I could to repay Torin and Gregg. They were kind, and there was no way I’d have a chance at saving Greyson without them.

“So, where’s this werewolf friend of yours being kept?” Gregg asked.

“This is the fun part.” Torin waggled his eyebrows at his friend. “He’s imprisoned in Wrenthorn’s.”

Gregg’s eyes went wide and he slouched, getting even smaller.

“Then I’m sorry, miss.” He frowned at me. “Your friend’s as good as dead.”

**Episode 353**

My heart sank. As nice as Torin and Gregg seemed, I’d wasted my time with them. While I’d been off trying to find a solution with them, Greyson could have been tortured or killed. I’d screwed up, and now I was back to square one.

I sighed and stood up.

“If Mr. Giant is too afraid to try, I’ll have to find someone who isn’t,” I told them. “Thanks for your help.”

Torin and Gregg exchanged glances, and for a moment I was worried I’d really put my foot in it. But then they burst out laughing.

“That’s a good one.” Torin literally slapped his knee. “Afraid!”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t help.” Gregg beckoned me to sit back down. “Just that your friend is in serious trouble.”

I flopped back down in my chair and tried not to let my frustration show.

“Okay.” I tried to not let my annoyance seep into my tone. “Just… that’s different from saying he’s as good as dead.”

Gregg shrugged. “It’s just an expression.”

I blinked, perplexed. *Different world, different customs,* I reminded myself. *No use getting pissed over it if they can still help.*

I took a cleansing breath.

“Are you going to help me or not?” I did my best to sound like I wasn’t snapping. But I was. I couldn’t afford to waste time.

“Depends.” Gregg sized me up, not put off by my tone in the slightest. “What’s in it for me?”

I sighed.

I didn’t have a good answer for him. Was Gregg like a witch? Would he want my blood or my eye? Did he want some kind of Fae world money? Because if so, I didn’t have any to give him. I looked to Torin. Was this all just a way to scam me?

But Torin just smiled back at me, supportive but quiet. So far, trusting him hadn’t been a bad idea. I’d gotten a nice drink out of it, at least.

“What do you want?” I asked, trying to sound aloof.

Maybe there was a treasure inside the mansion he could take while we were there. A heist within a heist. Or maybe I’d watched too many movies. Maybe if I wanted Greyson back, I was actually going to have to give this guy my left foot.

“Your friend,” he mused. “When we get him out, could I see him shift? Turn into a wolf, I mean. I’ve never seen that before, and I’d very much like to.”

Well that was easier than I’d thought it would be.

But it seemed best to not let Gregg know that.

“You drive a hard bargain.” I grinned at him. “But I can make that happen. Should we go now?”

“Slow down, Wolf Girl.” Torin waved at me to return to my seat. “We can’t just storm the castle. We need a plan.”

“Okay.” I returned to my seat, anxious to get moving. “What kind of plan are you guys thinking? Do we get disguises and sneak in?”

Gregg raised his eyebrows and snuck a look at Torin. I grimaced, feeling embarrassed. Apparently the whole ‘no bad ideas in brainstorming’ thing hadn’t traveled to the Fae world.

“Torin, isn’t there a summit at Wrenthorn’s tonight?” Gregg asked, stroking his chin.

“There is,” Torin confirmed. “It’s supposed to be to discuss some kind of treaty. All the bigwigs will be there.”

“Perfect.” Gregg smiled. “Then everyone will be distracted and we can find our window.”

“But…” I looked at them, at a loss. “How do we actually get in? Like, won’t there be security? Wouldn’t we need invitations?”

Torin chuckled and slung an arm around his tiny friend.

“I wouldn’t worry about that.” Torin grinned. “You’re looking at the world’s greatest forger. Why do you think I brought you here in the first place?”

“Really?” I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

“Really.” Gregg nodded, a bit smug. “I can create flawless invitations for the event. How many do we need?”

“Well, one for Cali, here,” Torin listed. “One for me, and another for Astrid.”

Oh great, another person.

“Astrid?” I asked, nervous about trusting someone else. “Who’s that?”

“Another friend,” Torin told me. “She’s strong, but she’s also brave and really skilled at glamor magic. Which could come in handy.”

I wanted to ask if we could just keep things between us, but I knew there was no use arguing. If Torin said we’d need this Astrid person, I was going to have to trust him. He knew more about this than I did. What other choice did I have?

“Okay,” I nodded. “So three invites then, right?”

Torin threw back his blue drink and I took another sip of my elderflower cocktail, figuring I’d need it to calm my nerves.

“I’ll meet you later with the invitations,” Gregg told us as we walked out of the tavern together. “I need to gather a few supplies first.”

“Of course.” Torin waved at him as we headed in a different direction.

“Where are we headed?” I asked Torin, hoping we could act swiftly.

“To meet Astrid,” he answered. “And don’t worry—she’s not a giant.”

I huffed a little laugh and smiled at Torin, feeling lucky to have met him.

As we walked through town, it really sunk in how kind he was being to me. I could have met so many other people outside Wrenthorn’s. They could have been cruel or indifferent or dishonest. But instead, I’d met Torin.

“Torin, can I ask a question?” I looked up at him tentatively.

“You just did, so why not ask another?” he said genially.

“Why are you helping me?” I asked. “It can’t just be because you’re very kind—which I can tell you are. Every time someone has helped me before, it’s come with strings, and I just… Are there strings here that I don’t know about?”

Torin looked at me, thoughtful.

“Well, when I saw you, I was really surprised to see you in human clothes,” he said. “Humans aren’t common around here. It made me interested to know you.”

I patted my clothes down, discretely slipping my pendant inside my shirt so it wasn’t visible. Something told me I should keep it hidden.

“You got me—I’m not from around here,” I told him. “If I’d known it would be a problem, I would have dressed differently. But that still doesn’t tell me why you agreed to help me.”

“Well.” He shrugged. “Who would help you if I didn’t?”

I looked up at him, shocked that he was real. This big, burly teddy bear of a man might be the best person I’d ever met.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “If you hadn’t found me… I don’t know anyone else here. And I don’t think I could have figured this out on my own.”

Torin and I walked in silence for a moment, both reflecting. When I peeked over at him, he had a melancholy look on his face as he gazed at the shops we were passing.

“I know what it’s like to be alone,” he said, his brow furrowing. “It can really mess with your head, thinking that no one cares about you. Having no one to lean on, or to help you out. And you seem nice, so why would I want that to happen to you?”

I didn’t even know how to respond to that. I owed Torin, maybe more than I’d ever be able to repay.

“Plus, I agree with Gregg.” He chuckled. “I think it’ll be cool to see a werewolf shift. That’s the kind of thing you can tell your grandchildren… If I ever have them, you know?”

“I think you will,” I smiled up at him, feeling optimistic that together we could do this.

We arrived at an arched doorway with beautiful carvings. Torin knocked, and the door swung open on its own.

“Woah,” I murmured at the self-opening door. I peeked through to see if anyone was there, but there was no one.

Torin laughed at me softly. I made a face at him, which only made him laugh harder.

“Follow me.” Torin headed right inside, emerging in a small living room. There were colorful fresh cut flowers in vases all around, which made the place feel pulsing with life. It was cozy.

“Astrid.” Torin nodded in greeting. I looked behind him, and almost gasped when I saw her.

Astrid was gorgeous, with dark greyish blue hair and willowy limbs. And if that wasn’t enough, she was also sharpening a knife on a stone, as if it were the most natural thing a person could do.

“Astrid, this is Cali.” Torin pointed to me in introduction. “We’re going to crash the summit at Wrenthorn’s in order to free her werewolf friend. We could really use your help. I’ve already got Gregg on board to make us invitations. Are you interested?”

Astrid looked me up and down, her eyes cold as she assessed me. She stood up from her table in a graceful, fluid movement, keeping the knife in her hand.

“I’m not going to help.” She pointed the knife right at me. “Not with *that*.”

**Episode 354**

XAVIER

My fists clenched and I fought the instinct to shift and tear every single person in this room apart. There was still a way to play this smart. A way to avoid getting into a fight we were not likely to win.

A way to make sure I got home to Cali.

Silm reached for something inside his vest. All the worst possibilities flashed through my mind: He was reaching for a weapon. A gun. A silver blade.

I turned to Gabriel, hoping I’d see him wearing his trademark smirk, or giving me a knowing wink. Even though I knew it was stupid, I let myself hope—just for a moment—that this was all part of his plan.

But I seriously fucking doubted it.

Instead, he wore a tense expression. His brow was furrowed, and his eyes were darting around the room, looking for threats just like I was. I wondered if he was going to shift. He knew the odds as well as I did, but maybe fighting was our only option. It certainly felt like the only thing I knew how to do.

“Hey,” Mikah called out, getting to his feet.

Everyone turned to look at him, surprised to hear someone speaking when we were clearly supposed to be ripping each other’s throats out. As much as I hated to admit it, I looked too. The bloodsucker radiated authority.

“If a fight breaks out here,” Mikah said, “every single one of us will be hurt. This is a no-win situation. Think about it. Demon, werewolf, and vampire brawls don’t end well. Not to mention the property damage. So let’s all take a breath.”

I was thrown. A rational vampire? Opposing blood lust? That was new.

I took in the rest of the room. The tension was thick as ever, but no one seemed inclined to start the fight back up again. Everyone’s head was on a swivel as they surveyed the room, seeing if anyone would break first and start the violence once more.

“Mikah’s right,” the Milkman said, and everyone dropped their fists and turned to him. “Sit and play or get the fuck out. I don’t want trouble in my club. We just got the floors redone. And none of you all are worth my paying for that again.”

He threw back his head and let out a phlegm-filled laugh. As he wheezed, I watched his two goons step forward, still looking eager to kick some ass. I held my breath, waiting for someone to fuck up the uneasy truce Mikah and the Milkman had created. But the seconds ticked by, and everyone stayed cool.

“If ya got proof about the cheating, Slim,” the Milkman said, breaking the silence again, “I’m willing to listen. If not, you should get the fuck out of here. I don’t tolerate liars and troublemakers.”

Slim clenched his teeth and glared at Gabriel, his face contorting with rage. I held my breath.

“I’m waiting,” Gabriel challenged him.

I looked between the two of them. *Had* Gabriel cheated? He had been winning a lot, and cheating would explain that. But that seemed especially reckless, even for him.

“Fine.” Slim snatched his money off the table and stomped off.

The room breathed a sigh of relief and Gabriel slung an arm over my shoulders, laughing like we hadn’t just almost died. It really made me want to punch him, but I restrained myself.

Because I was a fucking professional.

“Well, that was fun.” He grinned at all of us and I wondered if anyone had patience enough to handle him for much longer.

“You can thank me later,” Mikah sniped.

Gabriel ignored him and turned to the Milkman instead.

“How about we have that talk about Triple X Bob?” he asked. “I’m feeling kind of done with cards.”

“Sure.” The Milkman shrugged. “My office, five minutes. I gotta make a quick call first.”

He winked at us and then started off up the stairs, his two goons following closely behind. That meant our fight would be three against two. That gave us better odds than fighting here in the card room, but I still didn’t like it.

“This could be our only chance,” Gabriel whispered to me. “We take care of the bodyguards first…”

“Yeah,” I agreed, ready to finish his thought. “And once they’re gone, it’s two against one. The Milkman shouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“Your math’s off,” Mikah interrupted, and I felt my muscles tense. I hadn’t realized he could hear us. Our cover was blown.

I spun around to look at him, ready to rip his head off if I needed to.

“It’ll be three against one,” he continued.

Well, that was unexpected.

“You want to join us?” I asked, trying to keep my voice quiet. “Are you serious? Why the hell would you think we’d let you?”

“We’re on a job,” Gabriel spat, before Mikah could answer me. “We don’t want a vampire around fucking everything up.”

“You’re after the Milkman, right?” Mikah asked, eyeing us.

I looked at Gabriel, who kept his mouth shut. I did the same. I knew better than to divulge information about a job to outsiders. It never ended well.

Mikah rolled his eyes at our silence.

“Well, so am I,” he said, taking our silence as all the explanation he needed.

He turned his gaze on me, and I felt my hackles raise. I didn’t like the way he looked at me. Like I was something to check off his to-do list. *Clean dirt off boot: check.*

“And once we’ve taken care of him,” Mikah continued, still looking at me, “then you and I can have a nice, long chat about Tony Blanchet.”

If I’d been ready to fight before, now I was hungry for it. I could practically hear my blood pumping through my veins. I wanted to end this guy right here and now.

Cali’s face appeared in my mind again, and I thought of her worry that the way I’d handled Tony would come back to haunt me. I saw her expression, all the times I’d brushed off her concerns.

Maybe I should have paid more attention.

I kept my mouth shut and stared daggers at the fanged asshole in front of me. I guess if it came down to it, the world would probably be better off with one less bloodsucker.

But first, the job.

“Let’s go get the cookie, gang.” Gabriel grinned, eager for the fight. He always was.

I sighed, trying to psych myself up. But first, Gabriel turned to look at Mikah one last time.

“You’re not getting a cut, Dracula.” Gabriel’s eyes were hard. “The fee is ours.”

“We can discuss that later,” Mikah replied smoothly. “You might change your mind.”

Gabriel scoffed and turned to lead us up the stairs. I tried not to feel like I was walking toward the gallows, but something in my stomach told me this was too easy. I made sure I was behind Mikah so I could keep an eye on him. I didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him.

We stopped outside the Milkman’s door, and I took a second to savor the adrenaline. Despite everything, I couldn’t deny that it felt good to be back in action again. Especially with Gabriel. With him, Mikah was less of a threat.

We exchanged looks, using the nonverbal shorthand you developed after years of doing this kind of work together. I could tell by the set of Gabriel’s jaw that we were on the same page. I threw a glance at Mikah to make sure he was ready. He nodded.

Gabriel opened the door and revealed the Milkman, sitting alone at his desk.

“You brought your friends?” The Milkman raised his eyebrows when he saw Mikah and me accompanying Gabriel.

I didn’t like something about the way the Milkman was holding himself. He seemed too at ease with three killers walking into his office. He seemed more than confident. He seemed… smug.

I put a hand on Gabriel’s shoulder in warning. Gabriel turned to look at me, making a show out of my concern.

“Come on, boys.” He grinned. “We’re all friends here. Just here to discuss the tricks of the trade. You wanted to know about the Triple X job, right?”

And for a second, I thought he’d smoothed it over. For a second, I thought I was just being paranoid.

But then the Milkman rose from his chair and leveled a gun on Gabriel, just as the door behind him swung open. His two goons stepped out of the shadows, staring at me and Mikah.

“Oh, I know exactly why you’re here.” The Milkman’s voice was dark with menace. “But before I kill all three of you assholes, I want to know one thing. Who hired you?”

**Episode 355**

CALI

I felt my stomach drop as I watched the light glinting off Astrid’s knife. I backed up instinctively and reached back to feel for the door. I needed to get out of there. Now.

Finally, I found the doorknob. My sweaty palm slid against the metal as I tried to get a grip on it. I wondered if Torin was wrong to trust Astrid, or if I’d just been wrong to trust *him*. Either way, I was staring down a murderous Fae.

Astrid, casual as could be, tossed her blue hair over her shoulder and gave Torin the side eye.

“You love to challenge me, don’t you?” She smirked at him.

Torin shrugged. Still smiling like no one was *pointing a knife at us.* Well more specifically, at me. Maybe he was just too sweet to realize we were in trouble. Or I was too much of a dope to realize he’d been playing me.

“Well.” Astrid looked me up and down, a frown on her face. “This definitely is a challenge.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my voice annoyingly high pitched. Why couldn’t I—for *once*—sound cool?

Astrid slid the knife into a dark brown leather sheath on her belt. For a fashion accessory that doubled as weapons storage, it was beautiful. I might have admired it if I hadn’t been trying to remember how to get back to the Wrenthorn estate.

“Sit in the chair,” Astrid told me, pointing to a tall stool with a leather padded seat.

And let her Sweeney Todd me? No thank you! Did she really think I was just going to walk to my own death? Was it that easy to kill people in the Fae world? Were they all like lambs to the slaughter? What wasn’t I getting here?

“I’m not sitting anywhere until you tell me what’s going on,” I snapped, anger and fear crawling up my throat. “Torin?” I turned to him, hoping for an explanation.

“Astrid does glamour magic, remember?” he reminded me, finally recognizing my fear. “It makes her pretty selective when it comes to appearance.”

“So this is about my appearance?” I sighed with relief and felt a smile break out on my face. I wasn’t about to be murdered! Murder wasn’t even on the table!

But my calm was short lived.

“Wait.” I looked back at Astrid. “What’s wrong with my appearance!?”

Astrid rolled her eyes. The gesture reminded me of Maya, and for a second I felt a pang in my chest. I wished I was home. Or that more of home was with me. This would all be easier with Maya or Lola, or if I could even just *talk* to Greyson…

“Why don’t you take a look for yourself?” she said, pointing me toward the mirror in front of the stool.

Gritting my teeth in annoyance, I scurried forward to check myself out in the mirror. And yeah, okay, my hair had seen better days. I reached into the tangles to try to finger comb it out. Instead I just found a leaf, which made me blush, humiliated.

“I’ve been a little busy,” I said, trying to defend myself. But it came out half-hearted. Astrid was right. This was not my best look.

Astrid planted her hands on her hips, taking in my dirty clothes and the general lack of style I was exhibiting.

“Are you going to sit down or not?” she asked bluntly, her annoyance not masked at all.

I hesitated. Right now hardly felt like the time to worry about my hair. As bad as it was.

Torin caught my eye in the mirror and smiled.

“It’s okay, Cali,” he reassured me. “Astrid’s a friend. This is all part of the plan.”

*A friend of* yours, I wanted to say. I didn’t know if I had any friends in this room. What if this whole thing had been orchestrated by my grandmother? Torin could be working for her, looking to humiliate me further and take all my blood to perform some kind of evil fairy magic.

But on the other hand, that seemed like an awful lot of trouble for my grandmother to go through to embarrass someone she’d just met. And she probably had enough blood of her own.

Before I could realize how much of this had played out on my face, Torin’s hand was on my shoulder. His eyes looked sad, like he could sense my pain and didn’t like it.

“It’s okay,” he insisted. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

And once again, I found myself melted by Torin’s kindness. So I sat down in the chair and took a deep breath. It couldn’t hurt to detangle my hair if we were going to be sneaking into a big event where I was trying to lie low.

Before I could thank Torin, Astrid stepped up behind me and snatched the leaf out of my hair. I winced as her fingernails scraped along my scalp. With a fluid movement, she flicked the leaf into the trash.

“I’d better get started if I’m going to finish this century,” she murmured, eyeing my hair with obvious distaste.

I wondered if Astrid was this mean to all her clients. If she was, either all Fae were much prettier than me or they just didn’t care about customer service.

Astrid dragged a shiny silver brush through my hair. I winced at every snag of the bristles through the rat’s nest on my head. Astrid was not gentle. Maybe if I were all Fae instead of half, I’d have some kind of iron scalp and this wouldn’t bother me at all.

“So who’s this guy you’re breaking out?” she asked. “Why is he worth all this trouble?”

*Oh, he’s just my ex-boyfriend’s brother who is also possibly my soulmate. Well, one of my two soulmates. The other one being his brother, who took my virginity. They’re werewolves. Does that answer your question?*

I felt my face heating and watched a blush paint my cheeks in the mirror. How in the hell did I explain this without having to say the words ‘*due destini*’ or ‘mates’?

“Greyson is a friend,” I mumbled. “He’s helped me a few times and I want to return the favor.”

“Hmm.” Astrid eyed me. I could tell my explanation wasn’t enough for her.

“Plus, he’s part of my pack,” I added, hoping that would be enough.

Astrid’s eyes widened, and I watched her almost drop her brush. She whirled around to look at Torin, who just grinned.

“Pack?” she repeated, spinning back around to stare at me. “But you’re not a werewolf. Why do you have a pack?”

A lot of people were used to talking with the person who did their hair—I was one of them. But right now, I really wished we’d just been able to do this in silence.

“It’s complicated,” I answered, wishing we could talk about literally anything else.

Astrid folded her arms across her chest and glared at my reflection in the mirror.

“Tell me what’s going on.” Her hands found the knife at her belt. “Or I’ll cut all your hair off.”

“*What?*” I shrieked.

“You’re risking your life for a werewolf,” she told me, as if I didn’t already know. “Fae don’t do that. So what’s really going on here?”

I chewed on my bottom lip as I thought about how much to reveal. There was no way Astrid needed to know everything. *I* didn’t even know everything! I’d promised my mother I wouldn’t tell anyone about her or my family. I was already trusting Torin and Astrid to help me with Greyson—what else was safe to tell them?

Something inside me told me to keep my family a secret. And that meant I would have to lie—something I wasn’t great at.

Astrid cleared her throat impatiently, and I jumped a little in my chair. I had to start talking.

“The truth is…” I scrambled to come up with something credible. “I was adopted! By a pack of wolves, when I was a baby.”

I could feel them staring at me like I was a crazy person. But I knew I had to keep going. It was all or nothing at this point.

“My parents had to send me away,” I continued, talking quicker than I wanted to. “In a basket on a river. And the werewolves found me in the reeds. And they raised me!”

I paused, peeking to see if Astrid and Torin were buying it.

“So you’re Moses?” Astrid asked, rolling her eyes.

Drat. I hadn’t thought Fae would be up on the Bible.

“Um, I see how you could think that,” I stammered, trying to find a way to spin this.

“Your new friend is a riot,” Astrid told Torin, grinning.

“I think so.” Torin smiled at me proudly and I felt like crying for a second. What would I have done without him?

Astrid took a deep breath and waved her arms above my head, her hands moving in intricate, mesmerizing patterns. I felt a strange tingle as I watched her move, and I couldn’t take my eyes off of her.

When her eyes met mine, blazing with intensity, I gasped. But Astrid just laughed and pointed in the mirror.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“Of wha—” But before I could finish my question, I looked down and saw myself.

Or rather, I saw a complete stranger. “HOLY SHIT!”

**Episode 356**

I honestly wondered if I’d been drugged. Had something been slipped into my elderflower cocktail? Was that why it had tasted so good?

I blinked at my reflection, and it blinked right back. I brought a hand up to my face and watched the girl in the mirror do the same. I just couldn’t believe she was me.

I reached out to touch the cool glass of the mirror. And once I felt the smooth surface against my fingertips, I knew it had to be true.

“Is that… me?” I asked, mesmerized. “I look like… like Kim Kardashian *now!* You know, instead of Kim Kardashian when she was Paris Hilton’s assistant.”

Astrid raised an eyebrow at me—my human world pop culture reference was obviously lost on her.

“Oh.” I couldn’t resist letting the sarcasm drip into my tone. “But *Moses* you get?”

“Astrid used glamour magic on you,” Torin said patiently. “I told you she was good at it, right? Do you not like it?”

Honestly, I wasn’t sure how I felt about it at all. I was still working on believing that the girl in the mirror was actually me. Was this something all Fae could do? Did that mean I could do this to myself, like, before parties and stuff? Or possibly more often?

I took in my new look. My formerly tangled hair was now in flowing loose waves. I ran my hands through my silky smooth tresses, marveling at its shampoo-commercial shininess.

My brows were perfect—like, YouTube-makeup-artist-tutorial perfect. Like when *they* did it to themselves. *Not* like when Lola and I had a glass of wine and tried to do it ourselves and ended up looking like the dad on *The O.C*.

“Did you give me a smoky eye?” I couldn’t help but ask.

When Astrid just smirked at me, I shook my head, trying to rid myself of thoughts about how I might never have to curl my eyelashes again (I was still traumatized from the time a girl in my seventh grade class had ripped all of hers out by accident). There were more important things to think about. Like the fact that I had to save Greyson. So that I could save my mom.

Glamour magic could wait.

Though I was totally going to make time to ask if Astrid could teach me how to do even a minor version of this.

“I think she likes it,” Torin told Astrid. “You do look pretty breathtakingly gorgeous, Cali. Not that you didn’t look nice before! Only this is just…”

“It’s okay,” I said, cutting him off with a smile. “You don’t have to flatter me, Torin.”

I looked back at my reflection, admiring my blood-red lipstick and hoping it wouldn’t smudge during our mission. I considered asking Astrid if I had to be careful when I ate or drank, but I had a feeling she’d find that question annoying, so I kept it to myself.

“Astrid, this looks incredible,” I told her. “But… will this be enough to get us into Wrenthorn’s and get Greyson out?”

“Are you seriously doubting me?” Astrid asked with another eye roll. “You look like a completely different person. A much prettier person, if I do say so myself.”

“No!” I answered quickly, ignoring the jab at my natural appearance. “You’re right. And thank you so much for your help. We should probably get going though, right?”

I stood up and turned to face Torin, ready to head out.

“Not just yet.” Torin held out his hands to stop me. “We still need the invites from Gregg. And I’m not trying to be rude, but maybe we should think about your clothes…”

I looked at my jeans and dirt-stained sweater. I could maybe see how this outfit didn’t quite match my red carpet-ready hair and makeup. Plus, my clothes were the first thing Torin had noticed when he’d met me.

“They’re problematic at best,” Astrid said, finishing his thought.

I grimaced. That was probably less polite than what Torin might have said. But as I looked in the mirror, I found that it was a hard opinion to argue with. I stuck out like a sore thumb compared to Astrid and Torin, who were dressed like they were in some kind of cool, trendy Renaissance faire (one significantly less dorky than the one I’d been to).

I knew I had to change. The guards and my grandmother would recognize me if I showed up in the same clothes. I looked incredibly different, but under the glamour I was still myself. I couldn’t risk letting my outfit give me away.

“I just…” I winced. “These are my favorite jeans. I got them on Black Friday on sale and they fit really well. Will I be able to get them back?”

“*Really?*” Astrid asked, throwing her arms up in the air in frustration.

At least I thought it was in frustration until she started to wave her hands in intricate patterns, like she’d done for my hair and makeup. I felt that same tingling sensation and braced myself for whatever Astrid had changed.

I looked down and saw black shiny pants instead of my favorite jeans. When I looked in the mirror, I saw I was wearing a white lace-up shirt and black boots. Really comfortable black boots. I looked kind of like a sexy pirate.

“Do I have to bring these back before midnight or something?” I asked, hoping I wasn’t about to see a bunch of singing mice. “Like, will they fade away?”

“No.” Astrid snorted. “That’s a fairytale. This is real.”

“Oh, so you know ‘Cinderella’ too?” I asked, annoyed. Okay, so they got the Old Testament and fairytales, but had zero knowledge of celebrities.

“Don’t think I won’t turn you into a pumpkin if you annoy me,” Astrid challenged.

“Can she actually do that?” I asked Torin.

He shrugged.

“Great work, Astrid,” Torin told her, always positive. “We should get going, though. Gregg should be done with the invites by now, and the Giant does not like to be kept waiting.”

As much as I wanted to ask what he’d do if we didn’t show up, I decided it would be best to keep my mouth shut.

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Patrons at the Drunken Unicorn were staring at me—even the bartender, who I wasn’t supposed to be making eye contact with. And they didn’t look happy to see me.

Maybe Astrid had gone too far with this whole glamour magic thing. Wasn’t it supposed to make me blend in? What if she’d made me too pretty and now people were angry or jealous? What if she’d made me look like a wanted fugitive?

“Get out of the way,” I heard someone growl.

I whirled around to see a gorgeous dark-haired woman with a dart in her hand, staring just over my shoulder. Her gaze was steely.

“Unless you want to be the dartboard,” she threatened before chuckling darkly.

So *that* was why people were looking! Not because I was having my ‘*Kiss Me* plays while I descend the staircase’ moment, but because I was in the way.

I moved immediately, mumbling an apology and thanking my lucky stars I hadn’t said anything out loud about being ‘too pretty.’

As I looked around, trying to make sure I wasn’t in anyone else’s way, I realized something. Everyone here was strikingly glamorous. Everyone at the bar could basically be a runway model. The wait staff looked like the cast of a CW show. The bartender was… an exception.

I felt a tap on my leg and turned around to see Gregg the Giant smiling up at me. I grinned, happy to see him.

“Can I interest you in some invitations to Wrenthorn’s, miss?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows.

“Thanks so much, Gregg,” I said, beaming down at him.

“Come on, Wolf Princess,” Astrid teased. “Let’s get out of here.”

As we made our way out of the dark bar and into the light of the street, I felt my heart start to pound with anxiety. Anxiety that increased with every step we took toward the Wrenthorn’s gate.

What if we got turned away at the gate?

What if the guards recognized me?

What if my grandmother recognized me?

What if we couldn’t find Greyson?

What if they’d already killed him?

What if they killed all of us?

What if I made some huge social faux pas because I was from the human world, and *then* someone recognized me? And then killed all of us?

Soon, the estate’s stone gates were towering over us. Everything about the place was imposing. It screamed ‘don’t break in.’

My breath caught when I recognized one of the guards—the one who’d escorted me out and slammed the door in my face. What if he recognized me?

My hands started to sweat as we joined the line to get inside. I watched the couple in front of us hand over their invitations to the guard. The envelopes were a sparkly silver.

*Wait.*

I looked at the invitations Torin was holding in his huge hand, moving to pass them over. The ones Gregg had made. They were gold.

I grabbed Torin’s arm in desperation. “Wait!”

**Episode 357**

XAVIER

I stared down the barrel of the gun, knowing there was also one aimed at Gabriel, and another at Mikah. I felt an eerie calm wash over me. My life was in someone else’s hands. In a way, there was nothing I could do.

Then came the guilt and the self-recrimination. We should have shifted when we’d had the chance. We should have planned this whole thing out better. We should never have underestimated the Milkman. Everything we’d done was wrong because all of it had brought us here. Here, where if we moved a muscle, they’d start shooting. And at this range, they weren’t likely to miss.

You could have heard a pin drop as the Milkman waited for our answer. As if it would matter to us. He wasn’t going to kill us any *less* if we told him who’d sent us. But every second we didn’t answer was a second we had to find a way out of this.

Gabriel’s laugh almost made me jump. I looked at him, wondering if I’d misheard and he was actually making some kind of agonized groan. Was there someone behind him with a silencer? But he was grinning.

What the hell did he find funny about this situation?

“Come on, Mr. Milkman, *sir*,” he said sarcastically. “Our profession doesn’t have many rules. Maybe because the people who choose it have a screw loose and can’t be trusted to remember much. But I’d have to be a real idiot to break rule number one: never reveal your employer.”

The Milkman didn’t bristle at Gabriel’s tone. It was like he was more comfortable dropping all pretense and speaking plainly. Maybe I’d have respected that if there wasn’t a gun aimed at me.

“Fair enough,” the Milkman grunted. “But how does that rule sit with you when you’re faced with this?”

He cocked his gun, aiming squarely at Gabriel’s heart. He was in his element now. Using his power, holding it over people, and daring them to disobey.

“And just in case you think *I’m* an idiot,” he said with a smirk, “these bullets are silver tipped. Had them made just for the occasion. So. Do you want to maybe reconsider your response?”

Obviously, this guy didn’t know Gabriel very well. He wasn’t the type to reconsider. Our plan in situations like this had always been to take out the guy closest to us. Meaning Gabriel would go for the Milkman, and I’d take the taller of the two henchmen. Which left the third henchman to Mikah. Who I didn’t want to count on, but might have to.

The Milkman made a big show of yawning, covering his mouth with the hand not holding the gun.

“Getting bored over here, boys,” he sing-songed. “Maybe I’ll count to three and pick you off one by one. Is that motivational enough for you?”

Mikah scoffed and the Milkman rounded on him, gritting his teeth in anger. I braced myself. Mikah was going to turn on us. He was going to find some way to wriggle out of the situation—maybe offer to kill us and get rid of the bodies. He was a vampire. They didn’t abide by any kind of code of honor—he could turn on whoever he wanted.

“Nice plan.” Mikah grinned, flashing his fangs. “Except you made one mistake. A potentially fatal one.”

I squinted at him. What the fuck was this guy talking about? And was I really going to have to listen to this Crypt-Keeper’s full Bond villain speech? I really fucking didn’t want that to be the last thing I heard before I died.

“You and your… *cookie crew*”—Mikah said those words with as much disdain as he could muster—“were smart to bring silver bullets. Because they kill werewolves. But, fun fact: silver doesn’t do shit to vampires.”

Well, maybe this bloodsucker wasn’t the worst person to have in our corner after all. Or maybe he just hated the Milkman more than he hated us.

I looked at the Milkman, expecting to see his face fall. But he just laughed.

“Everyone knows silver doesn’t hurt vampires.” He smiled predatorily. “But this will do the trick.”

He motioned to the goon closest to Mikah, and he raised a crossbow. I felt myself deflate a bit. Mikah’s edge could have saved us, if they hadn’t been prepared.

“So.” The Milkman clapped his hands together. “Are you gonna tell me the name of the moron who was foolish enough to put a price on my head? Or are you gonna die to protect your precious mercenary honor?”

I inched forward, knowing I couldn’t just stand there and wait to die.

“I thought you were gonna count, Milk Bottle.” I sneered at him. “Do you not know how? Or do you just not have the stomach to pull the trigger yourself anymore?”

The Milkman’s eyes narrowed as he stared me down. While he liked dropping all pretenses, he clearly *didn’t* like being insulted. It was clear that he’d been so powerful for so long, there wasn’t a single person around him who dared speak against him.

“Thanks for volunteering to die first.” He turned his gun on me and I braced myself for the pain.

“Hey,” Gabriel called, sounding nervous for the first time. “If you shoot him, you’ll never learn who hired us.”

I saw the Milkman consider this, his expression unreadable.

“And maybe you can stop us,” Gabriel continued. “But if we fail, people will keep coming in our place. And one day, one of them is going to succeed.”

Gabriel glanced at me, a hard look in his eye. The same look he’d given me in Vancouver. It was our signal.

I took a deep breath. This was it. It all came down to this. All that was left was to see if I’d survive.

How would Cali feel if I never came back? Scared? Alone? Heartbroken? Relieved? Whatever the case, I couldn’t let it happen. I wanted to see her again. I wanted to watch her struggle to open a jar, to trip on smooth ground, to find a way to put her foot in her mouth no matter what the situation. I needed to hear her laugh, to make her smile, to hold her tight.

So I needed to end this now.

I tensed, coiling my muscles and getting ready to pounce on my mark. I couldn’t wait to tear into these guys. I just needed to wait for the signal from Gabriel—a subtle wrinkle of his brow. I watched him closely, hoping it would come sooner rather than later.

“That’s probably true, Gabriel.” The Milkman didn’t look worried. “But the people they send after you aren’t going to be half as fun to kill as you will be. I’ve been looking forward to this for way longer than you realize. I guess now is the perfect time to learn you’re not as charming as you think you are.”

I waited for the signal, afraid to blink in case I missed it. But Gabriel just rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Agree to disagree.” Gabriel grinned. “But one thing’s for sure—you cookie boys are going down.”

And then he wrinkled his brow.

In a split second, all hell broke loose.

I lunged across the room, toward my target. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gabriel and Mikah leap toward their marks. My vision tunneled as I got closer and closer to my own kill. The henchman on the right. The one with the crossbow. I saw his eyes widen in surprise as I let my hand shift.

I reached for the henchman, slashing my claws across his chest. His crossbow went off and the arrow went sailing through the air. I saw it strike the ceiling right before I slammed into the man and took our fight to the floor.

Behind me, I could hear Gabriel and Mikah fighting the Milkman and the other henchman. I pinned my guy to the floor with my forearm pressed to his throat, and then I glanced over my shoulder. I was shocked to see Gabriel and Mikah fighting back to back, Gabriel leaning against Mikah to brace himself so he could kick his henchman in the teeth.

But before I could turn back to face my own opponent, I heard a jarring blast. Had someone gotten a shot off?

Almost instantly I felt warmth flooding through me, and a hot flash of adrenaline and pain. I staggered back on my knees, and then it dawned on me.

I’d been shot. With a silver bullet.

**Episode 358**

CALI

We had the wrong invitations.

We were going to be turned away.

I wouldn’t get in.

And Greyson would die.

And I’d never make it home.

And I’d never save my mom.

But I knew I couldn’t give up. So I tried to shake off my terror as Torin, ignoring me, began to pass over the invitations in what felt to me like slow motion. I stared at him, reaching for the invites in the hope that I could grab them back and make something up. Like *‘Oh, you brought the gold ones? Those are for next week’s party! We gotta go home and grab the* silver *ones!’* Which admittedly wasn’t brilliant, but was better than getting caught.

“What’s your problem?” Astrid hissed in my ear, her teeth clenched thanks to the smile frozen on her face.

I shook my head, my hand still scrabbling against Torin’s in an effort to grab the invitations. I couldn’t risk the guards hearing. Maybe they wouldn’t notice. Maybe they were color blind.

Maybe we should run. I’d put Torin and Astrid in this situation—I couldn’t let them get hurt trying to accomplish my mission.

But just as my fingers touched the invitations, the guard snatched them out of my hand and looked at them. I watched him as he studied the invite, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip— bold lipstick be damned.

“Go on in,” he said, nodding at us.

When I looked at the invitations he’d handed back to Torin, I was shocked to see that they were silver. My jaw dropped as we continued down the hall.

“But…” I whispered, at a loss. “But they were gold, I swear! Everyone else’s were silver. I thought we were done for.”

“They change color,” Astrid explained, like I was an idiot. “That’s how they work, Wolf Girl. And Gregg knew that because he’s a genius and he never lets us down.”

“I’m gonna tell him you said that,” Torin teased her.

“Remember the Winter Ball?” Astrid asked, ignoring him. “They made it snow *inside.* Damn, that was so much fun. And we wouldn’t have made it in if it weren’t for Gregg.”

“And you wouldn’t have almost gotten frostbite on your toes from dancing barefoot,” Torin pointed out, grinning.

Astrid clapped her hand over her mouth to muffle her laugh, and I felt a surge of triumph. It was nice to see my newfound friends happy. But it was even nicer that this had actually worked! I was one step closer to saving Greyson.

We followed the other guests into a great hall. It was the same ornate one I’d met my grandmother in, only decorated much more beautifully, with twinkling lights everywhere. But even prettier than the room were the guests.

It was really true, what they said about Fae. Everyone was absolutely stunning. Different kinds of beauty, too. Some were cherubic and adorable, others angular and intimidating, some upsettingly sexy.

A smile spread across my face when I realized I was one of them.

Kind of.

Astrid tugged us into a corner, ending my people-watching session.

“So what exactly is the plan here?” she asked, scanning the room.

I was eager to know the answer to that question as well. So I was less than thrilled when Torin turned to me.

“What do you have in mind, Cali?” he asked.

“Erm. Find Greyson, I guess,” I said. “And get the hell out of here.”

“And how do we find him?” Astrid asked, frustration leaking into her voice.

Torin chuckled. “Split up?” he offered. “Snoop around and see what we find?”

I considered it. Being caught alone in this strange place didn’t seem like a good idea. But what choice did we have?

A door opened and a uniformed man stepped into the ballroom, looking out at all the guests.

“Good evening,” he greeted the assembly formally. “If you would please take your seats, the summit is about to begin.”

There were murmurs of assent all around us as people found their seats. I turned to Torin.

“What exactly is this summit about?” I asked, realizing I probably should have done so sooner.

“It’s about proposing a truce,” he told me, like that explained it.

“A truce between who and who?” I asked, hoping he’d take pity on me.

Astrid rolled her eyes at me. “You seriously don’t know about the war?”

“What war?” I yelped, too surprised to worry about keeping quiet.

“The war between the Light and Dark Fae,” Astrid told me. “Maybe I’ve been too busy with it to learn who Ken Kardash is.”

As much as I wanted to correct her, I was still surprised I hadn’t realized what was going on.

“So you guys are at war,” I murmured.

Torin nodded, his face unusually grim. “It’s been going on for a long time,” he told me. “Even by Fae standards. A truce would be amazing for everyone. There’s been so much death and pain on both sides.”

My head was spinning, and I felt vaguely nauseous. I’d heard there were Dark and Light Fae, but I couldn’t even begin to know how to tell them apart. And I’d had no idea I was bringing Greyson into an active war zone. Maybe my mother had been right to tell me to stay away.

“Which are you?” I asked Torin. “Dark or Light?”

“Seriously?” Astrid scoffed.

I shrugged. Apparently, I wasn’t gonna get an answer on that.

“Has there ever been a truce?” I asked.

“We got close a few years ago,” Torin said. “But then there was an attack and it all fell through. The resentment between the Light and Dark runs really deep. It’s hard to know where to begin when going about making peace.”

I wished my mom had mentioned all of this before. But it wasn’t like she’d known I’d be coming here. She’d actually hate to know where I was.

But I couldn’t get caught up in Fae history—I had to look for Greyson. I’d gotten him into this mess, and I needed to get him out.

As the guests all took their seats, Torin, Astrid, and I lingered at the back.

“Where would they put Greyson?” I asked Torin.

“The dungeon, I suppose,” he replied, shrugging.

“Okay, then.”

And with that, I turned on my heel and slipped out of the hall as discreetly as possible. Torin and Astrid scurried after me, clearly surprised that I’d just bolted.

“Where are you going?” Astrid hissed.

“To the dungeon,” I answered, rolling my eyes at her.

“Do you even know where it is?” she whisper-screamed at me.

“Isn’t it in the basement?” I asked. “Dungeons are usually…” I pointed down. “Down,” I finished lamely. “Right?”

Astrid laughed at me. “Some are in towers, Wolf Girl.”

I groaned. I didn’t have time to search the whole place. I had to take matters into my own hands, and I had to do it fast.

I saw a guard patrolling at the end of the hall and made a beeline for him, waving to get his attention. He paused, clearly confused that I was trying to hail him down.

“Excuse me.” I tried to sound as polite and enthusiastic as possible. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but you work here, right?”

“I do.” He smiled, amused.

“Amazing,” I gushed, trying to look impressed. “Umm, well. This is silly, but…”

I giggled into my palm and the guard leaned forward in anticipation. Was this what being an absurdly hot girl was like? Did guys just want to listen to you all the time?

“I heard you guys captured a real werewolf today,” I said breathlessly. “Is that true?”

The guard smirked at me as he puffed out his chest. “It is.” I could practically see his head inflating. “I was actually there.”

He hadn’t been. I would have recognized him. But I covered my mouth in surprise, anyway.

“I helped subdue the beast,” he bragged. “I actually almost got bitten.”

I could tell he was trying to flirt with me. My plan was working.

“No,” I gasped, putting a hand on his arm. “You must be so brave. And such a good fighter. I hope the other guards helped you, instead of making you fight the creature all alone. How do you even restrain a werewolf? And where would it be safe to keep him?”

The guard leaned in close, and I batted my eyelashes at him.

“They took him to the North Tower after I was done with him.” He whispered his false confession while pointing up at the ceiling.

“Oh wow,” I sighed. “Well, thank you for keeping everyone safe. Maybe we’ll see you around the party.”

I gave him a flirty smile before I turned around and walked back down the hall, making sure to put some extra sway into my hips. As I ducked around a corner, I headed straight for the stairs and beckoned for Torin and Astrid—who were looking pretty dumbstruck—to follow me.

We dashed up the stairs, and I couldn’t help but note that I actually wasn’t losing my breath. I was fueled by adrenaline and hope and… well, by just *how much* I wanted to see Greyson.

What would he say when he saw me? I wasn’t just coming to save him… I was looking pretty damn good while doing so. Would he even recognize me?

I reached the top of the stairs—and okay, at this point I was panting a bit. At the top, there was just one door. I looked over my shoulder at Torin, who nodded.

I reached for the handle and was surprised to find it wasn’t locked.

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered, and pushed it open.

But all I saw was an empty room, the floor covered in blood.

**Episode 359**

GREYSON

Anyone who thought Fae were cute little creatures who sat on lily pads and hung out with woodland creatures or some other shit had clearly never met a real one.

My head was pounding, a dull throb that matched the *drip drip drip* of a water source somewhere nearby. I was still bleeding in a few places from fighting those Fae guards. It took a hell of a lot of power to make me bleed at all, much less leave me *still* bleeding hours later.

Fae didn’t fuck around.

Honestly, I was probably lucky to still be alive, even though I *was* shackled to a cold stone floor. I shifted slightly, trying to find a position that didn’t send a chill through my bones or rub my ankle raw against the shackle. More than once I’d considered shifting to break through the metal, but knowing these Fae assholes, the shackle was probably made from something strong enough to withstand my shift and I’d be the one who ended up broken—and still bound. It wasn’t worth the risk to try.

It hadn’t been a joke when I’d told Cali that facing down a Fae had been one of the most dangerous and terrifying experiences of my life. If it were my choice, I’d take ten more Lupo Finales before I faced down even one more unfriendly Fae.

Not that I really had a choice in this shitshow.

I leaned back with a groan, wincing as the bruises and cuts on my back pressed against the stone wall of my cell. In the hours since Cali and I had been separated, I’d become intimately acquainted with the tiny room.

*Ladies and gents, if you look to the right, you’ll see an old, dark, mysterious stain from god only knows what. The centerpiece of the whole room is a lovely, perhaps unbreakable, shackle on a short chain. Perfect for the kinkster in your life.* *This cozy little cell has only one window, high enough up that it’s impossible to see outside and too small to fit through—an ideal source of natural light for even the most discerning of dungeon aficionados.*

I dragged my tongue over the inside of my bottom lip, which was still bleeding. Was the magic here suppressing my healing or something? The metallic tang of my own blood was multiplied by the general scent of blood—salt and iron and old decay—that hung in the air.

Things weren’t looking good.

I only hoped Cali was doing better than I was. I’d allowed myself to end up in this place, and I’d known from the moment I’d decided to join her on her crazy quest that this could be the result. Not this horrifying Fae jail cell that could double as the set for a horror movie or some kinky dungeon porn, of course—but messing around with the Fae rarely ended well. And Cali either hadn’t understood that or hadn’t cared. She’d needed back up. Protection.

Even knowing this was where I’d end up, I’d do it again in a heartbeat. Cali’s side was where I belonged.

I tugged at my shackle again and gasped, gritting my teeth. I felt a small trickle of hot blood run down the chilled flesh of my ankle. Fucking great.

I shifted on the cold stone again. Maybe shattering my ankle on this shackle would be worth it, just to warm up a bit. I sighed and dragged my fingers through my dirty hair, wincing when I brushed over a goose egg, courtesy of those Fae bastards.

Coming to this world had been a risk, and the longer I stayed here, the greater the risk would become. I was honestly shocked that they’d let me stay alive this long. What did they have to gain by keeping a werewolf in the dungeon?

And what about Cali?

Where had she ended up in all of this? Had they captured her too? Were they torturing her too? I felt my entire body tense at the very thought. God, I hoped this hadn’t all been in vain. I couldn’t imagine that Cali being half-Fae would help her much. She was still an outsider.

Though she did have an uncanny resemblance to the Fae woman who’d confronted us. The same cheekbones, the same eyes. Was there a connection there? Some long-lost relative, perhaps? Those guards at the gates had seemed to think Cali was someone important. Fae hated werewolves, that was no secret, but what about half-humans?

My only solace during my time in this little stone prison was the memory of kissing Cali the night before, of feeling her body moving against mine, tasting her, savoring every inch of her.

*She pulled me down on top of her, and the sensation of our bodies pressed together sent just about every ounce of blood in my body rushing straight to my cock. I needed more of her; I needed everything.*

*I dragged my lips down her jawline until I reached her ear and began to nibble on her earlobe. The little hitch in her breath and her long, deep moan had my hips moving up against hers involuntarily, and my hand traced up her stomach and teased under the curve of her breast.*

*I was trying to be gentle, but all I wanted to do was make her mine. Forever.*

The clipped echo of footsteps on stone pulled me out of my memory, and my head snapped up. Well, at least I wasn’t cold anymore. I glanced around my shitty little stone box, but there wasn’t anything in here I could use as a weapon. Besides me and the shackles, the only other thing in the cell was a pile of hay in the corner, presumably for sleeping on. I wouldn’t know, seeing as my leash didn’t reach quite that far.

The lock on the door clanked open and I lurched into a crouch, ignoring the shackle digging even tighter into my ankle. Maybe if I rushed whoever came through the door, I’d be able to get the key and free myself. I glanced down at the chain and did a quick calculation.

It wasn’t long enough. Whatever this Fae bastard wanted, they’d have to get close for me to have any chance at protecting myself or escaping.

The door swung open to reveal a guard, and the same Fae bitch Cali and I had met earlier. I couldn’t help baring my teeth at her, human form or not. This was the woman who’d ordered me beaten and locked up—maybe who’d taken Cali, too.

The woman eyed me coolly, clearly unafraid of the werewolf she’d leashed. “I apologize for the discomfort,” she said, her voice making it clear she wasn’t actually sorry at all. “But I must consider the safety of my people. I hope you understand.”

I didn’t say anything, just kept watching. My predator instincts were on such high alert that even the smallest twitch of the guard’s fingers had me bracing for a fight. If he tried to touch me again, he’d lose a hand.

The woman seemed dissatisfied with my silence, and rather than speaking again or leaving, she just stood there with her guard, waiting. As if she had all the time in the world for this shitty excuse for a conversation. Maybe she did. Fae lived an awfully long time.

I hated myself for breaking the silence, for giving this ice queen the upper hand. But I couldn’t stop myself from asking. “Is Cali okay?”

She laughed. “You should know that I would never harm her.”

“Right. Because Fae are implicitly trustworthy and altruistic creatures. Your kind would *never* carve someone up just for the fun of it.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “Why would I harm my own granddaughter?”

Shock thrummed down my spine. “Your—How is that possible?”

“I knew the second she walked in. Do you think I don’t recognize my own blood? The face of my own daughter in hers?”

The implication hit me like a fucking Mack truck, and my vision hazed red. “Your guards threatened her! What kind of grandmother are you?”

She straightened, her eyes narrowing. “One who sees that a werewolf in my house could be beneficial to me and our side. Now, perhaps you and I can reach an agreement?”

I watched her warily, searching her impassive face for any kind of tell. Striking a deal with the Fae was probably the stupidest thing anyone could do. But it wasn’t like I had a lot of other options. “What did you have in mind?”

“Are you aware of the war between the Light and Dark Fae?” she asked.

I slowly stood from my crouch, eyeing the woman, inching forward. I had no idea what she was talking about, but maybe if we talked long enough she’d let her guard down long enough for me to grab her. “I’ve heard of it.” I shrugged. “But I don’t see how it concerns me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” She stopped just out of my reach.

The chain was taut now, digging into my ankle. She wasn’t going to make things easy for me. “What do you mean?”

“If you agree to help me, to fight for my side, you’ll be free to leave the Fae world unharmed.” She laced her fingers together, ignoring my question entirely.

“And if I don’t?”

She shrugged. “Do you think you have other options?”

Well, she wasn’t wrong. Maybe if I played along, I’d get a chance to grab Cali and get the hell out of here. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

A smile spread across her face. “I always liked to believe that werewolves were rational creatures, and you’ve just proven me right.” She turned to leave, still out of my reach, and then turned back to face me. “Oh, and there’s one more thing I need from you.” She motioned the guards forward. “Take him.”

**Episode 360**

CALI

I couldn’t pull my eyes away from the blood on the floor.

Greyson.

This was where they’d taken him, wasn’t it? Was that his blood? I thought back to what that horny guard had said. *I helped subdue the beast. I actually almost got bitten.*

My fingers curled into fists as I kneeled down next to the blood and dared myself to touch it. Part of my brain was screaming about germs and diseases, and how it might be a while before I was able to wash my hands. But a much larger, stronger part of me was snarling in terror and fury. Was this Greyson’s blood? How badly had he been hurt?

The blood was cold on my fingertips, but not completely dry. Still tacky. I knew firsthand how tough werewolves were. It took a lot to make them bleed. A shudder ran down my spine, and suddenly there wasn’t enough air in the tiny, cramped cell.

There was an empty shackle connected to the floor, a pile of hay in the corner, and a small window high up on the wall, too high and too small to escape through. My mind, ever so helpful, began whispering worst-case scenarios—images of Greyson being beaten by Fae guards, of sharp silver blades dragging across his bare skin, blood blooming in their wake, of his wolf form snarling and whining as he fought, outnumbered and chained to the floor…

I was going to kill them all. If they’d touched him, I’d rip them to shreds with my bare, half-human hands. I would burn this whole fucking castle down if I had to—

“*Cali*.”

It wasn’t until Torin pulled me to my feet, away from the blood, that I realized I’d started speaking out loud. My eyes skipped wildly around the room, from the stain on the floor and the shackle back to Torin, who had taken me by my shoulders and was shaking me gently.

“Cali.” His calm voice managed to break through the fear and rage. “Hey. You need to calm down, okay? There’s no reason to panic. He could be totally fine. It’s possible they’ve taken Greyson somewhere else.” He looked to Astrid for backup. “Right?”

She nodded. “It wouldn’t make sense to have killed him so soon. Werewolves are such prized possessions in our world.” She gave me what she clearly thought was a comforting smile and said, “Don’t worry. Wherever he is now, they’re not going to kill him before they have a chance to exploit him. He’s a precious commodity.”

*Precious commodity.* My stomach turned over.

“Exactly!” Torin said brightly. “He’s worth so much more to them alive. Do you have any idea what the going rate is for a werewolf on the black market? Nobody’s going to pass that up!”

I cringed. “I don’t think this is helping.” New, horrifying possibilities rushed through my mind, some of them worse than death. “What if—What if they tortured him and then sold him into slavery? Or for a weird Fae science experiment?”

Torin and Astrid looked at each other, but didn’t deny the possibility. Note to self: do not turn to Fae for comfort. They were almost crueler when they were trying to be kind.

“This is all my fault.” I slumped against the wall, my eyes locking onto the creepy, anonymous blood on the floor. “He warned me not to come here, tried to tell me how dangerous it was, but he came anyway. To protect *me*. And now he’s the one paying the price.”

“Don’t play the blame game,” Torin said. “It’s not gonna help Greyson. But do you know what will?”

“Burning this whole horrible castle to the ground?”

He blinked. “Are you some kind of pyromaniac? No, we’re not going to burn anything down. We’re going to keep looking. We can check the other cells. They might have moved him.”

Astrid tapped her chin. “I wonder if that guard knows anything. The one Cali was honeypotting.”

I frowned, trying to remember what exactly that meant. “I wasn’t *honeypotting* him. I was just trying to get information by being a little flirty—”

“Literally the definition of honeypotting,” Torin said helpfully.

Astrid rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Let’s get out of here. This place is creeping me out.”

We left the cell, and I couldn’t help looking back one last time. *I’ll find you, Greyson.*

“Let’s try the next floor down,” Torin suggested. We began to descend the spiral staircase, moving way too goddamn slowly for my taste. I pushed past Astrid and Torin, ready to sprint down the staircase, and immediately stumbled.

Oh god, this was how I was going to die. Not at the hands of werewolves or vampires or even a sadistic Fae. Death by staircase—

Torin caught me before I could make a Cali-sized splat on the next floor and helped me right myself. “Easy. We need to be careful. We don’t want to draw any unwanted attention.”

Which my untimely and very clumsy death would definitely do. “Thanks.”

We arrived on the next floor and moved cautiously toward another row of cells. How many dungeons did one Fae castle need? My heart raced as I pushed open the door, a rapid-fire cadence of *Grey-son, Grey-son, Grey-son—*

The cell was empty. We moved on to the next and the next and the next—all of them were the same. Completely empty.

I slumped against the cold, unforgiving stone wall. “What is going on? Where is he? What have they done with him?”

“They must have moved him. The question is where,” Astrid said, oh-so-helpfully. I bit my lip to keep from spitting out something awful and sarcastic.

We checked the next floor and found it empty as well. Beyond wanting to rip my hair out because we couldn’t find Greyson anywhere, I couldn’t help but notice it was also a huge waste of space. Why have a dungeon tower with several levels of cells if you didn’t plan to use it?

“Let’s go back to the summit and try to find some answers,” Torin eventually said.

“Get ready to honeypot a new guard,” Astrid said to me. “The last one was clearly a dud.”

“I didn’t honeypot anyone!”

We made it back to the main floor, where it was at least significantly warmer. I prepared myself to get my non-flirt on. A polite, respectful, non-sexual request for information.

We’d almost made it to the summit room when the door suddenly swung open and the guests came streaming out. *Oh shit*. I froze. I felt so many eyes on me. Could they see through my glamour? Could they smell the dungeon on me?

Astrid grabbed my arm and pulled me into the crowd. “Relax. Just try to blend in.”

We followed the mass of Fae into a grand ballroom, where a quintet was playing a song I’d never heard before. We moved off to the side, glancing around at the rest of the partygoers. “Who do you think knows what’s going on here?” Astrid asked.

A gorgeous man in a sparkling tunic stepped up to Astrid and held out his hand. “May I have this dance?”

“Um, actually—”

He was already whisking her away. Welp. Hopefully she’d be able to learn a thing or two from her partner.

Torin chuckled. “Astrid *hates* dancing. This should be fun.”

And it *did* look fun. All the elaborate decorations, the beautiful people, the dresses and tunics and finery… Suddenly, so intensely that it was almost painful, I wished Xavier were here. We’d be able to dance the whole night away.

“So who do you think we should ask about Greyson?” Torin asked.

My heart stopped. Right. Greyson. The Alpha I’d brought here with me—who I had to find. I didn’t have time to think about Xavier right now. I looked around, and then felt a strange sensation in my belly. That tug I felt whenever Greyson was close. Could he be here? In this room?

“He’s here,” I said slowly, looking around.

“What?”

“I can feel him. He’s close.”

Horns blared, cutting off the quintet and bringing the room to a standstill. A spotlight illuminated a small stage, occupied by the Fae woman from this morning—the one who looked like me. My grandmother, though I’d never seen anyone who looked less like a loving grandma. There was a small smile on her face.

Rage boiled in my blood. That bitch—

“Thank you all for being here tonight. I have a very important announcement,” the woman said, her voice magically magnified.

The crowd began to murmur excitedly, but I felt my heart sinking. What had this woman done to Greyson?

A large structure began to descend from the ceiling, and the crowd burst into excited whispers.

“Ooh, what has she caught for us this time?” someone said excitedly.

I watched the structure drawing closer to the floor, and realization hit me. It was a cage.

And Greyson was chained up inside.

**Episode 361**

XAVIER

I hit the floor long before I felt the impact. The searing pain roaring through my body blocked out everything else—the sounds of the fight around me, the scents of hot blood and wolf and vampire and demon, the creak of my bones smashing into the floor…

I’d been shot with a silver bullet. It had to be. Nothing else burned like that, like my nerve endings were being twisted around and doused in napalm. A regular bullet was a mosquito bite in comparison.

My vision already beginning to tunnel, I lifted my head to glance at my shoulder—the epicenter of my agony. It was a raw, bloody mess. I’d felt the bullet go in and come out the other side, so at least we wouldn’t have to go digging for it. Gabriel and Mikah came in handy in a fight, but I had a feeling they’d be complete shit when it came to bedside manner.

I awkwardly rolled onto my hands and knees, gritting my teeth against the white-hot agony radiating from my shoulder. My head spun from the simple act of turning over, and I took a few deep breaths to steady myself.

Keeping my weight off my wounded shoulder, I pushed off the floor and tried to stand. Instead of getting upright like I’d hoped, my body spasmed, and I crashed sideways into the table with a cry.

Werewolves prided themselves on being tough as shit, and I was no exception to that. But silver… It put us down faster than a regular bullet would a human. Unless it was a fatal shot, of course.

But I tried not to think about that. We were all still in danger, silver bullet or not, and I wasn’t about to make things easy for the Milkman or his henchmen by just lying there and waiting for them to kill me.

To my left, the henchman with the crossbow was bleeding from the gash I’d given him, but he was recovering enough to reload the crossbow. I tried to stagger over to him—to either knock the weapon out of his hands or simply become a dead, pain-riddled weight on top of him if worst came to worst—but my knees buckled and I hit the floor like a rag doll.

I lay limply on the floor, barely able to breathe around the pain that only grew worse as the silver poisoning spread through my body.

I wasn’t even mad. Not really. This kind of shit happened all the time, and it was bound to happen to me sooner or later. Everyone died. And it was a rare few, especially werewolves, who got the chance to grow old and go peacefully. No, I’d been expecting something like this for a long time, even though I’d dodged death in the Lupo Finale.

Now, it was just catching up to get its due.

Instead of anger, all I could think of was Cali. Images flashed through my mind—her smile, the way her voice had sounded that first time she’d told me she loved me…

If I had any regrets, it was leaving her to go chase after adventure with Gabriel. I’d allowed myself to be scared away from her by my own insecurities, and in doing so I’d let go of the most important person in my world.

I was such a fucking idiot.

The fight continued around me but, limp on the floor, the world spinning around me, wrapping me in a cocoon of pain and regret, I was barely aware of it.

I wished I could hold Cali one last time, feel her warmth, hear her voice…

But Cali wasn’t here. Because I’d left her. And now I was going to die alone.

Blinking rapidly, I managed to focus on the wounded henchman, slowly staggering to his feet and raising the crossbow. I wouldn’t be able to reach him, even though he was only a few inches away.

“G-Gabriel!” I cried out, my voice rough. “Mikah! Watch out!”

The henchman fired his shot, and the arrow blasted toward Mikah. The vampire spun around, just a second too late. There was no way he’d be able to dodge the arrow heading straight for his heart—

And then Gabriel snatched it out of the air

I let out a rasp of relief, blinking rapidly to stay conscious, to keep the pain and darkness from smothering me completely.

Mikah went still, watching as Gabriel flipped the arrow around in his palm and then shoved it into the Milkman’s chest, bones crunching and organs shredding until the head of the arrow peeked out the other side.

The Milkman crumpled to the floor, dead, and Mikah wasted no time in dispatching the henchman he’d been fighting. The vampire and the werewolf turned to the remaining henchman in tandem as he struggled to reload his crossbow.

And then they pounced.

My vision flickered, and I couldn’t tell what exactly the duo had done to the man. But the abruptly cut-off scream, followed by a crunch and a wet squelching sound, told me more than enough.

Silence settled in around us for a beat before Gabriel and Mikah rushed over to my limp form.

“Easy,” Gabriel soothed.

I lay against him, and Gabriel hefted me up into a sitting position so he could see my wound. Even half-dead, with the world blurring, I recognized the fear in my friend’s eyes when Gabriel saw the gunshot wound.

It took a hell of a lot to scare Gabriel. He wasn’t exactly the type to take things seriously, no matter how dangerous the job or how high the odds were stacked against him. The fact that he had that look on his face, more than anything else, drove the truth home.

I wasn’t going to make it.

Would Gabriel tell Cali what had happened today? Would anyone ever find out the truth? Mikah would probably tell her, if Gabriel never did. Would she ever forgive me for leaving her alone to run off and die for some half-assed job?

“Thanks for warning me, Xavier,” Mikah said. He frowned when he saw my shoulder and looked at Gabriel. “And thanks for stopping the arrow. Why’d you do it?”

Gabriel shrugged. “We had the same objective, and… I guess we make a pretty good team. Maybe the first of its kind, even. A werewolf and a vampire fighting side by side.”

Mikah snorted. “Don’t go public with that.”

A hot flare of pain rattled my body, and I couldn’t hold back a groan. It was getting worse. Not so much the gunshot wound as the silver, making contact with my insides as it travelled through my body. Honestly, it made the silver poisoning I’d gotten from Ryker feel like a really bad scratch. This time, it felt like I was being burned alive from the inside-out.

Gabriel eyed the wound gravely. “Unless we can get you to a witch, it’s not looking good.”

I huffed out a laugh, wheezing. “I d–don’t have my w–w–witch directory on me. M–maybe try Google.” I laughed again and then groaned. My muscles were starting to spasm and cramp, overloaded by the pain.

“Hey.” Gabriel took my hand. “Hang in there, okay? We’re going to find someone.”

I’d never heard Gabriel sound like that before. Never seen his face so pinched up. If I didn’t know any better, I’d have said he was scared of losing me.

Gabriel turned to Mikah. “What should we do?”

“Well, for a start, we need to get the hell out of this club,” the vampire said. “It won’t take long until the rest of the gang finds out we offed their boss, and then we’ll be seriously outnumbered.”

“Fine, but what about Xavier?” Gabriel squeezed my hand tighter, and I resisted the urge to wince. I knew he was trying to be comforting, but even the slightest pressure felt like being shoved onto a bed of needles.

“We’ll take him with us.” Mikah walked around to my other side and braced himself under my good shoulder. “I know a witch who’s only a few hours away.”

Gabriel lifted me from the other side, and the pain was so intense I bit my lip hard enough that blood rushed into my mouth. Mikah was right about keeping a low profile, but holy *shit* this hurt.

The three of us moved forward like we were in some kind of four-legged race, and looked around until we found a back way out of the club. The constant jostling was a fresh dose of hell, and more than once I wished they’d just drop me and let me die.

“Will she help him?” Gabriel asked, shooting me a concerned look. We were almost at the car. “Your witch?”

“She will,” Mikah said. “Her name is Nneka, and she owes me a favor. I think it’s time to call it in.”

**Episode 362**

CALI

I blinked one. Twice.

*Come on, Cali*. *Wake up. This is clearly a bad dream. There’s no way Fae have truly caught Greyson and are putting him on display in a big-ass cage like some kind of zoo animal. You’re going to wake up on the ground next to Greyson in the Fae wilds and realize that none of this shitshow ever happened.*

I pinched myself. *Now hurry and wake up before this turns into some kind of kinky dream.* Though dreaming about Greyson cage dancing probably wasn’t the worst thing—

I pinched myself again, so hard that I squeaked, pulling Torin’s attention away from Greyson, whose cage was now settled on the small stage next to the Fae woman.

“Are you all right?” Torin asked.

“Mmhmm,” I managed, my eyes still on the man in the cage, taking in every detail in transfixed horror. Greyson’s skin shone with sweat, and his clothes were stained with blood in more than a few places. His face was swollen and bruised, and he was favoring one foot as he paced the two steps the cramped space allowed . He was a mess. A hot mess. That is, he was still handsome under all that blood but—

*Focus, Cali!*

“He’s not dead,” I whispered, relief rushing through me. Maybe there was no waking up from this nightmare, but at least Greyson was still alive. “Why do they have him caged like an animal?”

“Isn’t he one?” Torin asked.

My head snapped to the side, so fast I almost gave myself whiplash. “*No!*” I whisper-yelled.

Torin’s eyes widened. “I didn’t… I just mean, a wolf, by definition, is an animal, right?”

I scoffed and turned back to the stage. The crowd was *oohing* and *ahhing* over Greyson, and the Fae woman on the stage (I just couldn’t think of her as *grandma*) was drinking in their curiosity and attention. Another female Fae on the floor in front of the stage tried to reach through the bars to touch him, but Greyson slapped her hand away with a snarl.

I felt my own hackles raise. *I will cut a bitch if she tries to touch him again.*

I couldn’t help but think of what Astrid and Torin had said, about werewolves being ‘precious commodities.’ Was this going to be some kind of slave auction? Oh god. If that happened, I was 10/10 going to lose my shit.

Astrid finally joined us again. “What’s going on?” she asked.

Torin shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Not good enough. I started to push my way toward the front. Screw keeping a low profile. Greyson had to know he wasn’t alone. That I was here, and I wasn’t going to let whatever was going on happen without a fight.

The shock and murmurs in the crowd died down as the Fae woman stepped forward again. “Attention everyone! Attention! I know you all must have questions, so allow me to explain: what you are all looking at is the answer we’ve been seeking in the ongoing war with the Dark Fae.”

*Aha*. So these were Light Fae. Thinking of the blood on the dungeon floor, I shuddered to think what the Dark Fae were capable of.

My relative paused, letting her words sink in before continuing. “This specimen is neither human nor Fae.”

*Specimen?* I pushed forward more roughly, elbowing a man as I passed.

“What you are looking at”—there was a dramatic drum roll, and I bit my lip to keep from screaming, *stop showboating and get on with it already!*—“is a werewolf.”

I stopped cold, looking around to see the reactions of the Fae audience. Some of them laughed, and several raised their eyebrows skeptically.

I felt my chest loosen. Though I knew all too well that the rumors of a werewolf in the realm had already swept the area, these Fae clearly didn’t believe her. And if they didn’t believe her, maybe they’d just let him go.

Then I heard the all-too-familiar sound of bones cracking, and a scream cut through the room. My eyes snapped over to the cage in horror.

Greyson was shifting. Fae closest to the cage began to panic, rushing backward as I rushed in to get closer to him. By the time I made it to the front of the crowd, the change was complete. A gigantic wolf stood in the cage, his hackles raised, his silver fur reflecting the light from the chandeliers.

That same Fae woman who’d tried to touch him before moved toward the cage, and Greyson snapped his teeth at her, snarling. I felt a smile tug at my lips. If she couldn’t keep her hands to herself, then maybe she didn’t deserve to have hands.

Wolf Greyson looked around the crowd, and when his eyes landed on me, he went still as death.

“Greyson,” I whispered.

*Cali!?* I heard his voice in my mind. *What happened to you? You look different.*

My knees almost buckled in relief. He was here. Right in front of me. Talking to me. Granted, he looked like he’d been through hell and he was in a cage, but beggars and choosers and all that. I couldn’t help the relieved, breathy laugh that bubbled out of my chest.

*It’s Fae glamour magic,* I explained. *Are you okay? What happened to you?*

His sharp eyes looked me over so intensely that I felt myself blush.

*I liked you better before*, he finally admitted.

Heat rushed into my face at the compliment. I’d wondered whether he’d like my glamour-powered makeover, and I’d hoped I’d make an impression. But hearing that he liked my normal appearance better? Well, that was pretty much the best answer I could have hoped for.

Then I shook it off. This wasn’t the time. *Are you okay?* I repeated.

*I’m fine. But why are you here?*

*I came to rescue you, but now… How are we going to get out of this? What’s going on?*

*I’ll be okay, don’t worry about me,* he said, his eyes urgent. *But you have to get out of here immediately.*

*What? I’m not leaving without you!*

*Yes, you are,* he insisted, sounding more like a domineering Alpha and less like the Greyson I’d come to know. *That woman claims to be your grandmother, and she’s dangerous. You can’t—*

*Dangerous?! Like hell I’m going to leave you locked in a cage in a room full of Fae!*

*You need to leave, Cali.*

I shook my head. *If she’s my grandmother, then surely she’ll help us—*

Said grandmother raised her voice again. “And this werewolf has agreed to fight for us, to lead us to victory against the Dark Fae!”

What the… My jaw dropped. Why would Greyson agree to such a thing?

*Greyson, is that true?* I demanded.

I couldn’t hear his response over the roar of the crowd.

“Cali.” A hand rested on my shoulder, and I spun around, ready to fight—

—and smacked my head into Astrid’s chin. Spots burst in front of my eyes, and pain reverberated down my spine.

“Calm down, tiger. It’s just us.” She winced, but my skull was throbbing like I’d smacked it against steel. Were Fae bones made of *metal*?

I rubbed my forehead and groaned. “I need to talk to that woman on the stage and find out what’s going on.”

Torin glanced up at the stage, his eyes wide. “Are you sure? She’s—”

“—going to talk to me, whether she wants to or not,” I finished. I’d come too far to just give up now, when Greyson was literally there in front of me.

Astrid and Torin both looked shell-shocked by my proclamation, but they nodded and helped me get to the stage, where my darling grandmother was watching the crowd with a feral grin.

Enough with this. I stomped up to her, ignoring the guards that rushed toward us. “So you’re my grandmother, huh?”

She held her hand up to keep the guards at bay and then turned that smile on me. The crowd was still too excited about Greyson to pay any attention to some rando storming up onto the stage to talk to their queen, or whatever the hell she was. She pulled me away from the stage, out of the spotlight, and pointed at the necklace. “Where did you get that pendant?”

The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I hesitated. Could I trust her? This woman who had taken Greyson, beaten him, and put him on display like a show animal?

“It’s from Orla. My daughter,” the woman said calmly. “Isn’t it?”

A new wave of anger flooded through me. “Why did you pretend you didn’t know who I was?”

“It isn’t safe for you to be here. There’s a war going on. I have enemies, and your mother betrayed her people when she left us. Some haven’t forgiven her. Some never will.”

My head spun. First she’d lied about knowing me, and now she was being almost too forthcoming. I could barely keep up. “Why did you cage Greyson like he’s an animal?”

The woman shrugged. “It’s a strategy, a gamble I had to take. And judging by everyone’s reaction, it’s paying off.” She nodded at one of the guards, and Greyson’s cage began to ascend back toward the trapdoor in the ceiling.

*No, no, no! Not again!* “What are you doing to him?”

“All in good time, Cali.” My grandmother smiled. “But first, you and I need to have a little chat.”

**Episode 363**

CALI

I followed my grandmother away from the stage and over to a pair of side doors. The woman had refused to talk to me until we were ‘somewhere more private,’ and it was taking everything I had to keep my hands from shaking.

Wasn’t going ‘somewhere more private’ typically code for ‘you’re about to be murdered’?

“Cali!” Astrid and Torin caught up to us. My grandmother glared and kept walking in front of us, though I noticed that she slowed somewhat.

“Where are you going?” Torin whispered, his face tense.

I searched his face and then looked over at Astrid. Could I really trust them with the truth? *I know you think I’m some human girl, but I’m actually the Anastasia of the Fae world, reuniting with my long lost grandmother and trying to keep my boyfriend from being murdered or being used as some kind of were-soldier in—*

Wait.

Boyfriend?

Where had that come from? Greyson and I—

“Cali?” Astrid nudged me, yanking me out of my mental tailspin. “Are you all right?”

They’d both been so kind to me so far, in their own ways. They were the reason I was here having this conversation with my Fae grandmother at all. But there was more on the line than just knowing the truth about my identity. Greyson’s life was still in danger. And that, I couldn’t risk. I *wouldn’t* risk.

I forced a vague smile onto my face. “I just need to talk to her alone about Greyson.”

Torin frowned. “You shouldn’t go anywhere without backup, especially with a stranger.”

“Especially not *that* stranger,” Astrid added, nodding her head toward my grandmother.

“The stranger-danger sentiment is appreciated, but it’s fine,” I assured them. “I’m fine.”

Torin shook his head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“How about this? We can wait here in the ballroom, and at the first sign of trouble we promise to come charging in,” Astrid suggested.

“You just want to check out the food tables,” Torin huffed.

Astrid shrugged. “I don’t think our priorities here need to be mutually exclusive.”

I heard a throat clearing behind me and saw Grandma Fae waiting in a doorway, giving me a pointed look. I nodded quickly, then threw my arms around Torin, and then Astrid. “Thank you for everything. I’ll be fine.” The words felt like a lie, but they didn’t need to know that.

“Just holler if you need us.” Astrid smiled. “I’m going to check out those pastry puffs before they’re gone.” She tugged Torin along with her, and they disappeared down the hallway. I watched them go, grateful beyond words for their help. I’d only gotten this far because of them.

Then I turned around, took a deep breath, and followed my grandmother.

We were escorted into a study not far from the ballroom. Two guards were posted outside the door as my grandmother closed it and turned the lock behind her. I felt my heartbeat speed up.

I was locked in a room with a powerful Fae woman I’d met only hours ago—a woman who’d kicked me out of her castle and taken Greyson captive. A woman Greyson had warned me not to trust. I looked around the office, taking in the gorgeous, spindly furniture with flowers and vines and thorns carved into the wood. The window looked out over a garden, full of flowers and shrubs I’d never seen in the human world.

Suddenly, I felt very, very alone.

“What’s your name?” I blurted out. I knew Fae had a thing about names, but I didn’t even know this woman—despite her claim that she was my grandmother.

“Hera,” she said simply.

“Hera.” Wasn’t that the name of Zeus’s jealous wife-sister from Greek mythology? Was my grandmother named after her? Or was it some kind of accident? Then again, Fae lived a long time. Maybe Hera the incestuous goddess had been named after my grandma.

I blinked, trying to do the math on how old she would be if *that* were the case. Oh god, I was so out of my depth.

Fortunately, Hera closed the distance between us and grabbed my shoulders before I could lose what was left of my sanity. “Let me look at you.” Her voice was softer now, much more grandmotherly. Her eyes scanned my face, and I stared back, my throat tightening with emotion.

She looked so much like my mom. The same eyes, the same face shape. Hera and I had the same hazel eyes, I realized. A new pain speared through my heart as I remembered why I’d come to this godforsaken place. Not for Greyson. For my mom.

Did Hera know my mom was dying? Could she feel it somehow? Would she even help?

Hera smiled again, a real one, wistful and so full of longing that for half a second I didn’t feel quite so alone. A tear slipped down her cheek and she stepped back, wiping it away as she cleared her throat. “Excuse me. You look so much like Orla.” She gestured to the chaise longue beneath the window. “You can sit if you like. I’m sure you have a lot of questions. You might as well be comfortable.”

A sense of distance had fallen between us again, and I bristled at the implied command. But I *was* exhausted, and my body was already in motion. I couldn’t help but sigh as I sank into the soft cushions. “I do have a lot of questions,” I admitted. I had no clue where to start, but I did know what needed to be cleared up first. “Greyson—”

“Your werewolf friend is safe,” she assured me. “He’s being taken care of as we speak, and when we’re done here, I’ll bring him to you.”

*Oh.*

“He’d *better* be safe,” I snapped. The promise of his safety was… surprising, considering recent events. But I knew better than to trust any of these people, even if we came from the same gene pool. “Or you’re going to be sorry.”

Hera laughed and took a seat in the chair in front of her desk. “You’re just as fiery as your mother.” That wistfulness slipped over her face again, but then her expression darkened. Her lips thinned. “Your mother hurt me deeply, Cali. I hope you’re not here to do the same.”

My eyes widened. Was that a threat? Maybe it *had* been a mistake to follow her here. After all, my mom had left the Fae world for a reason. Was that reason right in front of me? Was Meemaw Hera some kind of Fae Other Mother?

My fear must have been written all over my face, because Hera’s expression softened, just a bit. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

I swallowed down my terror. There was so much I wanted to know, *needed* to know, and I didn’t know if I was going to get another chance. *Grow some ladyballs, Cali. You’ve got a job to do.*

“What happened between you and Mom?” I asked, gathering my courage. “Are you mad at her because she married my father?

Hera seemed to weigh her response. Finally, she said, “I’ll admit I wasn’t happy about that, but in hindsight… Perhaps I expected too much from your mother. I may not have been fair to her, considering what happened to her first husband and child.”

My heart stopped. “Her *what*?”

A crease appeared between her eyebrows. “Your mother hasn’t told you about her life before she met your father?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t even know she was—” I stopped myself, then shook my head again. “She didn’t tell me anything.”

“Your mother was married before she met your father—to a Dark Fae, as part of an alliance. We were expecting our first grandchild when Orla’s husband was killed. Your mother was distraught, of course. And then her baby died in childbirth. We were all devastated.”

I shook my head for a third time, stunned. “My mom didn’t tell me any of this.” *How could she have left all of this out?*

Hera nodded. “It’s understandable. Parents are always trying to shield their children from harsh realities.”

“So what happened?” I asked, starting to feel something a bit like anger. I wasn’t ready to simply give my mom a pass for keeping her entire life a secret from me. If she hadn’t gotten sick, would she ever have told me the truth?

There was a long pause before Hera finally said, “Orla ran away from the Fae world, probably to escape the pain of her loss. And then she met your father and never came back. I suppose I could have been more understanding, but it stung like a betrayal.”

I couldn’t muster up a reply. How had Mom kept this whole history a complete secret from me? She’d had a completely different life, another husband, another child, a family, a culture—and she’d run away from it all. Did Dad know any of this?

The door burst open, and I spun around. I was barely aware of the tingle in my belly as my eyes landed on the one person I needed to see more than anyone else.

Greyson was back.

**Episode 364**

XAVIER

If this was what it felt like to die, then the Grim Reaper could go fuck himself.

I was still clinging to consciousness when, what seemed like an eternity later, we arrived at Nneka’s roadside house. I felt every damn bump and crack in the road while I was sprawled out in the backseat of the car, trying very hard not to die.

The wound in my shoulder had stopped bleeding some time ago, thanks to my heightened healing abilities, but it still looked raw and angry, weeping a fluid that wasn’t blood but smelled like iron and decay.

The whole ride over, Gabriel had practically been hanging over the front passenger-side seat, talking to me, prompting me to recall memories of jobs we’d taken together. When I’d started slipping in and out of consciousness, he’d resorted to trying to piss me off.

*The hum of the tires on the road was soothing in its own way, and it was so damn hard to stay awake, to ignore the pain that whispered at me to let go, to be at peace, to finally rest. I’d only shut my eyes for a second before a burst of fresh pain spread over my cheekbone. I gasped, lurching upward before slumping back onto the seat. Gabriel hovered over me, his hand raised.*

*“Did you just slap me?” I demanded, my voice hoarse and weak.*

*“I did.” There wasn’t an ounce of remorse on Gabriel’s face. “And if I see you giving up again, I’m gonna slap you twice as hard the next time.”*

*“You little shit.” I had about as much bite in my tone as Gabriel had gentleness. “Trying to get me to live out of spite?”*

*Gabriel gave me a gruesome smile, the kind that promised exactly zero good things. “I guess it wouldn’t be the worst thing if you kicked the bucket. You know I’d be second in line to help that sweet little mate of yours through her grief.”*

*A growl raced up my throat, and I blinked rapidly, trying to break through the haze. I knew what Gabriel was doing, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t working.*

*“‘Course I only say* second *because you and I both know Greyson won’t even wait until you’re cold in your grave before jumping on your mate—”*

*“Enough!” I snapped. My voice was stronger than it had been since that goddamned bullet had pierced my flesh. “Nobody’s touching her! She’s* mine *and if any of you even think about touching her—”*

*In the driver’s seat, Mikah raised his hand. “I solemnly swear not to fuck your mate if you die, but I also think it’s worth mentioning that Cali has her own bodily autonomy, and consent is—”*

*“Jesus, Mikah. Can’t you see I’m trying to save a life back here?” Gabriel looked back at me with a smirk. “You’d better stay alive, just to be on the safe side.”*

Mikah and Gabriel held me up as I staggered out of the car, nearly dragging me to the witch’s door. The fresh, earthy air that wrapped around us was soothing, and when my head nodded to the side, Gabriel used his free hand to flick my nose.

“Bastard,” I grumbled. He was determined to keep me alive, even if it was through sheer annoyance.

An older black woman stood on the porch, staring at the three of us with distrust. “What do you want?”

“I’ve come to collect on that favor,” Mikah explained. He nodded to my wound, which was inflamed enough for Nneka to see clearly from across the porch. “It’s growing,” the vampire added. “The damage from the silver is spreading. Can you fix him?”

My head lolled onto Gabriel’s shoulder.

“You’re cuddly when you’re dying,” he teased, keeping up his infuriate-me-into-living routine, but I could hear the strain in his voice. I was putting everything I had into breathing, into staying conscious and paying attention to what was happening around me, but my eyelids felt like they weighed about a thousand pounds each, the world kept spinning around me, and my heartbeat was doing some very unsettling things. I didn’t know how much time I had left. I groped for Gabriel’s hand. “I need you to t–t–tell C–Cali—”

Gabriel cut me off. “You can tell her yourself when you walk out of here.”

Sighing, Nneka directed us inside and to a couch, and Gabriel was uncharacteristically gentle as he laid me down on it.

“Can you help him?” Mikah asked again.

The woman examined the wound. “You shouldn’t have waited so long.”

“We wouldn’t have if there had been another option!” Gabriel spat, all teasing and gentleness gone from his voice. “It’s not like we stopped for tacos and scratch-offs on the way.”

Nneka threw him a dirty look and turned to Mikah. “So now you not only hang with werewolves, but you’re actually helping save their lives?” She snorted. “Vampires helping werewolves. What a world.”

Mikah shrugged. “They saved my life. I owe them.”

My body went rigid, muscles and bones so tense I thought I might snap in half, and pain flooded through me. I couldn’t stop the scream from escaping my throat. “The s–silver. It’s g–getting worse.”

While I was trying not to black out or actually shit myself from the pain, Nneka patted my hand. “You’re lucky you’re not dead.”

The way things were going, death was starting to sound not so bad.

Still, it didn’t look like Nneka was going to be a sympathetic sort of witch. She started to turn away, and my hand shot out and caught hers. “Can you really help me?”

She jerked her hand out of my grip. “Do not touch me again. I’m only helping you because I have to. Normally, I steer clear of werewolves.” She huffed. “You lot are nothing but trouble.”

Gabriel scoffed. “What about bloodsuckers?”

Mikah glared at him. “Come on, man. It’s not like I’m calling you a dirty mutt or anything.”

“Except you kind of just did.”

Nneka rolled her eyes. “You can take your interspecies rivalry outside if you want to help your friend.”

Mikah sat back in his chair and folded his arms. “He’s not my friend.”

“Absolutely not.” Gabriel shook his head.

“Whatever.” Nneka disappeared into a back room for a moment and returned with a small vial and an eyedropper. She began filling the eyedropper. “Hold your friend, or whatever he is, down. This is going to hurt like hell.”

She leaned in to me. “Are you ready?”

I tried to swallow, but between all the screaming and my body freaking the fuck out because it was shutting down in the most painful way imaginable, my mouth was bone-dry. I’d been through this before, when Ryker had wounded me with silver at the Lupo Finale and Cali had saved my life. That had hurt worse than anything I’d ever experienced up to that point.

I glanced down at the seemingly innocuous eyedropper. This wound was much worse than the last one, and the silver poisoning was further along. This time, the cure itself might kill me.

But doing nothing would *definitely* kill me.

I braced myself as Mikah and Gabriel held me down. I nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Nneka applied several drops into the open wound on my shoulder, and the pain hit me so hard the world around me whited out. She’d poured lava into my shoulder and doused the rest of my body in ice. Her ‘cure’ was ripping me to pieces from the inside out. I didn’t even try to hold back my screams.

Gabriel’s face had gone a strange shade of puce, but he didn’t let go, holding me tight against the couch as I thrashed.

Nneka watched my suffering clinically. “You’re lucky twice, you know,” she said conversationally. Maybe to distract me from screaming and writhing on her couch, or maybe because she enjoyed a captive audience. “Normally, I wouldn’t be able to do this much for you. You should know that silver is usually fatal, but as luck would have it, I just acquired some Fae blood—the only known cure.”

The pain was finally starting to ease. Fucking finally. For the first time since the bullet tore through me, I felt like I could breathe. “That’s not true,” I panted. “It was Cali’s blood that saved me the first time. Because we’re mates.”

The witch’s lips drew up into a smirk. “Cali, huh? Well, I’ve got news for you, Wolfman. Your Cali lied.”

What the fuck was she talking about? “But it worked. She didn’t lie!”

I didn’t realize that I’d sat up—relatively free of soul-destroying agony—until Gabriel put a hand on my good shoulder and eased me back down. “You need to calm down.”

“Didn’t your mate tell you?” Nneka pressed.

Had the silver poisoning made me lose my mind or something? “Didn’t my mate tell me what?”

Nneka held up the bottle. “This is her blood. Your mate is Fae.”

My breath kicked out of my chest. “What?” My head was spinning, but by now it was no longer from the silver. Was Nneka telling the truth? Could Cali possibly be Fae?

She shrugged. “Weirder things have happened, I suppose.”

I stared at her in disbelief, not knowing where to start. How would she and Cali even have crossed paths? And the blood—if Cali really was Fae, her blood would be invaluable. “You’re a witch. What did you give her in return for her blood?”

She smiled cheekily. “A witch never tells.”

If I hadn’t been clawing my way back from the brink of death, I would have torn her to pieces. What had this witch done to my mate? And *why*?

“Your mate is no prize, by the way,” Nneka continued, looking disdainful. “After I took her blood, she nearly knocked me out and then ran off with a hot-looking werewolf—looked a little like you, in fact.”

“*What*?” Cali was with Greyson? “Where were they going?”

She shrugged again. “They never said for sure, but I’d guess they were headed to Haystack Rock.”

“Why?”

“Because Haystack Rock is a portal to the Fae world.”

**Episode 365**

CALI

I couldn’t get over to Greyson fast enough.

I’d known coming to the Fae world would be dangerous, and was probably a genuinely insane thing to do. But even knowing all of that, this little adventure Greyson and I had gone on had been one shitshow after another. I’d been tossed out without a friend or any kind of backup. Greyson had been hurt and caged. And then I’d learned that my mom had had a completely different life and family, once upon a time, and she’d kept it a secret.

Sure, Greyson had an uncanny ability to win the Asshole of the Year award, but I’d never been happier to see him, and had never felt safer than with his arms wrapped tight around me. “Are you okay?” I asked, my words muffled against his chest.

I felt his head rest on top of mine for a gorgeous few seconds, and then that weight lifted and he let go of my waist. I kept holding on. “I’m fine. Are you okay?”

I nodded, burying my face in his chest. Tears pricked in my eyes. The relief was overwhelming. He looked good. His injuries were gone, and his clothes were clean. Must have been some kind of Fae magic.

Hera cleared her throat behind us, and I reluctantly untangled myself from Greyson. I couldn’t forget, even for a second, that she was the one who’d put him in that cage. She might have been my grandmother, but our shared blood clearly hadn’t meant all that much to her, seeing as how we’d never met before. She could still very well be a threat.

“I have a question, Cali,” Hera said. Her voice was more business-like now, with Greyson in the room. “Why did you come to the Fae world?”

I paused, considering my words carefully. Hera seemed to regret not being more supportive of my mom, but how much of that was true? Greyson had said not to trust her. That she was dangerous. And Mom had kept all of this secret for a reason, hadn’t she? Would telling Hera the truth just make things worse? Or would she help us? Would she even want to save her daughter’s life?

“Do you… Do you still love my mom?” I asked.

Hera’s eyebrows lifted, and she scanned my face as if it offered up the answers she was seeking. I tried to school my expression, to not give away any more than I already had. Finally, Hera clasped her hands together in her lap. “I do.”

“Even though it’s been so long? Even though she left you?” I pressed. “You said she hurt you—”

“No matter what happens, a mother can’t help but love her daughter.”

Maybe she could help, then. She was clearly powerful; she had resources that might make my task easier. And if she really did love my mom, she’d do whatever she could to help, wouldn’t she?

I glanced at Greyson. Did he think we should tell her the truth about my mom? About why we’d come here?

He gave a single, tight nod.

I turned back to Hera. “We came here because my mom is dying.”

My grandmother’s eyes widened, and her jaw went slack. Whatever she’d been expecting me to say, it hadn’t been that. “She’s *what*?”

I took Greyson’s hand and tugged him over to the chaise I’d been sitting on before he’d come in. “My mom said she’s been away from the Fae world for too long. And now she’s… declining,” I said delicately, thinking of Mom’s pale skin, her thin, waifish frame. It was like she was sinking in on herself, on her way to disappearing altogether. “We risked our lives to get here, and now that we’re here, we’re hoping to find a cure.”

Hera blinked rapidly, trying to make sense of things. She pointed at Greyson. “And him?”

“I’m here to protect Cali.”

Hera cocked her head to the side. “A werewolf helping a Fae?”

I almost wanted to laugh. She believed her half-human granddaughter had somehow stumbled into the Fae world, but she couldn’t wrap her head around a werewolf helping her do it? *If only she knew the truth about Xavier and* due destini*. Or, god forbid, selling my virginity.*

“I know it seems crazy,” I finally said, feeling oddly diplomatic. “But with or without Greyson, I’m determined to save my mom.”

Hera rubbed her temples. “I should have expected this. I’d secretly hoped that Orla had somehow returned to the Fae world and was living a quiet life in safety. We live so long that it would have been possible for her to have outlived both you and your father. But living for so long in *your* world…” She sighed, suddenly looking very, very tired. “How sick is she?”

See, it was things like this that made me wonder if I could trust my grandmother. Had she just admitted to hoping that my mom had *outlived* me and Dad and returned to the Fae world alone? That was a tally for the sus column.

I glanced over at Greyson, and his expression told me it hadn’t slipped his notice either. I pulled myself together and set that nice chunk of family dysfunction aside for later. Maybe I could find a supernatural therapist to help unpack this baggage once Mom was on the mend. “She’s sick enough to admit that she’s dying.” Emotion clogged my throat, and I felt that tingle in my nose that told me tears weren’t far off. “Which, considering how great she’s been at keeping all of this”—I gestured vaguely—“a secret, she’s probably doing very poorly. She might already be dead.” My voice cracked. “I don’t know.”

Greyson slipped his arm around me. “Will you let Cali go?” he asked Hera. “Let her try and save her mother? I’ll fulfill my part of the deal as long as I know Cali will be protected.”

I drew back. “Wait, hell no. What’s this deal you two made?”

Hera cleared her throat again and delicately dabbed at her eyes. Was that real emotion? Or was this all some kind of game to her? “Greyson has agreed to help me fight the Dark Fae.”

I turned to him in horror. “What have you done?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. I can take care of myself.”

I spun back to my grandmother. “You can’t make him do this! It's bad enough you put him on display, but to make him fight your wars? I won’t allow it!”

Hera stared at me calmly, as if I were just a petulant child having a tantrum. “The display was just that—a way of letting the world know that we have werewolves on our side. It was a tactic to strike fear into the hearts of our enemies, and to prod them toward reaching a truce.”

“And Greyson agreed to do that for you? You didn’t trick him or pressure him?”

Hera smiled then, looking between me and Greyson. “Of course he agreed to do it. He’s in love with you. But Cali, be careful. Fae and werewolves rarely mix.”

My heart tripped over itself and my brain forgot how to make words. “What?” I spluttered, standing up. “We’re not—We’re just—His brother’s my—No!” I laughed then, too loud and too hard, though I’d never found anything less funny. “You’re kidding me! Nice joke, Grams! Isn’t she such a comedian?” I turned to Greyson, who was staring at me like I’d gone insane.

Maybe I had.

He stayed silent, had absolutely nothing to add to my lovely pile of word vomit. *Say something! Is she right? Are you… in love with me?*

“*Grams.*” Hera tested the word on her tongue and then laughed. “You can deny your relationship all you want, but not to me. Being in a room with you two for all of five minutes makes it clear.” Her eyes landed on Greyson. “Would you truly risk your life to protect my only granddaughter?”

“Of course.”

I gaped at him. Where was this quick certainty when I’d needed him to validate our non-relationship status? And then my stupid brain finally caught up to what he was saying—and not saying. Heat flooded my cheeks and I sat back down next to him. How could he do so much for me? After everything?

But Hera had already moved on. She stood and turned away from us, looking at something on her desk. “This complicates matters greatly.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “Do you know if there’s a cure to help my mom? A spell, a talisman, something to save her?” I’d do anything. Hunt for a magical creature, bribe a witch, turn myself into a freaking Horcrux—anything.

“There is a cure,” Hera replied. She finally turned back to face us. “It’s a flower. The moon buttercup. It carries the Fae world with it wherever it goes.”

“Great! Where is it? How can I get some?”

“You can’t.”

My brain short-circuited again. Enough with the riddles! “What—”

“The moon buttercup only grows in one place, and that place is controlled by the Dark Fae.”

**Episode 366**

“Is that all? I’m not afraid of the Dark Fae,” I insisted. “And if I don’t get that flower, my mom is going to die. It’s not a choice. I have to do it.”

Hera shook her head, and fury almost knocked me over. Was she going to give up on her daughter so quickly? “I appreciate your bravery, but it is nothing more than foolishness to get into a situation you know nothing about.”

“Why don’t you fill us in, then?” Greyson suggested. “Let Cali decide for herself what is or isn’t dangerous. Because believe me, I know from experience: you shouldn’t underestimate her.”

A smile tugged at my lips before I realized it. It felt good to hear Greyson—the Alpha of the Redwood pack—describe me like that. For so long I’d felt like a liability, like most of the people around me thought of me as an annoying pest at worst and helpless at best. But Greyson… He saw things differently. Saw *me* differently. Sometimes I wished Xavier saw me the same way Greyson did. Maybe things would have been different if he did. Maybe he’d be the one here at my side instead.

Greyson squeezed my shoulder, his arm still wrapped tightly around me. He didn’t smile, but there was no mistaking the warmth in his eyes.

“All right,” Hera conceded. “Think of the battle between the Light and Dark Fae as one between good and evil—though both sides are certainly capable of each. The Dark Fae dwell in places of cruelty and despair and use their powers to further their control of the realm. The Light Fae, on the other hand, celebrate life and hope and we use our gifts to enhance and improve the realm.”

I grimaced. Life and hope, huh? Didn’t see much of that in her dungeons. “That sounds like a pretty one-sided take, Gran-Gran.”

“Perhaps it is, but—” She stopped and tilted her head to the side. “*Gran-Gran?*”

“Just trying it out.” I shrugged. “So, wait, you’re telling me that this war is literally light versus dark and you’re over here doing no harm while the Dark Fae are basically evil incarnate?”

“That’s correct.”

My mind flashed back to Greyson in a cage, to blood on the floor, and I frowned. “Have you ever thought that maybe the Dark Fae think the same thing about the Light Fae? That you’re the bad guys to them?” I wasn’t some kind of history buff or anything like that, but it seemed like in just about every war in human history, people thought that their side was good and the other side was evil. Usually the truth was a bit more complicated.

Or maybe Dark Fae were worse than I could possibly imagine.

Hera sighed. “They can think whatever they want, but the fact remains that we are at war with the Dark Fae. And until that war is resolved, it’s not safe for anyone—much less a half-human with no knowledge of the Fae world—to travel into their territory. I simply won’t allow it.”

“You won’t *allow* me to go?” I squared my shoulders in a huff. “You don’t get a say here, actually! You can’t just pop into my life like this and start laying down rules like you actually care what happens to me.”

Hera let out a long-suffering sigh. “Cali, if anyone *popped* into anyone’s life it’s y—”

“I’m going,” I said firmly. “With or without your approval. And if you care about me *at all*, then you should help me instead of trying to keep me from saving my mom’s—your daughter’s—life.”

“Absolutely not!” Hera stood, her eyes blazing with inhuman intensity. “I lost your mother. I will not risk losing you!”

“You never had me to begin with!” I shouted back, jumping to my feet. “I met you, like, three hours ago. You’ve missed my entire life, and now your daughter is dying and suddenly you want to pretend to be Grandmother of the Year?”

Hera stalked over to the door. “I’m doing this for your own good.”

“My own good? You don’t know me well enough to have the first fucking clue what’s good for me!”

“Guards!”

Four guards rushed into the room, and Greyson immediately stepped in front of me. I put a hand on his arm to keep him from rushing the guards. “Gram, what are you doing?”

Hera’s face was twisted with anger and grief, and tears slipped down her face. “I’m putting you somewhere safe, where you won’t run off like a fool and die at the hands of my sworn enemies.”

“I won’t go,” I snapped. “You can’t make me. Please, don’t do this. You can help us. Help Orla. Don’t just give up—”

“Guards, put them in one of the guest rooms at once.” Hera’s voice was low and measured, a law unto itself. “And lock the doors.”

“No!” I screamed. A guard moved forward to touch me, but Greyson shoved him back. And then it was four guards against Greyson all over again, my grandmother stoic as she watched them outnumber him.

“Please don’t do this!” I said, tears in my eyes.

Hera didn’t look at me. “Take them out of here.”

I held my hands up to the guards. “I’ll go with you! Just don’t hurt him!” Not again.

And that was how Greyson and I were led away from the study and through a labyrinth of hallways to a guest suite with a table and chairs, a dresser, and a large bed shoved in the corner. The door slammed behind them and the lock engaged, trapping Greyson and me in the room.

The echo of the lock made something break open inside of me, and I spun around and rattled the door handle. “Let us out!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “You can’t do this! Hera! Gram! Please!”

How could she do this? Orla was her daughter—her *only* daughter, as far as I knew. Was Hera really willing to condemn her only daughter to death?

I banged on the door, ignoring the pain reverberating up my arms. “Let us out! I have to save her! Please! *Please!*”

Silence answered from the other side of the door, and I spun around to face Greyson. He watched my outburst with concern etched into the lines of his face.

“Shift,” I snapped at him. “Shift and rip that fucking door off its hinges! We’ll fight our way out if we have to! They don’t get to keep us locked in here forever!”

But he didn’t shift, and there was no breaking of door hinges. Instead, Greyson walked over to me slowly, his hands held up in front of him like I was some kind of wild animal. “Cali, it’s gonna be okay,” he said quietly. “But I need you to calm down.”

“You calm down!” I screamed.

“That… doesn’t make any sense.”

I ignored him. “I need to get out of here! And if you can’t be bothered to lift a damn finger to help me, then you can just get out of my way.”

Since the door was useless, I rushed over to the window and shoved it open. It was more than big enough for me to fit through, but it was a long, sheer drop to the rocky ground below. “Maybe there’s some vines to climb on?” I murmured, hanging half of my body outside the window to look around. I could feel Greyson behind me, but I ignored him.

Traitor. Hadn’t he said he was here to protect me? That he wasn’t going to let me do it alone?

“No vines,” I groaned. Maybe I could find a rope. I spun around and brushed past Greyson, heading for the dresser on the opposite wall. I began digging through every drawer for some kind of rope, but there was nothing. Maybe I could craft one from the bedsheets?

I’d just begun to strip the bed when I felt a pair of large, warm hands settle on my shoulders. I tensed and tried to break out of Greyson’s grip, but he didn’t let go.

“Get off me!” I snapped.

He held on, and his thumbs idly kneaded a pair of knots between my shoulder blades.

“Cali.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“*Cali*.”

His voice was deep, rich, and commanding. Instinctively, that wild energy pumping through my veins stilled for just a moment, and he took the opportunity to gently turn me around to face him.

“I’m not going to stay here,” I warned him.

“I know. I’m not asking you to.” His fingertips kept up that light kneading, and I could feel my control slipping. I had to get out of here. I had to save my mom. I had to—

“We’re going to figure this out,” he promised me. “But you need to think clearly first. Take a breath.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. I have to get out—”

“Please, Cali.” He leaned in, curling his body around mine and blocking out my ability to see anything but him, to smell anything but the wild, masculine scent of him. “Breathe.” He wasn’t angry like me. His eyes had none of the wildness that I knew had to be written all over my face.

One hand slid around to the back of my neck and squeezed at the tense, knotted muscles. I softened with a whimper and he pulled me into his arms. I closed my eyes and breathed him in, letting his warmth and scent wrap around me. This was what safety felt like. Greyson was right. I couldn’t get anything done while I felt so crazed, so panicked. I had to center myself.

With a shudder, I pulled back and looked up at him. Greyson was staring at me with an intensity that made my toes curl, and heat flooded my face. Then his hands slid up to my face, cradling it gently as his lips descended on mine.

**Episode 367**

Greyson’s lips moved against mine as he devoured me, his fingers dragging through my hair and tugging just hard enough to make me moan. We walked backward, never breaking apart, until the backs of his legs hit the bed and we tumbled onto the mattress. I wasted no time crawling into his lap, and his hands landed on my hips and moved me right where he wanted me—pressing against every delicious inch of him. I rocked on his lap and tendrils of pleasure travelled up my spine.

His fingers moved over the swell of my breasts, cupping them lightly through my clothes. Somehow it felt like a reunion, like we’d been apart for years instead of hours. I arched into his palms with a moan, and he slipped his hands underneath my shirt.

His fingers dragged down my spine, feeling each goosebump as they rose beneath his fingertips. My fingers explored the planes of his chest again, still hungry for more after our last kiss, and I rocked forward as I laid a line of kisses down his neck.

His hips canted up, pressing against me and hitting almost exactly where I wanted him—*almost*. One large, warm hand anchored in my hair and the other settled on my hip, guiding me into a rhythm on his lap. We were separated by only a few layers as I ground down on his cock.

“Cali,” he moaned. “You feel so good.”

And we were barely feeling each other at all. If dry-humping like a pair of horny teenagers was this good, how was I supposed to survive full-on sex with Greyson? I was going to spontaneously combust any second now.

He rolled us over so that I was spread out on the mattress beneath him, my hands braced against his chest and my legs wrapped tight around his hips. I looked up at him and god, he looked absolutely delicious. His pupils were blown wide, his cheeks were flushed, and his beautiful lips were red and swollen. *Fuck*.

Something pulsed in my chest as we stared at each other. I’d missed him. I’d been so damn worried about him. But now he was here, with me. “Why did you stay?” I asked suddenly, my voice rough, full of emotion I didn’t fully know how to express. “You could have left me here. This isn’t your fight, or your problem.”

He shook his head, smiling like the answer was obvious. “Where you are is where I want to be,” he said simply.

My mouth went dry, and I recalled what my grandmother had said about Greyson being in love with me. But… no. That wasn’t what was going on here, was it? He liked me, sure. Lusted me. We’d always had great chemistry, and recently that had grown into something. But him being *in love* with me? And how did I feel?

“Even locked in a Fae castle?” I asked. “I can think of about a thousand places better than this.”

“It doesn’t matter where we are, as long as I’m with you.”

Emotion caught in my throat. I knew from the intense way he was staring at me that he meant it, one hundred percent. I gripped his neck and pulled his lips down to mine, trying like hell to convey with my body the words I didn’t know how to say. There was so much between us that still hadn’t been discussed. Things like his brother being my mate and Joss being his Luna and the looming *due destini* question that never failed to make me feel like my soul had been ripped in half.

But I didn’t want to think about that right now. I just wanted to be with Greyson. Simply and completely, even for just a little while, while the real world waited on the sidelines.

He broke away from my mouth and braced himself over me with one hand, lightly running the fingers of the other across my cheekbone. He leaned down and pressed a line of kisses down my throat. “So fucking gorgeous.”

“Greyson.” My voice hitched. “Please.”

His fingers trailed up my neck, and his thumb brushed over my bottom lip. “Can you blame me for wanting a taste?”

My arms slipped around his neck, I and wriggled my hips against his, desperate for some relief.

He shifted and I felt the long, thick length of him pressing just below my belly button against my shirt. Reaching beneath it, his fingers skimmed up my stomach and circled my nipple, hard and straining against my bra. Why did I still have so many clothes on? Why did he?

“*Please*.” I moaned, not knowing exactly what I was even asking for.

Slipping his hand beneath my bra, he lightly squeezed my nipple, teasing it, and I almost screamed. How was it possible that just his fingers flicking at the hardened bud sent bolts of electricity through my entire body?

I shimmied an arm down to where our bodies were connected and dragged my fingertips over his denim-covered cock. He hissed at the light touch and thrust his hip against my palm. And then he was like a man possessed, his eyes flashing dark as he slowly—agonizingly—unbuttoned my jeans and moved his hand over my wet panties, tracing my outline lightly as I gasped.

He rolled us onto our sides, hitching my leg over his hip. He met my eyes, his gaze questioning, and I nodded before he slipped his hand inside my panties. His fingers found my hot, soaked skin and began drawing circles around my clit. My vision exploded into a delicious haze. I was so wet his fingers had a slick, easy slide, and I almost jumped out of my skin from the pure pleasure of it.

He ducked his head to kiss me again, circling his finger so slowly I thought I was going to lose my mind.

I moaned into his mouth, jerking my hips forward, and my hand finally finished its journey inside his pants. My fingertips hesitantly dragged over the outline of his huge cock, and he groaned into my mouth.

Emboldened by his response, I shoved his jeans down a little farther, moving my hand inside his boxers to finally feel his hot, throbbing skin. My mouth watered just a bit, and I wrapped my fingers around the base and stroked up and down his shaft a couple of times.

“Fuck, *love*.”

He pressed a finger inside me and I groaned, bucking my hips in an attempt to ride his hand. Greyson added another finger, then a third, filling me with delicious pressure as his palm rubbed against my clit.

“*Ohmygod*—” I keened at the fullness, the girth of his fingers keeping me stretched while the friction of his palm kept me doused in pleasure. My eyes rolled back in my head and my thighs tensed, each raise of my hips pushing me higher, winding me tighter.

And then suddenly, he *stopped*, leaving me right on the edge of bliss.

Greyson pushed away from me lightning fast, zipping up his pants. “Someone’s coming.”

I was too keyed up, all the blood pumping through my very unfulfilled lady parts, to understand what he was saying at first. “What?”

He let out a long breath, trying to compose himself as he dragged a hand through his hair. “Footsteps.”

My face fell so quickly that a smile ghosted across his features. He brushed his lips over mine. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Promise?”

“Pinky promise.”

As I reached to smooth my shirt and adjust my hair into something that didn’t scream *I almost just got lucky!,* the tumblers of the lock clanked and the door swung open. My grandmother entered the room in all her matronly Fae glory, and I felt my ladyboner cool off just a bit.

“Um, hi,” I managed. I glanced over at Greyson, whose lips were swollen and red, approaching the same shade as his flushed face. He was so beautiful, so distractingly gorgeous, and it did funny things to my stomach to think I was the one who’d made him look like that.

I forced myself to focus on my grandma. I could get off later. Preferably when Meemaw Cockblocker the Prison Guard was far, far away. “What are you doing here? Did you think we’d try to escape?”

Grandma sighed. “I’ve had some time to think about things. I realized that I already lost my daughter because I wouldn’t listen to what she wanted. And I can’t make that same mistake again. It would be too foolish. Too painful.”

I blinked, not even daring to hope that she’d changed her mind. “What are you saying?”

“This may be a mistake too, though I hope it isn’t. I’m going to let you go.”

“You’re not going to keep us locked in this room?” I clarified.

She shook her head, looking resolute. “I’m going to let you go into Dark Fae territory so you can retrieve the moon buttercup flower and save my daughter.”

**Episode 368**

XAVIER

I blinked, trying to make sense of everything the witch was telling me. Which felt impossible, considering that not even one piece of information was making the slightest bit of sense. Cali and Greyson were together, away from the pack house, and on their way to the Fae world? Why? And why together?

Nnenka hummed in satisfaction and left me alone, busying herself with her supplies in another room. I felt Gabriel and Mikah’s eyes on me, but I ignored them.

Jealousy raised its ugly head, and I had to fight down the instinctive fury twisting in my stomach. Were they running away together? Cali and I were broken up, after all. I’d left her to go hunt demons with Gabriel, and things between her and Greyson hadn’t exactly been strictly platonic.

If I were being honest, some part of me wasn’t terribly surprised by the news. Greyson had always done his utmost to make my life a living hell, and taking my mate from me definitely topped the already spectacular list of shit he’d pulled over the years.

But that didn’t make sense, because Cali loved me. She wouldn’t betray me, and as my mate, she shouldn’t even be capable of having feelings for Greyson… Unless we *were* caught up in *due destini*. Which would have been awful all on its own, even though it would have explained how she was able to have feelings for both me and Greyson.

And… Jesus, did I even deserve a say in any of this, anyway? I’d left her. We’d broken up. I’d been such an insecure mess since she’d kissed Greyson that we’d never recovered from it.

I rubbed my face. My head was beginning to pound, and it had nothing to do with the silver poisoning. No, it still didn’t make sense, because even if they *were* together, what were they running from? Or running *to?* They could have just stayed near the pack house. Greyson was supposed to be Alpha. He had responsibilities. He wouldn’t have just run off for no good reason, would he?

Maybe the witch had put a spell on me. Or maybe I was delirious from almost dying from silver poisoning, and this was all some twisted fever dream.

“Xavier,” Mikah said softly. “Cali asked me about the Fae world a while back, and I gave her a clue about Haystack Rock. She must have figured it out and decided to go there on her own.”

“So she *is* Fae,” I murmured, my head still whirling with unanswered questions. That piece of the puzzle alone was almost too much to believe.

The silence that settled around me was answer enough. I felt something solid settle in my stomach. Why hadn’t she told me about any of this? Did she not trust me?

The reality hit me hard. Had I ever given her a *reason* to trust me? I’d pushed her around from the moment we’d met, kept her at arm’s length for as long as possible. And even when we finally had gotten together, I’d never listened to what she wanted from me. I hadn’t made her a proper Luna, hadn’t completed our mating bond. I’d always assumed I knew best and that even if she didn’t like it, she’d come around to my way of seeing things eventually. God, how many times had she asked me to change her into a werewolf before I’d finally agreed to do it?

And then I’d left her alone. After pushing her away for so long and keeping her at a distance even though we’d still shared a bed, I’d completely bailed on her. How much of her life had she given up to be with me? And when had I ever returned the favor?

So really, it wasn’t a mystery why she hadn’t trusted me with the truth about her being Fae. That was one question answered, at least. But I couldn’t stop myself from wondering: what exactly had *Greyson* done to earn her trust? The thought made me sick.

“I’m sorry, Xavier,” Mikah said.

I waved him off. “It’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine, but there was nothing he could do about it. This was my mistake to fix.

Nnenka came back into the room. “How are you feeling, Wolfman?”

My head snapped up. Nothing like a witch to break you out of a self-imposed pity party. “Better,” I admitted.

She smiled. “Witch magic works wonders.” Then she glanced at Mikah. “I think we’re even.”

He nodded. “Yes, I think we are.”

I sat up slowly, grimacing. My shoulder was sore as hell, but it was more than bearable after what the poisoning—and its antidote—had felt like. Feeling about a thousand years old, I slid my feet off the end of the couch and onto the floor.

“Wow, what’s the hurry?” Gabriel asked. “You need to rest.”

He held a hand out, clearly intending to keep me on the couch instead of helping me up from it. That was fine. I could do it without him. Eventually. Maybe with a couple false starts.

I brushed his hand away. “We have to get going.” It took me four tries to stand up without my legs threatening to buckle beneath me. But I was nothing if not persistent, and a horrible sense of urgency was tugging at me. I couldn’t sit around any longer.

“Where are you going?” Mikah asked.

“To the Fae portal, so we can go get Cali,” I said. “Obviously.” It seemed simple enough. We’d go to Haystack Rock, I’d grab Cali and kick Greyson where the sun didn’t shine, and life would go back to normal. It had to.

“Not so fast.” Nneka held up a finger. “You don’t have a key to get in.”

I bristled. “What kind of key do we need?”

“Fae blood and an item forged in the Fae world, both of which you don’t have.”

Fair point. “You have Cali’s blood,” I said.

Nneka shook her head. “No. I’m not giving you anything more. My debt had been fulfilled.”

My teeth ground together. “Where the hell else are we supposed to find Fae blood?”

She shrugged. “Not my problem.”

“Don’t waste your breath,” Mikah said. “I know her well enough—she’s not going to give up what she’s bargained for.”

Christ, I wanted to rip this woman to shreds. It didn’t matter that she’d just saved my life. She was standing between me and my mate, and that wasn’t something I took lightly. There was a reason I never trusted witches.

Apart from one.

Realization hit me. “I know a witch who has Fae blood. Lots of it.”

Gabriel’s eyebrows rose. “You wanna share with the rest of the class?”

I felt a little woozy from standing on my feet for so long, but I wasn’t going to sit down again. At least not until we got to the car. I wasn’t so sure I’d be able to get back up again, and I didn’t want to spend a single moment longer than I had to in this witch’s house. I blinked the spots away from my vision and took a deep breath. “Cali gave her blood to Big Mac. If we find Big Mac, we get our Fae blood.”

I started to the door, but then Nneka’s reedy voice stopped me. “I don’t know why I’m telling you things, but you’re bound to find out one way or another so allow me to save you some time: Big Mac is dead.”

I turned around, then regretted it when the world kept spinning long after I’d come to a standstill. Gabriel appeared at my side and caught my arm, bracing me. “I’ve got you, buddy.”

I jerked my arm out of his grip, my eyes still locked on Nneka. “How do I know she’s really dead? How do I know you’re not just protecting one of your own?”

“I don’t know for certain that she’s dead, but I performed a search spell for her recently, and nothing showed up. That usually means the person is dead. So I can only assume that MacKenzie, may Satan take her soul, is no longer with us.”

I ran through this new information. Nneka could have been lying—about Big Mac and about the portal. Maybe there was more than one way into the Fae world. “Is it possible that Big Mac is in hiding? Maybe she’s using, I don’t know, some kind of ward that’s immune to search spells?”

The witch shrugged. “Perhaps.”

Well, that was a perfectly useless answer. My fingers curled into fists, and I took a deep breath, trying to fight my impulse to rip Nneka’s house to shreds. “Haystack Rock. Where is it?”

“It’s no use. I already told you, you won’t be able to get in.”

“I’m just asking where it is,” I snapped.

With a long-suffering sigh, the witch pulled out a map of the Oregon coast, drawing her finger up the highway until it stopped on a seaside town called Cannon Beach. She tapped on the shoreline. “Here. It’s a tourist destination, so you should have no trouble finding your way.” She shrugged again. “But like I said, there’s not really any point. There’s no way you’re getting in.”

I started for the door, ignoring the pain pulsing from my shoulder and the general sense of being slightly high—either from the antidote or the latent effects of the silver.

Gabriel rushed in front of the door, blocking my exit. “Wait, what are you doing? She just said there’s no point.”

I glared at him. “I don’t care what she said. If Cali’s gone to the Fae world, I’m going to find Big Mac, and then I’m going to find a way to get Cali back.”

**Episode 369**

“I’m going to let you go into Dark Fae territory,” Grandma said, “so you can retrieve the moon buttercup flower and save my daughter.”

I stood there, gaping at her. Was this real life? Did overbearing controlling parents, like, *change*?

“Are you for real right now?” I asked. “Did you seriously just change your mind?”

She nodded, her expression severe. I gulped.

*Holy shit!* I thought. *This is actually happening!*

“Um, thank you?” I spluttered. Grandma sighed, shooting me a look that I could’ve sworn was frustrated but fond.

“I’ll be back in the morning. We can discuss this further then,” she said, pausing by the door. Raising an eyebrow, she stared at me. “Tomorrow is going to be a long day. Make sure you rest.” She eyed Greyson, the man I’d been trying to forget for the past few moments, just to avoid imploding from sheer mortification. “*Both* of you should get some rest.”

*Oh my GOD!* I screamed in my head. *Does she know we were about to—*

No! I wouldn’t have gone all the way. No way.

*Right?*

“Cali?” Greyson said in that raspy velvet voice of his. I shuddered, taking a step away from him because I couldn’t look him in the eye. I also didn’t trust myself not to maul him again. I was pretty sure my whole face and body had turned the color of ripe tomatoes.

*Great job, Cali!* I scoffed at myself internally. *So much for your plan to stay away from him.*

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked, reaching out to touch my arm. He had no sense of personal space. Rude!

“I’m fine,” I mumbled, pushing my hair back. I glanced at him, and he looked as devastatingly hot as ever. It was ridiculous—I couldn’t keep getting distracted like this. I needed to focus on finding a way to save my mom. The hot werewolf was here to assist me, not to... do whatever it was that he’d done earlier.

Even though it had been AMAZING.

Though I wasn’t sure if it was worth the incredible awkwardness going on between us right now.

“I hope you’re not—”

“Moon buttercup!” I exclaimed, facing him.

He looked at me, all frowny with disheveled hair and swollen lips from all the kissing, and raised his eyebrows. “What?”

“The moon buttercup is the flower, which we need,” I said, raising an index finger. “We should go look for it! Right now!”

Greyson crossed his arms over his chest. The same arms he’d wrapped around me. And his *hands*. Those were… *good*.

“Cali,” he said patiently. “It’s the middle of the night, and we’re not familiar with the territory. We should sleep right now.”

It was kind of annoying how he still had a brain that worked, even after getting down and dirty with me. Was I offended that he could think straight after what we’d just done? Would it make me seem completely ridiculous if I said yes? Perhaps it would, so I just shut up.

I stared at him silently, and that wasn’t awkward at all.

“I’ll sleep over there,” he said, breaking the silence before it could kill us both. He gestured at an armchair in a parlor-like room. I was still not speaking. Not even when we locked eyes and he walked past me, his arm inches away from mine.

The need to touch him made me feel like I was on fire. The urge to pull him closer, tell him to sleep here, with me, on top of me, *glued to me* was so hard to ignore. But I did. Taking a deep shaky breath, I settled down on the couch, knowing that sleep wasn’t going to come easily.

Not with Greyson just a few feet away.

\*\*\*\*

Greyson was awake when I got up the next morning, looking like a fucking well-rested GQ model.

It was so fucking unfair.

“Bathroom is free. Go wash up,” he said. “I’ll finish packing supplies in the meantime.”

All the awkwardness from last night had vanished. He was all business, calm and collected. I’d expected him to say something—*anything*—about what had happened, but what I got instead was a big fat nothing. Was he pretending that last night hadn’t happened? That would be pretty disappointing, not to mention annoying, though perhaps his reaction was for the best. I had to get a grip and focus on the bigger picture here.

I had to save my mom.

After I finished showering, got dressed, and had a quick bite to eat, there was a knock on the door. Greyson looked up from the map he’d been studying. A moment later, my grandma walked in. Her outfit today was regal as ever. She looked like a legendary old Hollywood actress.

“Good morning,” she said. I wasn’t about to be rude to the lady who’d enabled my madness, so I replied politely. Greyson just nodded, oh-so-serious.

“There are a few things you two need to know before heading off,” she told me, sitting across from me at the table.

“Go on,” I said.

“Dark Fae can be ruthless and dangerous,” Grandma said. “You both have to be on your guard at all times.” She handed me a small rose quartz crystal. It was beautiful.

“What’s this for?” I asked, tracing the rough surface of the crystal.

“It will glow when you’re near Dark Fae,” she said.

“Wow. That’s really helpful, thanks.” I looked up at her. “Any other tips? How exactly are we supposed to find the moon buttercup flower, anyway?”

Grandma handed me another map. Greyson straightened to his feet and hovered over us, watching as she gave us directions and pointed to our route. “You’re going to have to follow the river westward, through the valley. The flower grows there.” She pointed at a spot on the map, looking between us. “Got it?”

“Piece of cake,” I said, folding the map.

Greyson nodded, just as Grandma turned to him.

“Remember,” she told Greyson, “you must protect her at all costs.”

Maintaining his somber expression, Greyson nodded once more.

Grandma reached out and gave me a hug. It felt good, despite all the baggage between us. It felt like coming home—to a home that I’d never known before. She faced me, cradling my cheeks before placing a gentle kiss on my forehead. Her gaze was warm, sweet. “Be careful, sweetheart.”

“I will,” I breathed.

She caressed my shoulder, reaching out to hug me once more. Her voice was a barely-there whisper in my ear. “Remember what I told you about Fae and werewolves.”

I didn’t reply, or allow myself to think about the implications of her words. I couldn’t afford any distractions. Grandma squeezed me one more time before walking out the door, shooting Greyson one last look.

Taking a deep breath, I pocketed the map and the quartz, turning to look at him. “We should get going.”

“I think we should think about this for a moment first,” he noted. “The mission won’t be easy.”

“But we have a new map—”

“The map is great, but it’s not a solve-it-all,” he said. “We know nothing about this world.”

“You have a point,” I admitted, pausing. After processing, I said, “I wonder if Astrid and Torin would be willing to help us? They know the Fae world and they’ve been pretty nice to me so far.”

Grimacing, Greyson said, “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

Emboldened by Greyson agreeing with me, I smiled. He looked away the second I did, but I wasn’t going to obsess over that. I felt hopeful but anxious about what was about to come. We headed out, and I led Greyson through the streets to Astrid’s house. The road was quiet in the morning.

I only had to knock once for Astrid to open the door.

“There you are!” she said, making room for us to walk in. “I’m so glad to see you—I was pretty worried after you didn’t come back. We waited as long as we could!”

“I’m okay,” I said. “Had a little adventure.”

Greyson hadn’t spoken a word so far. He was clearly feeling super sociable today.

“Cali’s alive?” Torin asked, popping up from somewhere behind me while munching on a cream puff. Had he spent the night here, or had he come over for breakfast? I didn’t have the time to ask, because he beamed at me. “You’re alive!” he said. “Good to see you safe and sound.”

“About that…” I looked between them hopefully, explaining our mission for today. The mythical moon buttercup flower and all that. The two exchanged a sheepish look that looked more interested than terrified, which was great.

And then Torin asked, “You’re going by yourselves? Into Dark Fae territory?”

“Um, yes,” I confirmed, hoping they’d offer to come with us without me having to beg them. “Why?”

“Do you guys have a plan on how to get across the border?” Astrid asked.

I glanced at Greyson, who was frowning. “Well.” I cleared my throat. “That’s a good question. What border?”

“The one that leads you into Dark Fae territory. It’s really dangerous, but you can’t avoid it,” Torin said.

“What should we do?” I asked, looking between him and Astrid.

Astrid grinned wide. “That’s easy. Just take us with you.”

**Episode 370**

XAVIER

I was feeling stronger after our stop at Nneka’s. The witch was sneaky and untrustworthy, like the rest of her kind, but she was effective. I was ready to get going. I didn’t want to think what Cali going off to the Land of Fae with Greyson meant—if it did mean anything—but in the end, that didn’t matter.

I would find Cali if it was the last thing I did.

“So what’s your plan, exactly?” Gabriel asked, blocking my way as I headed toward the woods. “How do we find this Big Mac witch? A drive-thru?”

“I know where her house is,” I replied. “That’ll be a good place to start.”

Gabriel squinted at me. “Sounds like you’re pretty sure this is gonna be a walk in the park. Witches aren’t known to be easy targets.”

I paused. Then I remembered something. “We’re werewolves. We won’t be able to actually see the house because of an invisibility spell. At least that’s what Mrs. Smith said.”

Gabriel offered a shit-eating grin, shrugging. “That won’t be a problem.” He gestured at a sour-faced Mikah, who stood a few feet away. “We have him!”

I glanced at Mikah. “We don’t need a bloodsucker,” I said. Mikah rolled his eyes, but I kept talking. “Besides, he wants to nail me for Tony. I don’t trust him.”

“Are you two going to continue talking about me like I’m not here?” Mikah demanded.

Gabriel flipped him off before turning to me again. “What other choice do we have? He’s the worst, but we need him.”

Huffing, Mikah walked up to us. “Okay, can you two stop going on and on about this witch situation? We gotta talk about what happened earlier.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, raising my eyebrows.

Mikah looked at me like I was nuts. “I don’t know if you forgot, but you did almost just lose your life, Xavier. The Milkman clearly doesn’t fuck around.”

I shrugged. Gabriel looked pretty casual about it too. “I mean, Xavier almost dies a lot. You know, in general.”

“You guys might have a casual relationship with death, but I don’t,” Mikah said.

“Is that because you’re made of death and darkness?” Gabriel asked the vampire obnoxiously.

Mikah shoved him. “I’m being serious here. I almost got staked last night. If it weren’t for the two of you, I wouldn’t even be standing here.”

I eyed Mikah. “What are you saying?”

Mikah glared at me. “Do I need to spell it out?”

I turned to Gabriel. “What the hell is he saying?”

Gabriel looked suspicious. “I think he’s feeling grateful? I don’t know. It’s weird.”

I rolled my eyes at Mikah. “Whatever. You already thanked us for last night. You can leave now. Goodbye.”

“Oh, I plan to,” Mikah said. “But I want to settle something first. I still believe that you’re responsible for Tony’s murder—”

I huffed, balling up my fists. The urge to punch him was instant. “Are we going to do this fucking dance again?”

Mikah barreled through, unfazed. “I also know you are responsible for countless human deaths—”

“Why is this guy still talking?” Gabriel asked me, pointing at Mikah. “Why haven’t we killed him yet?”

Mikah rolled his eyes. “I’m not here to fight, though I’d relish taking down two werewolves.”

“Then what’s the point of all this?” I demanded. “I have to find Big Mac, and you’re wasting my time.”

“If you two would let me finish,” Mikah said in a sharp tone, “the point here is that I’m going to let you guys off the hook. You saved my life last night, which means you’re not just murderous werewolves. You’re something more.” The next words came out of his mouth with obvious difficulty. “I… owe you.”

I didn’t speak.

Gabriel blinked at Mikah, dubious. Then he laughed in disbelief. “So you’re just going to let us go? Wave us goodbye with a handkerchief? Should I expect a postcard from you in the future?”

“Are you done talking to us about your feelings?” I asked Mikah, moving past him. “Because I’m in a hurry—I have a house to find.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Mikah said from behind me. “I’m willing to go house hunting with you two.”

I paused in my tracks. Facing him, I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. I wasn’t sure if I could trust a vampire, but I *could* use Mikah’s help. I peered at him, ready to make just one thing clear. “If you try anything with us, Gabriel will tear you apart.”

“In a bad way,” Gabriel piped up, smirking.

Mikah raised an eyebrow. “Is there a good way?”

Before Gabriel could respond, I barked out, “Okay, no more chit-chat. We have a house to find; let’s get going!” I pointed at Mikah. “You’d better not slow us down.”

I was about to shift when Mikah blocked my way. The motherfucker actually startled me.

“Did you just pop out of nowhere?” I demanded.

He didn’t answer my question. “You’re still recovering from your wound. You should take it easy.”

“Aww, Xavier!” Gabriel exclaimed. “Our little vampire pet is worried about you!”

It was Mikah’s turn to flip Gabriel off.

“This is none of your business,” I told the vampire. “I’m fine.” Ignoring the twinge in my shoulder, I continued, “The fastest way to get there is to shift—we can cut through the woods.”

“Good idea,” Gabriel said, shrugging. He pointed at Mikah. “What about him, though? How’s he going to keep up?”

The vampire offered a loud scoff. “I travel faster than both of you combined. I don't need to shift into anything.” He wrinkled his nose, looking down at Gabriel and me. “Vampires are, at the very least, superior beings.”

Gabriel, who weirdly didn’t seem as annoyed as I was that we had to entertain this annoying leech, grinned at him. “How about a race? Last one there will have to eat a skunk. Whataya say, Mike?”

Mikah gagged.

I was losing my patience with these assholes. “Stop acting like kids. We gotta get going.” Ignoring the throbbing of my wound once more, I shifted. The ache didn’t go away—if anything, it multiplied.

I forced it out of my mind.

I took off running through the forest, Gabriel close behind me. It always felt good to run with him. Even if he pissed me off more often than not, he was someone I could trust. I knew he had my back—unlike Mikah, who had vanished.

Where the hell was he?

I didn’t have the time to stop and look for him, though—I had to focus and move forward, make sure I maneuvered through the thickening woods as efficiently and quickly as possible. I hoped we’d find Big Mac sooner rather than later.

I had to get to Cali.

Why was she going to the Fae world? This whole situation was a mess, and even though Cali was a walking disaster waiting to happen, this took the cake. After all, she kept surviving situations that no ordinary human would, just by using kitchen supplies. But at least her being part Fae explained some of the unusual things that had happened since I’d met her.

Why hadn’t Cali told me about all this sooner?

What if she had more secrets that she hadn’t shared with me yet? I was starting to really understand why she got on my case about my own.

And what if… What if she wasn’t really my mate?

That last thought made my shoulder hurt viciously, but I couldn’t stop dwelling on it. What if Cali wasn’t my mate, and the way we felt about each other was just the product of some kind of fucked up Fae magic?

*She’s mine!* the wolf inside me growled, and the pain in my shoulder felt like a sudden stab. I stumbled and fought to recover, but the pain was like a lightning bolt. Relentless. In a second, I stumbled again, crashing to the ground while the horrible sensation spread all over my body. The pain turned into agony, and I shifted back into human form.

There was something wet on my stomach.

I traced it and saw blood.

“Shit,” I hissed, looking at my shoulder. My wound was open again, raw and red. The warm liquid was dripping down my arm, my chest and stomach.

“Hey!” Gabriel called from somewhere behind me. “What’s going on?” I could sense him approaching quickly, but it was hard to keep my eyes open. My whole body throbbed with pain, and it wouldn’t stop. My breathing came out labored and painful, too.

“Goddammit!” Gabriel said, coming into view. “You pushed too hard!” He got on his knees on the ground next to me, his usually mischievous expression turning to worry. “Can you hear me, Xavier?” he asked, gripping my good shoulder. “How badly does it…”

My sight started to get foggy, same as my hearing. I reached out to touch Gabriel, to ask him to help me stand, but I shuddered instead. The fogginess got worse and worse and worse…

Until everything turned black.

**Episode 371**

GREYSON

I hated being in the back.

I should’ve been in the front, leading the way, with Cali behind me so I could protect her in case there was an attack. The only problem with that, though, was that I had no fucking idea where we were going, so I was forced to let Torin and Astrid take the lead. But that didn’t mean I had to like it.

Nevertheless, I had to admit that Torin and Astrid had proved invaluable so far. They’d even been able to pack enough supplies—some food and basic camping gear—to last us for a while. Of course, nothing had truly changed in my eyes—I still didn’t trust either of them. I was wary of all Fae. Always had been, probably always would be.

If they tried anything or attempted to hurt Cali, I would be ready.

I made sure to keep all my senses alert, taking in every inch of my surroundings. Cali chattered with her new comrades in the front, all bubbly and relaxed while I stewed in the back. If these Fae were to be trusted, Astrid had said that we would reach the border around dusk, which should be perfect. We’d be less visible that way, in the half-light of the shadows. As to how we would get across the border—Torin wasn’t sure about that, or what would be waiting for us on the other side.

There could be guards on the other side. There could be supernatural horrors that I couldn’t even imagine. All the more reason for me to keep all my senses acute. I’d considered shifting, but I was worried that a werewolf out in the open would’ve drawn too much attention.

“Yes!” Cali said excitedly, interrupting my thoughts. “And then you binge-watch it!” She laughed, having now spent at least fifteen minutes explaining what Netflix was to a bewildered Astrid and Torin. She kept up with both of them easily, working her way through rough terrain while rambling at the same time, her step and posture full of strength and purpose.

I felt this weird emotion in my chest at the sight of her, all tight and intense.

Shockingly, it wasn’t just lust. It was admiration, too.

My lips twitched in a smile as I thought about how much she’d grown since the first day I’d laid eyes on her. But even back then, she’d been striking. Her energy and magnetically weird personality had been unlike anything I’d ever witnessed.

How could someone as amazing as her get stuck with an asshole like Xavier?

Not that I was hating on my baby bro—although I wasn’t his biggest fan—but she was way out of his league. The way I’d felt the first time I’d met her had been incredible. The feeling had been so intense, and it had been raging within me ever since.

Was it normal for mates to feel so intensely about each other? I’d never felt it before. Until now.

Until *her*.

Or did the fact that she was part Fae change things?

Could that be what had drawn me to her so forcefully? Was Fae magic playing games with me? It wouldn’t be something that she’d done on purpose—she didn’t have a mean bone in her body—but maybe there was some Fae trickery at play here.

Or maybe I was simply falling in love and losing my mind while I was at it.

Now that I was walking only a few feet behind her, with her scent so close to my nose, I felt my control slipping once more. I could almost taste her, and it was driving me crazy. I hated losing control, and whenever I was near her, I continuously felt my common sense slipping away.

Like it had last night.

I’d wanted her so badly it made me ache, even now. And I’d known that she wanted me too. It was obvious from the way she kissed me, the way she touched and held onto me, her gorgeous body so hot and willing, her skin trembling as she writhed all over me, delirious with desire. I’d been so close, so close to taking her, having her, making her mine till my name was the only word hanging from her lips, but then—

Then her goddamn grandmother had barged in.

It had probably been for the best, though.

Not getting too close to her, too quickly was probably for the best…

But now I couldn’t stop fucking thinking about last night, and getting a hard-on while on a mission was the least practical thing ever.

And being in the back with a great view of her ass.

“Stop!” Torin’s low but intense voice interrupted my train of thought. I stopped walking just as Astrid turned around and faced me, raising her index finger to her lips in a ‘be quiet’ motion. I came to stand right next to Cali, every sense on high alert, searching out any threat.

“That’s it,” Astrid whispered, pointing up ahead, past the trees. “The plank bridge.”

“That’s the border,” Torin added.

“We cross that and we’re in Dark Fae territory,” Astrid said.

Cali started blinking rapidly. “Um.” She stared at the bridge. It really did look quite worn out. “That’s what connects the canyon? That flimsy thing that looks like a bunch of tiny sticks tied together?”

“I doubt it could hold one person, let alone four.” I looked around. “Why isn’t there a sentry? Something’s fishy here.”

“There is a patrol,” Torin said, “but if we hurry across now, we might be able to avoid it.”

I narrowed my eyes at Torin before turning to Cali. “Get out that quartz your grandmother gave you,” I said. “We need to see if there are any Dark Fae around. I don’t like surprises.”

Nodding eagerly, Cali did as she was told, for once not objecting. Which was kind of cute. Though that wasn’t what I should’ve been thinking right then.

The most important thing at the moment was that the quartz wasn’t glowing.

“We’re good,” Cali said.

I still didn’t trust her new friends.

“See?” Astrid said. “I told you. Let’s get going.” She started walking toward the clearing, Torin following. I frowned, and Cali grabbed my arm to lead me forward.

“Stop it!” She huffed. “Everything’s gonna be fine.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” I grumbled, looking around. I hated being out in the open—what if there was some sort of hidden danger? I scanned the area, my instinct to protect her going haywire.

“Oh, no,” Cali said when we reached the bridge.

Torin turned to look at her, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry,” Cali said, “but this bridge looks even worse up close.”

“Told you so,” I said. Then I grunted when Cali elbowed me.

“Oh come on,” Astrid said. “We can deal with this. We can go one by one. I’ll go first.”

“We’re all going to die,” I said dryly. Cali stepped on my foot, glaring up at me. She looked annoyed and bothered and really hot. Good enough to eat.

I needed to get my mind out of the gutter.

“I’m going,” Astrid said. I redirected my attention there. As she stepped onto the bridge, I held my breath. But as I watched her move ahead, she seemed pretty at ease. The bridge didn’t even twitch before she reached the other side.

“Talk about having a light step,” Cali mumbled, in awe.

“Let’s see if Torin survives,” I said.

Cali elbowed me again just as Torin stepped onto the bridge. This time, the bridge swayed. Cali gripped my forearm hard enough to bruise. No matter her huffiness, her nerves and anxiety were evident.

“Hey,” I murmured.

She looked up at me.

“I’m not gonna let anything happen to you,” I said. “Go slow. Don’t look down as you cross the canyon, okay?”

Before she could say anything, Torin waved for her to go next. She nodded at me, slowly letting go of my arm. My skin felt hot where we’d touched. Shooting me one last look, she walked cautiously onto the bridge.

“Slowly,” I said under my breath. As if she could hear me, she took it one plank at a time, walking across the bridge at a languid pace. I had told her not to look down, but I couldn’t help but glance below her—the river was full of waves, white foam at the surface. I noticed a bed of rocks and felt my pulse race. If she slipped…

No.

It didn’t matter.

I wouldn’t let anything happen to her.

“You’re doing great,” I said under my breath. She’d just reached the middle of the bridge. I knew she could hear me, or at least *feel* me, like a mate would. She paused, gripping the ropey sides of the bridge. Her slender frame shook for a second before she glanced over her shoulder, back at me.

“You’re doing great,” I repeated, trying to soothe her. I could actually feel the steadying breath she took before moving forward.

But the second she stepped on the next plank, it snapped.

*CRACK!*

The piece of wood tumbled into the cold river below.

*CALI!* I screamed inside my head, and a second later, I saw her slip and fall straight down, toward the raging river below.

**Episode 372**

I felt the ground give way underneath me, and a scream clutched at my throat as I dropped straight down.

*OH MY GOD, I’M GONNA DIE!* I screamed inside my head. *NO! NOT TODAY SATAN!*

Clutching at air for what was probably about half a second but felt like a fucking lifetime, I grabbed onto one of the vines, stopping my fall. I was panting, a small part of me sobbing in terror, while I fought to hold myself up. I felt like screaming for help, but I realized that that was probably not a good idea, considering we were supposed to be hiding from whatever patrol was roaming around here.

*Don’t look down*, Greyson had told me earlier.

I looked down.

Big. Fucking. Mistake.

The river seemed miles and miles away—too far to fall. I’d probably get smashed to pieces. I forced myself to focus. I could pull myself up, right? Lara Croft did that—I’d seen her do it a lot. Angelina Jolie was a classic legend. Though clearly I needed to start working out more, pull-ups in particular, because I couldn’t figure out where to put my feet in order to support my weight.

I remained dangling like a useless, helpless moron.

Terror and fury overwhelmed me. How could I be so stupid? I shouldn’t have gotten on this bridge! If I fell right now, any hope my mother had to survive would fall with me.

*Cali!*

I heard Greyson’s calm but firm voice in my head. I gasped, fighting to hold onto the vine more tightly.

*Cali*, he said. *Concentrate on holding on—I’m coming to get you.*

Holding on as tightly as I could, I turned my head in Greyson’s direction. I saw him step onto the bridge, causing it to rock unsteadily under his weight. He paused, staring at me. He was who-knew-how-many pounds of pure werewolf muscle. I doubted the thing could hold him, but he didn’t seem that worried about breaking it.

*Greyson!* I screamed in my head. *Is this happening?*

He raised his eyebrows. *I told you this fucking bridge was a bad idea!*

I wanted to shout at him to shut up, but I couldn’t. Instead, I whispered, “Are we seriously telepathically communicating right now? Or I am imaging the whole thing just before I die?”

*You’re not going to die, Cali,* Greyson said in my head.

Slowly, steadily, he took one step at a time and headed toward me, like this was a super slow walk in the park for him.

*Stay calm*, he said. *I’m coming.*

I felt like crying and/or going into hysterics, which wouldn’t have helped anybody. Especially not me. My hands were getting sweaty, burning with the effort of supporting my weight.

The vine was starting to slip.

*No!* I thought, panicking internally. *NO! I can’t die like this! I HAVEN’T EVEN WATCHED THE NEW SEASON OF* THE BACHELOR *YET!*

But then I felt Greyson’s grip.

Large, strong hands wrapped around my wrists, lifting me up like I weighed as much as a feather. He pulled me upward, toward him, and wrapped me in his arms. “There we go,” he muttered.

“*Ohmygod*,” I blurted out, grabbing onto him like he was a lifeline. In many ways, he was.

“It’s okay,” he whispered in my ear. I was shaking, so badly that my teeth were chattering. He embraced me tightly. “I’ve got you.”

“Don’t let go,” I whimpered, sniffling. “I almost died! Did you see that?”

His tone managed to sound both amused and worried at the same time. “I did. But you’re safe now.”

“I d-don’t feel s-safe!”

It felt like my lungs were going to burst. I realized that I’d been breathing so harshly that I was getting dizzy. “Cali,” Greyson said calmly. “I need you to breathe for me, okay? Slow and steady.”

I nodded hesitantly, drawing in a deep breath. It was all Greyson’s scent. I could feel his chest against my back, and it calmed me like nothing else.

“You’re safe,” he repeated. “I’ve got you.”

He did have me. His massive body framed mine like armor, making me feel cherished, protected, and, a few moments later… safe. The effect he had on me was powerful. Amazing.

But then he said, “I told you this was a bad idea.”

I felt like bursting out laughing or turning around and biting his nose. In the end, I just dug my nails into his forearm instead. He snorted like I was some stray feral kitten, wrapping his arms tighter around me. He kissed my neck, the top of my head, caging me against him as we sat on that flimsy goddamn bridge.

It felt divine, but it unfortunately couldn’t last forever.

Turning to my right, I saw Torin and Astrid’s worried faces across the canyon. This was really, really bad, mostly because several more planks had fallen from the infuriating bridge.

“How are we going to cross?” I asked quietly.

Greyson didn’t respond.

“I don’t want to go back,” I said. “I can’t go back without finding a way to help my mom.”

“I know,” he said evenly, breathing against my neck. “I know, Cali. We’ll find a way.”

His words soothed me. Bottom line: no matter what, and even when he judged me and rolled his eyes at me, Greyson had my back—even when I did outrageous shit like this.

*Is this, like… love?* *Was my grandmother right?* I wondered internally. Then I scolded myself. *No! I shouldn’t be thinking of that right now!*

“Wait,” Astrid mouthed at me, gesturing for me to be quiet. Torin nodded at me, stepping away for a moment only to return with a long branch.

“I don’t like this,” Greyson said under his breath, his voice a rumble in my ears.

Astrid made another motion for us to wait. After a couple of minutes that felt like a decade, Torin returned, holding a long branch. He gingerly stepped out onto the bridge and extended the branch toward us.

“Go on,” Torin whisper-hissed at me. “Grab it and use it to cross the gap!”

This was some serious bullshit right here, honestly.

Perhaps Greyson was right and we were going to die, after all.

“Go ahead,” Greyson told me. “Do it. I’ve got you.”

Hearing those words again made my stomach flutter. But still, I was incredulous. “So *now* you think this is a good idea?”

“No, Cali,” he told me dryly. “I think we have no other choice.”

“Don’t be so optimistic,” I grumbled, glancing down at the river with a squeak.

“I’ve got you,” Greyson repeated, his hands still on my waist as I tried to balance myself enough to stand. He was really good at that, thank god.

I tentatively reached for the branch, clutching it tightly. Using it for leverage, I started to step over the gap in the bridge, trying my best to keep my eyes focused on Torin—and not on the churning river far below.

“Don’t look down,” Greyson said behind me, highlighting my thoughts.

I moved forward slowly until my foot made contact with the plank. This was happening. This could really happen—we could survive this! I lifted my other foot, about to move it forward while Greyson kept his hands on my waist, urging me toward the plank.

“This isn’t so bad,” I mumbled. “Don’t you think, Grey—”

The whole bridge shuddered, and I rocked backward, right into his arms.

“Jesus fucking Christ! Can you not—”

Greyson never finished his sentence.

The vine rail snapped, making the bridge break right in the middle. The force and pressure of the *SNAP!* was so terrifying that I cried out.

*Don’t scream don’t scream don’t scream don’t scream!* I thought, frantically reaching for one of the rails. It slipped away as Greyson and I tumbled down, swinging in an arc. His one arm was still wrapped around my waist, like he was Tarzan. I fought to channel my inner Jane, but it was seriously not working!

“GREYSON, YOU WERE RIGHT!” I shouted this time, unable to help myself as we swooshed toward the rocky face of the opposite side. “OH MY GOD!”

This was definitely going to hurt.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I held onto him, about to be squashed like a bug on a windshield. *Goodbye, cruel world!* I thought. *Though I guess I might survive since I’m half-Fae and all?*

We were definitely about to learn what was up with that.

But then Greyson said, “Hold onto me!”

With one arm still around my waist and in one swift movement, Greyson swung his body around to take the blow. We crashed onto the rocky surface. My whole body was shocked through and through by the *BANG!* of the impact. I had an out-of-body experience, realizing that I was alive, and Greyson was alive, and he’d saved me once again. His strong arms were still around me, but then—

Then, we tumbled into the raging river below.

**Episode 373**

MAYA

Colton was the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

How dare he just *assume* I was going to follow him to the council meeting? Yes, I had followed him in the end, but that wasn’t the point. The point was that his arrogance was intolerable, and every time he was around me, I wanted to strangle him. Considering he’d been hanging out with me all the time lately, my patience was running thin.

I deserved so much better than this.

Here I was, in the middle of the woods, bathing in a freezing cold stream—and for *what?* To make sure Joss didn’t start a war? The Redwood pack had to stop underestimating Joss. I’ll admit I wasn’t her biggest fan initially, but this was getting ridiculous. She was their Luna, chosen by their Alpha, and they should’ve shown her all the respect that came with that position. And she was trying, you know? She was trying really hard, which perhaps was the problem here, because werewolves tended to see that as some sort of weakness, especially from a woman.

Fucking bastards.

The fact that they doubted Joss and didn’t accept her was making her try even harder, so the cycle of idiocy kept going. I wasn’t interested in all this annoying petty drama. Okay, maybe that was a lie. I kind of lived for the drama. But bottom line: Joss was a whole lot more gracious than I would’ve been if anyone had doubted my authority. I would have ripped everybody’s throats out the second they challenged me, just to get it over with. But what had Joss done?

She’d acknowledged everyone’s criticisms, and now she was just sitting there, brushing her hair on a rock like a stoic, super-hot mermaid statue. She definitely looked the Luna part, actually. She was stunning all the way. But not like I was about to start kissing up to her.

“How’s it going?” she asked me when our eyes met.

I scowled, finishing soaping myself up. “I hate everything.”

Her chuckle was the last thing I heard before I plunged my head under the ice-cold water. It was both refreshing and infuriating. Why couldn’t I be in a hot shower, surrounded by comfort? This whole thing was madness. Stupid, fucking madness.

When I resurfaced, Joss was a few feet away, getting dressed. Colton had taken her spot on the rock, drying himself off. The second we made eye contact, my stomach clenched in that familiar, horrible way that it always did when I saw him. I glanced away, walking to the shore to dry off. From my peripheral vision, I could see him using a towel to wipe down his muscular arms. It was unfair how hot he was. I continued wiping myself down so that I could put my clothes back on, but I could feel his eyes burning holes on my body.

Having a mate like that was purely *enraging*.

He was undeniably handsome, and he knew it. I could have looked past the cockiness—it wasn’t like I was a wallflower myself—but Colton was also an asshole. Loud and opinionated and did I mention *loud*? He was like a walking siren, always making jokes and teasing and generally acting like a massive child. Immaturity was a major turn-off. There was just no way I’d ever think of him as someone that I could *really* be with.

Come to think of it, the real question here was who would ever decide that it would be a good idea to send *Colton* to a council meeting? He didn’t strike me as the pack’s greatest diplomat. Now or ever.

I doubted Colton was the best person to deal with this situation. I was pretty sure that council meetings were serious business and boring as shit—everyone making speeches, trying to impress everyone else. I hoped they’d treat Joss as an equal and not an outsider. This whole sexism thing had gotten old a *long* time ago. Misogynistic bastards. All of them.

“Hey,” Joss said, walking up to me. “I’m thinking we should leave at first light. I don’t want to be late for my first council meeting.”

I snorted. “Oh god, that’s such a goody-two-shoes thing to say.”

Joss shot me a hostile look. “I’m just trying to be professional here, despite everybody else acting like fucking idiots.”

I waved her off. “Don’t worry, I get it. You can take it down a notch with me, though.”

Joss arched an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“I’m on your side,” I said, shrugging.

She blinked at me in surprise.

I chuckled. “Hey, I get it. I know what it’s like to have to prove yourself. It’s exhausting. But I guess we’d all die of boredom if there were no challenge in anything.”

“I guess,” she said dryly. “Either way, I didn’t need any escorts for my first council meeting. You guys are like glorified babysitters.”

“I agree,” I said. “But the pack insisted we come with you. I hope they get their heads out of their asses soon.”

Joss paused. She definitely looked a little sheepish, now that she’d realized I was on her side. It was probably a whole new concept for her. “Thanks for coming,” she said. “Better you than anyone else. There’s nothing worse than being the new kid on the block.”

“And the only Luna at the council meeting, probably,” I added.

She winced. “Yeah. What a clusterfuck. I wanted to do this alone, just to make them see me as an equal, but I guess having a support system with me this time isn’t a bad idea.” She glanced behind us, where Colton was getting dressed. “Though I could’ve done without the murder-happy man child.”

I choked down a laugh. “He really is the worst.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t he your mate?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. *Why the fuck did she have to remind me?*

“Hey, Maya!” Colton called, marching toward us. “I had an idea!”

“Wake me from this nightmare,” I groaned, rubbing my forehead.

Joss smirked at me before sauntering away. “He’s all yours.”

I fought the urge to smack her or pull out her hair. Mostly because we had a council to attend, and it would be hard to explain her sudden baldness. As Colton approached me, I felt all the blood rush to my cheeks, which was annoying. And impractical. I didn’t need this shit in my life. He paused by the tree next to me, leaning against it like he was ready to pose for a photoshoot. The most infuriating part of it all was that he didn’t *look* stupid right then. He just looked supremely hot.

I really did hate him with the force of a thousand suns.

“So.” He smirked. “Netflix and chill?”

Thank god he said dumb shit like that from time to time. It helped water down my absurd attraction to him.

“In your dreams,” I scoffed, crossing my arms over my chest.

He shrugged, all cocky and hot. No, not hot—*horrible*. He was horrible. “You can drop the ‘I’m so tough’ act, you know. I saw you watching me earlier.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I deadpanned. “Did you fall and hit your head on the rocks?”

“Come on, Maya, I know what I saw,” he said. “I was drying myself off, and you were watching me and drooling. Not very subtle.”

I huffed. “I would NEVER—”

He walked up to me, cutting me off. “Maybe it’s time we stopped pretending? This thing between us is inevitable.”

“You’re delusional!” I laughed, shoving past him. My heart was racing, but I wasn’t about to acknowledge that. It was enough that my cheeks were on fire. “There’s nothing going on between us. Not right now, not ever.”

He blocked my way. He *dared* to block my way. But the most shocking part of it all was that he suddenly seemed serious. His trademark smirk was gone, replaced by a severity I didn’t recognize. “Seriously, Maya,” he said. “Why do we keep playing this dumb game?”

For a second, I didn’t know what to say. But then he gestured at himself. “I mean, come on, look at me! Do you know how many women would *beg* to have me as their mate?”

Again: thank GOD he kept saying shit like that to remind me that he was a complete and total douchebag. A complete and total douchebag I kept struggling to resist.

Pulse thundering in my ears, I glared at him. My fury was pretty close to lust, and I hated that as much as I hated him. Glaring, I moved closer, staring deep into his eyes. For a second, I thought I saw him hold his breath, as if shocked by my closeness.

I was about to shock him even further.

I wasn’t sure what I was doing, but with all those contradicting emotions roaming inside of me, I felt out of control.

“*Fine*,” I said in a low, shaky voice. “You’re right. I’ve been fighting this for way too long.”

Colton gulped. “You have?”

Furious, I grabbed him by the neck of his T-shirt. “You’re so right; I can’t resist you any longer…”

His eyes widened in shock before I hauled him close and kissed him harder than I’d ever kissed anyone.

**Episode 374**

The wind was knocked out of me as I hit the water. I flailed about in panic, fighting to swim upward toward the surface, where things with lungs were supposed to thrive.

“OH MY GOD!” I screamed after breaking the surface, coughing up water. “THIS IS FREEZING!”

I sucked air back in my lungs, fighting to gather my bearings while also staying afloat. It felt like I had pins and needles all over my body, and my panic rose when I realized that I was no longer holding Greyson, and Greyson was no longer holding me.

Frantically looking all around for him, I felt like crying. Jesus fucking Christ, WHERE WAS HE? Had he gotten hurt when he’d slammed into the rocks? When he’d slammed into the rocks to protect *me?*

My totally-not-stressed-out thoughts were interrupted when I slammed into a rock myself. The pain shooting down my spine was so severe that for a second, even the pins and needles from the cold subsided. I was getting swept away when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Greyson swimming toward me. HE WAS ALIVE!

He was super hard to kill, actually. I was proud of him. And of myself. Historically, I was the hardest person in the pack to kill. Though I definitely didn’t have Greyson’s upper body strength—my god, watching him swim against the current with those powerful arms made me very scared but also very proud of him.

“I’M HERE! YOU’RE ALMOST THERE!” I screamed. I was trying to be helpful and encouraging. It must have worked, because what felt like seconds later, he was grabbing me in the water. I reached for him, kind of sobbing now but without any tears. Or maybe there were tears, but I just couldn’t tell because of all the river water.

“Are you okay?” he asked, yelling over the sound of the waves. We floated, and the current pushed us around wherever it liked.

“I’m fine!” I held onto him like he was an anchor. “Are you?”

His reply was a grunt as the asshole current shoved us into a rock, and then another, and another, like we were part of its own little pinball machine. A memory flashed through my head: I was about seven, riding in a bumper car with my dad. Similar to now, I had the feeling of being out of control and slamming into things. But bouncing around back then had been both fun and terrifying. This was only terrifying.

We could die, right here, right now.

The feeling of Greyson’s powerful body pressed against mine filled me with a sense of hope, though. Maybe we could make it through this, because then…

The water smoothed out.

Greyson was panting in my ear, squeezing me so tight I thought I might burst. But I didn’t care. My own breathing was out of control as I fought to take in my surroundings. The moon peeked out from behind a silver cloud amid a sea of twinkling stars. How fucking scenic.

Fingers still digging into Greyson’s arms, I felt overwhelmed by the booming, thundering sound that had taken over my ears. It was the beating of my heart, wild in a way I couldn’t even process right then. I looked around, realizing that the river had widened, and the water was now calmer.

Everything else was eerily quiet.

“You’re okay,” Greyson told me, staring at my face while keeping me afloat.

I nodded, whimpering as I looked up at him. He maneuvered me around to his back like I was some sort of backpack. “Put your arms around my neck. I’m going to try to get us to the shore.”

I did what I was told, grabbing onto him like Bella did with Edward in that *Twilight* ‘spider monkey’ scene. I could feel Greyson fighting the current to get us to the shore, but despite being so powerful, he was struggling.

“Let me go,” I said in his ear. “I can swim!”

“Just hold onto me tighter!”

“Greyson—”

“This isn’t up for debate, Cali!”

I kissed the back of his neck, because I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude toward him, even though he was being a bossy jerkface right now. I tried to figure out how deep the river was—maybe the bottom wasn’t that far down? But nope—the second I stretched my body downward to figure it out, Greyson let out a growl.

“Don’t do that! It’s really deep, Cali, just hold onto me.”

For once, I did what I was told.

Greyson kept fighting his way toward the shore, and I kept being useless, but then I heard a low rumble. “Um. What’s that?” I asked.

He didn’t respond.

I hoped it wasn’t some sort of hungry fairy monster. Like a massive Venus flytrap! That would’ve been terrifying. Everything was terrifying, and I was feeling a little delirious, because when I looked around, I realized we were suddenly moving a lot faster.

The current was picking up.

“Why are we moving faster?” I asked in a high-pitched voice. “What’s going on?”

“We’re not having a discussion right now,” Greyson said, fighting to shift direction while the current battled us. His sudden urgent tone terrified me most of all, because the low rumble was getting louder and louder. And then Greyson said, “Okay, it’s a waterfall!”

“*WHAT?*” I screamed, looking ahead only to see that we were about to be swept over.

*OH MY GOD, WHEN WILL THE MADNESS END?* I shouted inside my head, or out loud—either way, my voice was lost in the thunderous roar of the falls. The world turned topsy-turvy, and we tumbled over the edge and plummeted down. I choked on water while we kept falling.

And falling.

And falling.

For what felt like an eternity.

The pins and needles sensation returned when I crashed into the river with what felt like yet another *BANG!* I held my breath as I was pulled underwater before I shot back up to the surface, a rising force dragging me upward.

That force was Greyson.

When I resurfaced, panting and taking in gulps of air over and over again, I looked around only to see him still holding onto my arm. Our eyes met, and he nodded at me. Hyperventilating, I choked out, “We—We’re alive!”

He said, “Yeah.” He pulled me close, wrapping his arms around me once more. “Yeah,” he whispered in my ear. “You’re alive.”

The water was shallower here, entirely calm. I felt him find his footing on the bottom. A moment later he was walking, carrying me with him to the shore. When he reached dry land, his legs shook and gave up, and we both collapsed to the ground.

Fighting to catch our breaths, we turned toward each other. I reached out to him, holding his hand once more. He seemed exhausted.

“That was some waterfall,” I said. My voice felt raw after all the screaming. After all the terror. He snorted, rubbing his forehead. I could still hear the falls crashing behind us in the distance.

“Thank you. For saving me,” I whispered.

He turned to me, pushing my hair back. He looked breathtaking under the bright light of the moon. “I’m just glad you’re okay,” he said. “No thanks necessary.”

There was a lump in my throat. He reached out to touch my chin, caressing my cheekbone. The air around us was cold, and my rapidly increasing breaths marred the air between us. When I shivered, though, I wasn’t sure if it was because of the decreasing temperature or because of Greyson’s touch. His lips parted as he leaned closer to me, and my pulse rose.

*Would this be a life-affirming kiss?* I wondered, my head pounding. *Is that what this is?*

Then there was a crackling noise, and the spell was broken. I gasped.

“Wait,” I said. “What about Torin and Astrid?”

Greyson’s intense expression changed to something resembling alarm. He sat up and helped me do the same. We looked behind us. Above and beyond the falls, I could see the remains of the bridge, but my new Fae friends were nowhere to be seen.

“Where are they?” I wondered out loud, getting more worried by the second.

Greyson got to his feet in one swift movement. He gripped my wrist and pulled me up. It felt so good to know that I could depend on him like this, even as a semi-frail semi-human.

“We should head up and try to find them,” Greyson said.

“I thought you didn’t trust them,” I said.

“I don’t,” he said. “But they’re still your friends.”

I almost teared up at his words, for reasons that I couldn’t even understand right then.

Greyson held my hand as we started walking. When he reached a muddy slope, he told me, “Be careful, okay?”

Instead of telling him that he was a patronizing smartass, I nodded. “You know—”

Greyson squeezed my hand, cutting me off. Frozen in place, he pointed ahead, his eyes wide.

My blood ran cold when I realized he was pointing at Astrid and Torin.

They were tied up, surrounded by guards who were leading them away.

**Episode 375**

XAVIER

The memory always started in my childhood bedroom.

There were hot tears running down my cheeks. I felt tiny, lying in bed, curled up in a ball while my mother stroked my hair. Her touch was sweet and meant to be soothing, but I was still scared.

I was always scared.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry, honey, but it’s going to be okay, all right?”

It wasn’t going to be okay.

“Your father never meant to hurt you,” she said, sniffling. She wiped away her own tears. Her face was bruise-free today, but there was no way to tell how long that would last. For a second, though, I was comforted by her warmth, the tenderness of her touch. But then the moment was shattered by my father’s heavy footsteps stomping up the stairs, sending waves of terror through me.

When the door swung open, I was shaking so hard I thought I would jump out of my skin. Burying my face in the pillow, I refused to look at him, despite his low, menacing growl.

“Look at this,” he spat at my mother. “It’s a disgrace! You’re only making him softer!”

“But—”

“He has Alpha blood!” he snarled. I felt the bed shift. I realized he’d grabbed my mother by the arm and started shaking her. “Feelings are for Betas! Leave him the fuck alone!”

Mom started whimpering, muttering apologies.

“Look at me, you useless piece of shit,” Father hissed at me.

I shuddered, more and more tears escaping my eyes. Bracing myself, I looked up…

But instead of my father, I was staring at Gabriel’s bemused expression, while Mikah poured water on my face.

“What the—” I coughed, spluttering. “What the fuck?” I shoved them both off, growling as I sat up.

“You sure you got Alpha blood?” Gabriel scoffed at me. “Cause you passed out so fast we thought you’d died. So what the fuck, man?”

I took a moment to get my bearings. It all came back to me—the fight, the silver bullet, Nneka, Cali being in Fae land with fucking Greyson—and *this*. The throbbing of my shoulder.

I’d almost died, just hours ago.

“How long have I been out?” I asked, glaring up at both of them as I sat up.

Mikah shrugged. “Just a few minutes.”

I didn’t want to feel embarrassed, but being weak horrified me more than anything. My brain had been hardwired to feel shame about it. Fighting off a wince, I started to get up.

“You look like shit,” Gabriel told me, frowning.

“I’m feeling better,” I lied. “We need to keep going.”

Gabriel grabbed my arm. “Are you sure? Maybe you should rest first.”

“I thought you didn’t give a damn about me.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re not getting rid of me so easily.”

“Thanks for your concern, dipshit,” I replied. “I promise I’ll take it easy.”

I needed to do whatever it took to find Cali. I couldn’t maim myself the entire way.

As I shifted, Mikah asked Gabriel, “Has your friend always been such an emotionally stunted douchebag?”

Ignoring the son-of-a-bitch vampire, I took off into the forest. The other two followed. I told myself it was because they respected me, not because they felt sorry for me.

Soon, we reached the area where I’d last seen Big Mac’s house. The moon was covered by clouds, but werewolf vision made it pretty easy to see. I shifted back to human, ignoring the twinge I felt in my shoulder. Gabriel did the same. Mikah paused too, kind of hovering in the background.

“What’s wrong?” Gabriel asked, glancing at my shoulder. “Why are we stopping? Are you okay?”

For a trained assassin, this guy was turning into a mother hen real quick. It was pissing me off. “I said I’m fine,” I declared. “We’ve just reached our destination.” I gestured straight ahead. “Big Mac’s house should be over there somewhere.”

Gabriel and Mikah stared at me. “Where, exactly?”

“Like. Around there. In that direction,” I said.

“I see nothing,” Gabriel said, frowning.

“That’s literally the fucking point.” I turned to Mikah. “Do you see anything out of the ordinary?”

Mikah raised his eyebrows. “Perhaps I do. So what?”

“So do your thing,” I said. It was an order.

Mikah scoffed. “What am I supposed to be doing?” He waved his hand toward where the house used to be.

I told myself I had to be patient with the bloodsucker if I wanted him to be useful to us. Reining in my temper, I said, “Cali was able to find the house pretty easily. She just moved through what she called a shimmering wall.” At the time, I’d thought she could see it because she was human. Apparently that wasn’t the case. At all.

I cursed myself for not believing her back then. She’d been right. But then again, wasn’t she always? I’d just always been the dumbass who hadn’t seen it sooner.

“A shimmering wall,” Mikah deadpanned. “And what I am supposed to do with that? Shimmer and sparkle right along with it? This isn’t fucking *Twilight*.”

“But you’re a vampire, so can you see any… shimmery shit?” I asked.

“So eloquent,” Gabriel commented, snickering.

Mikah rolled his eyes at both of us, looking around before he paused. “Okay…” He seemed to be focusing, brows furrowed, before he approached what looked to me like a pile of rocks and grass.

And then, in the blink of an eye, he disappeared into thin air.

“Shit!” Gabriel choked out.

“Mikah?” I shouted. “What do you see?”

The vampire gave no response.

“Motherfucker,” I growled, but Gabriel grabbed me by the arm.

“Okay, you need to go against your nature and chill right now.”

“I don’t want to chill,” I snapped. “I need to know what’s going on!”

Mikah returned through the shimmering wall, which I now could also see, for whatever reason. Magic was weird.

His expression was concerned.

“Out with it!” I demanded.

Mikah shook his head. “There is a house back there, but it’s been ransacked.”

My stomach dropped. “*What?*” I shook my head. “But I saw Big Mac only a few days ago!”

Mikah looked sheepish. “Sorry. It is what it is.”

Confused and frustrated, I ground my teeth together. Rage was a pretty easy emotion to channel for me. “You’re lying!” I accused, pointing at Mikah. “I was stupid to trust a fucking bloodsucker!”

Mikah’s expression went cold once more. “You’d better back the hell off before I ruin your other shoulder too.”

“For real?” I scoffed, shoving him in the chest. “You think I can’t take you?”

Mikah’s eyes flashed dangerously as he pushed me back. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Hey, stop it!” Gabriel said, coming between us. He grabbed me and Mikah by the nape. “You!” He showed his teeth at Mikah. “Back off!”

“Fuck off!” Mikah snarled, and Gabriel used both his hands to grab Mikah, ripping off his shirt. I was quickly forgotten, Mikah letting out a hiss before attacking Gabriel. The two of them wrestled on the ground, tumbling and rolling…

Until they disappeared entirely.

“What the fuck?” I said.

Before I could even process what the hell was happening, a hovering hand appeared out of nowhere and dragged me through what felt like a field of energy. The goddamn shimmering wall. I fell through and found myself staring at Big Mac’s house.

Just moments ago, there had been nothing in its place.

I shoved Mikah away, and he tumbled right back into Gabriel. The two of them continued to fight.

“You’re an annoying bastard!” Mikah snarled, managing a punch.

“Right back at you, dipshit!” Gabriel shouted, clawing at his arm.

Ignoring them, I walked through the house’s open door only to be faced with a disaster zone. It was like a hurricane had passed through. The chaos and devastation reminded me of something. Something bad.

Something that made me feel sick to my stomach.

But weakness was not an option.

Swallowing hard, I walked out of the house. Gabriel and Mikah were still wrestling on the ground.

“Hey!” I barked. “You two, stop!”

Surprisingly, they did. Gabriel was on top of Mikah. Both of them were panting, their shirts torn off. Their faces were so close, and they were kind of looking into each other’s eyes, which…

Which was none of my business.

“Whatever enemies-to-lovers bullshit thing you two have going right now,” I said, eyebrows raised, “you’d better deal with it another time.”

Mikah scoffed, shoving Gabriel away.

My friend just laughed. “He fucking wishes.”

Rolling his eyes, Mikah dusted himself off. He turned to me when I spoke.

“I need you to do some detective work,” I told him. “We have to figure out where Big Mac went.”

Shockingly, Mikah didn’t protest. He headed toward the door, but then something shifted in the atmosphere. A breeze. My nostrils flared. When I scented the air, I froze.

Instant, horrifying memories of my father flooded my head.

“Wait!” I said.

Mikah stopped.

Gabriel stared at me, puzzled. “What’s wrong?”

My voice sounded hoarse. Shaky. “He’s been here.”

**Episode 376**

MAYA

When our lips touched, Colton froze.

But the second I dug my nails into the back of his neck and pulled him closer, it was as if he’d been shocked to life. He grabbed my waist, opening his mouth for me to invade. The kiss was as hungry as I was, deep and demanding. I’d missed this—the heat and contact, the touch and feel of another person.

And goddammit, Colton felt so good it hurt.

He was hard and hot and needy, kissing me like he couldn’t get enough, and I loved it. But I also hated it, because I *hated* him. Always would. He was shackled to me like an anchor. Being mated was complete bullshit. I despised the idea of being forced into a relationship with any man, even if that man smelled incredible and his lips were pillowy and eager on mine.

When I moaned into his mouth, he broke the kiss, panting against my lips. He shoved me against a tree, hard enough for the wood to make a loud cracking sound, but neither of us gave a shit. That infuriating smirk of his was back, and I would have slapped him if I hadn’t been so busy nibbling at his neck. He just tasted so good, and the way he grabbed and wrapped his arms around my waist… I couldn’t help but want more.

But then I could, because his hand moved from my waist to my ass, squeezing. “So you’re finally ready to admit how much you want me?” he whispered.

His infuriatingly cocky voice shook me to my core, making me snap out of my cloud of lust. This wasn’t going to happen. Not with Colton. We were never going to get together, ever.

“In your dreams,” I hissed. I was about to shove him, but then he grabbed both my wrists with one hand, pinning them against the tree over my head. My body was trembling, and it wasn’t because of my fury.

It was all desire.

At least, mostly.

*Fuck*. I wanted to keep kissing him. Some twisted part of my mind hoped he wouldn’t stop. We both knew that I could kick him and break free, but I didn’t want to. What was fucking wrong with me?

“Say you want me,” he taunted, licking up my neck. He kept my wrists pinned over my head while his other hand moved from my waist to my hip, then to the inside of my bare thigh. He fiddled with the hem of my shorts, sending electrifying sparks of arousal through my core. Against my lips, he repeated, “Say you want me, Maya. Admit it.”

“You first,” I said, acutely aware of how slowly he was caressing my thighs. His touch was so soft, so feathery, but also firm. It was maddening enough that it made me feel like I was melting from the inside out. I needed to stay strong.

“It’s not that hard for me to admit, Maya,” he muttered, nibbling at my jawline. I shuddered, tilting my head to the side to give him better access. “I knew it from the first second I saw you.”

“What did you know?” I asked, my voice shaking.

He stared at me in the dark. His Adam’s apple bobbed. “That I had to have you.” He sealed the words with a hot kiss that made me weak at the knees. He could feel the effect he had on me. The asshole could tell how much I wanted this, how good it felt. He began to trace his fingertips toward the band of my shorts.

And that was when I snapped the fuck out of it.

How *dare* he?

“Too bad, because it’s NEVER going to happen!” I shoved him back, freeing my wrists from his grip only to slap him across the face.

He gasped and then chuckled, rubbing his cheek. He eyed me with wild eyes. “You’re a feisty one.”

“Oh fuck off, Colton.”

“I was joking, you know,” he scoffed. “I don’t give a shit about you.”

I sneered at him. “Sure you don’t.” I moved past him. “I’m going to find a comfortable place to sleep. Don’t follow me, because if you do, I’ll kill you.”

He laughed, delighted.

I would never admit it, but my stomach clenched pleasantly at the sound.

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The council meeting was at a location that had apparently decided to imitate the Sahara desert. The lodge was fine, but the climate—nope. It was horrid, with hot, dusty air that felt so sticky I wanted to scream.

“Were there no other places available? Did they really have to hold the council meeting in the freaking desert?” I asked Joss.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not sure why they had to hold a meeting in the first place.”

“Seriously,” I grumbled, standing in the lodge’s shade. “What’s wrong with a hotel, a tub, a soft bed? Why can’t I enjoy happy hour without anyone bothering me for once?”

Colton’s scoff sent a chill down my spine. He stood behind me, a little too close. His chuckle vibrated through me. “Don’t be such a princess,” he said. “You gotta learn to be tough.”

I wanted to yell at him that I *was* tough, and I could rip his throat out to prove it, but I refrained. More and more packs were gathering at the meeting spot, and I didn’t want to cause a scene.

“How long do you think this is going to take?” Joss asked me.

“I’m not sure,” I said truthfully. Despite Joss’s outward air of confidence, it was obvious that she was anxious. I knew all too well what that was like, especially at events like this one. I’d learned firsthand how fucked up werewolf politics could be when my grandfather had cast me out of our pack, forcing me to fend for myself.

Ignoring the way my heart clenched at the memory, I looked around at the approaching werewolves. Several packs had already arrived. Would my grandfather be here? I knew I’d recognize him right away, no matter how long it had been. I’d never forget those cold, unforgiving eyes, or that perpetual scowl. The real question was, would *he* recognize *me?*

I was his granddaughter, but that had never stopped him from ignoring me in the past.

Besides, I’d changed a lot since the last time he’d seen me—both on the outside and the inside. Joining the real world did that to you. I had grown, matured, and learned not to take crap from anyone. Come to think of it, I actually hoped that he’d arrive sooner rather than later. Maybe then, I’d be able to make him pay for all the things he’d done to me.

“Hey,” Joss said, nudging me out of my thoughts. “They’re making the announcement.”

A host announced the beginning of the council meeting, and we were all herded into the lodge.

“We’ve got your back,” I told Joss as we walked inside. She nodded, expression serious.

I turned to Colton, who seemed thoughtful for once.

“We’re here to support Joss, okay?” I whispered. “Don’t forget that.”

He frowned. “But what if she screws up?”

It was amazing how easily this guy managed to press my buttons.

“Shut up and listen,” I hissed at him.

He rolled his eyes at me, just as we found the Redwood seats around a large wooden table. I noticed that we’d been placed right in the middle. As we took our seats, all eyes seemed to be on us. I didn’t like that.

Something about this felt less like a council meeting and more like a trial.

“What’s wrong?” Colton asked me in a hushed tone.

I shook my head.

Once we were all seated, a man across the table stood up. He was massive and bald, with beady black eyes. All the packs fell silent.

“I am Samson Cesaries, the council leader.”

A small round of applause commenced. *Awkward*…

“Thank you all for coming,” he said, looking around the table. “Then again, not everyone of importance is here…” Wrinkling his nose in disdain, he turned to Joss. “The Redwood pack’s Alpha, Greyson, has opted to send his Luna in his place.”

All eyes in the room remained on Joss.

I reached under the table to squeeze her hand in support.

She sat straight, pretending to be unaffected, but I could tell that she was upset.

“I am the Redwood pack’s Luna,” she said evenly. “It’s within my responsibilities to represent the Alpha when he is unable to attend to his duties.”

Samson glared at her. “It is unfortunate, though. Seeing as I wanted Greyson to hear the council’s recommendation firsthand.”

I squeezed Joss’s hand again before she stood to her feet. She looked so intimidating right then that I wanted to applaud her. “I am fully capable of representing the Redwood pack,” she said. “What is it that the council wanted to recommend?”

Samson’s beady black eyes were fixed on Joss. He sneered at her menacingly. “We think it’s time to banish the Redwood pack for good.”

**Episode 377**

“Oh my god,” I said under my breath, turning to Greyson. “They’re taking them away!” I gestured wildly at Astrid and Torin, shaking from the cold now. My teeth were chattering.

Greyson eyed me, his brow furrowed. “Are you okay?” he asked in a low voice.

I shook my head. “Forget about me!” I pointed at Astrid and Torin, who were being led away like lambs to the slaughter. “What are we going to do?”

Greyson took a deep breath. “Give me the map.”

I removed the map from my jacket’s inside pocket. It wasn’t wet despite the fact that I was soaked, and if that wasn’t magic, I didn’t know what was. He opened the map up, and I looked at it. Fighting to ignore my shaking that seemed to be getting worse, I said, “They must be taking them to someplace where there’s a prison. Probably a nearby village?”

Greyson looked at the map, nodding. “Good call.”

He traced a finger along the piece of paper before stopping above a town called the Golden Acorn. “Probably here,” he said. “If we keep following the river westward—just like your grandmother instructed—it will lead us to the village.”

“Sounds about right. We should get going,” I said, hugging myself to stop the shaking.

*Why won’t it stop?* I thought, starting to panic. *Why am I so fucking cold?*

“Cali?” Greyson said, holding both my arms to pull me closer. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said, lying my ass off. “I just don’t want Torin and Astrid to stay in Dark Fae hands for too long.”

Greyson shook his head. “Maybe you should rest, regain your strength. What happened in that river wasn’t fun and games.”

“You mean you didn’t have the best time ever?” I asked sarcastically.

He snorted. “I’ll go find some food for you.”

“But Astrid and Torin—”

“It’s the middle of the night,” he said seriously. “Whatever the Dark Fae are planning to do with the two of them won’t happen until tomorrow morning, at least. You should rest.”

On the one hand, it was kind of sweet that Greyson wanted me to be okay. On the other hand, I wanted to move forward, and there was no way he could stop me or change my mind.

“Greyson,” I said.

“Cali,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m fine, Greyson. Thank you for trying to reassure me about Torin and Astrid, but we shouldn’t stop for my benefit. This is just a little cold from our trip down the river. Once I dry out, I’ll be fine.”

He raised both eyebrows, looking me up and down as I continued to shake. “Right,” he said. “But in the meantime, you’ll just keep shaking like an egg beater?”

I wanted to thank him for not using a vibrator analogy. That would’ve been awkward.

“I’m fine,” I repeated, heading back toward the river. I used the moonlight to help navigate, but it wasn’t easy. I didn’t have werewolf super vision.

“How about you hold my hand and let me navigate?” Greyson said quietly, reaching out to touch me. “I can see in the dark much better than a human. Even a half-Fae human.”

The moment our fingers intertwined, I felt a sense of comfort and peace that I couldn’t ignore. “Okay,” I mumbled. “You lead.”

He let out a small sound of surprise before he started moving again.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s just that you’d usually give me hell before letting me take charge.”

“Who, me?” I gasped. “I would never!”

“Come on, Cali. I’m pretty shocked you haven’t screamed at me and called me an asshole for asking you to rest in the first place.” I could actually hear the smirk in his voice.

It made me smirk too, despite the shivers still running down my spine. “I guess you’re not all bad.”

“Wow,” he scoffed. “What a compliment.”

I snickered, and he squeezed my hand. We navigated through the thick forest for a little while before I turned to stare at his profile. He seemed focused, intense, and it made my heart pound.

“Why did you really come with me?” I asked quietly.

He didn’t hesitate. “To protect you. It was part of the deal I made with your grandma. You know that.”

*That’s not all, though, is it?* I wondered. Swallowing thickly, I kept staring at him.

“But you agreed to come with me to the Fae world, and that was way before any deal with my grandmother.” I paused. “You didn’t have to come, but you did.”

Greyson glanced at me. “Are you sorry I came?”

I fought the chills running through my body. “Of course not.”

My mind flashed to the night before, when things between us had gotten hot and heavy, when we’d been locked together and hadn’t seemed to want to let go. “But…” I trailed off.

Greyson stared at me. “But what?”

“But did you come with me because you wanted to?” I asked. “Or was it because of some…” I forced myself to complete the sentence. “Or was it because of some Fae magic?”

Greyson didn’t even bat an eye. He kept walking, chuckling now. “If it were Fae magic, I wouldn’t know, would I?”

“That’s true. Maybe, I guess.” I frowned. “Why don’t you seem more bothered by that?”

“Does it bother *you?*” he asked.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I want you to be here because you want to be here. Not because of some bullshit magic trick I don’t know I’m using.”

*I want this thing between us to be real*, I thought. *I need us to be real, because being with you feels… amazing.*

I didn’t say any of that out loud, but Greyson seemed to sense my inner turmoil. A fresh wave of shivers hit me, just as he stopped walking and pulled me closer to him. “I don’t think it’s a magic trick,” he said, wrapping his arms around me. His warmth enveloped me like a blanket, tender yet alluring. When I shivered this time, it was out of anticipation.

“But how can you know for sure?” I asked, looking up at him.

He scrutinized my face. His thick, long eyelashes fluttered for a second before he looked down at my lips. “It *feels* real…” He leaned closer, brushing his mouth against my temple. “Doesn’t it?”

In a moment, my whole body was on fire.

“Yes,” I whispered, wrapping my arms around his neck to pull him closer. “*Yes*.”

He leaned in, trailing his lips over the shell of my ear, his large palms tracing the sides of my waist. “Does this feel real?” He sucked at a spot behind my ear that had my toes curling. I swayed in place, whimpering as he held me. I nodded and my trembling kept growing, just like my desire. I felt ravenous for him, but I also craved this little game. I loved feeling his hot breath against my skin.

When he faced me again, he tilted my chin up, making our eyes meet.

“How about this?” He planted the softest kiss against my mouth.

I was quivering so hard, he had to keep me upright. My voice was a whine. “It feels good.”

When he kissed me this time, it was hard and demanding. His tongue pressed against my lips, begging for me to open up for him. His taste was so delicious that I moaned, clinging to him.

“I can’t stay away from you, Cali,” he said against my mouth, his voice raspy. He was panting, cradling my face. “I can’t hold myself back any longer.”

“I don’t want you to,” I breathed, demanding now. “For the love of god, just, *please*—”

The second the plea was out of my mouth, it was as if Greyson caught fire. He was everywhere all at once, his mouth on mine, his hands all over me, tearing my clothes off as I dragged his away. I didn’t care about him ruining my shirt, and I didn’t give a fuck about his jeans—they had to go. He had to be naked and all mine, even if it was just for now.

*YES! VICTORY AT LAST!* I thought when he pushed me back onto a nest of fallen leaves, crowding me. His weight felt so good on top of me, bare skin on skin, his body rubbing up against my stomach as he spread my legs.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he panted, between hard, devouring, kisses.

I wrapped my legs around his hips, locking him there, right where I needed him. I felt empty, transfixed, and so hungry for him I was begging for it. I watched as he reached down between us, taking himself at hand, ready to move forward. I was transfixed by the power of him, by how much he desired me, and I thought, *This is happening!*

*This is FINALLY*

*FINALLY*

*HAPPENING!*

I writhed under him, gripping the sides of his neck to make him face me. I pulled him into yet another kiss, arching my hips up to meet his.

**Episode 378**

XAVIER

Both Gabriel and Mikah were wearing the same expression of disbelief. Their eyebrows were raised, lips pursed.

“*Who* has been *where*?” Mikah asked.

Gabriel stared at me as I stood there, fighting to keep from shaking. The fear I felt was so sharp and sudden that I didn’t know how to deal with it. I hadn’t felt like this since I was a child. The piercing terror was familiar and just as overwhelming.

“Hey, man,” Gabriel said, squeezing my shoulder. He looked worried. And if I’d thought he’d seemed concerned about my shoulder earlier, this time, he seemed fucking *alarmed*. “You okay?”

I swallowed roughly, cold sweat covering every inch of my body. Horrible pieces of equally horrifying memories flashed through my mind, my monster of a father the star in all of them.

“Maybe we should rest some more?” Gabriel asked me. “You don’t look so good.”

“It’s like you’ve seen a ghost,” Mikah said.

My father had always haunted me, in one way or another.

“I’m…” I swallowed thickly. “Fine. I’m fine.” I tried to pull myself together. “I’m probably just still being affected by the silver bullet.”

Or perhaps… Had Nneka done something to me?

She was a fucking witch. I’d been a fool to trust her.

“Are you sure?” Gabriel asked. “I’ve never seen silver bullets have that kind of effect on anyone after they’ve been treated.”

“It’s not uncommon at all, actually,” Mikah said. “Silver is a very potent poison for werewolves. We should have waited longer, given him more time to recuperate.”

“I’m fi—”

“If you say you’re fine one more fucking time, I’m gonna snap your fucking neck,” Gabriel almost growled at me.

Mikah blinked, looking between us. “Wow. You guys really are close, huh?”

Gabriel ignored Mikah’s comment. “Maybe this Big Mac left a spell somewhere around here.” He eyed the house suspiciously. “Maybe that’s what’s affecting Xavier.”

No matter what Mikah said about the silver, no matter what I told myself about Nneka, no matter what Gabriel said about Big Mac’s magic, I was still afraid. The emotion was irrational. I couldn’t pinpoint or explain it.

I hadn’t felt so afraid in years.

I despised it.

Fear was weakness, and that was something that scared me above all else.

What the hell was happening?

“We should probably head back to the pack house,” I said. I didn’t want to sound hesitant or intimidated, so I fought to keep my voice even.

“Are you sure?” Gabriel asked cautiously.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I want to talk with Mrs. Smith. I know she and Big Mac are friends. Maybe she’ll know where to find her.”

“Do we really need this Big Mac?” Mikah asked, rolling his eyes.

“I need to find Cali, Mikah. This isn’t a drill.”

I also needed to get the hell out of this ruin of a house. I was heading for the door when Gabriel’s voice echoed through the space. “Wait!”

Turning to face him, I scowled.

“Before we go, why don’t we give the private detective some time to do what he’s good at?” Gabriel gestured at Mikah. “Maybe there’s a clue in all this mess.”

I looked at Mikah, who seemed thoughtful. Then he shrugged. “It’s not a bad idea. I’ll poke around, but don’t get your hopes up.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, sighing. “Okay. But let's not spend too much time here.”

Gabriel gave me a cautious look. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I said I’m fi—”

“Cut the bullshit, Xavier.” Gabriel scoffed. “I’ve never seen you this off, not even when the Vancouver job almost went south. You’re hardcore, man.”

I didn’t feel ‘hardcore’. I felt like a kid, back in my childhood bedroom, hiding under the covers and trying helplessly to fight off the terror.

“I’m just feeling weird because of the wound,” I told Gabriel. He seemed dubious. Suspicious. But I wasn’t about to talk about my fucking *feelings* right now. I didn’t dare voice the reason why I felt the way I did. My father was the source of all my stress and anxiety, and that made me hate him even more. But I couldn’t share that with Gabriel.

My father’s name was not to be spoken out loud.

Cali would say, *Why? Is he Voldemort or something?*

The thought of that monster ever coming near Cali made a violent shiver run through me. I suppressed it, though. I wasn’t about to admit to anyone—not even to myself—that my father was the one thing that could still get to me, even after a life spent as a literal murderer.

It had been years since I’d last seen him, anyway.

I could not and would not let my father have so much power over me.

It pissed me the hell off.

“Stop fussing over me,” I snapped at Gabriel, shoving his hand from my arm. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Fuck off,” Gabriel told me, rolling his eyes. That felt better than him trying to take care of me or whatever. I flipped him off, looking around the house.

It really was a mess.

Everything in the residence was trashed: broken vials, books ripped apart, furniture turned over, food scattered everywhere, art pieces torn or broken…

I wondered what had happened to Big Mac. Was she still here, hiding somewhere? Had she left? What if she’d been killed or kidnapped?

Though why would anyone target Big Mac in the first place?

My father had been here, I was certain about that. But how had he even seen the shimmering wall that concealed the house? How had he even managed to find it in the first place?

How had he managed to find Big Mac when she was hiding so well?

Did he have some sort of accomplice? A vampire like Mikah, or someone with Fae blood like Cali? It seemed like werewolves were the only ones who couldn’t see this house.

Had my father been the exception?

“Hey, look!” Gabriel said, pulling me out of my thoughts. I turned to face him. He’d picked up a broken vial, a glint in his eye. “There are heaps of these.”

I looked at the ground, where a pile of bottles was scattered.

“They’re probably potions,” Gabriel said gleefully. It was alarming. He was like a kid in a candy store, all excited at the prospect of chaos. “We could probably use some of them!”

“Gabriel,” I said patiently. “*No*.”

He pouted. “But why? It could be fun.”

Mikah snorted from somewhere in the house. “You guys are ridiculous.”

“I heard that!” Gabriel barked.

“I don’t give a fuck,” Mikah replied.

Gabriel rolled his eyes, picking up another bottle. The liquid in this one was blood red. He stared at me excitedly. “Come on, Xavier! Live a little!” He shook the bottle up. “This could be, like, mermaid’s blood or something!”

His words made me realize something. “Actually,” I said, bending to my knees to examine the bottles. “If Cali’s blood is still here, we could use it to get into the Fae world.”

Gabriel sat on the ground, clearly happy with himself. “There’s only one way to figure that out.” He started going through the bottles with a shit-eating grin on his face. “I did tell you these bottles could be useful, didn’t I?”

“We’re not sure if they’re useful just yet,” I said.

“Would it kill you to be more encouraging?” he said, offended, though I could tell he was fucking around.

“Where do you get the energy to be such an annoying shit?” I asked, wrinkling my nose as I sorted through the bottles. Many of the enclosed substances stank, and were pretty slimy. “Also, this is disgusting.”

“Enjoy the journey, Xavier,” Gabriel said in a sing-song voice, holding up a vial that held a lime-green colored liquid and a dead goldfish.

“I’m gonna kill you one day,” I said conversationally. “Just FYI.”

Gabriel laughed.

Mikah stepped past us, shooting us a look. “You two bicker like an old married couple.”

Gabriel raised an eyebrow at him. “Jealous?”

“Hardly,” Mikah deadpanned. Gabriel kept grinning.

“Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to help us?” I asked Mikah impatiently, gesturing at the bottles. “Maybe you can smell the blood?”

Mikah huffed, straightening his jacket. His expression was indignant. “Excuse me? I’m not a literal bloodhound.”

Gabriel squinted. “Aren’t you, though?”

“I was just thinking that sorting through these vials is going to take forever, if you don’t…” I trailed off as Mikah got this absent look on his face. He ignored me and started walking away from us, deeper into the house. “Hey!” I called after him. “I’m talking to you!”

He raised a hand as if telling me to be quiet and moved toward the hallway.

“What’s up with him?” Gabriel muttered. “Is he, like, *in the zone?*”

I didn’t reply. Mikah stepped back, stopping before a wall-mounted mirror. He stared at it. His expression was puzzled, but then realization grew on his face.

Turning to look at me, he pointed to the mirror. And then, with absolute certainty, he said, “She’s in here.”

**Episode 379**

CALI

I reached for Greyson, desperate to feel him. I wanted his weight on me, the feel of his body hard against mine. I was aching for him, *burning* for him. But when I closed my arms around him, there was nothing but air.

“Greyson,” I panted, wanting more. Where was he? Where were his arms, his hands, his lips?

“Cali!”

His voice was far away, like he was shouting at me across a canyon.

“Greyson?”

“Cali! Open your eyes!” His voice was growing louder, like he was walking closer. “Open your eyes. Can you hear me, Cali?”

But I didn’t want to open my eyes. My body was aching for him. I needed him. I needed his hands on me, his mouth, his—

“Cali!” Greyson shouted, his voice sharp.

Why did he sound so scared? I struggled to open my eyes. There he was, right in front of me. But why was his face swimming like that? Why did he look so scared? And why the hell was he fully dressed?

I could have sworn I’d ripped those clothes off. Hadn’t I? He was kneeling beside me, peering into my face.

“Why’d you stop?” I rasped. I was still moving, still writhing, aching for him to touch me.

Confusion registered on his face. “Cali, you’ve been dreaming.”

“No,” I snapped. I was sick of this, of the way he was so afraid of what was going on between us. I wasn’t going to let him get away with it. “I *wasn’t* dreaming and you know it, Greyson. You know it!” God, why was my speech slurred?

When Greyson put his hand to my forehead I gasped—it was ice cold. I wriggled away. It was too cold. It was going to freeze me. What was he doing? What was going on?

“Fuck, Cali, you’re burning up,” he muttered, putting his other icy hand on my cheek. “You’ve got a fever.”

Fury surged through me and I grabbed for him, fisting handfuls of his T-shirt and pulling him closer. “It *wasn’t* a dream! Why would you say that? Why are you denying what’s between us? It wasn’t a fucking dream!”  
 “Okay, okay,” he said soothingly, pressing down firmly but gently on my shoulders, forcing me to lie back down. “It’s okay, Cali.”

Wait, I was dressed, too. But… But hadn’t Greyson just pulled my clothes off in a fit of wild lust? Hadn’t his face just been slack with desire? What was happening? Could it really have been a dream?

The anger faded and I looked around, trying to remember where I was, and why I was there. “What’s going on?”

Greyson disappeared for a moment, then returned and laid a damp cloth across my forehead. It was so cold it seared like fire and I began to shake. “Get that off me. *Please*,” I begged. “I’m so cold. Why is it so cold?”

There was a worried crease between his eyes. “We fell in the river, remember?”

The river? Memories of the fall swam slowly back to me, drifting across my muddled brain. “Yeah.” I swallowed. “I remember.” My teeth were chattering, and I curled in on myself.

“God, Cali, you’re shaking,” he said. “Your clothes are soaking.”

I was so cold I could barely think, but I pushed myself up into a sitting position; there were things to be done. “I’ll start a fire.”

Greyson’s hands were on my shoulders again, but he wasn’t pushing this time. My shaky arms had given way under me, and he caught me before I could crash. He eased me back down to the ground. “We can’t start a fire, love.” He looked around, the crease between his eyes deepening. “We don’t want to draw the Dark Fae’s attention.”

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Someone was in danger. Someone I was supposed to remember. I was tired. So tired. Sleep kept drying to drag me down, but I fought against it. There was someone I was supposed to be helping…

“Astrid!” I gasped, opening my eyes. “Torin! Where are they?” I looked around wildly for them.

“*Shh*,” Greyson said, stroking a soothing hand down my arm. “Cali, *shh*. Calm down.”

“Astrid and Torin. Are they okay? Did you find them?” I gasped out, grabbing his hand.

“We’ll find them,” he said, his voice low and calming. “But right now you need to rest, Caliana.”

“No, Greyson—” I clawed at him, trying to sit up.

“You need to get better, love, before we can even think about rescuing anyone. Okay?”

I wanted to argue, but my teeth were chattering too hard. Every muscle in my body was tense, trying to ward off the cold, and I curled into a ball. “It’s so cold here. I can’t get warm. It’s like my *bones* are freezing. I need soup, or one of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mochas.” My body relaxed a little just thinking about the warm, rich drink.

Greyson braced himself, starting to get to his feet. “You need something to eat. You must be starving. I’m going to go find something—”

“No!” I said, reaching for him. “Don’t leave me, please. We’ll order something. Someone around here has to deliver.”

Greyson chuckled. “I think you’re still a little delusional, Cali. You need to sleep. It’ll make you feel better.”

“Sleep,” I mumbled. It did sound good. I closed my eyes. I wanted to sleep, but I was so damn cold. Cold in a way that was starting to hurt, my every muscle aching from the tension of it. I still had hold of Greyson’s hand, and I pulled him close. “Come lie down with me.”

He hesitated for a moment. Then, “Okay, but I want you to drink some water.”

“I don’t want it.” I tried to push it away when he held his cupped hand to my mouth, but he was persistent, and, as soon as the water touched my tongue, I realized I’d been *dying* of thirst. Greyson carried six handfuls of water to me before I was sated, and then I lay back, shivering again.

When Greyson stepped away again, I nearly cried. “Come back,” I sobbed. “I’m so cold.”

“I’m going to keep you warm,” he murmured. Then, with the bone cracking sound that could only mean one thing, he shifted.

Maybe this was a dream. Maybe this was *all* a dream. Greyson, the Fae world, the pack house, Xavier—everything. Maybe tomorrow, I’d wake up in my shitty little apartment in Minnesota. Lola would knock on my door, shouting for me to hurry or I’d be late for class.

A second later Greyson lay down behind me, the delicious warmth of his wolf fur pressed against my back, and I thought no more.

\*

An ocean wave broke at my feet, then sucked back out and I stumbled, fighting its pull. Another wave took its place. I tried to run from it, but my feet were buried in the sand, and it crashed into me. I bent to dig the sand away and, when I stood up, I was standing on the bank of a raging river. The water was white with the rapids, roiling and thundering over jagged rocks.

Greyson stepped to my side and grasped my hand. “We’re going to have to jump,” he said, his eyes grave.

“We’ll never make it,” I gasped out, shaking my head. “We can’t do it, Greyson. We’ll die.”

He didn’t appear to hear. “On three, Cali. One, two, three!”

I opened my eyes with a gasp, reaching out. “Greyson!”

But he wasn’t there. I sat up, my head swimming, and looked around. The leaves were stirring in the wind and birdsong was floating down from the top branches, but Greyson was nowhere to be seen.

I took a moment to let my brain catch up. I was alone. Completely alone in Dark Fae territory.

I looked around wildly. Where was he? Why would he leave me?

It was harder than it should have been, but I clambered to my feet. I’d had a fever—that was what Greyson had been telling me last night. I put a hand to my head, but I couldn’t tell if it felt warm. But I was conscious and thinking more clearly, both of which seemed like good signs.

I was looking around, trying to orient myself, when I heard underbrush crunching in the copse of trees to my right. I swooped down and picked up a rock, cocking my arm back, ready to attack.

When Greyson stepped out of the trees, he looked at me strangely.

“Oh my god, Greyson,” I said, dropping the rock and putting my hand to my thumping heart. “It’s you. Where have you been?”

He held up the armful of apples he was carrying. “Ordering out. Glad to see you’re up.” He walked closer, looking at me critically. “But you still look pale. How do you feel?”

“Okay.”

“You’re lucid, at least. You were really out of it last night. Have an apple. You need something to eat.”

I took the apple he offered and looked at it warily. It looked like a fairytale apple—like the one the witch gave to Snow White right before the princess fell into that death-like slumber. It was perfectly round and rosy and it shone in the weird golden light. It looked perfect. *Too* perfect.

“How do you know these are safe to eat?”

“I didn’t just find them out in the woods. They came from an orchard.”

“Whose orchard?”

Greyson gave me a sheepish grin. “I’m not sure. I kind of borrowed them. But they’re fine. I’ve already eaten a couple.”

“That doesn’t rule out slow-acting poison,” I said, but took a bite anyway. My stomach lurched as I swallowed. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was.

Greyson touched his fingers to my forehead. “Do you remember anything from last night?”  
 I swallowed my bite of apple. I didn’t remember much, but the touch of his skin reminded me of a *very* vivid dream. It had involved both of us, not a lot of clothes, and an awful lot of touching.

My face began to flush. “Not really,” I lied. “Just being cold.”

Greyson’s gaze on me was intense, like he was trying to see me from the inside out. After a moment he gave me a small, knowing smile. “Your fever’s broken.”

I stared at him for a moment more, then turned away. Had he known I was lying?

I’d just taken another giant bite of apple when I heard a voice. A low, melodious voice, still a ways off.

“I wouldn’t eat that if I were you.”

**Episode 380**

GREYSON

I whipped around to see a man step out of the trees and head toward us. Well, *nearly* a man. He had the head and bare torso of a man, but instead of legs, he was walking on what appeared to be two hairy goat legs.

The instinct to shift and attack the new threat was strong, but something told me that this creature—whatever he was—wasn’t strictly a threat. Not wanting to escalate the situation if it wasn’t necessary, I took a deep breath, managing to stay in human form.

Next to me, Cali spat her bite of apple onto the leafy ground in alarm. She looked warily at the creature. “What’s wrong with it? Why shouldn’t I eat my apple?”

The creature raised his eyebrow. “*Your* apple? Does it *belong* to you? Did you *pay* for it?’

“It’s just an apple,” I said, still sizing up this creature. “Who cares?”

“Who cares? Well…” Laughing, the creature shook his head. “Clearly you’ve never tangled with a nymph. That orchard you stole from belongs to one, and she’s… Well, let’s just say she’s *protective* of her property.”

“It’s an *apple*,” I repeated, growing irritated.

“I know, I know, but trust me, you do *not* want to get on the wrong side of a nymph,” he said with a shudder.

Cali looked down at the half-eaten apple in her hand, then up at me, her expression baffled.

“You got a name?” I asked the creature.

“Oh,” he said, looking startled. “How rude of me. Of course, I’m Leif.” He gave us a small bow.

“And…” Cali looked uncomfortable. “And what are you?”

Leif’s golden eyes narrowed. “I could tell you, pretty girl, but then I’d have to kill you.”

My heart thudded. Instinctively, I stepped in front of Cali and raised my fists, ready to attack.

The clearing was deadly quiet for a moment, then, inexplicably, Leif burst out laughing.

“Your faces!” he cried, pointing at us, laughing hysterically. “You were so scared!”

Cali looked at me, utterly perplexed.

“What the hell is going on?” I growled.

“I was just kidding,” Leif said, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “I’m not going to kill anyone. Geez. Guess I know who can’t take a joke around here. Haven’t either of you seen a satyr before? Half man, half goat, all baller?” He gestured down at his hairy legs, which ended in small, pointed hooves.

Cali looked at me, surprise registering on her face. “I didn’t think satyrs were real,” she said. Her tone was low, but it must have carried to Leif, because he scoffed.

“*Not real*.” He snorted, looking insulted. He angled his body so we could see the back of his goat legs. “Do these calves look *fake* to you?” He grimaced as he flexed his muscles.

This performance surprised a laugh out of Cali, but I just rolled my eyes. We didn’t have time for this kind of nonsense. I looked at Cali. It was good to see her smile, but she still looked pale. I wished she’d finish eating that apple. I’d been so fucking scared last night, watching her suffer with that fever. She’d been sweating and shivering, burning so hot I’d thought she was going to light herself on fire. She’d been so out of it, sleeping fitfully, talking to people who weren’t there, crying out in her sleep. Her delirium had freaked me out the most, even if some of those dreams had seemed pretty… *interesting*. I wondered if I could get her to tell me what, exactly, she’d been dreaming about.

I’d stayed in my wolf form all night, trying to keep her warm. I’d sweated all night. It had been like hugging a burning coal. Finally, she’d stopped shivering long enough for me to leave and find her something to eat. I’d had to. I couldn’t let her get weaker. She was so cold and damp from our unexpected swim in the river. People died of hypothermia, and that fever…

If anything had happened to her—if she didn’t get out of here alive—I’d never be able to forgive myself. I let my eyes range over her beautiful face, watched her expressions shift as she listened to Leif. I could never explain it, but we had a connection, me and this beautiful Fae. Whatever happened, I didn’t want to leave her side. I wanted to keep her safe—that was part of it. But there was more. I just liked the feel of her next to me. The way the curve of her body fit right beneath my arm, like a puzzle piece…

I took a deep breath and gave myself a mental shake. I needed to focus; I had a job to do. I had to get Cali out of here, and I couldn’t let my feelings about her complicate things.

“Should we be worried about this nymph?” Cali was asking, looking over at me.

I shrugged, careful to speak low enough that Leif couldn’t hear. “Maybe. This is Dark Fae territory. It’s hard to know who to trust. Probably best not to trust anyone.” I cast a dark look at Leif and raised my voice. “Especially not this creature.”

“Real ray of sunshine you’re traveling with,” he said, rolling his yellow eyes at Cali.

She smiled ruefully, but he didn’t smile back. He was staring at her, hard.

“There’s something different about you, isn’t there?” he asked, taking a step closer to her. I tensed, ready to spring, but all he did was sniff the air. His eyes narrowed. “You smell like a human. Has anyone ever told you that?”

Cali’s eyes grew wide and she took a step back, away from him, moving closer to me.

I put my arm protectively around her and she leaned in. I let the feeling of her warmth wash over me for a moment, then turned to Leif. “We’re just passing through, man. We’re not looking for trouble, and we won’t be stealing anyone else’s fruit, so you can just relax.” I tipped my chin up toward the woods. “Feel free to move along.”

“But you already stole the fruit, didn’t you?” Leif asked shrewdly. “And your problem isn’t with me, unknown beings. It’ll be with the nymph, Gunhild.”

“*Gunhild?*” Cali asked.

Leif grinned mischievously. “But, quite frankly, I don’t care that you’ve annoyed her. Gunhild’s a pain in my goat’s ass.”

We watched as Leif strolled casually past us to the river, looking curiously downstream. Maybe he was wondering how we’d arrived.

Cali leaned into me. “Do you think he knows anything about Astrid and Torin? Should we ask him?”

I looked at Leif, watching him carefully. “I don’t know.” It was possible—and probably not a bad way to start, asking a local for the lay of the land—but that wasn’t my style. I preferred a more cautious approach, and to rely on no one else. “Let’s not bring it up,” I whispered back, speaking close to her ear. “Not yet.”

Leif strolled back toward us. He glanced down at the small pile of apples at Cali’s feet. “May I?”

I nodded and he grinned at me.

“Thanks,” he said, reaching for one. “I’m starving.” He took a gigantic bite and sighed with satisfaction. “It is amazing how someone as sour as Gunhild manages to grow such sweet apples. A botanical miracle if I ever saw one. So,” he said, looking straight at Cali, “where are you passing through from? And where are you heading to?”

I felt Cali tense and I pulled her closer. “We’re supposed to be meeting someone.”

Cali had sidestepped his questions and, when Leif looked up at me, I thought he was going to ask them again. But he just smiled. “Well, I hope you take some time in your travels to visit the village.”

“Where is it?” Cali asked.

He nodded to his right. “Only a few miles downriver.”

“We’re not here to sightsee,” I growled. All I wanted to do was keep moving, find the damn flower, and get back to a world I fucking understood.

“Oh, that *is* disappointing,” Leif said, looking disheartened. “Especially with today being such a special day and all.”

“What kind of special day?” Cali asked.

“Everyone in the village is talking about it,” Leif said, almost to himself, taking another bite of apple.

“Talking about what?” Cali asked, louder.

Leif looked over at her. “They captured two Light Fae last night, of course.”

Cali’s whole body went still as stone. She swallowed hard. “That doesn’t happen often?”

Leif’s mouth was too full of apple to answer, so he just shook his head, eyes wide.

“What are they going to do to them?”

Leif finally swallowed, with some difficulty. “Well, there’s due process of course; we’re not animals,” he said with a wink. “So, after a fair trial, they’ll be convicted.”

“And then?” Cali asked, her voice nothing but a whisper.

Leif grinned. “And then they’ll be executed in the town square!”

**Episode 381**

MAYA

The dusty lodge suddenly sounded like a fucking beehive. Every head turned to the one next to it, muttering in alarm. For my part, I was staring at Samson Cesaries, doing my damnedest to not stand up and scream, *what the actual fuck?!*

Here I was, finally ready to make a real effort with the Redwood pack, and now this unraveling mummy of a werewolf was *banishing* us? What the hell? I crossed my arms, trying to control the fury coursing through me. This was all such bullshit. At this point I might as well just go Rogue.

Next to me, Joss stirred, then stood so suddenly that her chair toppled over behind her. She planted her feet and put her hands on her hips, giving Cesaries a glare so menacing even I drew back a little.

“Excuse me?” she hissed, her voice icy.

I stared at her with slightly begrudging admiration. Say what you will about Joss—and I’d said plenty—but you had to admire her confidence, standing and fighting in front of the whole council. This girl took shit from absolutely no one, and I could respect that.

Cesaries looked a little taken aback by Joss’s question, like he could never have imagined her response. He cleared his throat. “Did you not understand me? It is the agreement of this council that the Redwood pack will be banished. Effective immediately.”

Joss rolled her eyes. “*My* ears work fine,” she snarled, making a few members of the council gasp, “but *you* need to check the council’s creed. Because, in accordance with this council’s own laws and statutes, the banishment of an entire pack can only be declared when there is *due cause*.”

The room buzzed again as everyone turned to their neighbor, checking and confirming that this was true.

Joss gestured to Colton and me. “We’re waiting to hear your cause.”

This earned a gasp from the entire group. I looked around, working hard to keep from smirking as I took in the surprised looks on every single face. I had a sneaking suspicion no one here had ever seen anyone challenge the council like Joss was doing, and I wanted to support that kind of fight.

“She’s right!” I yelled into the eerie silence that had filled the room.

“Enough!” Cesaries said sternly, slamming his gavel down on the table. “We will have order!” He glared at me. “There will be no further outbursts, or I will have you removed, young lady.”

I’d have loved to see them try. I stood up, shoulder to shoulder with Joss, and glared at him. “We’re waiting for the answer we’re owed, Cesaries. Unless you have no answer. Not prepared to be challenged by a woman, were you? Well, wake up, pal, because it’s a brand new morning!”

The room exploded with sound. Colton grabbed my hand, tugging at me. I shook him off, but he grabbed it again.

“*Sit down*,” he said, yelling to be heard over the chaos filling the room. “Keep your shit together, Maya. This is serious.”

“Is it?” I snapped. “All this time I thought Cesaries was working on his new stand-up routine.” But I reluctantly let him pull me back down into my chair. Joss glanced at me and our gazes locked for just a moment. Her smile was brief, but I understood it. A silent thanks for having her back.

I crossed my arms again, fury bubbling just below the surface. Joss turned back to Cesaries.

“Now, about that due cause,” she said, tapping her foot impatiently.

Cesaries looked around nervously. “A moment, please,” he said, shuffling uselessly through the stack of papers on the table in front of him. He turned to the man next to him and leaned forward, whispering in hushed tones.

“They’ve got nothing,” Joss muttered, only loud enough for me and Colton to hear. Then, louder, “Any time today would be great.” She was working to sound casual, but every muscle in her body was coiled tight.

A thin man with a face like a grasshopper handed Cesaries a sheet of paper. Cesaries adjusted his thick glasses and squinted down at it.

“Yes, precisely this. Thank you, Brimly.” He cleared his throat and prepared to read. “The banishment of the Redwood pack steams primarily from the most recent attack undertaken by the aforementioned Redwood pack. This brutal and bloody attack resulted in the death of no less than seventeen werewolves!”

He announced the last part like a declaration, and the outraged response from the assembled council was instantaneous.

“*They* attacked *us!*” I shouted, jumping to my feet again. “*They* came after *us!* They deserved what they got.”

“*Maya!*” Colton snapped.

I glared down at him. “It’s true, Colton. You know it’s true.”

“Sit down before you get yourself in some serious shit,” he hissed.

Cesaries glared at me, then Colton, then back at Joss. “May I continue?”

A muscle in Joss’s jaw twitched, but she shrugged. “Read on.”

He looked back down at the paper. “The hostility between the Redwood pack and the deceased werewolves was directly caused by the death of one Ryker Dawson during a Lupo Finale instigated by the Redwood pack.” He looked up, glaring at us over the top of the paper. “And the failure of the Redwood pack’s Alpha to appear—*in person*—before this council is nothing less than gross negligence.”

I stared up at Cesaries, absolutely furious. This was all such bullshit. I might have been with the Samara Pack when most of this had gone down, but after that last battle—and now this—I finally felt like I belonged with the Redwood pack. In this moment, I felt like a loyal Redwood… Even if our Alpha was currently off honeymooning with Cali for some reason. I glanced up at Joss, who was still staring at Cesaries, fury practically pulsing from her eyes. She probably wasn’t too happy about Greyson’s little secret getaway. Just *another* way men were absolute trash.

Cesaries and his councilors were all shuffling papers and murmuring to each other. They were all men, every single leader of this council—this group of assholes who thought they could tell us what to do. I felt the heat in my blood rising. I was so fucking sick of this.

I glanced over at Colton, who was looking angrily at the council, but I could see that he was worried, too. Fucking Colton. Maybe *he* was part of the reason I was feeling so pissed off. I didn’t like being pushed around, and Colton was a freaking expert at pushing my buttons. Being mated to him made me feel…

A flush heated my cheeks and I turned away. Right now was *not* the moment to think about Colton, or our fucked-up dynamic. I tuned back to Joss as she began to speak again.

“I would like to take this moment to remind the council that the Redwood pack had *every right* to initiate the Lupo Finale to find a new Alpha. Anyone who was there will tell you that it was called and conducted in accordance with council rules.”

“While that may have some truth—” Cesaries began, but Joss spoke over him.

“And let it be known that the Manus Cruentae was responsible for viciously attacking the Redwood pack—*not* the other way around. There are witnesses who will confirm that, too.”

A feeling of pride welled in me as I looked at Joss. I’d had my doubts about her coming to the council meeting, but she wasn’t letting anyone push her around. Our Luna was holding her own.

Cesaries heaved a long-suffering sigh and pulled off his glasses. “Be that as it may—”

But Joss had evidently had enough. She slammed her fist down on the table hard enough that Colton and I jerked back, alarmed, and the rest of the crowd gasped. Her eyes were narrowed to slits as she bent over the table, glaring at Cesaries and the council’s governing body. “This council is obliged to consider the facts!”

The rumble in the crowd kicked up again, but I noticed a slight difference. It didn’t sound so condemning, somehow. I even overheard some murmurs of assent, acknowledging that Joss was in the right. Perhaps Cesaries noticed this as well—even though he was still scowling, he turned to his advisors and had a hushed but heated discussion.

When he turned back to Joss, his expression was cold and angry. “This council exists to serve the packs, but also to protect them from threats both on the outside and within.” He glared at the three of us. “But it does not act without due consideration. The Redwood pack’s assertions of self-defense have been taken under advisement. In accordance with our statutes, the Redwood pack will be tested and given a chance to prove itself.” Then he leaned forward, glowering at Joss. “But if you fail, the Redwood pack will be banished. *Forever*.”

**Episode 382**

XAVIER

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked incredulously. I turned to Gabriel. “Has the bloodsucker lost his mind?”

Gabriel shrugged, looking as baffled as I felt.

I turned back to Mikah. “How the hell can Big Mac be *inside* that mirror?”

Mikah gave a derisive snort, like he couldn’t believe we were being so stupid.

“Okay, man, my knowledge of vampires and your creepy ways may not be totally complete—the garlic and the sleeping in coffins and stuff—but don’t you guys hate mirrors?”

Mikah rolled his eyes. “We don’t hate them, we just prefer when they’re not around.”

“What the hell does that even mean?” I asked.

Mikah ignored me and pointed at the mirror. “But this is not an ordinary mirror, my friend. This one’s special.”

Gabriel walked over to look into the mirror, and, curious now, I stepped next to him. All I could see was the two of us, looking dirty, scuffed up, and pretty fucking confused. I met Gabriel’s eyes in the mirror and he shrugged.

“Well?” Mikah asked. “What do you see?”

“Just this joker’s face,” I said, elbowing Gabriel. “Doesn’t look special to me.”

Mikah heaved a sigh. “That’s because you’re not a vampire. You can’t see what I see.”

“So what can you see?” Gabriel asked, clearly interested.

“You don’t believe this bullshit, do you? He can’t see anything. He’s screwing with us,” I said, turning to Gabriel.

“I’m not,” Mikah said steadily.

“Then tell us what you’re talking about!” I exploded.

Mikah crossed his arms. “Some mirrors are just that. All they can do is show you your pretty face. But some mirrors are different. Some mirrors are portals.”

“To what?” Gabriel asked.

Mikah raised an eyebrow. “Other dimensions.”

“This is such bullshit,” I said, shaking my head. “Okay, so how come vamps can see these portals and we can’t?”

“Because we’re dead,” Mikah said simply. “We don’t see everything on the same flat, mortal plane, so we’re able to see beyond the reflection.”

“Great. Fantastic,” I snapped. “What a valuable piece of vampire trivia. I’m sure it’ll come in real handy. Even if all that nonsense is true, what makes you so sure that *this* mirror is one of those portals?”  
 Mikah shrugged. “Oh, because your missing witch is hiding in it. And she’s watching us.”

Before either Gabriel or I had time to react to this astonishing pronouncement, Mikah reached his hand into the mirror, quick as a flash. It disappeared to the elbow, like he’d dipped his arm into liquid silver, and when he pulled it back, Big Mac came with it, stumbling into the room.

Dumbfounded, I stared at the witch, and she glared back.

“Thanks a lot,” she snapped, pushing Mikah away. “Can’t you idiots see that I’m hiding? What does a person have to do around here to get a little privacy?”

“Sorry about that,” Mikah said, stumbling a little as he tried to get his feet back under him, “but my friends here have need of you.”  
 From behind us there was a tiny meow, and a small golden cat emerged from the ruins of the house. He beelined straight for Big Mac and leapt into her arms.

“Why isn’t your cat black?” I asked, frowning. “Aren’t witches meant to have black cats?”  
 Big Mac rolled her eyes, annoyed—as she always was—with everyone around her. “Don’t listen to the big stupid dogs, Lion,” she purred, petting the cat’s fluffy fur. Then she looked up at us, surveying us with deep irritation. She turned to Mikah. “So, a vampire with not one, but two werewolves. Fascinating. Do tell.”

Gabriel laughed. “I know it doesn’t sound great on paper,” he said, shooting Mikah a grin, “but we’re managing to get along okay. No deaths to report just yet. The bigger question is, why were you hiding in a mirror?”  
 “That’s none of your business,” the witch snapped.

I looked from Big Mac to the ransacked room. Bookcases were toppled over, books ripped from their bindings and strewn around the room. The couch had a long rip down the cushion and stuffing had been pulled out. In the corner a large, glass-doored cabinet was standing open and small bottles were smashed all over the floor, the glass sparkling like ice in the sunlight. Whatever had been in most of the bottles was gone, dried up or blown away, but there were a few dark patches on the floor where something had spilled, staining the wood a rust-brown. A thought occurred to me and I turned back to Big Mac. “Why did you want Cali’s blood?”  
 “Who?” she asked, though her eyes darted nervously away from mine.

“Cali. My mate. You know, beautiful, human, runs with werewolves. Can’t forget someone like that,” I said coldly. “What’d you do with her blood?”

Big Mac looked at me for a moment, then down at her cat. “That’s a secret.”

I felt anger surging within me and took a step forward. “A bit of cooperation would help if you want to keep your hiding place a secret,” I said in my most menacing voice. I was livid. Big Mac was shrewd, that was for sure, and I knew she was no teddy bear, but what had she done with Cali’s blood? Had she done something to harm her? Whatever her answer was, I had a furious feeling that she’d disregarded Cali’s well-being in favor of her own, selfish ends.

Big Mac looked up. “Are you threatening me?”

“You bet your ass I am,” I said, taking another step forward. “And it won’t be just a threat if you don’t start answering my damn questions.”

She looked around the room, like she was considering her options. Then she looked back at me. She sighed and let Lion leap to the ground. “What do you want to know?”

Suddenly interested in the rest of us now that Big Mac was in the room, Lion wove between my legs. I tried to ignore him as I turned to his owner. “You’re going to an awful lot of trouble to hide your house out here.” She nodded. “How are you even doing it?”  
 She rolled her eyes. “I’m a witch. We use spells.”

“How?” I asked.

Lion had completed his examination of me and moved silently back to Big Mac. She reached down and picked him up, stroking him thoughtfully. “Every spell requires something different. Sometimes we need werewolves or vampires or other creatures to create a spell.” She smiled. “Like I did with your friend Jay’s eye.”

If she was trying to rattle me by bringing that up, it worked, and my stomach lurched at the memory. I could still remember Cali running around, crazed with the effort of trying to save Jay. I could still remember how crushed she’d been when Jay had lost his eye. I shook my head. Cali was… a lot of things, but she loved her friends. She’d do *anything* for the people she cared about.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat, trying to get my bearings again. “I remember. I was kind of there for that. But you also took my mate’s blood. Why did you want it?”

Big Mac looked at me for a long moment, like she was considering what to say. Then she began to move around the room, looking at the ransacked bookcase thoughtfully. “Cali’s blood has many uses,” she said enigmatically.

“Because she’s Fae?”

Big Mac was reaching for a book, but she froze as I spoke. She didn’t look at me.

“Don’t try to deny it,” I said. “Nneka filled me in.”

Big Mac shook her head. “Of course she did.”

“I know Cali’s part Fae. Just tell me what you did with her blood.”

She finally turned to look at me. “Fae blood is especially powerful,” she admitted. “It helped you heal, didn’t it?”

“And what exactly did you do with Jay’s eye?” I demanded.

“That?” Big Mac asked innocently. Then she smiled. “That was just for fun.”

“I want the truth,” I snapped. I was getting tired of the witch’s games.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “You werewolves—can’t see what’s right in front of your snouts. I used Jay’s eye to create the invisibility spell, of course. What else would I use?”

“Why did you want to be invisible? What are you hiding from?” I asked. My heart beat hard, like I was getting closer to some truth I needed to know.

“I wanted to hide from werewolves, of course,” Big Mac said. She turned away, running a hand over her ruined couch. “Fat lot of good it did me.”

The house was dusty and warm, but a cold chill ran down my back. There was something here that I needed to know, even though I was afraid of hearing the truth. But I took a deep breath and asked.

“Are you hiding from my father?”

**Episode 383**

*Breathe.*

Just breathe, I reminded myself.

“Execution?” I asked. “You’re sure about that?”

Leif grinned around the apple in his mouth. “Yep. Should be pretty awesome. Everyone comes out. We haven’t had one in ages.”

I rounded on Greyson. “We have to do something. We have to rescue them.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Leif asked, looking startled.

“Don’t worry about it,” Greyson growled.

Leif shook his head. “Seriously, forget about it. If they catch you trying anything like that, they’ll execute both of you along with the others. Why risk it?”

“Because they’re our friends,” I snapped, tears springing up in my eyes. “And they didn’t do anything wrong. They’re innocent.”

Leif blew out a gust of air. “Well, here’s the thing: guilty or innocent, it doesn’t really matter. When Light Fae are found in our territory, it’s an automatic death sentence.”

My stomach flipped. *Light Fae. Automatic death sentence*. It wasn’t hard to do the math on what that meant for me. I swallowed. “What’s wrong with Dark Fae?”

Leif looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“Why are they so…” I cast around for the right word. “*Mean*? Are they this evil to werewolves, too?”

Leif raised his eyebrows. “I really wouldn’t know. We don’t usually see many werewolves around here.” He darted a look at Greyson. “So I’d be careful if I were you.”

My heart started beating faster as I took this all in. “Okay,” I said, trying to think reasonably. “Can you show us where they are?”

“Who?” Leif asked, taking the last bite of his apple.

I rolled my eyes. “The Light Fae. Will you take us to them?”

He choked. “*Me?* You want *me* to take you to the prisoners?”

“You said you were going there anyway,” I pointed out.

He swallowed. “Do you have any idea what would happen to me I got caught helping you two?” He dragged a finger across his neck, closed his eyes, and stuck out his tongue.

I took a deep breath. I needed to handle this carefully. I nodded. “I get it. It’s really risky. I totally understand why you’d be afraid.”

I’d thrown out the bait—now I just had to wait to see if Leif took it.

I didn’t have to wait long. Leif looked deeply offended for a moment, then puffed out his bare chest. “I’m not afraid of anything.” He threw down the apple and stomped on it with his goat hoof. “Follow me!” He stomped out of the clearing but stopped when he reached the point where the trail met the trees. “But stay back just a little.” He shrugged. “You know, just in case.”

Hiding my smile, I was starting to follow him when Greyson grabbed my arm.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Cali?” he asked, his face lined with worry.

“What?” I asked.

His grip on my arm tightened. “I was studying the map last night. I figured out where we were. And where the flowers are. If we can bypass the town, we can find the flowers without Torin and Astrid.”

“I can’t do that,” I said, shaking my head.

“Cali,” he said, his voice a throaty rasp. “I have to get you out of here. I have to keep you safe.”

My eyes ranged over his face. I knew he was worried about me, but I shook my head. “You know I could never leave my friends in danger, Greyson.”

“You just met them yesterday!” he said desperately.

“And they risked their lives for me!” I shot back.

He clenched his jaw, like he was chewing on the words he wanted to say. “I think you’re making a serious mistake.”

I yanked my arm from his grasp. “And it’s my mistake to make. They helped me when I was completely on my own. They didn’t have to.” I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter how long I’ve known them, Greyson—they’re my friends. But you don’t have to come with me. You can go back any time.” I turned on my heel and took off after Leif.

I crashed through the underbrush behind the satyr, but even with the noise, I could still hear when Greyson entered the forest, following behind me. “I told you, you can go back,” I said, without turning around.

He didn’t answer, just continued behind me, keeping his distance.

After a while, above the crunching of leaves and the snapping of sticks, another sound emerged in the distance. At first, I thought it was wind rustling through the trees, though I didn’t feel any wind in the hot, still forest. Then, as we kept walking, I realized what I was hearing. I remembered the sound from when I used to watch Alex play football; it was the sound of a hometown crowd, cheering for their team.

Ahead of me, Leif seemed to hear it too, because he stopped and looked around. He turned back to me. “This is where I leave you.” He pointed. “The village is up ahead. You’ll find your friends in the town square.”

“Where is that?” I asked, keeping my voice down because he was keeping his voice down.

Leif looked at me for a moment. “It’s in the middle of the town. It’s in the shape of a square. You can’t miss it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks a lot.”

“Good luck to you and your wolf friend. I’m off.” He veered off to the left, away from the sound of the crowd, but he stopped after a few steps and turned back. “By the way, on the off-chance you do make it out of this alive, keep an eye out for Gunhild.”

“What?”

“Gunhild. Just watch out for her. She can be very unforgiving about the apples.”

I cast my eyes up to the sky for a moment, thinking that I had bigger problems than apples, but I knew Leif was trying to help. I looked back. “Thank you—”

But he was already gone. There was no trace of the satyr, not even in the movement of the leaves.

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“I really wish you’d rethink this,” Greyson muttered as we stood together, staring at the row of cottages that lined the path Leif had pointed to. “It’s too risky.”

I pretended I couldn’t hear him. There wasn’t anything to discuss. It would have been one thing if I’d thought he was scared for himself, but I knew that wasn’t it. I took a deep breath. “I know you’re worried about me—”

“You’re damn right I am,” Greyson snapped. “This is totally unknown territory. We have no idea what lies inside that village, but you’re willing to risk your life for a couple of strangers—”

“So you’d be okay with just leaving Astrid and Torin to be executed?” I demanded.

“Fuck yes,” he said hotly. “I don’t care what happens to them. Who are they to me?”

“They helped me rescue you,” I snapped. “Who were you to them?”

“Cali—”

“I just don’t understand how you can turn your back on them.” Turning my back on him, I looked toward the village again. The path Leif had pointed out was faint, but it led toward the sound of the crowd. I figured I could follow it and… I wasn’t sure, just try to blend in. I hoped a plan might emerge by the time I arrived.

I’d just taken a step when Greyson spoke.

“You realize that we’re going to have to fight, right?”

I glared back at him. “You think?”

Greyson looked furious. “What the hell is wrong with you? Do you think this is a joke, Cali?”

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. Fury had rendered me momentarily speechless. I didn’t even know where to *start* with him. “Just stay out of my way, Greyson,” I warned, and headed down the path.

The sound of the crowd grew louder and louder, which meant that we were getting closer to the town. I shook my hair down so it covered my human ears, but what about Greyson? I darted a glance at him. His rounded ears had never seemed so…well, round. I looked into the back gardens of the cottages we passed and there, drying on a line, was a promising-looking load of laundry. I stepped over the low wall and grabbed a hat from the line. “Put this on,” I hissed, throwing it at Greyson.

He didn’t look happy about it, but he pulled it over his light hair so it covered his ears.

The little avenue of cottages ended, and the sound of the crowd grew louder than ever. We had to be close to the town square. I took a deep breath, but as we rounded the corner, I froze.

There was the town square, packed with people, and there, in the center, were Torin and Astrid. They were standing on top of a small, raised platform, bound to a giant stake. Firewood was piled all around them.

“Oh my god,” I gasped, my eyes wide as dinner plates. “They’re going to be burned at the stake!”

As I spoke, a group of Dark Fae approached the platform, their faces lit by the flaming torches in their hands.

**Episode 384**

I stared at the flickering torches, each tongue of flame a threat. I wanted to run and stop the torchbearers—rip the torches from their hands, free Torin and Astrid—but how the *hell* was I going to do that? The square was packed full of spectators, Dark Fae standing shoulder to shoulder. Just strolling in there probably wasn’t a great plan.

The torchbearers held their flaming sticks aloft and the crowd buzzed for a moment, then began to chant.

“Burn them! Burn them!”

“Oh god,” I said, swaying on my feet. What was I going to do?

Greyson gripped my shoulder. “Don’t do anything stupid,” he warned, as though he could read my thoughts.

I spun around, my eyes wet with panicked tears. “But they’re going to *burn* them! We have to do something! We have to stop them!”

Greyson’s jaw clenched as he scanned the crowded square. “I could shift,” he murmured, thinking hard. “Draw their attention away. Leif said werewolves were rare in this territory.”

The thought of all the Dark Fae’s murderous intentions turning on Greyson made my blood run cold. I shook my head. “No. They’ll go after you. They might capture you. Remember how the Light Fae were able to freeze you so you couldn’t move? The Dark Fae will definitely have magic they can use against you.” I thought back to those silver cords wrapped around his wolf form and shivered. “No, that won’t work.”

But I needed to think of something. My heart was racing, speeding up as the cries of *burn them!* grew louder and more frenzied. The bloodlust in the crowd was reaching a peak. My breath was coming fast, like I was on the verge of a panic attack. Which I probably was.

*Think!* I needed to think. I had to do something. I couldn’t just stand here while Torin and Astrid were roasted alive.

I scanned the crowd. There were three torchbearers stationed around the base of the small platform. “Who’s running this shitshow?” I hissed, looking through the faces in the crowd. “What are they doing? Who’s giving the orders? No one’s moving. Are they going to do a ceremony or something?” My stomach tightened at the thought.

Greyson pointed at a second raised platform near the far end of the square, where a tall, distinguished woman stood before a podium. “It looks like she’s in charge.”

Insane thoughts raced across my mind. Maybe we could kidnap her. Hold her hostage and threaten to kill her unless Astrid and Torin were freed.

I shook my head. That would never work. She was a half a mile away. There was no way to get to her. I kept scanning the area, hoping to find something that might help us. My breath caught as I spied a wooden well near the center of the square. Maybe we could get to that. Pour water on the torches?

I wanted to pull my hair out. This was all so fucking hopeless. There had to be *something* I could do, but I couldn’t see a damn thing. How was it that I felt so helpless? Time and again, when everything seemed lost, I’d proven that I could find a way to overcome the shittiest of odds.

But this…

There were just so many Dark Fae. I didn’t even know where to start. I couldn’t fight them all. Even if Greyson shifted, he could only take on a fraction of the assembled crowd.

My heart thudded harder than ever. I was scared, but I was angry, too. *I* was one of them. Maybe not Dark Fae, but I was still Fae, and there I stood, uselessly wringing my hands.

Where was *my* power? How did I not know how to summon *my* magic?

I felt a sudden rush of fury with my mother. She’d had so much time—why hadn’t she told me? Why hadn’t she guided me, coached me, *taught* me how to use my fucking magic?

Hot tears stung my eyes. I hated feeling useless, and in a moment like this, it was torture.

I scanned the square again. And then, like it had just dropped from the sky into my brain, I had an idea.

Dashing the tears from my cheeks, I took a step toward the square.

“What are you doing?” Greyson hissed in my ear, grabbing at me.

“I have a plan,” I said, shaking him off.

For a moment I thought he was going to pick me up and sling me over his shoulder like a bag of potatoes, but he managed to restrain himself. His jaw was tight with anger, but he let go of my arm, and when I started walking again, he was right next to me.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he muttered.

“I have no idea,” I admitted, without looking at him. “But I don’t care.”

We’d made it to the edge of the crowd. I stopped, took a deep breath, and yelled with all my might.

“There are more of them! More Light Fae! They’re all over the apple orchard!” I screamed, pointing back to the river.

PANDEMONIUM.

Complete and utter chaos.

At my words, the crowd *lost their shit*.

“We’re being attacked!” a woman near me screamed, her face red as a beet.

“Run for it!” a portly man shrieked.

Greyson had to snatch me out of the way before I was trampled by the fleeing crowd. With him in the lead, we fought our way toward the center of the square—and Torin and Astrid.

The crowd was scattering, and the torchbearers were looking around, baffled.

“Light the fire!”

The woman at the podium was leaning forward, pointing to the torchbearers.

“Light the fire!” she screamed again.

We were almost there, but not close enough to do anything as the torchbearers leaned forward and touched their flames to the wood clustered at the base of the pyre. The wood must have been dry as paper because the fire whooshed into life, sending flames spiking into the sky.

Desperate now, I started shoving through the crowd, knocking people to the ground. I got an elbow to the lip for my trouble, but I didn’t let it slow me down. I *had* to get to Astrid and Torin.

“*No!*” I screamed, as the flames continued to grow.

Astrid’s face was white as snow and she looked as though she was about to faint. She was looking around wildly, and when she saw me, she locked onto my gaze, her eyes pleading for help.

“I’m coming!” I shouted, but the sound was lost in the chaos. I pushed forward but an arm slipped around my waist. It was Greyson, pulling me back.

“Let me do this!” he said, shouting over the rest of the noise.

But I couldn’t stay back. He was jostled by a pack of men running in the opposite direction, and I was able to slip from his grasp. The heat of the fire intensified as I drew closer, and I saw that the flames were spreading quickly, jumping from one stack of wood to another. I could see Torin now, and his face was terrified, his mouth open in a silent scream. Tears were streaming down Astrid’s face.

They were here because of me. They’d been trying to help me, and this was what had happened to them. I reached the edge of the platform and started to pull myself up, reaching out for them. A surge of guilt and sadness and fear and anger coursed through me, then jolted out of me, shooting out of my hand like a lightning bolt.

And the flames went out.

Snuffed out in one gust, like blowing out a birthday candle. The world around me went quiet as I stared at the smoldering pile of charred wood.

Had *I* just done that?

And if I had, then *how* had I done it?

The sound turned back on, and suddenly I could hear screaming everywhere. Greyson blew past me, launching himself onto the platform with ease. He kicked through the charcoal at the base of the pyre, and, shifting his hand into a paw, used his razor-sharp claws to slice through the ropes that bound Astrid and Torin to the stake.

They both sagged—out of fear or relief or pressure from the ropes, I didn’t know. My stomach lurched as I wondered how we were going to move them, but then Greyson scooped each of them up in his powerful arms and leapt back down to the ground.

“We have to get out of here,” I said to Astrid, taking her hand. “Let’s go!”

Together, we hurried toward the edge of the square.

We let ourselves get lost in the fleeing crowd, and had made it to the southern-most edge of the square when I was forced to pull up short.

There, formed up into a solid wall, was a squad of armed guards—and they were blocking our only way out.

**Episode 385**

XAVIER

Big Mac didn’t answer my question. I stood there, waiting for a response, watching the what little color she had drain from her face until she was as pale as the moon.

She turned away, like she was looking for an exit, but I reached for her arm, yanking her to a stop.

“Are you hiding from my father?” I said, more insistently.

A muscle above her eye twitched. “What a ridiculous thing to say! Absurd. Why in the world would you think that?”

Witches, man. They were so sneaky and evasive. I glared at her. “You want to know why? Because when I first walked in here, I thought I smelled my father’s scent,” I said bluntly. “He was here, wasn’t he?”

Big Mac didn’t say anything and, disgusted, I turned away. I took a deep breath and looked around. I reached out to touch the ransacked bookcase and the wall just beyond it. He’d been here—my father—walking these very same floors, touching these very same objects. Ripping them apart. Throwing them. Destroying them.

A shiver ran through me. It chilled me to the bone to think of him.

“You okay?” Gabriel asked, his voice uncharacteristically gentle. He darted a nervous glance at Mikah. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something.”

I blinked at him. “I think I have.”

Big Mac moved close to me. “You understand now, don’t you?” she asked, her voice low. “Why I’m hiding. Why I have to *keep* hiding.”

I looked at her pale face and wide, scared eyes. “What did he do to you?” I asked. “Why are you so afraid of him?”

She flinched, a tiny movement in her face, and darted a glance at Mikah and Gabriel. “Not here,” she muttered. “This is a conversation only for me and you. No spectators.”

After considering this for a moment, I turned to Mikah and Gabriel. “Get lost, you guys.”

Gabriel, who’d been looking around the room and not paying attention, looked up, surprised. “Why?”

“I need to talk to Big Mac. Alone,” I added pointedly.

Mikah shrugged and turned toward the door. “Whatever, man.”

“Hang on,” Gabriel said, looking irritated, “I want to know what’s going on.”

“Gabe—”

“Don’t ‘Gabe’ me, Xavier. If it concerns us too, we have a right to know—”

“Let’s go,” Mikah said, grabbing Gabriel’s jacket.

Gabriel looked down at Mikah’s hand on his jacket, then up into his face. “Hands off, bloodsucker,” he said, but he cocked his eyebrow in a way that took all the venom out of the statement.

Mikah laughed. “You wish.”

Gabriel pulled away, shrugging to straighten his jacket. He looked at me. “I’ll go,” he said grudgingly. “But I don’t like it.”

“Let’s get out here,” Mikah said, pulling Gabriel from the room. “Before you make your friend cry.”

I turned to Big Mac, who was looking around her ruined sitting room like she’d forgotten I was there. It was clearly an act, and I stepped in front of her. “The spectators are gone. Let’s hear it.”

Big Mac’s eyes darted around the room, looking at everything but me.

“Come on,” I growled, anger mingling with my impatience. “Out with it.”

She finally turned to look at me and, with a deep breath, began. “I knew your father, Xavier. Did you know that?”

I shook my head. “No,” I admitted truthfully. “I had no idea.”

She nodded. “Back when I was a teenager.”

I thought about this for a moment. If they were old friends, how had I never met her before? She’d been a stranger to me until very recently.

Some of my confusion must have shown on my face, because Big Mac shook her head. “This was before you were even born, boy. Your father knew my mother.”

“What do you mean, *knew* her?” I asked.

Her face was twisted, like she was recalling something deeply unpleasant. “He used to force her to do magic for him.”

“What kind of magic?” I asked, feeling cold.

She shrugged. “Whatever he wanted. It was mostly small things—stupid shit. Things he couldn’t be bothered to do on his own, but—”

“He’s an abusive bastard,” I broke in. “And a manipulator. I know that, you don’t have to tell me.”

Big Mac looked at me for a moment, and the silence stretched between us. There was something in her eyes I couldn’t quite identify. Could it be… pity? “No, I don’t suppose I do,” she said. “You seem to know that well.”

I swallowed. “I do.”

She gave me a wan smile. “I can see the pain in your eyes. It’s there, behind the walls you’ve built. I’m sorry you had to live through that.” Then her gaze darkened. “But your father was more than abusive, Xavier. He was evil.”

I didn’t disagree. “You must know that there’s no love lost between me and my father,” I said gruffly. “But what you’re talking about happened a long time ago. You said so yourself. What does that have to do with this?” I asked, gesturing around the destroyed room. “What does it have to do with anything that’s going on now? Why are you hiding?”

Big Mac didn’t answer right away. She bent and picked up Lion, who was weaving through her legs, meowing plaintively. She walked the perimeter of the dusty room, taking in the mess and the long, angry slashes on the wall. There were only a few of them, but they bit viciously into the plaster, deep enough to expose the beams of the house. When she finally spoke, her voice was far away. “I did something, for which he’s never forgiven me.” She was quiet for a moment, then added, “And he never will.”

“What?” I asked, my frustration growing. I needed answers, and I needed them faster than Big Mac seemed interested in providing them. “What did you do to him?”

She turned to look at me. “I took something away from him.”

“What?” I asked, but she gave her head a minute shake, and I knew she wasn’t going to say. “Okay. Well then why didn’t you just give it back?”  
 She stroked Lion for a moment. “If I had, he would have killed it.”

Silence hung heavy in the dusty room. Dust motes floated in the shafts of sunlight streaming from the window and, from outside, I could hear the distant sounds of Mikah and Gabriel arguing over something.

It felt like the stuffiness of the room was getting into my lungs, making it hard to breathe. Grit coated my throat and I tried to swallow it down. “So, why is he back?”

Big Mac raised her eyebrows, like she didn’t understand my question.

“After all this time, why has my father come back?” I clarified.

She sighed heavily. “I wish I knew. I really do.”

“You must have some idea,” I said. I could feel sweat dripping down my back.

“All I know for sure is that when he finds me, he’ll kill me.”

*You know, don’t you? You’ve known all along.*

The memory came back to me, clear as day. It had been ages ago, when Cali was trying to help Lola. She’d come to me, swearing that someone was after Big Mac, but that neither she nor Mrs. Smith would talk about it. She’d wanted to question Mrs. Smith—to figure out what was going on—but I’d blown her off. I’d told her that if it didn’t concern the pack, it wasn’t our problem.

Cali being Cali, though, she’d insisted. In the end I’d gone along with it, on the condition that *I* asked the questions.

It had been obvious from the moment we’d started talking to Mrs. Smith that Cali was right, but Mrs. Smith wouldn’t divulge anything, no matter how or what we’d asked. But during the course of the conversation, one thing had become perfectly clear: Big Mac *was* hiding from someone, she was terrified, and whoever she was hiding from was most likely a werewolf.

Then Greyson had arrived, interrupting the conversation.

When Cali had explained to him what was going on, he’d gone rigid. I’d barely registered it at the time, but he’d looked fucking terrified when she’d told him.

*Whoever it is, they’re back!* Cali had yelled.

*I said drop it, Caliana.*

She’d flinched back, like he’d slapped her.

Mrs. Smith’s eyes had gone wide. She’d grabbed at Greyson.

*You know, don’t you? You’ve known all along.*

My blood began to run hot, heating higher and higher until it felt as though it boiled in my veins. Greyson—my brother—was a lying, conniving, duplicitous son of a bitch.

I should have seen it when he’d come back. It had been with an agenda. Looking back I could see it, clear as day. I turned to Big Mac, who’d been watching me warily.

“Greyson knows our father is back, doesn’t he?”

She didn’t move.

“Greyson’s working with him, isn’t he?”

**Episode 386**

GREYSON

If I’d been alone, I would have shifted in a heartbeat and ripped the heads off as many of the guards as I could. Maybe all of them. Maybe I still should. It would be a risk, but it might give Cali enough time to escape. But if I was wrong, or these guards used their Dark Fae magic on me before I got the chance to inflict any damage, Cali could be captured. She could be killed. I couldn’t risk it.

The guards started to advance, pushing through the hordes of Dark Fae citizens who were still fleeing the square. The screams and shouts of the townspeople filled the air.

“Astrid and I can fight,” Torin yelled. His face was still pale, but his eyes were fire-bright, and he balled his hands into fists. “Bring ‘em on!” he screamed at the guards.

Maybe Torin had been worth saving after all.

“Don’t be stupid,” Cali snapped. “There are too many of them.” She looked around, terror flashing in her eyes.

I followed her eyes around the square. People were panicking, screaming about the “attack” and shouting for each other. Babies were clutched close, and children were being pulled along behind their mothers. But there, to the sharp left of the guards, was an opening in the crowd. That was our only chance. *If* we could make it.

“We have to do something!” Astrid was shrieking. She looked nearly hysterical, like the fright of the fire had undone her. “They tried to barbecue us! They’ll do it again if they get their hands on us. We have to get away!”

“*Don’t panic!*” Cali cried, panic rasping her voice.

I knew what I had to do. I bent close to Cali. “I’m going to give them something that’ll really make them panic.”

She looked up sharply. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to shift,” I said simply.

The color drained out of Cali’s face. “You can’t, Greyson,” she whispered, gripping my arm. “Don’t be crazy. You’ll be captured. There are too many of them—you can’t take them all on.”

I grinned. “I’m not going to.”

The burn started in my belly, then jolted through my body as my anatomy realigned itself. I dropped down to four paws, shifted to my wolf form. And, just as I’d suspected, the crowd *freaked out*.

“*Run!*” Men pushed each other, knocking each other to the ground, sweeping their whole families into their arms as they fled the town square like they were being pursued by the hounds of hell.

The guards in front of us looked terrified and bewildered, and backed up in fright. A couple of them lost their heads completely and ran, dropping their weapons, which clanged loudly on the cobblestone ground.

Breathing hard, I lowered my head to charge. *Have everyone climb on my back*.

Cali heard the message, and, for once in her goddamn life, didn’t argue.

“Get on!” she ordered.

Torin and Astrid looked surprised, but followed her lead, clambering onto my back.

“Stop!” A guard shouted. “By order of the guard, I order you to stop! Surrender yourselves at once!”

I growled menacingly, making the guards take another fearful step back. A few cowered, their eyes darting around, looking for the easiest escape route, but a few of them responded when their leader bellowed, “Arm yourselves, men!”

They raised their bows and reached for arrows.

The tips of the arrows flashed dangerously as they positioned them. God, I hoped they weren’t silver-tipped. I needed to get Cali out of there safely. That was my first—hell, my *only*—priority. If Astrid and Torin could hang on for the ride, that was fine by me. I knew she’d be pissed to hear me say that, but the only one I was worried about was Cali.

As if she could hear that my thoughts were on her, her arms went around my neck, holding tightly. I lunged at the guards with a deafening howl. They flinched, as I’d known they would, and I took advantage of their surprise. I sprang up, leaping right over their heads. I barely cleared them—I could feel the tops of their bronze helmets graze my belly—but I managed, landing hard behind them. With the extra weight of the three people on my back the landing was jarring, but I kept running, my eyes on the woods and the safety beyond.

Something whooshed past the side of my face as I sprinted, and I didn’t have to look to know what it was. The guards had recovered from their surprise and were shooting at us. I’d just barely dodged an arrow. *Keep your head down*, I thought, trying to communicate with Cali.

We’d almost reached the relative safety of the woods when I felt it—a pain in my thigh that burned like fire—but the adrenaline pumping through me was enough to keep me going. I didn’t have time to worry about it—I had to get Cali out of there. I had to keep her safe.

I slowed as I reached the woods. *Shit.* The path branched off in three directions, and I had no idea which way to go. I tried to think back to the map I’d studied that morning, but my mind was in attack-and-flee mode and wouldn’t focus on navigation. But I needed to make a choice—now. I could hear the guards approaching, getting closer and closer with each passing second.

“Go right!” one of them shouted.

“Loop around! Left flank, attack. We’ll take them dead or alive!”

Cali screamed as an arrow drove into the tree next to us.

That decided it for me. It didn’t matter which way I went. I just had to get out of here, and fast.

“Go left,” said a woman’s voice.

I looked up. Just in front of me, there was a dark-haired woman sitting on a tree stump. She was chewing on something, and I zeroed in on the apple in her hand.

“Can you help us?’ Cali shouted to her.

“Yeah, I said go left,” she said, looking bored. “Or right. I don’t really care. It’s not my concern what happens to filthy little apple thieves.”

*We need to move, now.*

I hoped to god Cali got my message, as the pain in my leg was building to a blinding ache.

“You’re that nymph, right?” Cali called. “Hindleburger or something.”

The woman narrowed her wood-brown eyes. “Gunhild,” she snapped. “And how do you know my name, strange one?”

“Leif,” Cali said, tightening her grip on me. “The satyr. We met him this morning. He warned us about you.”

“What did he say?” the nymph demanded, standing from her stump.

Cali shrugged. “He just said you were a mean, spiteful nymph who wouldn’t dare help us.”

“He said *that?*” Gunhild said, looking outraged.

*Faster.*

“Yep,” Cali said.

“That fucking asshole,” the nymph raged. She pointed an angry finger. “Take the road to the left and hide in my orchard. Take *that*, Leif.”

“Thank—” Cali started, but I took off before she could finish.

Following Gunhild’s directions, I raced to the left, toward the orchard, anxious to put as much distance between us and the village—and the guards—as possible.

*Keep your head down*, I thought over and over again, hoping none of the arrows would hit Cali.

The orchard came into view—a large, open space, dotted with trees that were heavy with fruit. I lowered my head and charged, but I was limping from the pain in my leg. I hoped Cali and the others were holding on tight.

There was a low wooden fence surrounding the orchard and I leapt over it. Under any other circumstances, the modest height would have been nothing to clear, but the effort made me howl with pain. Still, I kept running. There was a copse of trees up ahead, and I waited until I was behind it before I pulled to a lumbering stop.

I let everyone slide to the ground before shifting back.

“Wow!” Torin yelled, pacing around. “I cannot believe that! What a fucking rush! That was awesome!” He turned to Astrid and picked her up, spinning her around. “I just rode a werewolf! *We* just rode a werewolf! Wait ‘til I tell my brothers! They’re going to lose their shit!”

Cali dropped down into the grass next to me and laid a hand on my shoulder. She was breathing hard. “You did it, Greyson! You really did it. Thank you—”

But once again, she was cut off. The pain surged back to me, harder and more powerful than before. I curled in on myself, every muscle in my body rock hard. The pain was a blinding fire, and I panted, trying to breathe past it.

Distantly, as though it were happening in the distance, I heard Cali scream. “He’s been shot!”

**Episode 387**

MAYA

As I walked out of the lodge with Colton, Lola turned toward us.

“There they are,” she said. She, Jay, Rishika, Sage, Zainab, and Violet all stood from where they’d been sitting on the porch steps. “What’s going on?”

“Thanks for coming,” Colton said, coming down the steps.

“This had better be important,” Lola said, crossing her arms. “We were playing Cards Against Humanity. And I was winning.”

“In your dreams,” Jay muttered, and Lola elbowed him, grinning.

“So what’s up?” Rishika asked. “Why’d you need us to haul ass out here?”

I rolled my eyes. “I already fucking told you when I called.”

Joss emerged from the lodge. “There you are,” she snapped, looking at the rest of the pack. “Took you long enough.”

“Um, you’re welcome,” Lola muttered. “We were just asking why you dragged us up here?”

Joss was always pretty edgy, but she was especially keyed up now, and glared at the other pack members. “Maybe we’d have a better chance at this thing if there were less bitching and moaning.”

“What thing?” Rishika asked.

Joss’s jaw was tight with tension. “Maybe the complainers should have stayed at the pack house.”

“Hey,” Jay said, holding up his hands. “We’re not complaining, just asking. We’re here, aren’t we? We just want to know what the deal is.”

Joss heaved a sigh. “Those gargoyles in there want to banish the Redwood pack—”

“*What?*” Sage and Violet gasped out in unison.

“Why?” Jay demanded.

“Why do you think?” I snarled. “All those deaths from the Manus Cruentae apparently didn’t go unnoticed.”

“But *they* attacked *us!*” Rishika shot back, looking outraged.

“I know that,” Joss said testily, “and I told them that, but they didn’t seem too impressed by my argument. And they told us that our only chance to escape this bullshit banishment is to show them how well we can work together as a pack.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Lola asked.

“We have to compete in some kind of stupid challenge,” I said.

Rishika shrugged. “That doesn’t sound too bad. I love challenges.”

“Us, too,” added Sage and Zainab.

“So, what is this challenge?” Lola looked around at the dusty landscape. “Can I shift to do it, or do I have to stay in human form?”

Joss shook her head. “I have no idea. They didn’t tell us what it is. Some kind of dumbass obstacle course, maybe. Like a fucking team-building exercise. The council’s arranging it as we speak. We’re supposed to go this way.” She tipped her head toward the back of the lodge and started walking around the side of the giant building.

I’d just started after her when I felt a hand on my arm. When I looked up, Lola was looking at me, her expression apprehensive.

“Can we trust this Luna?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Lola said, looking at me like I was crazy, “that we barely know her. And what little we do know, I don’t love.”

I looked after Joss’s retreating form. “Actually, she might surprise you. She’s pretty tough.” Lola kept looking at me, that disbelieving expression on her face. “Seriously. You should have seen her in there with those old vultures on the council. She was a badass. They were awful, but she didn’t take any shit from them.” I shrugged. “Give her a chance.”

Lola thought about this for a moment. “Okay. Whatever.”

“A challenge like this is going to be a good test for Joss,” Jay added, stepping up next to Lola. He looked after Joss’s retreating form. “Let’s just hope she passes it.”

“Let’s hope we all do,” Lola muttered.

As we trudged around the side of the lodge, Colton caught up to me. He walked in silence for a moment, but I could tell there was something on his mind.

“Out with it,” I snapped.

He shrugged. “You’ve become a member of Team Joss awfully quick, haven’t you?”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s trying her best, man. And she’d probably do even better if she felt like she had the support of the pack. You all need to show her more respect.”

Colton scoffed. “Like the respect you showed me?”

I looked over at him. “What does that mean?”

“My jaw’s still sore—a little souvenir from our kiss,” he said, rubbing a hand along the stubble on his sharp jaw.

The raspy feel of that stubble against my face flashed into my mind. It had hurt, but that whisper of pain had been the only thing that had kept me from melting into his kiss. When I let my mind go there, I could still feel the pressure of his lips and the feel of his tongue sliding along mine.

I didn’t ever let my mind go there if I could help it.

I could also remember the shocked look on his face when I’d clocked him right afterward.

*That* made me smile.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, sounding annoyed.

“I’m glad it still hurts,” I shot. “You deserved it. Actually, you deserved a lot worse than that little love tap I gave your jaw.”

He shook his head, chuckling. “God, you’re a dick, Maya.”

“*You’re* the dick, man,” I snapped.

“Takes one to know one,” he said, chuckling again.

I pulled up short. “Stop. Just stop.”

His gaze held mine and something smoldered behind his dark eyes. “We’re going to kiss again. You know that, right?”

“Excuse me?” I snapped.

A smile curled his pouty lips. “You’re going to want me. *I* know it. *You* know it. Why not just admit it?”

Too stunned to speak for a moment, I stared at him. Then, finally recovering myself, I shook my head. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

We walked around the side of the lodge to the back, little tornadoes of dust swirling up with every step we took on the dusty, sunbaked ground. When we reached the back of the lodge, we found the rest of the pack standing in front of a large, fenced enclosure in the middle of the dusty property.

“In there?” Rishika asked, pointing.

“I guess,” Joss said with a shrug. She looked around. “Where else?”

She hesitated for a half-second at the fenced entrance, then strode purposefully inside. The rest of us followed, some with more certainty than others. We found Cesaries at the center. The rest of the council was gathered around the edges, like an audience.

In the very center was a large… *something*. It was impossible to tell what it was, because it was covered with a dusty blue tarp. But it was big. Eight feet tall, maybe. And ominous.

Cesaries peered at us as we walked toward him, his beaky gaze grim as always. It was like being watched by an ancient bird of prey, with the way his tiny head bobbled atop his skinny neck.

I let my gaze rest on it, thinking how little force it would require to separate that balding head from his pencil neck.

Tragically, decapitation probably wasn’t an option, so I let my gaze move to the covered structure, wondering what it was. Maybe it was a statue of Cesaries. He seemed the type to commission a sculpture of himself. Naked, of course. Something flattering, making him look taller, and with a dick three times its real size.

Joss stopped in the middle of the enclosure, right in front of Cesaries. “The Redwood pack is here,” she declared, her voice sounding oddly small in the huge enclosure.

Cesaries scanned the pack, his pinched face pinching even more as he scowled. “Where are the others?” he demanded. “Where is your Alpha?”

“Unavailable,” Joss said shortly.

“This is hardly—” Cesaries started, but Joss cut him off.

“According to the rules, it’s not necessary for all pack members to attend a challenge. Especially one we were so *recently* informed about,” she added testily.

Cesaries glared at her, but apparently she was right, because he didn’t contradict her. “Very well. We will proceed.”

Too impatient to sit through a fucking Ted Talk by Cesaries before we ‘proceeded,’ I stepped forward. “So what’s the deal, man? What bullshit are you going to make us do?”

The rest of the council grumbled and Cesaries glared at me. “I will get to that, young lady.”

“Then get to it,” I snapped.

Cesaries’s face began to redden. “This is a challenge to demonstrate that the Redwood pack is worthy of its place in the Pack Council, and the larger werewolf community.” He signaled to a hulking councilmember, who stepped forward and pulled the tarp from the structure.

As the tarp fell, I felt my pack members gasp and step back in surprise.

Before us stood a massive guillotine. It was made of wood, with a long rope holding up a razor-sharp blade. The steel sparkled in the unforgiving sun.

Cesaries eyed us all, his expression viciously triumphant. “Your challenge is this: you will choose one person from your pack to die.”

**Episode 388**

When I dropped to the ground, the grass next to Greyson was wet and warm and sticky. I looked down and, with growing horror, realized I was kneeling in a pool of Greyson’s blood.

And it was growing.

“Greyson,” I breathed, leaning into him. His face was pale and his eyes were half-closed. I scanned his body, looking for the injury.

“Oh my god,” I cried out when my gaze caught on his leg. There was an arrow jutting out of his thigh, and blood was pouring steadily from the injury.

The head of the arrow was buried deep in his flesh, and the sight of it made me feel weak. But then another thought flashed across my mind, and I began to see black spots in my vision: what if the arrow was tipped with silver?

“Greyson,” I said again, looking into his face, trying to capture his attention.

“I’m okay,” he said weakly. He reached for my hand and grasped it, but without any strength. “I’m okay.”

His eyes were distant and hazy, unable to focus. He didn’t even flinch when I waved a hand in front of his face.

“Oh god,” I murmured, grasping his hand and trying to think as fast as I could.

Torin dropped next to me, his face grave as he looked at the arrow. “I know he’s a werewolf and they’re supposed to have accelerated healing or something, but…” He shook his head. “From the amount of blood, it looks like the arrow hit an artery or something.”

My heart thudded. “He’s going to bleed to death?”

Torin was still looking carefully at Greyson. “It’s just a lot of blood.”

“We need a tourniquet,” I said, looking around wildly. I didn’t see a handy first-aid station, so I yanked at the bottom of my shirt, tearing it at the seam.

Torin laid a hand on my arm. “I can handle this, if he’ll let me.” He raised his eyebrows. “If *you’ll* let me.”

“Trust him, Cali,” Astrid said. “Torin’s a healer.”

There were tears in my eyes as I looked down at Greyson. He looked paler than ever and, as I watched, his eyes fell closed. “Heal him,” I begged, turning to Torin. “Please. Heal him.”

Torin nodded. “Okay. The first thing I’m going to have to do is remove the arrow.” He looked at Greyson. “I’ve got to warn you, it’s going to hurt like hell. Are you ready?”

Greyson gave a vague nod, his eyelids fluttering.

I leaned forward and caught Greyson’s hand. “I’m here, Greyson. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere. Don’t worry, okay?”

He didn’t answer, but when his grip on my hand tightened ever so slightly, I knew he was still with me.

Torin gripped the arrow with both hands and, with a deep breath, yanked it out.

Greyson grunted, and his grip on my hand became painful.

I swallowed roughly. “Are you okay?”

The ghost of a smile flitted across his features. “I’ve felt better,” he murmured.

My heart was beating so hard it hurt my chest. “This isn’t the time for jokes,” I said tightly, watching as blood rushed out of the wound.

Torin held his hand over the tear in Greyson’s flesh. He closed his eyes and began to speak in low, soothing tones, the sound almost a song. Like an incantation. I stared, not daring to feel hopeful yet, as blue light appeared beneath his hands. He lifted them higher to hover just above the wound, and I watched as the skin knit itself back together.

Finally, Torin dropped his hands and rocked back on his heels, looking pale and exhausted. But he smiled as he looked at Greyson’s leg. “There won’t even be a scar,” he said proudly.

Looking back at Greyson, I was surprised to see his eyes fluttering open. He took a deep breath and I watched, relieved, as the color began to return to his face. With some difficulty, he pushed himself up into a sitting position.

“Thanks, man,” he said, giving Torin one of his rare smiles. “I appreciate the help.”

Torin’s eyes went big. “No problem,” he said. “Happy to do it. And now that you’re feeling better, I have, like, a million questions for you. What’s it like when you shift? Do you actually feel your cells changing? What’s that like? Why are you naked right now? How many pairs of pants do you own?”

Astrid saved Greyson from the onslaught of Torin’s curiosity by pulling him up. “Let’s give them some space,” she hissed, shooting a look at me.

Torin looked at Greyson, then at me, then back at Greyson. “Right,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Right. Sorry.” And he let Astrid pull him away, deeper into the orchard.

Taking a shaking breath, I looked back at Greyson, who was staring at me, his gaze steady.

I reached out to push a lock of hair back from his forehead. “You’re sweaty,” I murmured.

He raised an eyebrow. “I was running pretty fast.”

My eyes ranged over his pale, angled face, and I felt a lump start to form in my throat. “I was scared you weren’t going to make it,” I whispered.

Greyson gave me the ghost of a smile. “Same, love. Though you were pretty pissed at me earlier. I thought maybe you’d have preferred it if I didn’t make it.”

“*What?*” I spluttered. “How can you say that? Just because we argued doesn’t mean I want you to *die*, Greyson. And besides,” I said, folding my arms haughtily, “I wasn’t *that* pissed.”

Greyson tipped his head and gave me the kind of stare that called out the bullshit. “You really were.”

“No, I wasn’t,” I shot back, pissed.

“Then prove it.”

When his eyes sparkled like that, I always knew what it meant, and I leaned in like he had a magnetic pull. His lips crushed against mine with more energy than I would have thought possible, considering how much blood he’d lost. But there was nothing weak about him as he curved his hand around the back of my head, threading his fingers into my hair and pulling me closer.

For a moment—one beautiful moment—the only friction between us was our bodies. I wanted nothing more than to lie back on the soft grass and test just how well he was feeling. But a thought kept jangling like a bell in my mind, and I pulled back.

“You were going to leave them to die!”

Greyson’s eyes took a moment to focus on me. “What?” He sighed. “Cali, I just saved your life. Could we not fight for, like, a minute?”

“I mean, why would you not want to help someone?” I asked hotly, starting to feel really angry. The sweetness of the moment before had dissipated, which made me even angrier. But what the hell did it *matter?* *Xavier* was my mate, not Greyson. What did I care what he did, or didn’t do?

I dropped my head into my hands. What the hell was I even doing?

“Anyone want an apple?”

I looked up to see Astrid walking back toward us, looking cautious.

“Yes!” I exclaimed, jumping up, absurdly happy to be thrown a break from my conversation with Greyson. “I’d *love* an apple. Where did you get these?”

Astrid looked around, clearly baffled. “We’re standing in an orchard, Cali. They’re literally everywhere.”

“I know, right?” I said, grabbing her arm and hot-footing it away from Greyson.

We walked for a few yards before Astrid spoke again. “I’m sorry if I interrupted anything back there.”

“What?” I asked, my voice about an octave too high. “No!” There was no way I was dragging Astrid—or anyone else—into the clusterfuck that was my relationship with Greyson. Hell, even if I’d wanted to talk to her about it, where would I even start?

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” Astrid said. “You just looked like… I thought you might need someone to talk to.”

That stopped me. It’d been too long since anyone had been this thoughtful with me. “Thank you,” I said, sincerely.

We walked for a few more silent moments.

“But, can I ask—what’s the deal between you and the hot werewolf?” she finally burst out. “That guy’s abs have abs.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks.

“N-not that I’m interested,” Astrid stammered, her own face flushing. “I’m just curious. It just seems like there’s something between you two.” She looked over at me. “You’re not a werewolf, right?”

“Nope.” I laughed. “Not a werewolf.”

“I didn’t think so,” Astrid said. “That magic in the town square—I didn’t think that was what werewolves did. You were really great back there.”

I smiled. “Thanks.”

“Thank *you*,” she said earnestly, her eyes getting big. “For saving us.”

“Anytime. Although,” I added, upon reflection, “maybe we shouldn’t plan on making a habit out of it.”

Astrid laughed. “Agreed,” she said, her eyes shining. “Now, back to Greyson. You and him, how does it work? Is he your mate?”

**Episode 389**

“Is he my mate?” I repeated Astrid’s question in an attempt to stall, to give myself some time to pull together an answer that would satisfy her. An answer that would end this conversation instead of starting a much longer one.

But what was I supposed to say? *Was* Greyson my mate? Was Xavier? Was I wrapped up in *due destini*, fated to be torn between these two men until one or more of us died in heartbreak and agony? Or had I just seduced them both unwittingly with my Fae magic? Was it possible that the connections I felt with Xavier and Greyson were both fake? Was I in love with Xavier, or did I just love the feeling of being someone’s first choice?

Whatever the real answer was, it was all way too complicated to explain to Astrid. But I had to say something—especially since I’d remained silent for so long.

“I’m sorry,” Astrid said, backpedaling. “I really didn’t mean to intrude—I don’t know much about werewolves so maybe that kind of thing is private, or…”

She trailed off guiltily and I felt bad for making her feel like she’d offended me. She hadn’t. It was a fair question to ask. It was an answer I wanted, too. How could I blame her?

“It’s okay,” I told her, putting my hand on her arm. “It’s just not an easy question to answer. Greyson and I still have a lot of things to figure out and unfortunately, we’re constantly being thrown into these crazy, high-pressure situations and there’s never time to sit down and have the ‘what are we?’ talk.”

“It must be complicated,” Astrid sympathized. “With you being Fae and all. I never thought a Fae could be a werewolf mate.”

I sighed. She didn’t know the half of it.

“There are a lot of things nobody seems to know,” I told her, thinking about the *due destini* myth that was either my ironclad fate or the werewolf equivalent to a Brothers Grimm fairytale.

I glanced over my shoulder at Greyson, who’d managed to sit up. He was talking to Torin, who was clearly peppering him with gleeful questions about being a werewolf. Greyson was grimacing and I couldn’t tell if it was the questions or if he was still in pain. We had to get him back on his feet so we could keep moving toward the flower.

“Where are you journeying to?” Astrid asked me. “It would be helpful to know where we’re going.”

I hesitated. It seemed risky to tell her, but maybe the greater risk was keeping my allies in the dark when they knew more about this world than either Greyson or I did.

“We’re after the moon buttercup,” I admitted. “It has healing power that will help my mother. She’s very sick and I came here to find a cure for her. She doesn’t have much time I don’t think…”

I tried not to let myself consider the possibility that she was already gone. That I was risking all of our lives for nothing. I couldn’t let myself think like that.

“I’m sorry about your mother.” Astrid’s brows knit together. “I know what it’s like to feel alone. Lost.”

She kept her gaze forward. I could tell she was nervous to say this to me, but I appreciated her honesty.

“Torin said something similar,” I told her. “When I asked why he was helping me, he told me it was because I looked alone. That he knew what that was like. You’ve both been so kind to me.”

“Torin’s the best person I know,” Astrid said with a small smile. “He’s all I have, actually. Has been for a while. He’s my best friend. You can count on us to help you.”

“Thank you.” I gave Astrid my own watery smile. “For everything you’ve done so far, and for saying you’ll help more. I can’t get over how lucky I was to have run into Torin and to have met you and Gregg and… I just don’t know where I’d be without you guys.”

Astrid smiled at me, and I was really glad I’d been able to break through her hard exterior. She was actually a really sweet person.

“How far is it?” I asked. “To the valley where the moon buttercup grows?”

Astrid shrugged. “I’ve never been there. The Dark Fae have held this territory since before I was born. This is the furthest I’ve ever been from home.”

I wondered if I was imagining it, or if I actually heard a little waver in her voice. Maybe this was just as scary for her as it was for me.

“Me too,” I replied.

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After a bit more apple picking, Astrid and I returned to Greyson and Torin, who seemed to be in good spirits. You’d never have been able to tell that just an hour ago, Greyson had been willing to leave Torin and Astrid to die. Now that Torin had saved his life, did Greyson see he had value? I wondered if Greyson thought I was crazy for wanting to help people who *hadn’t* saved me from bleeding to death. Sometimes he looked at me like he did. Why did he have to be such a difficult jerkface sometimes?

“It’s like stretching, almost,” Greyson explained. “But all of your bones crack and you find a position that’s comfortable that you might not have expected. And before you know it, you’re in another form.”

Torin nodded, clearly engrossed.

“So it doesn’t hurt?” he asked, eyes wide. “With all the, you know, bone cracking?”

Greyson sighed. “No, it doesn’t hurt. Much,” he said, more than a little exasperated. “We heal quickly.”

“Amazing.” Torin nodded again.

Astrid laughed. “You’re going to regret answering his questions,” she teased Greyson. “Now he’ll keep asking them until you die.”

Torin glared at Astrid. “I’m trying to learn!”

Astrid took his arm and tugged on it. “Maybe you should give him a little time to heal.” She gave Torin a pointed look to accompany her words.

“Fine,” Torin sighed. “But we’re not done.”

I knelt to look at Greyson’s wound. It was now just a faint pink line, almost completely healed.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

Greyson pushed himself off the ground, rising to his feet and putting my face perfectly level with—

“*Maybeweshouldgetyousomeclothes*,” I blurted out, my cheeks heating as I shot back up to my feet.

I spun around and took a few steps away, pulling the map from my bag and checking it. I acted like the light was better just a few steps away, rather than give away the truth… Greyson’s naked body was distracting, to say the least.

OBVIOUSLY, I’d seen him like that before, but I couldn’t afford to lose focus right now. There was too much on the line. And I definitely didn’t want to lend headspace to someone who had been perfectly willing to let Astrid and Torin die. Even if he was totally freaking gorgeous.

“Shit.” Astrid leaned in close to me, murmuring in my ear. “Your wolf is *really hot.*”

“He’s also really in need of some clothes,” I grumbled. “He can’t travel like this.”

“What’s the problem?” Torin asked. “Why can’t he stay like this?”

“Because this isn’t a nudist resort, perv,” Astrid pointed out. “Dark Fae tend to wear clothes, just like us. If we don’t want Greyson to stick out, he needs to blend in. By being clothed.”

“I don’t care.” Greyson ran a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated. Why did he have to look so hot doing that? Rude. “I just want to get moving. The sooner we find the flower, the sooner we can get the fuck out of here.”

I bristled at his gruffness. Astrid and Torin had been nothing but hospitable. The least he could do was hide the fact that he wanted to be rid of them as soon as possible.

“Astrid’s right,” I piped up. “Maybe I can sneak back into town and ‘borrow’ something for you to wear.”

“Don’t worry.” Astrid nudged me. “I’ve got this.”

I looked at her, wondering if she’d brought spare clothes with her. But hadn’t all her stuff been taken when she and Torin had been discovered by the guards?

But then Astrid started waving her hands, almost like she was painting with an invisible brush. Wind whistled around all of us, forming almost a small tornado around Greyson. It picked up leaves and sticks, blurring his outline.

Until it stopped.

Suddenly, Greyson was fully clothed. In way-too-tight green tights. And a billowing white shirt. And a leather vest. And it was all topped off with a little feathered hat.

Greyson eyed his reflection in a nearby pond and wrinkled his nose in disgust. I couldn’t blame him. It wasn’t his best look. I was trying not to laugh, myself.

“Seriously?” He whirled around to address Astrid. “This is the best you can do?”

A giggle escaped my lips and I clapped my hand over my mouth to stifle it. But it was too late. He’d heard me. But what was I supposed to do? The bad boy Alpha werewolf I’d spent all this time worrying about was dressed up like a Fae version of Robin Hood.

Greyson glared at me, but all I could see was the very, very small hat he was wearing. It was just too much. I glanced at Astrid out of the corner of my eye and it was clear she was biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

Finally, the dam burst and Torin, Astrid, and I burst out laughing. Eye-watering, knee-slapping, could-hardly-stand-up laughing.

“You guys are assholes,” Greyson grumbled.

But it just made us laugh harder. Until an angry voice cut through our merriment.

“Drop those apples and put your hands up!”

**Episode 390**

MAYA

Cesaries’s words rang in my ears as I stared down the guillotine. I shook my head. Maybe I hadn’t heard him right.

“Did you just say someone from our pack needs to die?” I asked, my voice coming out angrier than I’d intended—but when didn’t it, honestly? “Why the hell would that be necessary?”

“Because,” Cesaries droned, in the way only old powerful men could, “that is the rule. That’s how the challenge *works.*”

I opened my mouth to argue. To tell him that those were the words of a coward. Hiding behind tradition because it was easy, because it favored powerful people like him. People who would never have to choose a friend to sacrifice. But Joss stepped in front of me, pushing me behind her.

“What’s the point of this challenge?” she asked, her fists clenched. “If we’re being punished for the deaths of a bunch of murderous Rogues, why would you want another wolf to die? Who does that help? What does it solve?”

Other councilmembers started to stir at that.

“How dare this Luna challenge the challenge!” one shouted.

“Correction,” Joss snapped defiantly. “I’m challenging a *stupid* challenge.”

I moved to stand beside her, impressed by her strength. Not only was Joss standing up to the council, she was doing it on behalf of a pack that hadn’t exactly welcomed her with open arms.

I pointed to Cesaries and his cronies. “How about we kill one of *you* instead?”

And with that, the council went crazy. People were yelling until they were red in the face, but Cesaries just raised a hand, causing everyone to fall silent.

“The challenge has been set.” His voice was cold, as if he couldn’t have cared less about the pain his edict would cause. “You have until noon tomorrow to decide.”

I looked at my pack. Everyone’s eyes were wide with concern. Who would we pick? And how could the rest of us live with ourselves?

“If you attempt to leave,” Cesaries continued, “you will be banished.”

A few councilmembers cheered at the word. I bared my teeth at them. I couldn’t imagine being so happy about the misfortune of others. These people were disgusting. I felt anger boiling inside of me and I wished I could leap up there and tear all their throats out.

“So, it’s your choice.” Cesaries’s voice brought me back to reality. “You can sacrifice one to save the rest, or you can all be branded as worse than Rogues. It’s entirely up to you.”

And with that, the council stood and filed out of the room, leaving us to make a horrible decision with absolutely zero upside.

“What the fuck is wrong with that guy?” I asked Joss. “This makes no sense. We should just attack them.”

“Look, I’m pissed too.” Lola held her hands up. “But we have to think this out before we do anything crazy.”

We turned to face Colton, Rishika, Violet, Lola, Jay, Zainab, Sage, and Mrs. Smith. The remnants of our pack.

“Well, that went well,” Colton snarked.

I felt a flare of white-hot anger spread across my skin. Pissed and unable to do a damn thing about it, I smacked Colton in the chest.

“Stop being a jerk,” I hissed.

“Maya,” Joss warned me. “Don’t fight. That’s exactly what these council stiffs want—for us to turn on each other and forget that they’re our actual problem.”

“I agree,” Rishika chimed in. “We gain nothing by losing our heads.”

“No matter how unhappy we are with their ruling,” Mrs. Smith said, delivering her point directly to me, “the orders of The Council aren’t something we can just brush off.”

“All I know is I joined this fucking pack so I wouldn’t have to be treated like a Rogue,” Zainab growled, without a trace of her usual humor. “And now I’m no better off.”

She took Sage’s hand and looked at Rishika, her expression hard.

“Let’s get out of here.” Zainab didn’t look at the rest of us. “This isn’t our fight.”

She turned on her heel, like she thought he was just going to be able to storm off and betray us that easily. But Joss grabbed her by the wrist and jerked her back into the circle.

“If you take another step,” Joss growled, “I’ll sacrifice you to satisfy Cesaries.”

I saw the defiance in Zainab’s eyes evaporate as she lost her staring contest with Joss. Her shoulders slumped in fear as Joss straightened to her full height.

“Now that that’s settled,” Joss segued, “is there anyone else who thinks they can just walk away from their pack?”

Silence. No one would dare speak up after that.

“Wonderful.” She smiled coldly. “Now, let’s set up camp while we decide what we do.”

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I sensed Colton as he sidled up to me. I tensed, not looking forward to another interaction with him.

“So, our fearless leader is actually kicking a fair amount of ass,” Colton offered. I could hear how surprised and impressed he was. Something about it made me bristle. So, Joss got his respect but not me?

“Wow, look at you, saying something nice.” I refused to look over my shoulder at him as I finished up pitching my tent. “Didn’t know you were capable of behavior like that.”

Colton snorted. “She’s working hard to keep the pack together.” He sounded a bit more earnest. “That’s true Luna shit, you know? Maybe Greyson wasn’t crazy to pick her.”

I nodded, not wanting to let on what I was really thinking about. Namely, belonging to a pack, and how much strength came from that—even when the shadow of death was cast upon you. Being a part of something… it made you feel like you could only get hurt so much.

“She’s got a lot of fight in her,” I said, turning around to face him.

I forced myself to keep my expression neutral. Like I always did when I was looking at him. I hated letting him know he got to me.

“So do you.” Colton grinned at me. “Is that why you led Nolan on for so long? Because you were so suited to the Luna job?”

“You’re an asshole,” I growled, feeling the blood rush to my cheeks. How had he figured that out? “And you don’t know shit about me. You have no idea what I’ve been through.”

“And what exactly have you been through?” he threw back. “You’re always brooding, but to me, it looks like you’ve always had it pretty good. You’ve always belonged to a pack. You’ve never been alone, not like Xavier and I have had to be.”

I held my tongue. I wanted to unload on him, to tell him all about how my grandfather had kicked me out of my original pack for being the runt. How much it had hurt to be rejected by someone so close to me, to be told I didn’t belong, that I was wrong. That I didn’t fit in. That I never would again.

I wondered if the truth would wipe that smug look off his face. I wondered if he’d recoil like I’d slapped him.

But knowing Colton, he’d just say something cruel. I wouldn’t give him ammo to hurt me with. The less he knew about me, the better.

“Why don’t you stop pretending you give a shit and mind your own business?” I spat, wishing I could run away, take some time to regroup. I felt overexposed, like I often did when I was around Colton. Like he could see some part of me no one else could—the part I really fucking wanted to keep hidden.

“In case you forgot, one of us is going to die.” Colton’s words dripped with disdain. “That’s kind of my business.”

“Not mine.” I shrugged. “I’m not even officially in the pack.”

Weirdly enough, that wiped the smug look off of his face. Colton’s eyes darkened and he leaned in close to me, his breath tickling my cheeks.

“Yeah?” he said, in a terse whisper. “That’s how you want to play it?”

“It’s the truth.” I shrugged again, wanting to back away but knowing I should stay and hold my ground. “Why do you always want to fight with me? Why can’t you just let things be?”

Colton reached out to me slowly, giving me the chance to avoid him. Not wanting to let on that his proximity affected me in any way, I stayed where I was, staring him down as he let his fingers trail down my arm.

His touch felt so warm, and something in his eyes made me want to lean into it. But I couldn’t. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“Because you don’t want me to,” Colton replied, a slow smile spreading across his face. “Just admit it, Maya. You don’t want me to let things be. You never do.”

Blood rushed to my cheeks. I felt more exposed than usual under his gaze. God, this mate shit was serious. I cursed centuries of werewolf biology for the bullshit hormones coursing through my veins, making me want him.

I had to do something.

So I slapped his hand away.

“Touch me again, and I’ll make sure you’re the one on the chopping block,” I hissed.

I stepped back, like getting further away would kill whatever hold he had on me. But that was a joke—just like my hollow threat about him and the guillotine. No matter how crazy Colton made me, I’d never let them take him. There was something about him I just couldn’t shake…

*If something happened to you…* I heard Colton’s voice in my head, even though his lips didn’t move. *I don't know what I’d do.*

I froze. I just stood there staring at him as he turned and walked away.

“Colton!” I called after him, but he kept moving.

Had he just mind-linked with me?

**Episode 391**

I whipped around. At this point, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little pissed. Because, seriously, *what now?*

And that was when I saw Gunhild stomping toward me, her eyes wild with anger and her gaze fixed on the apple in my hand. I tensed, wondering if I should be preparing myself for a fight. As I looked down at the apple I had clenched in my fist, I couldn’t help but think it made an even worse weapon than a spatula.

“Put that down!” she shrieked at me, pointing from the apple in my hand to the ones on the ground.

I dropped the offending apple like it had caught on fire. It wouldn’t have been any use to me in a fight, anyway.

“You think you can just barge in here and take whatever you want?” she snapped.

“I-I’m sorry, I’m confused,” I stammered. “Didn’t you say we could hide here?”

Gunhild rolled her eyes. “I said you could *hide*,” she growled, looking at me with contempt. “I did not say you could steal my apples. Which one of you is going to pay for them?”

I looked to Astrid and Torin, wondering if they had any Fae money.

“We were cleaned out when we got taken prisoner.” Torin held out his empty hands to me.

“None of us have money,” Astrid told Gunhild.

“I’m sorry.” I turned back to Gunhild. “We didn’t mean to steal anything. It was just a misunderstanding. We thought that as your guests we were welcome to eat.”

Gunhild ignored me, scanning the area like a hawk, as if there might be more of us hiding in the trees, conspiring to take more of her apples.

“Where’s that no-good satyr?” she demanded, barely concealing a snarl. “This is all his fault.”

“You mean Leif?” I asked in an attempt to be helpful.

Gunhild glared at me and I shrank backward. As I stumbled back, I knocked into Greyson, who steadied me with his hands on my shoulders. For a moment, my back brushed against his chest and I could feel how warm he was. Even though I didn’t want to admit it, a part of me was tired enough to wish I could just curl up in his arms and let him do the talking.

But if I did, then who knew what choices he’d make. I had to protect us. All of us. So I stepped forward, out of Greyson’s orbit.

“Where is the bastard?” Gunhild hissed, bringing me back to the present.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, looking to my friends for help. “But maybe if we just calm down—”

“Do NOT tell me to calm down!” Gunhild’s face twisted in anger. “You have no right to tell me what to do when all you’ve done is exploit my generosity. Give me one good reason not to turn you in to the authorities? There’s probably a reward. A sum that would more than compensate me for the apples you’ve no doubt already eaten.”

Enough with the apples, already! Did the things cure cancer or something? Maybe I should bring a few back with me in that case…

“Please.” I shook my head. “Just let us go and we won’t bother you or your stupid apples ever again. We swear.”

Greyson sidled up to me. He was still limping, but at least he could move.

“This is pointless,” Greyson said. “Let’s get out of here.”

I looked at the way he was leaning on his good leg and felt anxiety twist my stomach. He wasn’t ready to start moving again. But it was looking like we didn’t have a choice.

Gunhild was staring at Greyson, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Why are you dressed like Pinocchio?” she asked him.

Torin and I both snorted with laughter before we could think to cover our mouths. Greyson glared at us as Astrid raised her hand like a reluctant school child.

“That’s my fault.” Astrid gave Gunhild a guilty smile. “It was the best I could do on short notice.”

Greyson shot her a withering look, but Astrid just shrugged.

I heard a loud belch and turned to see Leif stumbling toward us, drinking from a wineskin.

“Looking for me?” He leaned against one of Gunhild’s trees, clearly going for a dramatic pose but failing miserably.

Gunhild blinked back at him, taking in his drunken smile.

“So you told them I wouldn’t help them?” she asked, planting her hands on her hips.

“You never want to help anyone,” Leif replied. “You’re a drag, Gunhild. Everyone knows it.”

And that was when I sensed we were in the middle of a fight that had been going on for a long time.

“So says the useless, drunken fool,” Gunhild shot back, color rising in her cheeks.

“Look.” I stepped between them. “Clearly there’s a problem between you two. So we’ll just move on and get out of your way. A win-win.”

And with that, I tried to lead the others from the orchard, hoping that the satyr and the nymph would be so distracted by each other they’d forget all about us. I saw my companions take the hint, nodding and shuffling after me.

“If you go that way, you’ll end up right back where you started,” Gunhild warned.

I sighed and picked another direction to lead my friends in.

“That way, and you’ll end up roasted alive by Karennia,” Leif interjected. “Nasty way to go, or so I hear.”

“What’s a Karennia?” I asked him.

I saw Astrid and Torin exchange wide-eyed looks. Clearly whatever it was couldn’t be good.

“We always thought Karennia was just a myth,” Torin said to Leif. “To scare Light Fae away from Dark territory.”

“Are you saying there really *is* a fire breathing dragon?” Astrid asked.

Leif shrugged. Then belched.

“She’s mean as they come,” he told us threateningly, seeming to relish the danger.

“We have to worry about *dragons* now?” I turned to Greyson, my voice a whole octave higher than usual. “That’s what it’s come to, now? Dragons?”

“You need not concern yourselves with Karennia,” Gunhild interrupted. “If you tell me where you’re trying to go and promise to stay out of my orchard, I can steer you in the right direction.”

“We’re trying to—” Astrid started.

“We have a map,” I interjected, looking over at Greyson. “We can find our own way.”

I wasn’t sure if we could trust Gunhild—or anyone—with the details of our mission. We were in enemy territory. I remembered my grandmother’s fear at the thought of me traveling here. There was no way she’d approve of me telling complete strangers where we were going. If this flower had the magic to save my mother’s life, it had to be powerful. And people didn’t like to part with powerful things.

“I agree.” Greyson nodded at me. “The further we get from here, the better.”

“Suit yourself,” Gunhild said with a shrug. “Just don’t come crawling back here when that choice bites you in the ass.”

Leif picked up an apple and scrutinized it for a moment before tossing it aside.

“Your apples aren’t even suitable for cider,” he sneered. “The least you can do is offer your help.”

As Leif and Gunhild began another round of their disagreement, Greyson grabbed me by the arm and pulled me aside. I felt the warmth of his touch and had to force myself not to lean into it.

“Let’s get out of here,” he whispered in my ear, his voice stirring things inside me that I didn’t have time to examine right now.

“What about your leg?” I murmured, thinking about his limp.

“Don’t worry about that,” he told me. “I’ll be fine. But we have to keep moving. I don’t have a good feeling about staying here for much longer.”

“And let me guess,” I muttered back tersely. “You don’t have a good feeling about taking Astrid and Torin with us, so you’re going to tell me we should abandon them. Again.”

I shook my head as anger crawled up my spine, making me see red. Why was Greyson like this? So cruel and indifferent toward the people who’d helped save him. The people who’d taken me under their wing when it would have been easier just to let me flounder alone.

I’d always been struck by how gentle Greyson could be. How understanding. But then he’d turn on a dime and pull this kind of shit. It was *infuriating*.

“I’d leave them behind if it meant you would be safe,” he admitted, his grip tightening on my arm. “What’s so wrong with that?”

“Well, for starters, it makes you sound like a self-centered, uncaring jerk,” I hissed back.

Greyson pulled me closer to him. I felt my heart hammering in my chest. Even though I was pissed at him, he still looked and smelled and felt *really* good.

“I’m just trying to keep you safe,” he said.

He stared at me with unblinking grey eyes. They burned with purpose, and I knew in that moment that he’d already made the decision. And I wouldn’t be able to change his mind.

“Let’s go,” he whispered.

And this time, when he tugged on my arm, I followed.

“Stop!” Gunhild shouted after us.

**Episode 392**

XAVIER

I glared at Big Mac, waiting for her answer. Was Greyson working with my dad? Though it would probably be fair to call him ‘our dad’. Greyson certainly took after him in more ways than one. His aggression, his strength, his anger… They were traits I recognized in myself as well. Every time I recognized a part of him inside me, it made me wish I could cut him out. Burn every part of me he’d ever touched until there was nothing of him left.

Had he been here? Was that why I’d picked up his scent earlier? A small part of me was suddenly overwhelmed with fear that he could come back any second and I’d find myself face to face with the person who scared me most.

A million possibilities flooded my mind. Chief among them: had Greyson returned to the Redwood pack as part of some plan he had with our father? Was he just a distraction so that our true Alpha could return?

That would certainly make Big Mac’s fear understandable.

Her eyes darted around the room, clearly searching for an escape. For a second, I almost felt guilty for scaring her. But then I reminded myself that she had information I needed and was choosing to not cooperate.

“I need you to answer me,” I urged.

“Do you really think I’d spend a minute’s time with Greyson if I thought he was working with that bastard?” she asked, eyes alight with anger. “Because if you do, you’re a bigger fool than I thought.”

My hands balled up into fists in an automatic response to her insult. I knew better than to try and strike a witch, but she’d pissed me off and that usually meant a fight.

“He could be playing you. Or you’re in on it. How do I know you’re telling the truth?” I snarled. “Do witches ever tell the truth?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “I don’t care if you believe me.”

And I didn’t have much of a choice if I wanted a way into the Fae world. All I had on my side was a reckless werewolf mercenary and a bloodsucker I couldn’t fully trust. I needed her help if I was going to save Cali. And that was the most important thing.

“I get that.” I sighed. “And I’m sorry for barging in like this and yelling and… I’m just worried about Cali. I have to keep her safe.”

“If you’re so worried about her,” Big Mac said, eyeing me suspiciously, “then why did you let her go to the Fae world in the first place?”

I avoided Big Mac’s eyes.

“She made the decision herself,” I told her. “I don’t own her.”

Big Mac gave me a condescending smile that set my teeth on edge.

“Forgive me,” she said, sneering. “You usually act like she’s yours alone, so I assumed you wouldn’t let her out of your sight.”

“You don’t know me,” I hissed, not comfortable with how right Big Mac was. But she didn’t understand. Everything I did for Cali was out of love and fear and worry.

“What a fine way to keep your mate,” Big Mac continued. “Abandoning her to deal with your crisis of masculinity, and letting her run off with your half-brother.”

“That’s not what happened,” I snapped, even though I knew she was right.

Big Mac raised a brow, skeptical. I couldn’t help but feel like she could see right through me. That she could see the scared little boy and the guilty jilted lover cowering behind the big bad wolf.

“Sometimes, a mirror sees more than what meets the eye,” she told me.

“What kind of cryptic bullshit is that?” I asked.

I didn’t like talking to this witch about Greyson. I didn’t like talking about Greyson, period. I knew that Big Mac was just trying to push my buttons—and I was letting her. I had to regain the upper hand somehow.

Big Mac snuggled her cat up to her cheek. Lion purred contentedly and nuzzled into Big Mac’s shoulder.

“We saw them together, didn’t we Lion?” she asked the cat, and I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

I wanted to take the bait and ask what she meant. I knew she was dangling information in front of me on purpose, but I couldn’t look so eager.

“You realize you’ve put me in a difficult position, don’t you?” she asked me.

I sighed and nodded. “I get that, but I’m doing this for Cali. I understand her better than anyone, and she needs my help.”

“If you understand her so well,” Big Mac said, “then explain to me why she ran off to the Fae world.”

I tensed, thinking about it for a moment. Honestly, I didn’t know why Cali had gone to the Fae world. And I didn’t want to think about why she’d chosen to go with Greyson instead of Lola or Maya or… me. But I hadn’t really made myself a viable option, considering I’d run off with Gabriel.

But why had she picked *Greyson?* It hurt to even picture them together. Usually, I knew better than to let my mind go down that path. I knew it only led to jealousy and hurt and anger. But then I’d think of the moments I wished I’d never noticed. The way Cali would stare at Greyson, confused but curious. The way Greyson would put his body between hers and danger.

Cali certainly didn’t waste any time. As soon as I’d left with Gabriel, she’d left with Greyson. Had that been her plan all along? To leave me for Greyson the second it was convenient? Had she pushed me to break up with her?

Before I could stop myself, I started wondering if she and Greyson had slept together yet. If they’d kissed again. If they’d confessed their feelings for each other. I felt anger and guilt and sadness tangle inside of me until it felt like I could barely breathe.

“Are you guys gonna stop talking anytime soon?” Gabriel demanded, bursting through the door. “Because I’d like to get out of here ASAP. Witches make me nervous.” He glanced at Big Mac apologetically. “No offense.”

I was relieved to have an excuse to change the subject.

“I’m ready to go,” I said. “If Big Mac will help me.”

“With what?” she asked, confused.

“I need a Fae artifact and some Fae blood,” I told her.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “And what do you plan to offer up in return?”

I thought about all the things Big Mac had asked for in the past. I wasn’t ready to part with either of my eyes just yet. So I’d have to get creative.

“I won’t tell my father that I’ve seen you,” I offered.

Big Mac’s expression soured. She crossed her arms over her chest as she considered it, letting Lion leap to the floor and go about his business.

“Fine.” She sighed. “We have a deal. You’re lucky I still have some of Cali’s blood.”

“Why did you take so much?” I asked, trying to hide how relieved I was that she still had some.

Big Mac pulled a vial from the pocket of her flowing robe and waved it showily in front of my face.

“In addition to its many magical properties,” she said, like she was reciting the words from a textbook, “Fae blood also enhances spells.”

She handed over the vial. I all but snatched it out of her hand, I was so eager to have it in my possession. Not only did it bring me closer to saving Cali, having it felt like having a little piece of her with me. And I needed that right now.

“And the artifact?” I asked.

“You keeping my whereabouts from your father gets you the blood,” she told me, smiling smugly. “But I’m going to need something else in exchange for the artifact.”

She reached out toward my face, her fingers landing on my temple and starting to brush towards my eye. I slapped her hand away before I could think better of it.

“Fuck off,” I snapped.

“Why don’t we head out, X?” Gabriel beckoned me toward him.

But I just glared at Big Mac, feeling angry and duped and desperate in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time. My father had always acted like I was an overly needy child, and now I felt like one again. One begging for help and always being told I didn’t deserve it.

“I thought you actually cared about Cali,” I told Big Mac, around the lump forming in my throat. The one my father would have ridiculed me for having. *Real men don’t cry,* he’d told me, any time I got the slightest bit emotional. “But I guess witches only care about themselves, right?” I continued, knowing I was just pissing her off more.

“It’s called self-preservation.” She smiled, not unkindly. “Feelings don’t have anything to do with it.”

I nodded. I knew something about self-preservation. It had been the only thing I’d cared about for a long time. But now I had something new to want, to protect, to love…

“If by some miracle you and your little band of supernatural rejects make it to Cali,” Big Mac added, her voice softening. “Go easy on her, okay? She’s in a really tough situation. And it’s not like there’s anyone around to give her advice.”

I paused, turning back around to look at Big Mac, searching her face for an explanation.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Didn’t you know?” she asked, confused. “Cali’s a *due destini*.”

**Episode 393**

“What now?” I asked, turning back to Gunhild. I’d honestly had it up to my eyeballs with her and her abrasive attitude. I didn’t know what had crawled up her ass, but I was this close to screaming at her until I didn’t have any breath left.

“I’ll assist you in your quest,” she told me, looking down her nose at me. “*If* you help me find out who’s been poisoning my well.”

Well color me shocked, Gunhild had enemies. It must have had *nothing* to do with her sparkling good attitude.

“Why don’t you figure it out yourself?” I shot back. “I don’t have time to play Sherlock Holmes with you.”

Astrid and Torin looked at me, confused.

“He’s a detective!” I yelled, exasperated. “A very famous one!”

“I suppose I could do it myself,” Gunhild mused. “Only, I have to bring a cart of apples to a nearby village…”

I shook my head, confused. “How am I supposed to find this well poisoner if you can’t?” I demanded. “It’s not like I know anything about poison. Or wells. Why would you even want my help?”

“If my deal doesn’t interest you,” Gunhild said, taking a few steps toward me, “then you’re free to set off on your quest and take your chances. But I don’t have a good feeling about your odds.”

I groaned in frustration. Why did everything here come with weird strings attached?

“Personally,” Torin piped up, “I love a good mystery. Maybe all we have to do is watch the well and wait for someone to poison it? That wouldn’t take long, I’m sure.”

“This is a waste of time,” Greyson said through gritted teeth. “We need to start moving. Whatever we come across on the way, we’ll deal with it. We can’t get distracted from what matters.”

I glanced between Greyson and Torin, torn. I trusted Greyson to do anything and everything he could to protect me. But I also knew that we were in Dark Fae territory, and could easily come across things Greyson had no idea how to handle. Things like actual, real life, fire breathing DRAGONS. Apparently.

And it wasn’t just my life I had to worry about—it was my mom’s. If I died doing something reckless, there’d be no one left to save her.

Plus, I’d be lying if I said that being pissed at Greyson’s willingness to abandon Torin and Astrid wasn’t a factor. Because it was.

And maybe spite wasn’t the purest motivation, but right now, it was good enough to tip the scales for me.

“Where’s the well?” I asked Gunhild, shooting Greyson a sweet smile.

“It’s by the barn.” She pointed to the right. “About a half-mile past the orchard. You can’t miss it.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Astrid asked me, clearly concerned.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure. At all. But we weren’t in a position to turn down help in an unfamiliar place. Even if that help came with a price tag.

“I think we have to do it,” I answered truthfully.

Greyson glared at me and I felt a twinge of guilt for making an executive decision.

“This is a waste of time,” he told me. “And you and I both know how precious our time is.”

I bristled at that. Did he think I *wasn’t* considering my mother in all this? That I was just making the choice willy-nilly rather than taking a calculated risk? Did he really think I was that reckless? Or maybe he just thought I was stupid. Either way, I didn’t like his tone one bit.

“You can go back any time you like,” I snapped back at him. “I’ve made my choice.”

“Ooh!” Leif cried, rubbing his hands together excitedly. “Friction between lovers, how exciting!”

“We’re not lovers!” Greyson and I yelled at the same time.

Our words hit me. If we weren’t lovers… Then what *were* we? I looked at Greyson. His eyes were dark with rage and his chest rose and fell like he’d just finished running. I thought about how passionate he was. The kisses we’d shared. How close we’d gotten already to having sex… Was he just like that with everyone? Were we… nothing at all?

A wave of embarrassment hit me like a truck.

Leif made a big show of rolling his eyes.

“Whatever,” he said, pulling the cork out of his wineskin. “Semantics.”

He took a long pull and then his eyes crossed, his knees buckled, and he passed out against the tree he’d been leaning on.

Gunhild just stared at the sleeping satyr, obviously disgusted. She shook her head.

“To the well, then,” I murmured before turning and starting off in the direction Gunhild had indicated.

I heard Greyson sigh and start after me. I had to bite my cheek to keep a smile from spreading across my face. He wasn’t leaving.

“So what about the moon?” Torin asked Greyson. “Do you have to change when it’s full?”

I heard Greyson sigh again.

“So.” Astrid sidled up to me, pulling me a few steps ahead so we were out of earshot. “What’s with you? Why aren’t your ears pointed?”

“Kind of personal question, isn't it?” I asked nervously, trying to stall.

I had no idea if it was safe to reveal to Astrid and Torin that I was only half-Fae. It was possible that they’d already guessed as much, seeing as I lived in the human world and hung out with werewolves. But if they hadn’t guessed, and half-Fae were looked down on… It would definitely be better to keep it to myself.

“I think it’s just the light,” I mumbled, pulling my hair down over my ears. “They’re pointed. It’s just more of a… small… point.”

Astrid eyed me for a moment, and I held my breath. Had my bullshit answer worked?

“Fair enough.” Astrid shrugged.

*Phew*.

“So, this well.” Astrid looked ahead as we kept walking. “Who would poison it? Someone who wants to hurt Gunhild, I guess.”

“Probably a long list,” I grumbled.

Astrid barked out a laugh. “Yeah, she’s kind of an asshole,” she agreed. “But Fae can turn on a dime. Especially Dark Fae. You kind of never know.”

We walked through a cluster of trees that marked the edge of the orchard. I ducked under branches and saw a barn looming ahead, just like Gunhild had described.

“All right, let’s go.” I started toward the barn, but Greyson put an arm across my chest.

I flinched at his touch. Usually, he made me feel warm and safe and alive. Right now, I was too pissed to grant him that power over me.

“We should be careful,” he told me. “It could be a trap. I’ll go first.”

“You know, you and your brother aren’t as different as you think,” I huffed out, annoyed. “Neither of you trust me. It’s exhausting.”

Greyson glared at me. He looked furious, and I immediately regretted what I’d said. I’d only meant to put him in his place a bit. To let him know that his actions were immature, but I’d clearly hit a nerve.

“You really want to bring up my brother? Now?” he growled, his words giving me goosebumps.

“No.” I shook my head. “I mean, yeah. I mean, you know what I mean.”

“No.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “I don’t.”

And with that, he pushed past me and headed toward the barn. As I watched him leave, I considered calling after him and trying to fix it. To apologize. To ask what I’d said that had hurt him so much. But this wasn’t the time.

He was right. If this was a trap, he was probably the one best equipped to handle it.

The rest of us walked a safe distance behind him. Once we reached the barn, we were able to see the adjacent well. It was made of stone, with a pulley and a wooden bucket.

It was so quaint, I couldn’t help but smile. Every fairytale I’d ever read had a well. And this was like, the platonic ideal of a well.

Greyson leaned over the edge of the well and peered down to the bottom. I watched him carefully, wondering what I would do if this *was* a trap and we had to fight. Would I be able to use my Fae magic again or was it a one-time fluke?

Greyson drew back and waved us over. I sighed in spite of myself, glad that there wasn’t any danger.

Now I could go back to being pissed at him.

I pushed past Greyson and peered over the edge of the well. It was dark, seemingly endless. I wondered how deep it could possibly go.

I thought of every wishing well I’d ever thrown a penny into. I wished I had one now. We could use all the luck we could get.

I leaned further over, trying to see if I could spot any evidence of poison. My eye was drawn to a flicker of movement. And before I could even check to see what it was, I saw a hand, reaching for me.

I drew in a breath to scream, but it had already wrapped around my wrist and pulled me over the edge and into the well.

**Episode 394**

MAYA

As I ran after Colton, I could practically hear my heart pounding in my chest. I grabbed him by the arm and spun him around.

“What did you just say?” I blurted out, feeling like an anxious, needy mess.

“I didn’t say anything,” he scoffed. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Stop lying.” I squeezed his arm, only just realizing I hadn’t let go. “If you don’t, you’ll regret you ever fucking met me. I know you’re trying to mess with me, so just admit it and we’ll move on.”

Colton squinted at me, seemingly puzzled.

*He’s faking it,* I thought. *He’s pretending to be confused. Just like he’s pretending to care.*

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Colton told me. “But you sound insane.”

“I heard you,” I insisted. “You said if something happened to me, you didn’t know what you’d do. Don’t deny it, Colton. You *mind-linked* with me!”

All the color drained from Colton’s face, and his lips parted in surprise. “You heard that?” he asked, his expression getting more vulnerable by the second.

“YES!” I replied, waiting for him to catch up.

“Well, fuck that.” He shook his head and straightened to his full height. “That fucking sucks. I don’t want you hearing my thoughts!”

“I don’t want to hear your thoughts either, dumbass!” I yelled. “So maybe don’t invade my fucking head!”

I dropped his arm and was ready to hightail it out of there when Colton grinned at me.

“Admit it—it wasn’t so bad,” he said cajolingly, using that stupid voice that had probably gotten girls into bed countless times.

“It was worse than bad,” I hissed. “If you do it again, I’ll eviscerate you. For real. So stay the fuck away from me and the fuck out of my head.”

“I don’t think I can,” Colton told me, suppressing a smirk. “I mean, we are mates after all. Doesn’t the mind-link come with the territory?”

“I don’t give a shit.” I took another step toward him, invading his space. I hoped the anger was rolling off of me in waves. If I could intimidate him, maybe he’d back off.

“Is that so?” Colton couldn’t hide his amusement for long, and it pissed me off impossibly further.

“Just because we’re mates, doesn’t mean you have the right—”

Colton cut me off by touching my shoulder and looking at me. Really looking at me. And suddenly I felt naked again. Like there was this part of me that was just for him. A part I desperately wanted to keep hidden.

“We’re mates,” he told me, his voice husky. “You can’t fight it. You can’t change it. You just have to let it be.”

I struggled to think of a retort. A reason to leave. A comeback that would push him away long enough for me to run.

But all I could think of was the feel of his hand on my shoulder. And how it wasn’t a totally terrible feeling. I didn’t *not* like him touching me. And I hated it.

I shoved his hand away anyway.

“We have more important things to deal with than your pathetic little crush on me,” I sneered, hoping that going after his ego was the right tactic.

But Colton just laughed. “I do not have a crush on you,” he said, a little too earnestly.

“We interrupting something?” Lola smirked, approaching us with Jay’s hand in hers.

“Fuck off,” I snapped half-heartedly.

“We need to talk about the challenge,” Jay said, looking between us.

I nodded. Colton’s bullshit was way less important.

“Sounds like more fun than the talk we were having,” Colton quipped.

I just rolled my eyes.

“Look, what Joss did took a lot of guts,” Jay said. “Coming in as a Luna and being unafraid to stick it to the council is brave as hell. But… it’s not like she’s belonged to this pack for long. And she technically isn’t really in charge of it. I think we have to discuss whether or not we think she’s acting in the pack’s best interests.”

I was aware that what Jay was saying was smart. That this was a necessary conversation to have. But I wondered if they thought they’d have been better off with Xavier or Colton speaking in Greyson’s place instead of Joss.

“I mean, does Greyson always act in the pack’s best interests?” I asked, knowing I was stirring the pot. But I couldn’t help it. Men never got taken down a peg for being reckless. I was the only one here who was likely to stick up for Joss, so I had to do it.

“He was a pretty deadly Rogue before he became the Redwood Alpha,” Zainab piped up. “Maybe we can’t trust him *or* Joss.”

“Everything Joss has done here has been to protect this pack,” I reminded her. “And until I see evidence that shows otherwise, I’m going to support her.”

I held my breath as I waited for their response. I needed this pack to survive. I needed to belong somewhere, with the kind of family that would never leave me. And you only got out of a pack what you put into it. Right now, with Greyson gone, Joss was this pack’s leader, so I was going to back her.

“I hate to admit it,” Colton said, rolling his eyes in frustration, “but I agree with Maya and she’s not even part of the pack.”

“I don’t need your affirmation,” I whispered to him.

But Colton just smiled at me brightly. “Happy to help,” he chirped.

I strongly considered spitting in his eye.

“Why don’t we build a fire?” Mrs. Smith suggested. “We need to prepare for the evening.”

“I’ll help,” I offered quickly, grateful for the diversion.

Later, when I was gathering wood, Joss called us all together. We stood in a little semi-circle around her, and I felt oddly like I was back at school, waiting for the teacher to tell us we could go home.

“It’s been a long day,” Joss started, her shoulders straight. “We’re all going to need our rest tonight. I’m going to take some time to think things over. We’ll assemble here before dawn to discuss what we’re going to do. Understood?”

Her tone dared us to argue. No one did.

“Goodnight, guys.” She offered a tight smile and headed for her tent. Everyone else followed suit. I decided to sit by the fire and enjoy the warmth for a bit—I was too keyed up to sleep just yet.

I was less than thrilled, but not surprised, when I realized Colton was following me.

“Get lost,” I told him over my shoulder as I sat down on the ground by the fire.

Colton ignored me and sat down right beside me. “You should be happy.” He nudged me. “We agreed on something. It’s a first.”

I rolled my eyes and turned away from him. Colton sighed. I could hear him making himself comfortable, trying to lie down on the ground. Close to me, but not touching.

I could feel the electricity in the space between us. All of my senses were heightened, and every rustle, every exhale, felt louder than anything.

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the crackle of the fire. The heat felt good. I tried to relax into it and let my muscles loosen.

“Can I ask you something?” Colton interrupted my calm silence.

I turned to face him and was shocked to find that he’d sat up, and we were practically touching noses. My breath hitched and I hoped Colton didn’t notice. If I gave him an inch, he’d take a mile.

I shrugged, trying to keep my expression annoyed but neutral. “Make it quick.”

“Why don’t you give us a chance?” he asked, his eyes flickering down to my lips and then back up to my eyes.

Suddenly, I felt a heat that had nothing to do with the fire and everything to do with the way Colton was looking at me. So I turned away from him, looking straight ahead into the blaze.

“Because I don’t want you,” I told him, trying to keep my voice even. I’d just been hanging around him for god-knows how long… inexplicably. Well. That wasn’t entirely true… *God*.

Colton chuckled. It made me want to punch him. “Okay, let’s pretend that’strue,” he mused. “What if this is our last night together?”

“We’re not *together*, Colton,” I reminded him, my hands curling up into fists.

“But aren’t you, like…” He paused to search for the right word. “Curious? Don’t you ever wonder how it could be if we just… tried?”

I swallowed, warring emotions welling up inside me. Anger, sadness, lust, fear, excitement, anticipation… It was too much. I’d worked so hard for so long to avoiding letting anyone have control over me the way my grandfather had. He’d hurt me so much by sending me away. I never wanted to give anyone the power to hurt me like that again.

I shook my head, trying to let the anger win out. Anger was always safe. Anger always hurt other people and kept me safe.

I hadn’t asked to be his mate. I hadn’t asked for any of this.

“Well, you can keep on wondering.” I turned to look at him coldly. “Because it’s never going to happen.”

He stared back at me, his expression softer. The firelight reflected in his eyes. I watched it dance for a minute, struck by his beauty.

“Okay, Maya,” he said with a nod. “Okay.”

But instead of leaving, he leaned toward me slowly. His lips parted, and his eyes began to close. He was going to try to kiss me, and I didn’t know whether I had it in me to stop him.

**Episode 395**

GREYSON

Cali’s screams echoed in the well as she tumbled down. The sound of them twisted my stomach. They were the cries of someone small and scared.

I leapt forward, reaching for her as she disappeared down the well. I watched her get smaller and smaller as her screams got further and further away. I squinted, attempting to make out the shape of her in the darkness, but it was no use. Even with my heightened senses, all I saw was blackness.

This couldn’t be happening. She’d just been standing next to me. I’d taken every precaution to keep her safe. How could some… *thing* in a stupid well be the one eventuality I’d never planned for?

I shoved Torin and Astrid back so that I could dive into the well without kicking them on the way down. I wondered what Cali would think of that—see, I could be considerate.

But she wasn’t there to see it.

I reached inside, eager to get to her. We had more to do. More to talk about. More fights to have and kisses to share… But I was repelled by some kind of invisible force that pushed me backward. I stumbled, almost tripping over my own feet.

What the hell?

“Cali!” I shouted, desperate to hear her voice. To know she was okay.

But all I heard was my own voice, echoing against the stone walls of the well.

A pit formed in my stomach as I was forced to consider the fact that Cali might already be dead. But I shook my head. I couldn’t think like that.

“Help me,” I choked out to Astrid and Torin, who just stared at me in helpless silence.

I tried reaching into the well but my hand rebounded off the surface, pain prickling across my skin. I looked to see if there was a shimmer, like there had been outside Big Mac’s magically hidden house. But no… I could only feel the force field, I couldn’t see it.

Maybe it was some kind of spell.

“Do you know what’s causing this?” I asked Astrid and Torin, my panic—and anger—rising. “If there’s a witch down there, they’re going to pay for this.”

“I’m sorry.” Astrid looked genuinely sad. “But we can’t tell if there’s a witch down there. That’s not something we can sense.”

I nodded, barely listening. Why had I let Cali bargain with that nymph? Why hadn’t I just taken her to the flower myself? Why hadn’t I insisted we talk it through? I could have kept this from happening. I *should* have.

“Can you do anything?” I asked again, knowing how pissed I sounded. “Anything to break this spell, or whatever it is that’s keeping us out?”

Astrid and Torin exchanged looks and I wanted to yell, to hit something, to run toward a fight I could actually win. I felt so helpless, at the mercy of these people in this world I didn’t fully understand. Trying to care for someone who wouldn’t stop throwing herself headfirst into danger. This time, literally.

“Sorry.” Torin couldn’t even meet my eyes. “Neither of us has the magic to break spells.”

I struck the invisible barrier, angry and scared for Cali. But my fist bounced back again, and I hissed at the pain and frustration.

“Cali!” I yelled down again, even though I felt like it was useless.

But maybe it wasn’t. Because this time I heard a response.

“Greyson!” Cali’s voice sounded like it was coming from a million miles away. It was liquid and watery, but definitely Cali. And she was calling for *me.*

She was alive.

“Help!” she yelled. “Help me!”

A laugh burst from my lips. She was *okay*. She was alive. I could still save her.

“Cali?” I called out. “Can you hear me?”

“It’s got me!” Cali’s voice echoed up to me. “Help!”

She wasn’t responding to my question. Fuck. I kicked the outside of the well, not knowing what else to do. Something had her. Something I couldn’t see, couldn’t fight, couldn’t wrap my hands around. If it *dared* to fucking hurt her… It would be the last thing it ever did.

Torin and Astrid were useless, just like I’d expected. And now I’d delivered Cali to her death. How could I have fucked this up so royally? I was the only one who could save her, and I had to do it now.

I yelled as my rage boiled over. I fell to my knees and shifted. I leapt into the well and began to claw and scratch at whatever invisible force field was in my way. Maybe it was crazy, but I didn’t have a lot of other options. I felt the heat and the crackle of the magical barrier against my claws, but I kept slashing. Because I had to get to Cali.

I kept clawing and biting and tearing at the invisible wall until finally, something gave and I felt a rush of cool air. I’d broken through.

And I was falling.

Wind whistled past my ears as I hurtled down the well. I pushed down the fear building up inside me and vowed that if I lived through this, whatever had put Cali in danger would *not*.

The ice-cold surface of the water shocked me. It nearly pushed all the air out of my lungs as I broke the surface. My eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness as I fought my way to the surface. When I broke through, I gasped for air, my aching lungs desperate for relief.

I glanced up, wondering if I’d be able to see Torin and Astrid. But the light from the opening was just a tiny pinhole. It looked like it was a hundred miles away. I could hear their voices calling to us faintly. But all I cared about was Cali. I had to find her.

I reached out with my mind, hoping that being closer would let me mind-link with her. But it was just static. I slapped the water, roaring in frustration. What was keeping me from her?

I knew I couldn’t afford to lose my head, so I took a deep breath and tried to focus. I looked at my surroundings. The well had widened out toward the bottom and created a kind of underground cavern. It smelled fucking terrible. Like the middle of a dumpster, but *wet*.

I looked behind me and saw a rocky shore and a series of caves, obstructed by stalactites that hung from above. The water around me was blue and clear, but I couldn’t see the bottom. How deep was it?

And how long could Cali survive in this place until I found her?

Was I already too late?

A flicker of movement in the water caught my attention. I squinted at it and realized I was seeing the shadow of some kind of creature, slithering below me. A creature that was getting closer and closer by the second. I tensed, ready for a fight.

An eel-like creature broke the surface, water sliding over its slippery grey skin. It rose quietly until it towered over me, its slick flesh glimmering in the darkness.

It reared back, opening its little slit of a mouth to reveal rows of sharp, black teeth.

I couldn’t let it put me on the defensive. I had to attack first.

I swam forward as quickly as I could, using my strong back legs to propel me forward. I opened my jaws, showing off my teeth as well.

Once I was close enough, I bit down on the beast’s neck. I could feel its slimy flesh against my tongue, but now was no time to get squeamish.

Blood and slime spurted from the eel as I tore at it over and over. The taste was bitter and disgusting, but I knew better than to let it stop me. The creature thrashed and hissed, but I continued to bite and tear until it stopped moving.

Finally, the creature and I sank into the water. The eel went limp in my jaws, hissing a weak death knell. The water bubbled around us as the eel seemed to dissolve into the water.

I wondered if this creature had taken Cali. How long would she have been able to last against it in conditions like these, without a weapon to help her? Cali could fight, but these conditions were far from ideal for her.

And if this thing hadn’t gotten her, where had she gone? Fuck, this place was too confusing to know which way I’d come from and where I needed to go. And it was so rancid with all the scents down here that I couldn’t find hers.

*Cali, where are you, love?*

“Greyson!”

For a second, I thought I’d imagined her voice. But then she shouted again.

“Over here!”

I swam toward the shore, toward her voice, relief washing over me. She was alive. I threw back my head and howled in response so she’d know I was here. That I was coming to get her. I always would.

**Episode 396**

There was a hand wrapped around my arm.

At least, I thought it was a hand.

Whatever it was, it was cold and it was clammy and it pulled me down until I was falling.

Down, down, down the well I went. All I could see was darkness everywhere. I was falling down a cold, dark well and I had no idea what would meet me at the bottom. Water? Stone? Or something worse? And what was that terrible smell?!

I opened my mouth and screamed, too scared to self soothe or urge myself to be brave. The air at least tasted cold and damp, and my scream became a terrified choking noise. Could the others hear me down here? I hoped Greyson could hear me. That he could help me.

God, if this was it then we’d never make up. I’d die, and the last thing he’d remember was me being an angry and petulant child who’d fallen down a well. We’d never kiss again. I’d never know if we could be something.

I blinked furiously, willing my eyes to adjust so I could see what had grabbed me. But the rush of the air filled my eyes with tears, making everything a blurry, watery mess. I felt them dripping down my cheeks and shuddered, hating feeling this out of control.

I heard myself burst out of the water with a wet slap before I felt it. I sank underneath it, flailing my limbs in a reflexive attempt to swim to the surface. For a moment, I worried that I was going to drown. Was the thing holding me going to drown me? Was that what it wanted? To eat my drowned corpse?

I kicked furiously, trying to wriggle free. But I was being pulled and pulled and pulled, and eventually my head broke the surface.

I gasped for air, spinning around to find whatever it was that had brought me here. But I couldn’t see a thing. I felt something brush against my leg. Something scaly and cold. I screamed in fear.

In between the gulps of air I was taking, I whimpered. I was so, so scared that I was about to die. And then I was being dragged again, up onto some kind of rocky surface. The water was shallow, and I could see the faintest light glinting off some stones. Something about being able to see a recognizable shape comforted me.

The cold, clammy grip released me, and I scrambled further onto the shore, away from my captor. I kept scrambling until my back touched some kind of rocky wall. I looked around some more as my eyes adjusted, and finally realized I was in a huge cavern.

I looked back at the well, wondering if there was something I could climb up. A rope or a vine, maybe. But the stone walls were bare. Maybe if Greyson threw the bucket down to me… But then he’d have to risk facing whatever had pulled me down here. I didn’t want to put him in danger too.

Speaking of, I looked back at my attacker, wondering if I should grab a rock to throw at it. I squinted to make out its shape, only to realize it was staring right back at me. Blinking its beady little eyes.

Its skin was bluish grey, and its body looked like a barren bush. Like its limbs were vines and roots cleared of all leaves and green. It was hunched over, watching me intently.

“Greyson! Help!” I screamed. “Help me!”

I heard my voice reverberate up the well and the creature sprang back, covering its ears, in obvious pain. Wanting to keep it scared and far away from me, I opened my mouth to yell some more.

“It’s got me!” I called up to my friends. “Help!”

“Please don’t do that,” the creature croaked, hands clamped over its ears. “Please don’t shout. I really don’t like that.”

*What?*

Had I… offended the monster that had dragged me down to the bottom of a well?

The creature cradled its head in its hands. It looked so pitiful and pathetic, I couldn’t help but feel a bit sorry for it. But maybe this thing was clever and knew I might let my guard down if I thought I was causing it pain. I didn’t want to get killed because I was too much of a sap to know when to fight.

“Umm, I’m sorry?” I replied, not sure what else to say.

The creature lowered its hands and peered back at me owlishly. “You’re not going to do that again, are you?” it asked, voice thin and reedy. “No more yelling?”

Had I bumped my head during my fall? Like, could this possibly be real? I wondered if it was possible I was tripping on some kind of magical mushrooms again, but I hadn’t eaten in a while. Like, a *long* while. I would be starving if I wasn’t so terrified.

The creature reached out one of its spindly arms to touch me, and I pulled back.

“Don’t mess with me, okay?” I threatened, surely not sounding as tough as I wanted to. “I’ll fuck you up!”

The creature touched my arm almost tentatively with its weird vine hand. “Thank you so much for coming,” it cooed.

“I didn’t come here by choice,” I snapped. “You grabbed me.”

The creature whimpered pathetically and took its hand back to hug itself, like I’d offended it horribly by telling the truth. What was going on here?

And why did I feel a little sorry for it?

“Would you mind telling me… what you are?” I asked, wondering if maybe I could reason with the thing.

“Oh, forgive me for being so impolite.” The creature bowed its head respectfully. “I’m Spout. I’m a water sprite. Have you never seen one of us before?”

“I haven’t,” I admitted. “I’m Cali. And while it’s been really nice visiting and getting to meet you, Spout, I really think I should get back to my friends. I’m sure they’re worrying about me.”

Greyson had to be going out of his mind. I wondered if he was coming after me. Would he kill Spout as soon as he saw them? I felt fairly ambivalent about that. Sure, Spout had pulled me down a dark and scary well. But they really just seemed lonely…

“Please stay,” Spout crooned. “You must be hungry after your trip down the well. Would you at least stay for tea and dessert?”

I looked at Spout’s earnest expression and thought about it. I had to admit, I was curious to know more about this creature. Plus, it wasn’t like I had a lot of other options at the moment.

But what if agreeing to this was the moment Spout’s plan to serve me for dinner snapped into place? Maybe the sprite was just pretending to be non-threatening.

Before I could answer, Spout began to wail in the direction of one of the many caves surrounding us. Was he sending some kind of message?

I looked around. There was no way I could climb back up the well. Maybe there’d be a way up through one of the caves. Not knowing what else to do, I ducked under a stalactite and followed Spout.

I was sure Greyson would scream at me for being this reckless. He’d tell me I couldn’t trust Spout as far as he could throw them. But that was much easier to say when you were a huge, threatening werewolf.

And maybe he would be right. Maybe this *was* a bad idea. But it was the best idea I had, so I was going for it. Maybe I’d find a way to escape along the way. Or maybe Spout would let their guard down and I could overpower them and force my way back to the surface.

The cave narrowed into a small passageway as we kept walking, and the sounds of the water faded behind me. Up ahead, I saw a warm flickering light. A welcome sight in all this darkness.

“Welcome to my home, Cali.” Spout made a sweeping gesture as I crossed the threshold.

My jaw dropped. It was incredible. How the hell was this down here?

It was a big, airy cavern, with multi-colored crystals glistening in the walls and ceilings. They looked like enormous jewels, sprouting from every surface.

“This is beautiful, Spout,” I murmured, unable to stop drinking it all in.

“Please have a seat.” Spout gestured me toward a stool near a table made from bright blue crystals. When I peered at it, I could see my reflection. Sparkly, but nervous-looking.

“I’ll prepare something.” Spout started dancing off toward what I assumed was the kitchen.

“Hold on.” I craned my neck to keep an eye on Spout among the crystals. “This is absolutely stunning. You have really built a beautiful home. But is there a way for me to get out of here? I’m sure my friends are worried about me.”

Spout turned back to face me. “Oh, Cali.” Spout still looked so innocent, even now. “You don’t go. You stay here. With me. Forever.”

**Episode 397**

XAVIER

I was happy to be putting some distance between myself and Big Mac and trudging back through the woods with Gabriel and Mikah. Witches had always given me the creeps, ever since I was a kid, but she was even worse. She’d taken Jay’s eye, Cali’s blood, and she seemed to know things she shouldn’t.

But no matter how many miles I put between us physically, I couldn't outrun what she’d told me—that Cali being part Fae could mean that all the rules about werewolf mates might not apply to her.

I’d stood there like an idiot when she’d told me that. For a second, I could barely even speak.

“So you don’t know that she’s caught up in *due destini*,” I’d repeated. “You’re actually just full of shit?”

Big Mac had scoffed at my insult, and I’d longed to shift. To use my powers to intimidate her. But it was no use. She had the upper hand here.

“Maybe.” Big Mac crossed her arms. “Maybe not. But I do know that all of you should be careful, now more than ever.”

“What kind of cryptic bullshit—” I cut myself off. It was no use trying to get her to reveal things when she was being vague. She’d answer the questions she wanted to answer. So I should ask those.

But I was fuming. What she’d said about Cali had made me more pissed than I knew how to deal with. Big Mac had filled our heads with all these ideas, and all along, she’d known that our bond might not follow normal rules.

What on earth had I done to be cursed to be an exception? Why couldn’t I have had a normal life and a normal mate?

“Why did you tell Cali she was involved in *due destini?*” I asked through gritted teeth.

“*You’re* the one who had two mates. First Ava, and now Cali,” Big Mac drawled.

Of course she’d brought up Ava. At the mention of her name, every muscle in my body tensed. Every cell inside me screamed to avoid the thought of her. That it was too painful. I had to escape the hurt.

When I’d lost Ava, I’d lost a piece of myself. My wolf had abandoned me. I’d become a totally different person—a person defined by loss and pain and guilt. Just the mention of her name was enough to send me spiraling. And Big Mac knew that.

I wondered if any of this would even be happening if I hadn’t killed Ava. Well, Colton probably wouldn’t have felt the need to buy me a virgin. Which meant I probably would never have met Cali. But what if I had, and I’d still been with Ava? Would I have felt anything for her, or would she just have been any other person to me?

If Cali hadn’t found out about werewolves, maybe she would never have discovered her Fae ancestry. There was a chance we’d all be a lot safer right now. Maybe it would have been better for everyone involved if I’d just made things work with Ava.

Maybe Ava should have never killed my mother in the first place.

My mind was racing. I couldn’t help but think that all this confusion, this desperation and turmoil, had started when I’d met Cali. Maybe it would be smarter to let her and Greyson do whatever they wanted with each other. Then I could go back to being myself without all these questions and worries and coloring outside the lines.

But if I had the ability to do *that*, then I wouldn’t be in this situation. Talking to a witch I hated, working with a vampire I couldn’t trust, pushing through the pain of silver poisoning, all to ask about Cali. To try to find her, to protect her from anyone and anything that meant her harm. Because I had to. The thought of just rolling over and letting Greyson take her threatened to rip me apart.

So I kept running. Away from Big Mac, from Ava, from my father. And toward…

Gabriel and Mikah paused up ahead as I lagged behind.

“Are you going to keep moving this slowly?” Mikah asked, condescending as ever. “Or could you maybe pick up the pace a little?”

I considered breaking Mikah’s neck. He was skinny. It probably wouldn’t even take that much effort. That would probably shut him up—at least make him think twice before he talked shit.

Possibly sensing my violent impulse, Gabriel shifted back into his human form and casually patted Mikah on the shoulder. My eyes narrowed. Were they getting close? Did Gabriel actually *like* this guy? No, that couldn’t be right.

“Ease up on him, Dracula.” Gabriel smirked. “Let him swim in his emotional pool for a while. He’s had a day.”

I shifted into my human form, not comfortable letting Gabriel speak for me.

“Both of you can piss off,” I snapped. “Where are we even going, anyway?”

“There’s this Light Fae I’ve heard about,” Mikah said. “Apparently she’s been causing some trouble. Maybe if we scratch her back she can scratch ours and help us into the Fae world.”

“Trouble?” Gabriel waggled his brows suggestively, clearly not paying attention to either of us. “I love trouble. Where there’s trouble, there’s opportunity—and money. Maybe by the end of this thing, you and I will both have Fae partners, X. What do you think about that?”

Ignoring Gabriel’s comment, I wondered if we could trust Mikah. He could be leading us into a trap. He could also have bad intel. Were we really traveling to meet someone he didn’t know? Someone we weren’t even sure could help us?

“You got a better lead?” Mikah asked me, almost as if he’d heard my thoughts.

I shrugged. “What other options do we have?”

I had the vial of Cali’s blood, but that alone wasn’t enough to get me into the Fae world. I needed a Fae artifact. I needed Cali back in my life. *Fuck*, I missed her. The sweet smell of her shampoo, the sound of her laugh, the fact that she never stopped surprising me… Did Greyson love those things about her, too? Or did he see some other side of her? Maybe a side I didn’t even know about…

Gabriel’s expression softened. I could tell he wanted to comfort me, and he could tell I didn’t want to be comforted. But I appreciated his sympathy all the same.

“Look. Once we find this troublesome Fae, we’ll get you what you need,” Gabriel assured me. “Have a little faith.”

Mikah groaned at our display of friendship. “Should I leave you two alone?”

I glared at him. “Don’t be an ass.”

“It’s called friendship, dude. Jealous much?” Gabriel sneered at him. “Did they not have that whenever and wherever you grew up?”

Mikah opened his mouth to answer, but I honestly didn’t care to hear said answer, so I cut him off.

“Just take us to the Fae,” I told him.

Mikah rolled his eyes and walked away.

“I think he IS getting jealous,” Gabriel whispered to me.

“Of what?” I asked, confused.

Gabriel just shrugged and started to follow the vampire. I put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back.

“Does Mikah have a reason to be jealous?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. I wondered if I could even bully the answer out of Gabriel.

He just scoffed. “All I know is that this Fae better cooperate.” Gabriel set his jaw and I sighed. I wasn’t going to get anything out of him just now. I could do that later.

I had to keep us moving. For Cali.

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Several hours later, in the early morning, Gabriel stopped the car. We’d eventually reached Mikah’s and my legs were grateful for the rest. I was still weaker than I wanted to admit from the silver, and I would take any excuse to get off my feet for a bit. Even if it meant surrendering the shotgun seat to a vampire.

Gabriel sniffed. “Do you guys smell that?”

I took a deep inhale. An herby scent filled my nostrils. “I’m sorry, is that *weed*?” I asked.

“Keep it quiet,” Mikah hissed. “We’re close.”

“That’s *definitely* weed,” Gabriel muttered.

Mikah glared at him, parking the car so that we could step out into a field full of leafy cannabis plants. It was like a green version of the poppy field in the Wizard of Oz. I’d never seen this much weed in my life.

Gabriel clapped a hand over his heart. “I think I’m in heaven.”

“Would you shut the fuck up?” Mikah whispered.

He pointed up ahead, to a group of people standing around a smoke cloud that was billowing up into the sky. That explained the smell.

“That’s some serious skunk,” Gabriel quipped, looking at the huge cloud. “Where exactly are you taking us, anyway?”

Mikah pointed to a dark-haired woman, flanked by two huge guys. She wore her hair down, had dark green eyes, and blew perfect smoke rings.

“Who the hell is that?” I asked, impressed by her technique if nothing else.

But Mikah just ignored me and led us to the circle of people. I tensed, not liking the idea of being outnumbered by this Fae’s goons. But, once again, I didn’t have another choice.

“Mikah,” the dark-haired woman said with a smile. “Are these the werewolves you promised me?”

**Episode 398**

MAYA

Colton covered my body with his, kissing me hungrily. His hand tangled in my hair and he pulled on it, making me groan at the mixture of pain and pleasure. Fuck, how had he known I’d like that?

A part of me wanted to fight back, to push him off me and run away as fast as I could. How could I be so hungry for someone I hated with all my might?

Why couldn’t I just convince my body that I deserved better? That I deserved someone I actually *wanted* to be with? Not someone I’d been shackled to with some kind of bullshit supernatural bond. Someone who’d pissed me off from the moment I’d fucking met him.

But his lips were so soft. And when I let myself nibble on his lower lip, he growled into my mouth, which sent a lightning bolt of excitement right through me. My hips bucked into his, and he pushed back. I could feel him getting hard against me and I couldn’t resist rolling my hips again, and again, and again…

Fine, I was letting myself get a little swept up. It wasn’t like I was going to let myself become one of Colton’s conquests. All those girls were foolish enough to think one night with them would *change* him. I was nothing like them.

And what made Colton so special anyway? It wasn’t like he’d invented sex. I’d hooked up with plenty of people myself. Sure, my hookups were mostly fumbling in the backseats of cars, or in the woods somewhere. They were never mind-blowing, but they were always my decision. I went in with both eyes open, and with my own pleasure in mind.

Colton trailed kisses down my throat and I wondered if it was possible to drown on land, with absolutely no water around. Because I felt like I was drowning in his touch. When he bit down on the spot where my neck met my shoulder, I had to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

I heard him chuckle and didn’t like that one fucking bit, so I dug my fingernails into his arms and flipped us so I was on top. As much as I wanted his touch, I was going to at least make sure I was getting it on my own terms.

For a second, he just looked up at me. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought he was looking at me like I was the most beautiful girl in the world. Like he couldn’t believe we were doing this. I wondered if all the other girls felt like that.

And in that moment, I wanted to ruin him for them. To make him feel so good, he’d never want another person again—only what I could give him.

I straddled his hips and pulled him up into a sitting position. I kissed him hard, and he wrapped his arms around my waist. It felt like his palm was burning a hole through the back of my shirt. I ran my hands through his hair, and he moaned when I let my fingernails scrape against his scalp.

Now it was my turn to smirk against his lips. I fisted my hands in his shirt and tore it in two, exposing his toned chest.

He looked up at me, eyes wide, pupils blown. For a second, I wondered if I’d gone too far. Did he not like it when I was that aggressive? Was I being too needy? Too desperate for him?

“Fucking hell, Maya,” he growled under his breath before grabbing me by the throat and slotting my lips against his. Our teeth clashed together as he kissed me harder. Maybe he *did* like me being the aggressive one.

As his hands found my hips, I tried to talk myself into stopping this. Was this one hookup really worth ruining all my plans? I was supposed to become the Luna of the Samara pack, after all.

With Nolan, I’d have real power. I’d be a part of something—a part they couldn’t just throw away. Because Lunas weren’t replaceable. They weren’t asked to be the sacrifice. They were respected.

But instead of laying the groundwork for that, I was making out with a member of the Redwood pack. A member who wasn’t even an Alpha, and who had absolutely no interest in becoming one. Why would I even consider tying any part of myself to him?

I pulled back, breaking the kiss. A trail of spit webbed from his lips to mine, a clear reminder of what we’d been doing. And who I was doing it with.

“What’s wrong?” Colton asked, breathing heavily.

His hands trailed up my sides to cup my cheeks, searching my expression for whatever had made me stop. In spite of myself, I leaned into his touch. My body betrayed me, desperate for one more moment of friction.

“You are,” I replied, barely able to speak louder than a whisper. “We are. *This* is wrong.”

I pushed myself off his lap and scurried backward a bit, until my back was sweating from the heat of the fire. Which was ironic, because everything that had been heating up between me and Colton had just turned to ice.

Colton looked down at his lap and shook his head.

“You know, you can be a real pain in the ass.” He looked up at me, clearly pissed. “Why can’t you just enjoy this for what it is?”

“I know exactly what this is.” I clenched my hands into fists. “It’s bullshit. And that’s exactly why I stopped it.”

I pushed myself back up to my feet and brushed the dirt off my clothes. Colton stayed exactly where he was. He wouldn’t even look up at me. I turned on my heel and left him there to his thoughts. I didn’t owe him a thing.

On my way back to my tent, I saw Lola and Jay through the zipper door of theirs. She was nestled in his arms, her head resting on his chest. He stroked her hair gently and pressed kisses onto the top of her head.

I felt a wave of loneliness and remorse wash over me. The voice inside me that was begging me to go back to Colton got louder. But I refused to listen.

I crawled into my sleeping bag and curled up into a ball, hoping I’d be able to will myself to sleep. I tried to push Colton from my brain. Instead, I wondered what Joss was planning, and hoped as hard as I could that it would work.

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The next morning, I woke up early. The sun was only just beginning to light up the horizon. The sky was streaked with pink and yellow and orange. If one of us wasn’t about to be sacrificed, the beauty might have relaxed me.

I stuck my head out of my tent and glanced around. I saw Colton sleeping by the smoldering remains of the fire and rolled my eyes. No surprises there. Jay and Lola were still asleep. I wondered idly if I’d have time to go on a morning run. Maybe that would release some of my tension—after last night with Colton, I was full of it, and begging for a release. And why did *that* sound so sexual?

I got to my feet, stretching a bit before getting ready to run Colton right out of my mind. But just as I started off toward the woods, I saw someone stir on the other side of the fire.

For a second, I had to squint to make out who it was through the smoke. But then I realized it was Violet.

My heart broke a little at the sight of her, just like it always did. She’d been through so much in so little time. I was sure she felt alone—a feeling I knew all too well. I didn’t want it to poison her like it had poisoned me.

But she had a support system in her pack. Everyone loved Violet and would do anything for her. That was more than I’d had when my grandfather had kicked me out of my pack. With everyone’s help, Violet would find a new normal. It would just take a while.

I walked over to her, careful to tread lightly and not bother any of the sleeping wolves. I gave Violet a small wave, but she didn’t seem to notice me.

“Hey, what are you doing up?” I whispered. “Are you going somewhere?”

She must not have heard me, because she kept walking toward the lodge. I snuck up behind her, still not wanting to interrupt everyone else’s sleep.

“Violet?” I asked again.

Nothing.

I called her name a few times before she finally reacted, whirling around to meet my eyes. She looked scared and angry.

“Go back to sleep, Maya,” she snapped.

I didn’t like where this seemed to be heading.

“Not until you tell me what the hell you’re doing,” I replied.

“I’m going to save the pack.”

**Episode 399**

Spout’s words were like a record scratching inside my head. *Please tell me I misheard*. Had that sprite really just said they were going to keep me here at the bottom of this creepy murder-well forever? *I don’t think so.*

I started backing away from the blue creature, not sure where I should go, but determined to find a way out one way or the other. Greyson had to be losing his mind by now. Especially after his whole spiel of *oh,* *I’ll gladly step aside and allow your friends to be burned at the stake, but you’re precious to me.* Like Gollum and his ring, only if Gollum were hot and…

I shook my head. I’d only seen *Lord of the Rings* once all the way through; I needed to get the fuck out of this cave. Maybe the creature had a ladder? Or were there stairs somewhere? It had to have gotten down here SOMEHOW.

I started heading down one tunnel that looked like it might be ever so slightly slanted upward instead of down. It was the best I could do with my limited resources and Fae world knowledge—the surface was up, so if the tunnel went up too… Well, fingers crossed that up and down worked the same way in the Fae world as they did back home.

Two steps into the glittering tunnel that looked like it had been attacked by a bedazzler, Spout called after me, their voice slightly mournful. “What are you doing, new friend?”

“I’m getting out of here!” I called over my shoulder. No more crying, wailing, gnashing of teeth—

I heard a strange puffing sound behind me and spun around with a gasp. Spout was huffing like a tea kettle, their face twisted with grief, puffing up their chest—and they had also grown three times their size, like some kind of blue, vine-y pufferfish. “Don’t try to escape,” Monster Fish Spout warned, and I almost peed myself a little.

Seriously, what the hell was going on with this well? First there had been the weird tentacle monster, then sad regular-sized Spout and their cave of wonders, and now—

Dear god had they grown a hundred extra teeth too?

“Back off!” I shouted at the monster. “I came with a super Alpha werewolf, and he’s going to be really upset and very hot when he finds out you’ve tried to kidnap me!”

Spout’s eyes lit up, and those janky, overlapping teeth eased into something resembling a smile. “Will he bring others?” they asked, with all the eagerness of a small child. “Will they be staying for tea?”

My jaw dropped, and my eyes narrowed. What the hell was going on with this sprite? Was it a villain or a good sprite? Were all water sprites like this, or was this lonely weirdo just the result of a good sprite getting a little too much one-on-one time with themself at the bottom of a well that seemed awfully reminiscent of *The Ring*?

*A lonely creature, trapped in water and darkness. If a real-life Gollum exists, I’ve just found them. I need to stop watching so many movies.*

“What’s wrong with you?” I demanded. “He’s a *werewolf*. Do you know what that means? He’s not going to want to make small talk and sip tea—he’s going to want to rip you a new one!”

Spout’s eyes widened. At three times their original size—and with what looked like ten thousand extra teeth—Spout began to sob. They trembled, tears pouring down their face as they shrank back to their normal size.

“What. Is. Happening?” I groaned out.

But Spout was inconsolable, and threw themself at my feet, their long, vine-like fingers wrapping tight around my ankles. “Please don’t go!” Spout whined piteously. “I’m so l-l-lonely! I j-just wanted a friend!”

I looked down at the sobbing sprite with a sigh. When I’d imagined going on a journey to the Fae world to find a cure for my mom, I’d assumed there would be danger, probably strange creatures I’d never seen before with magic I could only hope to possess, and some family bonding with good ole Grandma. But this…

I looked down at the sprite lying prostrate on the ground, their face pressed into the dirt. This was something that I could never have predicted. I glanced around helplessly. I hoped Greyson would arrive soon. Every second I wasted down here was another second my mother would have to wait for her cure.

Spout let out a wail loud enough to make the cave rattle, squeezing me even tighter. My toes were beginning to go numb. Some kidnapper. They seemed more sad and harmless and, let’s face it, completely inept than anything else. Maybe they really were just lonely?

I tentatively reached out a hand. *I can’t believe I’m feeling badly for my kidnapper. Isn’t this how Stockholm Syndrome starts? Or the exact reason why so many women fall in love with serial killers?*

I was surprised at how smooth Spout’s skin was. The sprite leaned into my touch, reminding me of my childhood neighbor’s cat—it used to rub against my legs whenever I petted it, too.

But Spout was not a cat—they’d kidnapped me, after all, and since I’d been yanked down to the bottom of the well, they hadn’t exactly shown fantastic manners. I sighed and stepped away from the sprite. “Are you okay?”

Spout nodded, sniffling.

I crossed my arms in front of me, reminding myself not to feel bad for this deeply awkward creature, no matter how lonely they might seem. “Why did you kidnap me? You don’t seem the scary serial killer type.”

Spout’s bottom lip trembled. “I was lonely.”

“You were lonely?” I repeated.

They nodded.

“So when you saw me looking into the well, you decided to pull me down here?”

Another nod.

I sighed. *Do not be touched by this. It’s creepy and invasive and not something worth ‘aww-ing’ over.* “Maybe there’s a better way for you to find some company,” I suggested. “Have you tried sending out invitations? Maybe getting out and making new friends? Throwing a party?”

The sprite stuck out their lower lip again. “I don’t have any friends to invite.”

*Okay, so maybe less Ted Bundy and more Eeyore*.

“Well, kidnapping isn’t a very good way to make friends, Spout. It’s only going to make you enemies.”

“I know, but I was desperate!”

I frowned. What was I going to do with this sad, lonely creature? I couldn’t just abandon them to the bottom of the well, but Greyson was probably on his way.

Spout looked at me with the saddest puppy-dog eyes a weird-looking blue water sprite could muster. “Could you at least stay for tea? I made cupcakes.”

I hesitated. I did like cupcakes, but now probably wasn’t the best time for a tea party. Plus, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what kinds of things a water sprite put in their cupcakes. Kelp? Algae? Tiny well fish?

“How do I get out of here, Spout?” I asked instead.

They pointed straight up to the top of the well. “The same way you came in.”

“You pulled me down,” I reminded them. “Are you sure there’s not some other way out of here? I can’t climb that far.”

Spout frowned for a moment. “There is another way out, but I won’t tell you until you taste my cupcakes!”

Climb up a creepy well like the girl from *The Ring*, or endure a tea party with a Fae world Mad Hatter? Was there any option C? Because both of those ideas sounded truly awful.

I sighed. What would a time-out for a snack cost anyway? Just a few minutes? “Fine. I’ll stay and have cupcakes with you.”

A gleeful—and mildly terrifying—grin split Spout’s face, and they jumped for joy as they set about preparing tea.

I looked around the creature’s home while they got things ready—there were stumps for chairs, sketches of giant flowers on the walls, a stalactite chandelier—actually, considering it was at the bottom of a well, Spout had made a pretty cool little home. Just not cool enough for me to want to stay forever because I definitely didn’t. I had to find Greyson, the flower, and save my mom.

Spout gestured to one of the stump chairs. “Please take a seat.” They brandished a tray of cupcakes with odd-colored frosting that shimmered. They looked beautiful, and not unlike the gems and multi-colored rocks in the tunnels. Oh, god, was I about to eat a rock cupcake? Fuck me.

Steeling myself, I sat down, picked up a cupcake, and took a small bite. I had to be polite, right? “Oh my god! That’s amazing!”

Spout grinned. “You like it?”

Somewhere in the distance, I heard a splash. I looked toward the passageway that led back to the water. I heard *a lot* more splashing, and then a horrible hissing sound. Could that be Greyson?

“GREYSON!” I shouted down the passageway.

He howled in response.

I turned to Spout. “My werewolf is coming!”

Spout’s eyes went wide and they backed up against the wall. “Don’t let him hurt me!”

I opened my mouth to respond, but it was too late. Greyson, in wolf form but still wearing the clothes Astrid had fashioned for him—complete with a tiny feathered hat—leapt into the cavern, and his gray eyes locked onto Spout. With a ferocious howl, he charged at the water sprite.

**Episode 400**

GREYSON

The Fae world could eat a dick. Preferably not mine.

I was so done with this bullshit. Something had taken Cali from me. And I’d gone through this nasty old well, clawed my way through some kind of barrier, and fought off a creepy-ass deep-well octopus only to find Cali tucked away in a cavern with a strange, blue creature half her size.

I didn’t think twice. Didn’t see anything beyond the creature and the red haze that had settled over my mind. It had better be ready for a fight.

I pounced on the creature, preparing to sink my teeth into its soft, fish-like skin as it screamed bloody murder. After what it had done to Cali, it deserved to feel fear, deserved to feel pain right before I tore it to shreds—

“Greyson, no!” Cali screamed. “Stop! Put them down!”

I paused at the sound of her voice, my mouth seconds away from the monster. Then I pulled back slightly, holding it in place under one massive paw. I cocked my head at Cali, who was sitting in a tree stump chair and holding a half-eaten cupcake. A *cupcake*? The shining, multicolored frosting around her lips told me exactly where the other half of the cupcake had ended up.

What the hell was going on?

When Cali had been taken down the well, my mind had dreamed up any number of worst-case scenarios. Drowning, blunt force trauma from the fall, monsters not unlike the tentacle thing I’d encountered in the bottom of the well…

I scanned over the tray that was sitting on the stump next to her. It held more cupcakes, and teacups so small I wouldn’t be able to drink from them in my wolf form. She’d been having a tea party? With a monster?

Cali jumped up. “Please don’t hurt Spout. They mean no harm!”

I looked back down at the creature that was pinned beneath my paw. It was scared shitless, whining piteously, spluttering through tears and heaving breaths. “I’m s-s-so s-s-sorry! P-p-please don’t h-hurt me!”

I looked back at Cali, who, despite the scream she’d let out earlier, seemed completely fine. She wasn’t hurt. In fact, judging by the amount of frosting caked around her lips, she was probably having a pretty good time with this weird little monster.

Then *what the hell was going on*?

I snarled and backed off, shifting back into my human form, dripping with who knows what from the well. Cali rushed over and threw her arms around me, still holding onto her cupcake with one hand. I hugged her back, relieved to see her, but also kind of pissed off.

“Do you realize I just ripped through some kind of invisible barrier and fought off a disgusting sea creature to find you, to save you?” I demanded. “And you’re having *cupcakes?*”

“Would you like one?” she asked. “They’re really good.”

I barely stopped myself from knocking that damn cupcake out of her hand.

“I risked my life,” I said. “I was so worried about you, that something had happened to you, and *this* is what I find?” This thing just wanted to play house with her?

She poked me in the chest, frowning. “You should be glad I’m okay. And hey, at least you’re not naked! You’ve still got that outfit Astrid made for you!”

I looked down and sure enough I was still wearing the tights and vest. Groaning, I reached for my head and ran my fingers through my hair. I must have lost the stupid hat during my fight with the giant eel. However that fucking worked.

“I thought you looked kind of cute wearing those clothes when you were a wolf,” Cali added with a soft smile.

I glared at her. She didn’t get to be cute right now. Not here, at the bottom of this godforsaken well with that weird little creature staring at us. I pointed at the creature. “What about that?”

Cali’s eyes followed my finger, her smile not dimming in the slightest. “They’re Spout. We were having a tea party.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Cali could make friends with anyone, anywhere.

The creature climbed to its feet and waved sheepishly, showing off a set of sharp snaggle teeth.

I frowned, not taking my eyes off the strange, small creature. “What’s a Spout?”

The creature slowly and tentatively approached us. “I’m a water sprite.”

I blinked. I didn’t know the first thing about water sprites. “I’ve never even heard of your kind. What are you doing down here?”

Spout’s lower lip jutted out just the slightest bit, and their eyes took on a sheen. Was it going to cry again?

“I was banished from my home,” Spout admitted.

“Why?” Cali asked.

“It doesn’t matter.” The sprite’s shoulders curled inward. They were clearly uncomfortable with the topic. “As part of my banishment, I was imprisoned in this well. I’ve been here for so long, I don’t even know how long it’s been. I’m so lonely. And when I heard a voice, I thought it would be nice to have a friend—I’ve never had a visitor, ever.”

My teeth ground together, and I bit back a snarl. “So you dragged Cali down here?”

The creature looked down. “Perhaps it was a little extreme, but I was desperate for a friend, you see. I’m so sorry for upsetting you.”

I blew out a breath. “We’re getting out of here.”

“But we still haven’t figured out what’s poisoning the well!” Cali reminded me.

“I fought an eel creature at the bottom of the well, maybe that’s where the poison’s coming from?” I suggested.

Spout sniffled. “I’m responsible.”

“What?!” Cali looked shocked.

I cocked my head. “Why would you do that?”

Spout shrugged. “I can’t help it.”

“Of course you can,” Cali said. “You just don’t poison the well. Done.”

Spout shook their head. “It’s my tears—they’re poisonous to many other creatures, and…” They sniffed again. “Unfortunately, since I’ve been trapped down here I’ve spent a good portion of my time crying. I can’t help it.”

I blinked. This sad little creature cried so much it had poisoned a well *with its tears?* “Maybe someone should have dropped some Zoloft down here when they banished you, huh?”

“What is that?” Spout asked.

Cali smacked my chest. God I’d missed her, and it’d only been a few minutes. An alarming few minutes, but still. “Never mind.” She turned to me. “See? We need to help them.”

I glanced dubiously at the water sprite, who was staring at me with a sad excuse for puppy-dog eyes, then turned back to Cali. “Their situation is unfortunate and all, but all I care about is getting *you* out of *here*. I can carry you up the well wall, and we’ll leave this weird place behind us.”

She shook her head. “What about Gunhild? What do we tell her?”

I shrugged. “The truth? There’s a weird little sprite poisoning her well. What’s the problem?”

Cali glanced over at Spout and bit her lip. “What do you think Gunhild will do with poor Spout?”

I had exactly zero fucks to give for the fate of ‘poor Spout’, but I also remembered how upset Cali had been when I’d suggested leaving Astrid and Torin to the Dark Fae. How pissed she’d been. And now, even though we were talking about the same creature that had abducted her, I had a feeling if I voiced my genuine thoughts, Cali would just get even more upset. I sighed.

Why didn’t she understand she was my priority? First and foremost, and only her.

“What can we do, Cali?” I asked, trying not to sound as frustrated as I felt. “We have to get out of here, right? This isn’t our problem.”

Cali frowned, and I pulled her a little further away from the creepy smurf monster. Apparently Spout wasn’t one for privacy, because it moved forward, following us until I let out a low growl. “Can you back off for a second?”

Cali threw me a look and then smiled gently at Spout. “Greyson and I need to talk privately for a moment, okay? We’ll be right back.”

We stepped further away from the creature and this time it stayed put, watching us with large, mournful eyes. God, I hated cute shit.

I sighed and faced Cali. Believe it or not, I was trying very hard *not* to come across as a complete asshole, or to browbeat her through every stage of this quest for the moon buttercup. I loved her bleeding heart—it made her who she was.

But right now, I needed her heart to bleed just a little less. If we stopped to save every stray thing we encountered on our journey through the Fae world, we’d never make it back in time to save her mother. “Listen, I know you like to take on everyone’s problems. You have a big heart and you want to help, but the only thing you should be focused on right now is saving your mom.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she jerked away from me. “You think I’m not?”

*Great, that was clearly the perfect thing to say to her.*

“No, I’m just reminding you,” I said, trying to keep my voice low and calm. “Gunhild only asked us to figure out who or what was poisoning the well—how she deals with Spout is not our problem.”

“So you want me to just leave Spout at the mercy of Gunhild?” She asked. “Who could do anything to them?

I grit my teeth. Why did she have to look at me with her eyes like that? “Yes, Cali. I don’t give a fuck about Spout or if you had a grand old cupcake time down here together. We can’t solve everyone else’s problems for them.”

The anger slipped off her face, replaced with an expression that wasn’t unlike Spout’s. “I understand,” she said quietly. Great, said the wrong thing again. She turned to the creature. “I’m sorry, Spout, but—”

The water sprite rushed over and dropped to their knees in front of me. “Stop! Before you say anything more.” Spout turned to me. “You broke through the barrier! The hot, angry werewolf! Can’t you take me back to the surface with both of you?”

**Episode 401**

MAYA

Violet brushed past me before I could fully process her response. She was going to do *what?*

I spun around and caught her arm. “What do you mean, you’re going to save the pack?”

Violet’s eyes were red from crying, and her blue irises were nearly glowing in the pale, early morning light. “I’m going to save the pack, Maya. This is the only way. You heard what Cesaries said—one of us must be sacrificed.”

For a moment, I could only stare at the teenager in front of me. She was so young. *Too* young. “So that’s your plan? You’re going to sacrifice yourself?”

Violet shoved my hand away with a strength I hadn’t realized she possessed. “You can’t stop me. Don’t even try, Maya.” She tried to brush past me again, to put space between herself and the sleeping pack, but I stepped into her path and caught her arm again.

“Don’t try me again,” I growled. “Why are you doing this?” My voice was just this side of too loud. While the pack would undoubtedly back me up on this—they all loved Violet—it was probably best that the rest of the group remained asleep for a little while longer. I didn’t want to spook this girl who seemed so determined to end her own life for the sake of the pack. “You don’t have to do this. You heard Joss, we’ll find another way.”

Violet stared down at her shoes for a long string of seconds, sniffling. She didn’t try to jerk out of my grasp—if anything, it seemed like the fight had seeped out of her. I heard a slight hitch in her voice as she finally whispered, “Because I have nothing else to live for. Might as well make my death meaningful, right?”

I didn’t think twice before pulling her into a hug.

Violet hadn’t been the same since Lilac had been murdered, and I didn’t blame her. The twins had each seemed like half of the same whole. They’d had a strong bond, and now Violet had to face a future without her brother. I understood that strength you had to have to get up every day and put one foot in front of the other. Violet stiffened in my embrace at first, but then she melted into me, gripping my shirt like it was a lifeline. She sobbed into my neck, her tears saturating my shirt.

Touchy-feely stuff had never been my strength—a fact I was sure Colton would be more than willing to attest to—and it was strange to hug Violet this way. It was something I hadn’t done in… years. But it also felt right. And what else was I supposed to do?

It didn’t seem like reasoning with her was working, and I wasn’t about to let Violet serve herself up to the council on a silver platter. This wasn’t her problem to fix, and she had a hell of a lot more to live for than becoming a martyr. I’d sooner volunteer for the council’s sick mind game before any of those hateful men touched a single hair on her head.

Violet was a slight thing, which was good because my hug was the only thing keeping her upright. She sobbed into my shoulder, great heaving gasps ripping in and out of her lungs, and I knew this was about so much more than the council.

*A hug and a few ‘there, there’s’ aren’t going to cut it.*

“You’re wrong, you know,” I said. “You have a lot to live for. You’re a member of the pack; you have a family. You belong with them.” It was more than what could be said for me. “And what happened between the Redwood pack and the council isn’t your fault. They’re asking the impossible and punishing you all for defending against the Manus Cruentae. That’s not any of your fucking burden.”

The words were bitter on my tongue, talking about family and belonging and assuring this girl that she had a home here when I didn’t think I’d ever stop feeling like an outsider. My heart was with a pack that truly felt like home but didn’t want me, while I was tethered here to the Redwood pack by the piece of my soul that Colton held.

God, Violet actually reminded me a lot of myself and it fucking sucked. When I’d first been cast out of my pack, living through it had been hard. And I hated looking at this sad, broken girl, trying to comfort her and be the warm guidance that I’d never had—it felt like dragging glass through old wounds.

Violet shook her head, smearing her tears across my shoulder and neck. “They k-killed him,” she whispered brokenly. “The Manus Cruentae killed Lilac.”

“I know.” I ran a hand over her hair. “We’ll never forget what they did to him. Not a single one of us. But do you think this is what Lilac would want?”

“I don’t know.” She finally broke away from the embrace. Her blue eyes were rimmed with red, her complexion was blotchy, and her lower lip trembled. “I feel so lost without him. And Greyson’s gone. And now the council wants to hurt us. I just… I feel like nothing will ever be okay again.” She sniffled.

This was so out of my league. I knew the feeling of utter despair better than most, but I didn’t see how that could help. How could I talk her down from that ledge when I’d spent so much time there myself, over the years? When this shitshow of a situation made me want to go kill the entire council right now?

I nodded and squeezed her hand. “I know it seems impossible, but it’s going to be okay. I promise.”

*Liar, liar. Your mate’s on fire.*

I noticed a hint of orange in the distance; dawn was approaching, whether we were ready for it or not. I turned Violet back toward the campground and slung my arm around her shoulders, partly to comfort her and partly to keep her from running off again. We began to walk back to the camp. “It’s time for the pack meeting to hear what the options are. I’m sure Joss has some suggestions. They’ll figure something out.”

I finally got Violet back to the campground, and by the time we were face-to-face with the rest of the pack who was waking up, her face almost looked normal. Her eyes were still a little swollen, but she’d managed to calm down a little. Had I successfully talked her down? Or was she just putting on a strong face for the rest of the pack?

Joss emerged from her tent, her head held high, and approached the rest of the pack.

“So who’s it going to be?” Sage demanded. “Have you made a decision?”

Straight to the point, then. I tightened my grip on Violet’s shoulder. There was no way I was going to let her volunteer as tribute for the council’s stupid power play. Colton stopped next to me, nodding a cold greeting. He’d somehow managed to look completely put together, despite how early it was. His hair was perfectly tousled. He raised an eyebrow at my staring and I scoffed.

Would he offer himself up? It would certainly solve a lot of problems.

I shifted on my feet and tried to ignore the wolf inside me that roared at the possibility of Colton being sacrificed.

“Quiet down,” Joss said, her tone both soft and commanding. A reminder that she was the Luna of this pack and, currently, the only leader we had.

Rishika huffed. “We need to discuss this as a pack.” Beside her, Sage and Zainab nodded.

“And we will discuss it,” Joss said. “But in an orderly fashion and, like I said, as a *pack*.”

“Where the fuck is Greyson?” Zainab snapped. “He should be here! This is *his* pack!”

Beside me, Colton chuckled. “Fair point. I mean, isn’t the captain supposed to go down with his ship?”

I glared at him. Did he always have to be such a dick? I knew there was no love lost with the Evers brothers, but this was still Colton’s pack. Was it so impossible for him to accept Joss as Luna, as the leader who’d stuck with us during a crisis?

He must have felt me glaring daggers at him, because he crossed his arms and added, “Or we could get rid of Maya.”

*Seriously?* I spun to face him and bared my teeth. “I’m not part of this pack, asshole.”

He shrugged. “The council might think otherwise since you’re my mate, and if that’s the case, then who better to sacrifice than someone that’s not even one of us?”

His words cut deep, hitting some dark, wounded piece of me that I’d spent years trying to ignore. I didn’t even try to stop myself from shoving him. So much for being mates. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

He pushed me right back. “I didn’t think you’d mind, either. Anything’s better than being stuck with me, right?”

The whole pack had been on edge for days, just waiting to explode, and our fight lit the fuse. Chaos broke out around us. Sage, Zainab, and Rishika started a full-on screaming match with Joss, and when Colton grabbed me again, I couldn’t remember a single good reason to not rip out his throat.

He spun me in his arms so his chest was pressed flush against my back. He whispered harshly in my ear, his breath hot on my neck, but I wasn’t listening to him.

My eyes were locked on the empty patch of forest two feet away, and I looked around the campground.

Violet was gone.

**Episode 402**

XAVIER

What the fuck?

I spun away from the dark-haired Fae woman who was appraising Gabriel and me like we were piles of meat and launched myself at Mikah, grabbing him by his collar and snarling in his face. “What is she talking about? ‘The werewolves you promised her’? Is this kind of trap?”

“You better back the fuck off, Xavier. It’s not a trap.” Mikah flashed his fangs at me, but I didn’t let up. I didn’t need to. Because Gabriel stepped up next to us, getting in the lousy vamp’s face too, seeming somehow even more pissed off than I was.

“What the hell are you up to, bloodsucker?” Gabriel demanded. He also grabbed onto Mikah’s shirt, and the three of us toppled over in a growling pile of supernatural limbs. This was beyond a rookie move on Gabriel’s part. We’d both learned over the years not to double-up when getting a little… hands-on with a target. It made everything crowded and clumsy and, ultimately, more dangerous.

Plus it looked stupid as fuck.

Someone’s elbow ended up in my back, shoving me away from the other two. “Ow, Jesus!”

By the time I got to my feet, Gabriel had the vampire pinned to the ground and was baring his teeth at Mikah. My eyes widened. His anger seemed a little over the top for the situation.

“If you cross us,” Gabriel hissed, his voice low and soft and dangerous, “your charm and looks aren’t going to keep you out of trouble.”

Laughter echoed behind us, and I turned to see the Fae woman approaching. She didn’t seem the slightest bit worried about the amped up monsters wrestling in her front yard, and I couldn’t tell if it was because she was a powerful Fae, because she had backup, or if she was too stoned from the pot she was growing behind her house to tell just how volatile the situation was. One wrong move and the whole thing would blow up in all our faces.

She smirked at Mikah, who was still pinned on the ground beneath Gabriel. “Don’t tell me you didn’t tell them.”

I huffed. “Enough with the intrigue. I don’t feel like seeing Gabe rip your friend’s throat out tonight, so why don’t you tell me exactly what it was that Mikah failed to mention?”

She looked me up and down, her eyes lighting with interest. “You’re easy on the eyes. Nice.”

If it were possible for me to feel anything like lust for a woman other than Cali, I *might* have been interested. A weed-stinking Fae woman wouldn’t typically have been near the top of my list, no matter how pretty she was. But I could have made an exception, if I’d felt it would be worth it.

But since I was mated to Cali, even though she was a world away—and with Greyson of all people—when I looked at the Fae woman I didn’t feel the slightest flicker of interest. Only disgust. And anger. My patience had run out.

“Cut the bullshit,” I snapped. “I’m going to tear you all to pieces if someone doesn’t explain what the hell is going on here.”

The Fae woman grinned and bit her lip. “Oh, he’s feisty too!”

Gabriel climbed off Mikah with a growl. “Fuck this, Xavier. Let’s get out of here.”

“Oh, would you relax?” Mikah got to his feet and brushed himself off, tossing a dirty look at Gabriel. What was going on with those two? “Listen, I brought you here because Lottie wants to discuss a business deal—and I thought in exchange, she might help you on your quest.” Mikah eyed me meaningfully as he said that last part.

But why in the hell would I trust some strange woman at all? The Fae were notoriously tricky to deal with. You said the wrong words once and BOOM—you lost your firstborn, or your soul, or your eye. I glanced at the woman, Lottie. “What deal could we possibly make?”

“Tell me, wolf, is it true that your kind love to party?” she asked.

I glanced over at Gabriel. Judging by his expression, he found the woman’s question exactly as fucking stupid as I did. And I knew for a fact that Gabriel did, in fact, like to party. “What?” I snapped.

Lottie shrugged. “It’s more of a rhetorical question, anyway. Everyone knows werewolves love to party.” She pointed to the cannabis field surrounding her house. “And I have lots of grass for you and your pack to party with.”

Comprehension dawned, and suddenly I was pissed off at Mikah all over again. *You’ve got to be shitting me.*

I turned to face the vampire. “You want to sell us *drugs?* You took us to a *pot dealer*?””

Mikah shrugged. “I’m only introducing you. What you and Lottie do or don’t do is not my concern.”

Gabriel looked around and let out a low whistle. “There *is* a lot of weed here. I mean, a *lot* of weed.”

If Gabriel had a superpower—besides maiming and murdering, of course—it would be his ability to get sidetracked by the most stupid, inconsequential things. So what if this crazy Fae bitch had a shit-ton of weed? That wasn’t our goal. “Yeah, but we’re not here for weed, numbnuts,” I snapped. “All I want is to get a Fae artifact so we can be on our way to Haystack Rock.”

Lottie’s eyebrows lifted in genuine surprise. “An artifact? What did you have in mind? Maybe we can make a trade.”

I rolled my eyes. Was she gonna end up like Big Mac, with her creepy-ass supernatural body part collection? “Do you want my blood, too?”

Her face scrunched up in disgust. “Gross. Why would I want that? Werewolf blood is useless.” She sighed and began speaking very slowly, like I was an idiot. “What I want is access to the werewolf market to expand my clientele. I have all this weed, just waiting to be snatched up by someone like you.”

I blinked. “So this is a drug deal?”

Gabriel frowned at Mikah. “And you say you’re a fucking private investigator.”

The vampire shrugged again. “Right. A *private* investigator. Not a cop.”

Lottie held up her hands. “I prefer to call it a business deal, but yeah, basically what I’m offering is a drug deal. Introduce me to Bucky D and you can have whatever you want.”

“Who in the FUCK,” I started, “Is ‘Bucky D’?”

“Whoa, that’s a bit of a stretch, don’t you think?” Gabriel asked, not reacting to the most ridiculous name this way of Big Mac that I’d heard.

“You know that guy?”

Gabriel nodded. “He’s a big-time dealer in these parts… He’s got some good shit if you know what I mean.”

Of course he would know.

“So… you’re a drug-dealing Fae?” I asked, redirecting my attention to Lottie. I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around the whole thing. This wasn’t anything like the quest I’d been envisioning.

“I’m an entrepreneur,” she said.

I growled. *This is becoming one giant pain in the ass after another. I should have never agreed to team up with the bloodsucker.*

Gabriel pulled me aside. “What’s the big deal? You want to get Cali back. What do you care if this woman sells weed to werewolves? Maybe it’ll bring the price down—you know, more competition. It’s a win-win.”

I shook my head. “I don’t care about fucking drug economics. I just want to get to Cali.”

Gabriel’s face broke into a huge smile. “You won’t regret this.”

*Famous last words*.

He turned to Lottie. “It’s a deal.”

She turned to the two big guys flanking her, who’d spent the whole meeting glaring at Gabriel and me. “Go prepare our meal,” she said.

I watched the two men stalk inside the house. “Hold on, what meal? I just want the artifact. That was the deal.”

She shook her head. “We’re civilized here. We make a deal, we have sustenance—especially to nourish you before your long journey.”

“Nourish? The fuck—” I stopped myself. This just wasn’t worth the headache. “You know what, we’ll find another way.”

Gabriel caught my arm. “We haven’t eaten in a while. Why not have a little food before we leave?”

I paused. I knew what Cali would do—she wouldn’t want to be rude. She’d eat the meal and then be on her way with the artifact. I sighed. “Fine. We’ll eat with you, and then we’ll finish this deal.”

“Wonderful!” Lottie said brightly. “Please follow me.”

We followed her through the weed field toward the back of her house.

“You mind if I grab a few samples?” Gabriel asked.

I smacked the back of his head. “If you’re coming with me, I don’t want you high as a kite.”

We arrived at Lottie’s dwelling, in the heart of the giant weed field. It was a yurt. An alpaca was munching on a nearby patch of grass. What kind of trippy stoner world had I fallen into?

We followed Lottie into the yurt, where a long table laden with a feast awaited us. Fae magic was no joke, I guess.

Gabriel grinned. “Awesome!”

Lottie held out her hands. “Help yourselves.”

I took a seat and reached for a plate, my mouth watering. The food smelled amazing, and Gabriel was right—it *had* been a while since we’d eaten anything, much less a spread like this one.

Gabriel didn’t even hesitate before proceeding to stuff his face with meat and sweet potatoes. While I filled my plate, I noticed Lottie offering Mikah a goblet full of blood. She really was serious about eating a meal to seal this business deal. Where did she keep blood?

I relaxed and dug into the food pile on my plate—and immediately had to bite back a moan. Jesus, this was delicious. I took another bite, and then another. And then something strange happened.

The walls had started moving around us. I glanced over to Gabriel to ask him about it, but his eyes were glowing, and beyond him, Mikah had turned into a bat.

Realization hit me, along with a dose of panic. We’d been drugged.

**Episode 403**

How Greyson could ignore Spout’s puppy-dog eyes, I didn’t know. The sprite was on their hands and knees, begging Greyson to take them with us when we left the well. It was quite the sight to see.

“Please, oh please!” Spout cried, large tears running down their face. “I’ve been trapped down here for so long! All I want is to see the sun again. To breathe fresh air. To walk free once more! Please, take me with you! I’ll do anything!” They reached for Greyson’s hand and he jerked it away from their grip, eyeing the creature with distaste.

Greyson was being kind of a jackass. I mean, sure, Spout had tried to kidnap me and had yanked me down to the bottom of this well and was kind of the reason we were all stuck down here, but they were just sad and lonely. And maybe if we took them out of the well, it wouldn’t be poisoned anymore. Gunhild would appreciate that, right? So what was Greyson’s problem?

Spout threw themself around Greyson’s legs, holding on tight and begging him not to leave without them. Greyson glared down at the creature and then glanced at me, his expression saying something along the lines of *am I being Punk’d?*

I frowned. Would he treat this poor, helpless creature with the same indifference he’d shown toward Astrid and Torin? The two Light Fae had at least helped us on our journey, while Spout had been nothing but a roadblock. A very weepy roadblock.

Greyson grimaced. “Get it off me.”

I huffed. “You can’t just leave Spout here all by themself!”

“What the hell do you want me to do, then?” he snapped.

“Why can’t we just bring them with us?” As soon as I said it out loud, another idea presented itself. Neither Greyson nor I knew what other dangers might lie ahead in my quest. Maybe Spout could help us? Poisonous tears had to come in handy at some point, right?

Greyson’s fingers flexed like he wanted nothing more than to wrench the water sprite off him and toss it across the cave, and I tensed, expecting a show of violence. Instead, he took a deep breath. When he spoke, his voice was low and contained. “Cali, I had to fight like hell to get through the barrier to come down here. I’m honestly not even sure if I’ll be able to get through it again to get *us* out. Much less with an extra creature along for the ride.”

“But isn’t it worth trying?” I asked.

He glared down at Spout, who had begun hiccupping through their sobs. Their tears had soaked the calf of Greyson’s tights. “Stop crying!” Greyson snapped. “You’re only making the water more poisonous.”

I knelt down next to Spout and helped ease the creature away from Greyson. Spout’s face was slick with tears and snot. *I should have brought a handkerchief!* Except I was pretty sure I didn’t even own one. Maybe I should have stuffed some tissues in my pocket instead.

“Are you going to help me?” Spout asked.

I gave Greyson my best puppy-dog eyes, since he seemed immune to Spout’s. For whatever reason, whether it was the *due destini* thing or if he just actually, you know, *liked* me, Greyson had a bit of a soft spot where I was concerned. Maybe I could use it to my advantage, just this once, to help get Spout out of the well.

Plus, this was the perfect opportunity for Greyson to prove to me that he wasn’t a heartless bastard.

After another beat, Greyson rolled his eyes. “Okay, fine. I’ll do what I can.”

Spout jumped up and began clapping with joy. “Oh, thank you! Thank you, Mister Greywolf!”

Greyson leveled the sprite with a glare. “But at the first sign of trouble, I will drop you like a stone. So you have to decide if you’re willing to risk it.”

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “What’s wrong with you? Is this some kind of werewolf thing? Do you guys always have to be so cold?”

Greyson ignored me, keeping his intense gaze on Spout. “Is there another way out? I don’t relish the idea of fighting another one of those eels—the nasty taste is still in my mouth.”

“I’m very sorry, Mister Son of Grey, but I do not know of another way out. But I can make vines so we all can climb up and out of the well?” Spout offered.

I squealed in excitement, my anger with Greyson momentarily forgotten. “I want to see you grow vines! Are you like Groot and just grow your arms, or will it be more like Spider-Man and vines will just”—I flicked my wrists out—“shoot out?”

Spout blinked at me in confusion. They clearly weren’t up to date on their Marvel movies. Then they smiled weakly. “You will see.”

Greyson caught my arm as we began to head out of the cave and back toward the bottom of the well. “Stick close to me.” He took the lead and lead us through the glittering passageway.

I glanced over at Spout, who followed behind us. “I’m sorry I didn't get the chance to try more of your cupcakes.” I shrugged. “Maybe some other time, okay?” I kept my eyes glued to Greyson as we approached the water.

He stopped in front of me, peering into the shimmering blue water. I followed his gaze—and gasped when I saw the shadows gliding beneath the surface. I shuddered, remembering all too well the cold, scaly thing that had brushed against my leg as Spout had pulled me out of the water.

“Are we sure there’s not another way out of here?” I asked again. I already knew the answer, but the thought of getting up close and personal with those creepy tentacle monsters made me think twice. Maybe we could just dig our way out? Greyson had those big, powerful claws. And if Spout did have Groot-like powers, maybe he could grow, like, a wooden shovel or something, and then I could find some sharp rocks and we’d just do it old jailbreak-style and dig our way to the surface.

Yes, that would work. I could feel it! “Guys, what if we just dig our way out? Avoid this creepy leviathan pond altogether?”

Spout pointed upward, toward the daylight filtering in through the opening in the well, high, high above us. “That is the only way.”

Well, okay then.

Greyson turned to Spout and pointed to the shadows moving deep below the surface. “What are those things?”

“They’re worms,” Spout answered.

He shook his head. “Worms? They had *tentacles*—”

I cut him off. “Well, no need to dilly dally next to the giant monstrous worm pond. We need to get out of here.” I turned to Spout. “Can you make those vines you talked about?”

The water sprite beamed with pride. They raised their hands and a series of long, dark blue vines began to grow and attach themselves to the wall of the well. The vines crept upward, thickening out to form a strong trellis that looked like it could even support Greyson’s weight.

I grinned in delight. *Definitely a Groot! Baby Groot too!*

“Climb up!” Spout said. I’d never heard their voice sound so calm or determined. This was a good thing. We were right to try to help them escape from the pond, and maybe they could join our ragtag group on our quest for the moon buttercup. I was sure we could find a use for Spout’s abilities. At minimum, they could be the resident baker.

I glanced mournfully over my shoulder, back toward the cave where the other half of my cupcake remained, doomed to spend the rest of eternity half-eaten—

“Cali, are you coming?” Greyson called.

“Yes!” I hurried over to the vines and began to climb. Spout’s melancholy was probably rubbing off on me.

The vines reminded me of “Jack and the Beanstalk”, and I tentatively took hold and hoisted myself up. Greyson climbed up next to me. The vines were definitely strong enough to support both of us and Spout, and we began our ascent.

I glanced at Greyson as we climbed our way out of the well. He might have been cold-hearted sometimes, but I was glad he was here with me. I would probably never have gotten this far without him.

I carefully avoided looking down as we climbed. The light above us was getting brighter; we must have been getting closer to the well opening. I increased my pace, hoping to get the hell out of this creepy place, and then I felt Greyson tugging on my ankle.

“What’s the—” I stopped. Greyson did too, staring at me with a question in his eyes. Greyson wasn’t below me. He was still right beside me. *What the…*

I looked down—and saw a slimy tentacle coiled around my ankle. It wrapped tight, and then tugged me down.

**Episode 404**

MAYA

Despite being locked in Colton’s arms—and the bullshit he was no doubt hissing in my ear—I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the spot where Violet had been standing. I could barely feel Colton’s tight grip on my body, barely hear whatever he was telling me, or the sounds of the rest of the pack fighting.

Violet was gone. Stupid, stupid girl.

“Shit,” I said and elbowed my mate in the stomach. He groaned behind me, clearly not having expected me to burst into action after being frozen in his grip for so long, but I was already pushing away from him, dancing out of his reach when he tried to grab me again.

All around us, the fighting continued. Zainab, Sage, and Rishika looked ready to tear Joss’s head off, and the rest of the pack was either egging on Joss and the trio, or fighting among themselves about what our next steps should be.

“I say we take the council down the same way we took down the Manus Cruentae!”

“That’s the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard—maybe you should be our sacrifice!”

“If Greyson had bothered sticking around, none of this would have ever happened!”

I couldn’t take another second of this bullshit. “Everyone, shut the fuck up!” I screamed. My voice echoed through the clearing, fueled by rage and panic, and the rest of the pack froze. I was sure they could smell the fear and anger rolling off me in waves. They all turned, their gazes locking on to me.

“Where’s Violet?” I demanded, scanning each of their faces for answers. Maybe she’d gone back to her tent? I was desperate enough to believe she might even still be among us, hiding behind another pack member.

Anything was better than the alternative.

The pack glanced around, shrugging. They didn’t know either, and didn’t seem to care. I bit back the growl rising in my throat. No wonder the teen felt like she didn’t belong. She deserved better than these selfish idiots.

Her voice echoed in my mind. *I have nothing else to live for.*

“Maya, what’s going on?” Colton asked.

I ignored him and rushed through the crowd toward Joss, panic shadowing every thump of my heart. *No, no, no, no, no.* I stopped in front of Joss. “We have to find Violet.”

The Luna frowned. “I’m sure she’s fine. We need to focus on the council—”

“She’s going to the council!” I snapped. “She wants to offer herself up as a sacrifice on behalf of the pack.”

Joss’s jaw dropped. “She *what?* Why?”

I didn’t have time to explain how the loss of her brother had wounded her in places we couldn’t see, how, faced with a long future without her twin, on the fringe of the pack, she felt alone. Like she didn’t belong. Didn’t have a real place in the pack.

*Like me*.

Instead I shook my head. “We have to stop her before the council decides to accept her offer.” I spun around and burst into a sprint. A few seconds later I heard footfalls behind me and caught Joss’s scent. Good. She was going to help me stop Violet. Hopefully we wouldn’t be too late.

Soon, the footfalls of the rest of the pack joined mine and Joss’s. We sounded like a stampede of animals breaking through the forest and across the grounds to the lodge. We came to a shuddering halt just outside the lodge, where Violet was already standing in front of the massive guillotine. The structure was large enough to accommodate the swift death of even the largest of beasts, but it dwarfed Violet, made her look even more fragile. Her face was ghost-white, but she met my eyes with an empty expression. She looked like she’d completely given up hope.

“Violet!” I shouted. “Get away from that thing!”

She didn’t respond.

“Violet!” Joss snapped, her voice the demanding growl of a Luna. “Get down here. Now!”

The girl ignored both of us and reached for the guillotine. Her fingers brushed over the rough wooden frame, and I couldn’t stop myself. I launched myself at her, closing the distance between us and physically dragging her away from the death machine. Why did they even have that thing?

Caught in my arms, Violet blinked at me, confusion spreading over her face. “Why are you here, Maya?”

I almost loosened my grip. Was she so grief-stricken that she’d lost touch with reality? The girl’s expression was still confused, almost blank. Still held tight in my arms, she turned her body back toward the guillotine like they were the opposite sides of a magnet, drawing each other in.

Joss caught up to us and stepped in front of the teen. “Violet, you need to back off.”

“I don’t understand.” Violet cocked her head to the side. “It’s the only way to save the pack.”

What was going on with her? When she and I had talked before the pack had woken up this morning, her grief had been running the show too, but she’d at least seemed lucid. Now, it almost seemed like she was caught up in some kind of dream. Like she wasn’t even fully aware of what she was doing, even though what she was essentially walking straight to her death.

“Maya, get her away from that thing.” Joss pointed at the guillotine in disgust. “And keep an eye on her. I will not allow her to sacrifice herself for us.”

As I dragged her away from the guillotine, the rest of the pack finally caught up to us. “What’s going on?” Colton asked. “What was Violet doing here?”

“She’s fine,” I lied. “She just wanted to see the guillotine up close.”

It didn’t take Colton being my mate for him to know I was lying, but he didn’t push it.

Joss turned to face the pack. “I’m the Luna here,” she reminded them. “You do not make demands of me. And it’s time we solve this problem once and for all.”

The pack immediately quieted down, and I watched Joss in anticipation, my arms still tight around Violet as she sluggishly tried to return to the guillotine. What was Joss going to do?

“We don’t have much time,” Joss said. “If anyone wants to voice their opinion, they may do so now, but in an orderly fashion. The next person who yells or screams—their head will be on the chopping block.” She gestured at the guillotine to emphasize her point.

While I’d definitely been skeptical when it had happened, I was coming to believe that Joss had the makings of a great Luna. I couldn’t help but be impressed by her strength and command in a situation that no Luna should have to handle. I glanced over at Colton, wondering what he thought about our fearless leader.

He caught my eye and waved.

I rolled my eyes. *Doesn’t he realize the seriousness of this situation? And wasn’t he just suggesting that it should be my head on the chopping block? Asshole.*

Nobody immediately stepped forward, fearful of angering their Luna. Finally, Zainab spoke up. “I think we should give a big collective fuck-you to the council and walk away.”

Sage nodded, and a few other pack members murmured to each other. If that were an option, it’d be the easiest one. Nobody would have to die today.

Joss’s lips thinned and she shook her head. “If we don’t give in to their demands, the pack will face banishment.”

“I say let’s fight them!” Rishika called. “It’s not like we’ve never had to protect ourselves before.”

“We’re a pack,” Colton piped up. “We don’t sacrifice our own. I say we refuse to do it. I’d rather be banished than murder one of my pack members in cold blood.”

I blinked. Huh. I never thought Colton could be so loyal, except maybe to Xavier. Was it possible I’d misjudged him?

Probably not.

Joss held up her hands to quiet the rest of the pack. “I appreciate all your suggestions, but I’m not sure any of them are going to help our situation.”

Violet tried to move toward the guillotine again, and I gently pulled her back. *What are we supposed to do?*

The pack began to murmur among themselves as Cesaries approached us, flanked by his aides on either side, the council trailing behind him. He smiled at us, holding out his arms.

“I’m happy you’re here so bright and early.” Cesaries glanced at the pack, sizing up each member. “So who will it be?” He walked toward where we were clustered and stopped in front of me. “I hope it’s this one.”

*Fucking bastard.* I glared at him and spat, narrowly missing his face as he jerked back. Then I grinned at him sweetly. *You’d better back off, if you know what’s good for you.*

Cesaries grimaced and turned to Joss. “Who are you sacrificing?”

The entire pack’s focus was on Joss, and I tightened my grip on Violet—not to comfort her, but to prevent her from stepping forward. What was Joss going to do?

Colton stepped forward. “We’re not sacrificing anyone.”

Cesaries's gaze landed on my mate, and I stopped breathing. He rolled his eyes and turned back to Joss. I let go of the breath I was holding.

“You are the Redwood Alpha’s Luna. Is this your decision?” Cesaries asked Joss.

Joss nodded. “Yes, it is my decision. We’re a pack. We will stand, or die, together.”

Cesaries studied her for a moment. “No, that’s not how it works. Either you choose someone—or I will.”

Violet chose this time to speak up. “I’ll—”

I slapped my hand over her mouth before she could say anything else.

“Fuck you, old man,” Colton snarled, getting in Cesaries’s face. “We’re a pack.”

Joss pushed past Colton. “No. If anyone is going to die today, it’ll be me.”

**Episode 405**

“Let go!” I screamed, holding onto the vines Spout had made with a white-knuckled grip and desperately trying to kick off the tentacle that had wrapped around my ankle.

*Oh god, oh god, oh god.* I was going to die. This tentacle-monster-worm thing was going to yank me back down to the bottom of the well, drown me, and then eat me. Or maybe it’d eat me first. I’d probably taste better fresh—

“Cali!” Greyson yelled. “Don’t let go!” He gripped the vines with one hand and then reached for the tentacle with the other.

This was not how I’d pictured my death. I mean, I’d had a lot of opportunities to do so. Werewolves. Witches. Manus Cruentae. Dark Fae. Even something as stupid as falling out of a very tall tree. Any one of those had seemed much more likely than this—screaming my goddamn head off and practically peeing myself in terror while a monster tried very hard to either yank me down to eat for breakfast or, at minimum, tear my foot off for a nice mid-morning snack.

Greyson was close now, and out of the corner of my eye, I noticed his hand shifting to a wolf paw, ready to sever the tentacle wrapped around my ankle.

Spout’s voice echoed up from below. “Please don’t hurt Beloved!”

I froze. Greyson froze. ‘Beloved’ did not freeze, just started tugging even harder. I screamed again. “That—that thing has a name?” I called to Spout, daring to look down at my own impending death.

Spout’s head was below the water, where the tentacle disappeared below the surface. Bubbles rose up to the surface, carrying their voice. “Let her go!” Spout cried, their tone more ‘stern disciplinarian’ than any kind of real threat. Another cluster of bubbles rose up. “Down, Beloved! Down!”

I locked eyes with Greyson and let out a panicked sort of cackle. *Cue mental breakdown in five, four, three, two—*

“This thing is your *pet?*” I screeched.

Spout’s head finally broke the surface, and they looked up at me. “Not exactly.”

I cackled again. Because *of course* the lonely well-bottom kidnapper would try to turn the creepy worm monster into a pet—and fail. *Of course* said socially awkward sprite would name it Beloved. And *of course* the pet that wasn’t exactly a pet wouldn’t listen to a goddamn thing Spout said.

“What the fuck is happening?” I screamed, kicking even harder at the tentacle.

I tried to give the well and Spout the benefit of the doubt, but I was really beginning to hate this place. Thank god Greyson had come along to get me out of here. What other nasty things were swimming in the well? I shuddered, imagining dropping a bucket down into the well and pulling up a worm monster. Even if the well were no longer poisoned by Spout’s tears, why in the world would Gunhild want to drink from this slimy creature soup? I gagged a little bit just thinking about it.

Greyson moved closer to me and ran a hand up and down my back. “You’re okay. We’re going to get you out of this. I’ll just cut the tentacle—”

“Do not hurt Beloved!” Spout shouted up to us.

Greyson snarled, but I was the one who completely lost my shit. “Get your pet under control *right now* Spout, or so help me I will put it down myself! Do you understand?”

Spout’s eyes went wide, and they looked down at the water again. “Let go of her, Beloved!” The sprite waved their foot over the water, and a ripple ran across the bottom of the well.

To my complete and utter shock, the tentacle let go and calmly, almost gracefully, slipped back beneath the water.

Spout waved down to the creature. “Goodbye, Beloved! I’ll miss you!” Then they looked up at Greyson and me with a sheepish smile. “Beloved will probably not miss me, but I am always hopeful.”

*Hopeful?* I glanced at Greyson and let out another unhinged cackle before practically sprinting up the vines attached to the wall. I’d had more than enough excitement for one day, and if I never saw a well again, it would be too soon. Greyson and Spout picked up the pace behind me.

As we got closer to the top of the well, I saw Astrid and Torin worriedly peering in. “Cali?” Torin called. “Is that you?”

“We’re coming out!” I shouted, climbing even faster. I was so close. I could smell the fresh air, feel the sunlight burning my eyes. I let out a relieved little sob when I felt Torin and Astrid’s hands on me, pulling me out of the well. My knees buckled when they made contact with solid ground. “Oh, thank god.”

“How did you get out?” Astrid asked, her eyes wide.

“What did you find down there?” Torin asked. “We thought for sure that we’d never see you again.”

The questions kept coming, but I barely heard them. I had to make sure Greyson got out too. Would he be able to get through the magical barrier a second time? I scrambled to my feet, stumbled over to the edge of the well, and looked down.

Greyson was climbing up, Spout clinging tightly to his ankle. I saw the exact moment they hit the barrier, and Greyson was almost completely knocked off the vine.

“Greyson!” I screamed.

“Don’t drop me!” Spout screamed.

“Can you two please calm the fuck down?” Greyson barked out.

Worst-case scenarios were breeding like rabbits in my head. What if they couldn’t get out? What if Greyson was doomed to be trapped at the bottom of the well, with Spout and Beloved his only sources of companionship? What if he tried to break through the barrier again, and this time he really was knocked down?

No, I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t lose him, not after everything we’d been through together. After everything he’d given up to help me on this quest to save my mom.

Steeling myself against my newfound terror of wells, I bent over the side and held out my hand, reaching as low as I could. If Greyson couldn’t get out on his own, then I would help pull him free.

His fingers wrapped around my hand, sending a burst of warmth up my arm. I pulled back, my hand tight in Greyson’s, and a surge of energy spread out from our linked hands. Greyson and Spout tumbled over the edge and onto the ground.

I rushed over to Greyson, checking him over for injuries. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “Except for these damn clothes, I’m fine.”

Spout looked like they were tripping. Their eyes were wide, and they stared around the area in complete awe. “Is it possible? Am I really free?” The sprite took in a gulp of fresh air, and then began skipping away, singing, “I’m free! I’m *free!*” They stopped for a moment and turned back. “Thank you, Cali, Mister Greywolf! If you’re ever in Periwinkle, look me up!” And then they continued on their way, skipping and laughing, until they disappeared into the trees.

I watched Spout go, shaking my head. “This world is kind of fucked up.”

Torin and Astrid would not be put off any longer.

“What happened?” Astrid demanded. “Are you okay?”

“And who was that?” Torin asked. “And why is your leg all slimy?”

I did my best to answer their questions, telling them about Spout the lonely but harmless water sprite-slash-kidnapper, somehow baking cupcakes in their free time and trying to befriend disgusting worm monsters.

Astrid and Torin’s eyes went wide when I described Spout’s ‘pet’ to them. “And Greyson managed to break through the barrier on the well to come down and save me, and I guess I was able to break through it to pull him out.” I glanced over at him as I said this, and our eyes locked for a moment. He didn’t say anything, but I could feel the relief and gratitude rushing through him. And then, as if just realizing that I was watching him, he glared and looked away.

I smirked.

“Oh, hello there!” A familiar voice called. Gunhild rode up to us on an empty wagon, pulled by a pair of fierce-looking griffins. “I see you’ve finished my task. Well done!” She hopped down from the seat and approached us. “Now what, pray tell, is poisoning my well?”

“It was a water sprite named Spout who’d been banished down there. They were lonely, and they cried a lot and it turned out their tears were poisonous,” I explained. “And now that we’ve freed Spout, the well should go back to normal.”

Gunhild frowned, and I could tell she didn’t believe me. “If you’ve done what you say you’ve done, why don’t you take a drink from the well?”

I gagged a little bit in my mouth, thinking of the slimy tentacle monsters living at the bottom. “Uh, no. I’m not drinking from that well. Ever.”

“The well should clear up in a few days, now that the water sprite isn’t poisoning it anymore,” Greyson suggested reasonably. “You’ll just have to trust us.”

I nodded. “Yeah, we fixed your damn well. Now what about your part of the deal? How do we find the moon buttercup?”

**Episode 406**

XAVIER

I was tripping balls.

That damn Fae woman. Lottie. She’d dosed the food with god only knew what. I turned to Gabriel, blinking rapidly and shaking my head to keep the walls and ceiling in their respective places—and then screamed and jumped back.

A spider was crawling out of Gabriel’s ear.

I hated spiders. Shuddering, I stared in horror at the huge, black, eight-legged freak crawling its way out of my friend’s ear. “I’m tripping,” I reminded myself. “I’m tripping. It’s not real. There is definitely not a softball-sized black widow crawling out of my best friend’s ear.” Maybe if I touched it, the illusion would disappear?

I gagged a little bit at the thought, taking deep breaths to keep my drug-tainted food in my belly. Okay, maybe throwing up wouldn’t be the worst thing.

*Right, Xavier. You can do this. You’ve taken on worse monsters than this—real ones that can actually hurt you. You can handle touching an imaginary spider.*

I took a deep breath, let out a warrior’s cry, and ended up smacking the side of Gabriel’s head. My warrior’s cry turned into a high-pitched shriek when the spider jumped off Gabriel and onto *me*. “Oh god oh god oh god! Get it off get it off!” I instinctively brushed and slapped at my chest, my shoulders, the back of my neck, my legs—anywhere a freakishly large imaginary spider could crawl.

But seeing as how it *was* imaginary, the spider was gone once my little meltdown reached its end. I grabbed Gabriel, who somehow hadn’t noticed me smacking the side of his head—had I imagined that part too?—and shook him. “She fucking drugged us!”

Gabriel burst out laughing. “I know! Isn’t it great?!” He swayed, singing an off-key Beatles song while staring at an empty place on the wall. I dropped him back into his seat, where he promptly helped himself to another serving of potatoes.

Fucking useless.

I turned to Mikah, who was no longer a bat, but seemed to be floating in mid-air like a balloon. Was that real, or imaginary? I shook myself and blinked several times, but Gabriel kept cackling at whatever he saw on the wall, and Mikah kept floating in place.

I had to get out of there… An amazing scent wafted over to my nose. Roasted chicken and sweet potatoes, seasoned with something that made my mouth water. And suddenly, I was starving. The food looked beyond amazing, like it was actually calling my name, begging me to eat it until not a single crumb remained.

Plus, I hadn’t eaten in a really long time. I couldn’t even remember the last time. Maybe if I just had a snack, then I could grab whatever Fae artifact Lottie wanted to throw my way and hit the road…

I stopped, my mouth full of chicken. I glanced down at the chicken leg in my hand. There was a bite taken out of the meat in the shape of my teeth. When had I started eating? And where was I going on this little road trip?

I paused, glancing around the food-laden table for answers. There were beautiful glazed ribs, and a pile of rolls in the shape of a hill. I dropped my chicken leg. No… not a hill.

A haystack.

“Haystack Rock!” I cried in relief. That was where I had to go. To get to Cali. Beautiful Cali.

But first, a few of those ribs. I was starving, after all. Couldn’t even remember the last time I’d eaten anything.

I bit into a rib, and a juicy, savory flavor slid over my tongue. They were, hands down, the best thing I’d ever tasted. Next to me, Gabriel was writhing around in his chair, sucking meat off the end of his own rib and looking like he was in the middle of an orgasm.

When he finally came up for air, he wiped his sauce-covered chin on his sleeve and grinned at me. “Right? These ribs are awesome!”

I blinked. How had he read my mind? Or did I say all of that out loud? *I must be tripping pretty damn hard.* But this time around, the knowledge of my drugged state didn’t bother me much. Panic and shock gave way to resigned bliss, and I looked around the room, still eating to curb my never-ending hunger. My gaze settled on Mikah, who also looked like he was in the middle of a trip. He was looking around in awe, almost like he was watching butterflies.

*Can vampires get high? Are there special vampire drugs?* I knew that one of the many ways in which vampires were different from werewolves was their undead status. Werewolves might have had additional enhancements and the ability to shapeshift, but our bodies metabolized things very similarly to humans. Vampires, on the other hand… How did you drug someone who didn’t have a pulse?

I had no fucking clue, but there was no denying that Mikah was high as a kite. My lips turned up into a grin, and I leaned over to point out the stoned-cold bloodsucker to Gabriel.

“Hey, look who can’t hold his…” I trailed off, shocked into speechlessness at the look on Gabriel’s face. He was already looking at Mikah, his expression shifting from the pure joy and hedonism of enjoying a good trip to something like worship. He was looking at Mikah like I imagined I might look at Cali—or at those amazing ribs.

Like Mikah was someone very special.

*Huh*.

It made sense, in a way. I’d noticed them staring at each other, snapping at each other. There had been that moment when Mikah had gotten bitchy and asked if Gabe and I needed to get a room. Not to mention the way Gabriel had pinned the vampire in the yard outside. Mikah was strong enough to have put up a damn good fight if he’d wanted to, and yet he’d let Gabe pin him.

Those two had been putting out a vibe for a while now.

*Cali would love to see this.* I leaned in to Gabriel. “What’s the deal with you and fangy?”

Gabriel scoffed. “There’s no deal.”

Despite the expression on his face, there was no real heat in his tone, and he still couldn’t be bothered to tear his gaze away from the blissed-out vampire.

“You can’t lie to me,” I insisted, trying to ignore the call of the food laid out in front of me—and the distracting sight of Lottie dancing with her two lackeys under the sunbeams that streamed in from the top of the yurt. “I’ve wingman’d for you, man!”

“I’m not lying,” Gabriel insisted. Then he leaned in to whisper, only it came out as more of a whisper-yell. “He *is* infuriatingly hot though, right?”

I smirked. “I fucking knew it. What’s keeping you from taking things further? Do you think he’s not into you?”

Gabriel shrugged. “It’s not that so much as the fact that he’s a fucking dick. We *hate* each other, man. We’d tear each other apart.”

I laughed. Wasn’t that what happened when you had great chemistry with someone? You could either love them or hate them, but nothing in between.

“I could ask the same thing about you and Cali,” Gabriel added.

I shook my head. “That’s different.”

God, *Cali*. She was so beautiful. Her skin was as soft as rose petals. I missed her so much. The smell of her, the feel of her. Was she okay? Did she know how sorry I was for everything?

Suddenly, a strange wet sound filtered through my ears, and I looked up to see Gabriel and Mikah making out *hard* in front of me.

I sat back. “What the—Is this real? Was I right?”

I blinked, and Gabriel and Mikah were sitting together and laughing, but not kissing.

Suddenly feeling hot and dizzy, I stumbled up from the table.

“I need some air,” I mumbled.

Gabriel wiggled his fingers at me in farewell. “You can’t live in denial your whole life.”

I ignored him, heading to the door. Lottie stepped in front of me. “Where are you going, Xavier? The party’s just beginning.”

I could feel her eyes on me, drinking me in. Maybe some other time, long, long ago, I would have been tempted. There was no denying that she was beautiful, and she knew how to throw one hell of a party. If things were different, I would have enthusiastically lost days wrapped up in her.

But that was before Cali had come into my life and made me question everything I thought I knew. And now there was no going back to what I’d done before. There was only forward. To Haystack Rock. To Cali.

I gently brushed Lottie aside and stepped outside. The sun was rising in the east, and a gentle wind blew through the marijuana plants, causing them to sway back and forth.

Slowly I felt my senses coming back to me. I took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

A warm hand landed on my shoulder, and I spun around. *It’s Cali!*

Only it wasn’t Cali. Instead, I was staring into the ice-blue eyes of my very dead mate, Ava.

**Episode 407**

MAYA

My jaw dropped, and in my shock I let go of Violet and stepped in front of her, bringing my body closer to Joss’s and watching helplessly as she approached the council.

*Joss? Seriously?*

She couldn’t do this. She was supposed to be the Luna, the only leader since Greyson had taken off to god only knew where. She couldn’t volunteer to sacrifice herself. Could she? But what would I do in her place?

Joss stepped up to Cesaries, who watched her with raised eyebrows. It seemed like I wasn’t the only one surprised by her decision. “The goal here is to save my pack,” Joss said. “I am their Luna—take me. But don’t you dare expect me to sacrifice one of my own. I won’t allow it.”

Violet tugged on my arm, yanking me away from my fear and the protective instincts that had my hackles raising. “Why’s she doing this?” Violet whispered.

I stopped. Breathed. Watched the resigned, firm expression on Joss’s face. Emotion temporarily clogged my throat. Then I pushed past it.

“Because it’s what a Luna should do.” But even as I said it, I couldn’t help but wonder: was it really possible? Would the council truly accept her life to balance the scales in the Redwood pack’s favor, even if it meant a complete power vacuum in the pack itself?

Alphas and Lunas were the leaders of a pack, the ones to make the tough choices, to keep the pack’s balance and structure intact. To keep us strong. Now that Greyson was gone, were we about to lose Joss too? Surely Cesaries, if he truly cared about the well-being of the packs, wouldn’t let this happen.

Was Joss even truly ready to sacrifice herself for the pack—a group of people she didn’t really know, most of whom didn’t respect her the way a Luna deserved? And what would Greyson think of all of this, if he ever did come back? Would he have done the same thing and admired Joss’s choice, or would he hate us for letting his Luna sacrifice herself to the council in his absence?

A chilling thought slid through my mind.

Was this going to be the catalyst for another pack war?

Cesaries pointed at the guillotine. “Are you ready to lay your head down on behalf of the Redwood pack?” he asked Joss.

The Luna looked around, first at Cesaries’s aides and the council, and then into the eyes of every member of her pack. When her eyes met mine, I shook my head slightly, begging without words for her to not do this.

Then she faced Cesaries again. “Yes, I am.”

Colton came up behind me. “Is this some kind of trick? Does Joss have some plan up her sleeve?”

I couldn’t tell if he sounded curious or hopeful. He certainly hadn’t been one to sing Joss’s praises. Would he even care if she sacrificed herself? “I don’t think so,” I said. “What plan could there possibly be?”

Colton frowned and looked at Joss. He shook his head and blew out a breath. “Wow. Greyson is a dick. This should be on his shoulders, not hers. I’d love to see *his* head roll.”

Before I could respond, Colton moved past Violet and me and stepped up to Joss and Cesaries. “This is ridiculous,” Colton said. “You’re going to punish us by taking the Luna when we haven’t done anything wrong?”

Joss turned to him, her eyes narrowing. “Colton, you need to shut your mouth.”  
  
Instinctive anger blazed before I could even think about smothering it. How dare she get pissed at Colton for trying to save her life? I moved up to where she and Colton were standing. “No! He’s right. This whole thing is a fucking joke,” I said. “What did Cesaries and his boy-council do when the Manus Cruentae killed Violet’s brother? Where was the council’s justice when they were attacking our pack?”

Emboldened by Colton’s and my defiance, the rest of the pack joined us, forming a line at Joss’s side, facing the council head-on and chiming in with their own arguments. The volume increased with each passing second, and I could smell the pack’s fury, their bloodlust. We’d all been through too much together, fighting for the simple right to survive, to just let the council waltz in, make up some new rules, and then expect us to bow to them.

Greyson might have been okay with abandoning his responsibilities—abandoning us—and going with Cali, and Xavier clearly couldn’t see past his own issues to stick around either. But Joss had. She’d faced our anger, our distrust, and even plain attempts to undermine her, and she was still here. Willing to give her life to protect the rest of us.

It was exactly what a Luna in her situation should do, and I’d be damned if I let her go through with it.

Colton leaned in, brushing his fingers against mine. “You’re so hot right now.”

I glared at him. “Shut up.”

Cesaries motioned to some of his aides, who pushed through the line our pack had formed and cleared a path to the guillotine. So they weren’t going to listen to us, after all.

Jay stepped into their path, and even from my place several paces down, I could see the promise of death in his eyes. He didn’t even blink as he spoke to the aides. “If you take one more step, you’re going to regret it.”

Lola came to her mate’s side. “I dare you to try.”

One by one, the rest of the pack joined them until finally Colton took a spot on the end, holding out his hand to me. I took it, and joined the line, the pack, feeling—maybe for the first time ever—like I belonged here. I might not have been an official member, and things between Colton and me might have been one step away from full-on hate, but there was no denying the bond between all of us as we linked hands and stood in front of the guillotine. Protecting Joss. The pack. The future.

God, I hoped it wasn’t about to come crashing down on our heads.

Joss stepped forward, and for a moment I thought she was going to join us in our show of defiance. There was an expression on her face I’d never seen before—a softness that bordered on affection, and a steely resolve that made my heart lurch.

“Stop. This isn’t a democracy,” she said. “I’ve made this decision and will live—or die—by it. All of you are bound by your pack. If you disobey me, you will destroy the pack. Now *get back in line*.” Her expression made it clear that she would not tolerate any more rebellion from her pack, even if it was to protect her.

We all glanced anxiously at each other, and I looked at Joss again for guidance. Did she really want us to just give up on her? She couldn’t truly be going along with this, could she?

Mrs. Smith was the first of us to take a step back, and in doing so, she was the one who broke our rebellion. One by one, the others stepped back until Violet and I alone stood between Joss and the council.

I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t give up like this. I couldn’t just let this rotten council get away with their sick power trip. There had to be something we could do. Some course of action that would appease the council and let each of the Redwood pack members walk free. They hadn’t done anything wrong. No one deserved this.

“Maya,” Joss said quietly, but no less resolved.

It was then that I realized Colton’s fingers were wrapped around my wrist, and he was trying to pull me back. His other hand had taken Violet by the arm and had already pulled her back to the pack.

I allowed myself to be tugged back into my mate’s arms, and for maybe the first time, I didn’t fight the heat of his body pressing against my back or the weight of his arms wrapped around me.

“It’s not our decision,” he whispered to me.

*It fucking should be*.

There was a deafening silence as the two aides took their positions by the guillotine. Cesaries looked over the pack with a self-satisfied smirk. “According to the rules set forth by this council, the Redwood Luna has accepted responsibility for the sins of her pack. Judgment has been made.”

He nodded to one of the aides, who led Joss to the guillotine.

My heart in my throat, tears of suppressed rage sliding down my face, I watched as Joss calmly knelt and rested her neck on the guillotine’s cradle.

*I can’t believe this is happening*.

Cesaries raised his hand, and one of the aides took hold of the rope that would release the blade and sever Joss’s head from her body.

My heart was pounding so loudly I was sure Colton could hear it.

Cesaries waved his hand.

**Episode 408**

Gunhild smirked, and I kind of wanted to punch her. “The moon buttercup?” She laughed, a loud, obnoxious guffaw. “*That’s* what you’re looking for?”

I frowned, bristling at her tone. What the hell did she think was so damn funny? “Uh, yeah, that’s what we’re looking for.”

“That’s one of the rarest flowers in the Fae realm. You really think you can just waltz in here, pick it, and leave?”

I hadn’t been having the best day. And now, faced with Little Miss Condescending Fae, I could feel my short temper grow even shorter.

“You think we just waltzed in here? Lady, let me tell you a little something about waltzing. From the moment we arrived here, it has been one shitshow after another.” I pointed at Greyson. “He was taken captive and held in a cage for some kind of war rally.”

Then I pointed to Astrid and Torin. “They were nearly cooked in your cute little town square back there.” I pointed back to Greyson and then myself. “And we were nearly held prisoner by a creepy—if mostly harmless—water sprite in your well! Oh yeah, and attacked by a giant octopus-worm-monster thing. Its name is Beloved, and I do *not* want to talk about it. And those are just the highlights.

“We’ve been hungry, we’ve been sick, and we’ve fallen down a goddamn waterfall. Does that sound like *waltzing* to you? We made a deal, so you can shove your condescension where the sun don’t shine and tell me: where the hell is the flower and how do I get to it?”

Gunhild’s face paled a little bit, save for the angry splotches of red on her cheeks. She was not a fan of pissed off Cali, it seemed.

Greyson stepped up beside me and put a hand on my arm. At first I thought he was going to try to placate me into calming down a bit, at which point I would have been sorely tempted to unleash my temper on him too, but he was staring at Gunhild, not me. And when he spoke, the menace in his voice promised violence. “We were told it’s in the valley. Is that true?”

Gunhild snorted. Apparently, our intimidation tactics hadn’t worked. “Who told you that?” She eyed Torin and Astrid. “Some ill-informed Light Fae? Let me give you some advice, werewolf and little girl—you should never trust a Light Fae. They’re always spouting untruths.”

“Watch it,” Astrid snapped.

Gunhild ignored her. “But really, why would you think a Light Fae would know anything about Dark Fae territory?” She pursed her lips, as though she truly felt sorry for us, and I had to remind myself not to lose my shit and break into an all-out catfight with this Fae bitch. “Your dear friends couldn’t be more wrong.”

Then she laughed again, and I officially reached my limit. I pushed past Greyson, getting up in Gunhild’s face. Her nose wrinkled, and I knew she probably smelled well monster on me. I couldn’t find it in myself to be embarrassed. She was the one who’d gotten us involved with that well and its sad little horror show. It was only fair that she had to deal with the stench.

“Listen, lady. I have powers too, and if you try to back out of our bargain, I swear to you I will unleash all of my magic on you.” My voice dropped low and soft, mimicking the way I’d seen Xavier and Greyson threaten people. Yelling was shocking and abrasive, I’d learned, but if you really wanted to fuck with someone’s head, you spoke softly. “And I will make you wish that you’d never crossed paths with me or any of my friends.”

Silence set in around us, and I could sense Torin and Astrid’s shock. Gunhild’s face had gone pale again, with fewer red splotches this time. She looked a little shaken, and I savored the power I held over her.

And then Greyson’s fingers gently wrapped around my arms and pulled me back. I was still upset with him, but the warmth and weight of his hands was the exact comfort I needed, the anchor that kept me from flying off the edge of my own sanity.

Gunhild cleared her throat, seeming to gather up her strength again now that there was some space between us. She smirked at Greyson. “You’re wise to restrain her—she might bite off more than she can chew.” My fingers curled into tight fists, but she continued. “The flowers are on top of that mountain. *If* you can even get up there, which”—she looked me up and down—“doesn’t seem likely.”

I lunged forward, ready to rip that smug little smirk off of her face, but Greyson held on tight. “Don’t make the same mistake the others did,” he said. “Don’t underestimate Cali. She’s a force you don’t want to mess with.”

I froze, stunned by his words. Despite our differences—and it seemed like the list of them was ever-growing—he supported me. I wasn’t just a burden or a responsibility to him. He really cared. Really believed in me.

I beamed up at him, and his fingers slid down my arm to take my hand. “Let’s get out of here,” I said.

We started heading away from Gunhild, but she had to get in one last parting shot. “By the way, werewolf, nice clothes!”

I felt Greyson tense up next to me, but none of us said anything until we were out of earshot of Gunhild and the godforsaken well.

I glanced behind us to make sure that we were finally and truly alone, and then turned to Astrid. “Do you think you can conjure up something a little more appropriate for Greyson? Not that the Pinocchio look is bad, but—”

“It’s the fucking most godawful thing I’ve ever worn,” Greyson said matter-of-factly.

Astrid colored and ducked her head. “I’m sorry, Greyson! Really. I was under pressure last time, but I think I can do better.” She waved her hands and Greyson’s tights and vest shifted into a pair of a black leather pants and a flowing white shirt with an open collar that showed off the top of his chest.

Greyson looked down at himself and froze. “Seriously?”

My jaw dropped.

Torin laughed. “Well, if you wanted to blend in, Greyson, Astrid nailed it.”

Greyson scowled. “I look like I’m going to a kid’s birthday party.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off of him. *Helloooo, Captain Greyson, sexiest pirate on the seven seas. You can weigh anchor in my port anytime you want.* I could just see him now, on one of those big old ships with lots of sails, holding onto the rigging while ocean water splashed up around him, drenching his shirt and—

He caught me ogling him, and I cleared my throat. “You look great—maybe try not whining for a change?”

He huffed and shook his head. “Don’t lie to me. I know I look like the bass player for a fucking heavy metal Renaissance band.”

I snorted, but his eyes showed no joy. He was definitely pouting for the long haul. Fine, if he wanted to make himself miserable, I wouldn’t stop him. We weren’t in the Fae world to get him a new wardrobe, anyway.

Still laughing to themselves, Astrid and Torin moved a few yards ahead of us, leading the way. Though he was clearly still in a pissy mood, Greyson lingered next to me, and I felt his fingertips brush against mine as we walked.

“Are you still angry with me?” he asked.

I paused to consider his question. “Yes, I think so.”

“Even after everything I’ve done?” If I didn’t know better, I would have said there was hurt in his voice.

I sighed. “I’ll always be grateful for everything you’ve done for me, but that doesn’t excuse your willingness—*eager* willingness—to abandon Torin and Astrid.”

He seemed to take a moment to process that. “Is that what you meant, when you accused me of acting like my brother?”

“Honestly, yes. And I don’t like feeling that you don’t trust me.”

Xavier and I had our fair share of problems. I knew that, and with every day I spent away from him, I was realizing more and more how those problems had poisoned our relationship. Even with Greyson and the *due destini* thing aside, I didn’t think Xavier had ever trusted me. He never would have let me go off on my own like Greyson did, and it was always a fight to get Xavier to really listen to me and believe what I said.

But a lot of the time, I still felt like Greyson didn’t truly trust my judgment. Like he was unwilling, even for a second, to try to see things from my perspective. And I’d gotten more than enough of that with Xavier. I didn’t need it from Greyson, too.

He sighed. “When I was a Rogue, I was alone a lot. I bounced around from city to city, and I only ever had myself to rely on. And I *like* Torin and Astrid. They’re okay. They’re fine, Cali. But my priority is always going to be *you*, love.” I stopped and looked up at him, and his eyes probed mine, willing me to understand. “Don’t you get that?” he asked, his voice soft. “I’ll always choose you. When will you choose me?”

**Episode 409**

I paused, staring at Greyson. He *had* to be kidding me. “Do you *really* expect me to believe that you’ve always chosen me?”

He gave me this weird look that I couldn’t interpret. Before he could open his mouth to reply, I turned my back on him and kept on walking. “The way you’re acting right now isn’t fair, Greyson. I have a million important things to focus on, and you just keep trying to distract me.”

“I’m not—”

“And for the record,” I declared, cutting him off. “I haven’t forgiven you for abandoning Torin and Astrid.”

He paused. We kept walking. I glared at him over my shoulder. He reminded me of a massive wounded puppy.

“I’ve always chosen you, Cali,” he said. “You just don’t want to admit it.”

The way he looked at me made my stomach clench. But on the outside, I scoffed. “You’re *delusional!* Maybe the Fae world is affecting your brain.”

“My brain is fine,” he deadpanned. “You’ve always been my first priority, and it’s ridiculous how you always refuse to acknowledge that.”

“Um, excuse me?” I was beyond annoyed. “You seem to have forgotten who you picked to be your right hand at the Lupo Finale. Remember Joss, your beloved Luna?”

He looked like he’d just swallowed something bitter. “After I won the Lupo Finale, I asked you to trust me. I still need you to do that, Cali.”

“Sounds like a great plan! I’ll just keep trusting you while you and Joss are the reigning king and queen of the pack and I’m the token human, right?”

He snorted.

“*What?*” I demanded.

“Well,” Greyson said. “For a start, Joss and I aren’t involved in that way. Also, you aren’t even human.”

I paused. “That’s not the point! The point is that I’m on a mission here, and you’re delusional!”

Greyson scoffed. “And you’re fucking stubborn.”

“And you’re the worst!”

The path we were on got rougher, the ground suddenly more like gravel. Greyson came up to walk beside me. “I just need you to realize—”

“Hey!” Torin called from up ahead, interrupting Greyson. “You guys better watch out for Fae traps.”

Both Greyson and I stopped walking. “Um.” I looked around cautiously. “What*?*”

*Traps!?* I thought to myself. *Will they look like giant clawed bear traps? Or nets? Massive butterfly nets?*

“You look a little green,” Greyson told me, frowning.

I cleared my throat as we walked up to Torin and Astrid. “What are Fae traps, exactly?” I asked them.

“Dark Fae can use tricks to make the ground look solid when in fact, you’ll be walking right into a pit,” Astrid explained seriously.

Looking sheepish, Torin added, “Light Fae sometimes do that too.”

*Oh, that’s great*, I thought. *Amazing! My people are the best!*

“Then how can you even tell if you find one?” I asked, studying the ground ahead.

“Well, if you suddenly fall into a deep, dark pit, then you’ve found one,” Astrid told me, shrugging.

I blinked.

“How helpful.” Greyson’s tone was dry.

I elbowed him.

“Sometimes you can see the outline of dark circles, or even a shimmering on the ground,” Torin said. “I guess my advice would be to steer clear of anything suspicious-looking.”

“So specific,” Greyson said, smiling like the wolf that he was. “Thanks for the tip.”

“Oh my god, will you *stop*?” I shoved him again, but he didn’t even budge. Astrid and Torin didn’t seem to realize he was basically mocking them.

“You’re welcome!” Torin said cheerfully, smiling at Greyson.

I shot Greyson a pointed look as we kept walking. Then I realized I should be watching the ground instead of his infuriating gorgeous face. Greyson was super irritating, but this whole thing was pretty irritating too. Pretty stupid, as well. Like, why did we have to go through all this? Why did everything have to be so complicated out here?

“Why is there even a war between the Dark and Light Fae in the first place?” I asked Torin, frustrated.

Torin shrugged. “Why does any war start?”

My mind went back to years of school and classes and history textbooks. They always had overly lengthy explanations concerning the start of any war. Even if the reasons seemed stupid or complicated, wars were always triggered by *something*.

“Seems pretty dumb that you guys are fighting a war and don’t even know why,” I said.

“I’m sure someone knows,” Astrid said right away. “In general. In the entire kingdom, someone must know. You know?”

Her answer was so absurd that I lost my focus and stumbled over a rock. Before I could even process what was happening, I felt Greyson’s large palm on my waist. He steadied me, and I had to suppress a shiver at his touch.

He lingered, holding me gently. It felt amazing, but I forced myself to move away. I wasn’t about to get sucked into those feelings again—not while there was so much on the line.

Of course, Greyson wasn’t helping. He moved closer to me as we paced, lowering his head to speak into my ear. “At some point, you’re going to have to forgive me.”

His warm breath fanned against my ear. I felt a hot flash all over my body, and then I swatted him away like a very sexy fly.

He was undeterred.

“I’m being serious here, Cali. At some point, you’ll have to forgive me. To trust me. Why does that seem so hard for you?”

*Seriously!?* I thought, boiling. *Does he really want to have this conversation* now*?*

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from snapping at him. Determined to keep ignoring him, I quickened my pace. But then a deer leapt out in front of us.

“Ah!” I squeaked, jumping about a foot. The deer paused for a moment, turning its unusually green eyes on me for a moment before it bounded away.

I was on high alert when I turned to the others. “Did you guys see that?”

Torin looked at me like I was nuts. “Of course we did.”

“There are a lot of deer out here,” Astrid said.

I gulped. “But it looked right at me, like it was trying to say something.”

Astrid frowned, looking worried about me. “Maybe you ingested some of those sprite tears? You’re acting weird.”

“Weirder than usual,” Torin clarified.

“I think she’s just tired,” Greyson said. “Do you want a piggyback ride, love?”

I glared at him. He had to stop calling me ‘love.’ It was horrible. I hated it. Disgusting.

*Why does ‘love’ sound so good?* I thought mournfully before shaking my head.

“I’m not tired or weak,” I declared. My anger was strong enough to overcome any other emotion. “I don’t need you to carry me around.”

I turned my back on him and kept walking. Unable to help myself, my mind flashed back to how safe I always felt when I rode on his back. How safe I’d felt when he’d saved me in that river.

*Don’t go there, Cali!* I thought to myself, determined. *Stop thinking about him!*

As I stewed, Greyson pushed ahead of me, moving a lot faster than before. I looked at the back of his head, shooting metaphorical daggers at it.

Was he doing this to prove he was stronger than me? Because that would be pointless. He was a freaking Alpha—he was probably more powerful than the rest of us combined. It was just so hard to understand him, and I wished I could.

I also wished I could catch up to him without breaking a sweat. I counted every step in my mind, focused on the task at hand, making sure I wouldn’t trip. I even tried to outpace him, as hard as that was. In many ways, this was a competition to me—to prove that I could take care of myself. Which was kind of hard to do, seeing as I started huffing and puffing almost immediately.

*Ugh!* I thought. *I will not be defeated!*

I pushed myself harder, glancing at Greyson out of the corner of my eye. I was so focused on him, so fixated on keeping up, that I didn’t notice the very hard wall that had popped up in front of me.

That wall was Torin.

*Rude!*

“Shh!” Torin told me before I could speak, lifting his index finger in front of his mouth. “Keep quiet!”

“What?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

Only a moment later, the woods were filled with a gorgeous sound. A crescendo of angelic voices. It was so beautiful, it made me shiver.

“What is that?” I whispered.

Astrid and Torin looked at each other nervously.

“Keep quiet,” Astrid said in a hushed tone. “It’s the ondine.”

“Huh?” I asked, puzzled. “Ondine? But they sound so pretty! What’s the problem? Also, what’s an ondine?”

“Their voices will lure you in and then they’ll drown you!” Astrid hissed.

“Oooooohhhhhhhh,” I said. “They’re kinda like mean mermaids, then!” Then I realized what she’d just said. “Wait, *what?*”

Another sweet crescendo of gorgeous voices erupted.

“COVER YOUR EARS!” Astrid yelled.

**Episode 410**

MAYA

Joss was about to die.

I wanted to close my eyes, cover my ears.

But like any train wreck, I couldn’t help but watch…

And watch…

But the blade didn’t fall.

Joss knelt there, regal and ferocious and stoic, and the fucking blade didn’t fall. Was this some kind of torture the council had cooked up? To build anxiety before they murdered someone in cold blood?

I tore my eyes away from her to glare at Cesaries. He was watching Joss too, his brows furrowed in concentration. Then he lowered his hand, nodding to his aides.

To my utter astonishment, they reached out to help Joss to her feet.

The crowd had fallen silent, but now whispers erupted everywhere. What the hell was this? What kind of demented fucking joke?

“Care to explain yourself?” Joss asked Cesaries, her tone cold as the aides brought her to stand in front of him. Even with death so close, she remained composed, and I couldn’t help but be impressed.

“Congratulations,” Cesaries told Joss, his expression severe. “You’ve passed the test.”

My relief was turning into fury *real* fast.

“Seriously?” I demanded, storming up to Cesaries. “What the fuck was that all about?” I turned to face Joss. “Are you okay?”

I could see a flash of emotion in her gaze before it turned back to steel. “Well, I still have my head.”

“How can you joke at a time like this?” I asked, aghast, before turning to a serious-looking Cesaries. “What the *hell* is your problem?” I snapped.

I could feel the rest of the pack crowding around Joss as Cesaries spoke. “I’m surprised by your anger. You should be rejoicing.”

“You still haven’t answered our questions,” Joss told him coldly.

The fact that she hadn’t lost her shit so far was a serious testament to her badassery.

“The Redwood pack has proven their loyalty, Luna,” Cesaries said, in a tone that held, for the first time, respect. “Not only to each other, but to the other packs as well.”

He turned to the rest of us. “Your Luna’s selflessness, bravery, and ability to maintain order has proven that you—all of you—can be trusted.”

I was speechless.

Stunned, by this utter. Fucking. Bullshit.

Cesaries took in my expression, chuckling. “Did you really think we would kill her? What do you take us for?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” I demanded, fuming. All I could think right then was that I would love nothing more than to disembowel each and every member of the council.

As the rest of the pack burst into applause and Cesaries asked Joss something—all casual like he hadn’t just semi-tried to kill her—I felt Colton’s hand on my shoulder.

“Let’s get out of here,” he murmured.

I wasn’t done ranting, though. Not by a mile.

“Hey!” I barked, getting up in Cesaries’s face. “If you pull something like that again, you’ll fucking regret it!”

Cesaries arched an eyebrow at me. “I appreciate your vigor and loyalty,” he said and walked away, telling Joss to follow him.

Colton grinned. What an asshole. “For someone who claims not to be a member of the Redwood pack, you sure are behaving like one,” he told me, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I opened my mouth to tell him to fuck off when I realized that he was right. For once. The desire to belong to the Redwood pack was so strong right then that I couldn’t control it. Shoving him away, I marched toward Joss. A few members of the council had pulled her aside and were congratulating her. I snapped at them to leave and turned to Joss again.

“Hey,” I said. “If you were scared, I couldn’t tell at all.”

Joss stared at me, letting out a self-deprecating laugh. She didn’t confirm or deny her feelings. “Thanks for trying to protect me,” she said instead. “And the pack.”

I shrugged. “I just don’t like to see anyone being treated unfairly.”

Joss grinned, raising an eyebrow. “Okay. If that’s how you want to play it.”

I stared at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t get it. Why didn’t you join the Redwood pack when the other Rogues did?” Joss asked. “What’s keeping you so distant?”

I felt supremely uncomfortable. But still, I couldn’t *not* reply to her after all this. She deserved a response just for her ovaries of steel. “That’s a question that’s been bugging me, too,” I admitted. “But I don’t know the answer—and I’m not about to discuss it with you. Not now. Not ever, probably.”

Joss studied my face. “I’m not surprised,” she said. “You don’t seem like the type to talk about feelings.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What feelings?”

She snorted, looking away. She caught Mrs. Smith’s eye, and then gestured for the rest of the pack to gather.

“We need to pack up and head back to the house,” Joss said when everyone gathered at the camping area.

Everybody voiced agreement. The atmosphere around the group had shifted entirely after Joss’s almost-sacrifice. I was starting to gather my stuff when I overheard Zainab and Sage chattering.

“It was just amazing!” Zainab said.

“Right? Did you see her at that guillotine?” Sage gasped out. “So brave. What a Luna!”

“I bet you feel like crap now for doubting her,” I commented as I passed them.

“Definitely,” Sage said, nodding seriously.

Zainab cringed. “It was pretty shitty of us not to give her a chance in the first place.”

The two kept chattering as I walked away. I had this weird warm and fuzzy feeling in my stomach that I realized was… joy? Satisfaction? For *Joss?* It was freaking me out. Then again, it did feel good knowing that I’d been right about her after all. After what we’d just seen, any doubts anyone had about her should have been laid to rest.

“Hey, Maya!” A familiar, annoying voice said, interrupting my thoughts. Colton popped out of nowhere, grinning lazily. He found a tree to lean on, of course, because that was his signature move. “It’s so weird—who’d have thought we’d come out of this intact?” he asked.

I shot him a look. He, of course, didn’t shut the fuck up.

“This is almost like a happy ending, don’t you think?” he said.

That got to my nerves. “Why ‘almost’?” I asked, irritated. “Joss is alive and we’re all heading home.”

“You just called the pack house your home,” Colton said with a sly smile.

I winced when I realized he was right, but I tried to hide it. “Whatever.”

“*Whatever?* Maya…” He walked up to me, leaving only a couple of feet between us. “The two of us—we’re not finished.”

I scoffed, crossing my arms over my chest. “You’re wrong. We were finished before we even began.” I grabbed my backpack, turning my back on him.

“Maya!” he shouted.

I didn’t acknowledge him. I hated to think that he was right—that deep down, despite my denial, our story was still a work in progress. Thinking of it as a ‘story’ pissed me off even more, but the bastard had gotten into my head. Scowling as I passed by the lodge, I shot a glance at the others, who were still mingling.

I caught Lola’s eye, and she instantly waved at me and walked over, blocking my way.

“Hey!” she said.

“Can I help you?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“There’s someone asking about you,” Lola told me. Her expression was unreadable. It was annoying how she could do that from time to time—just forget her usual hyperactive self and become unnervingly collected.

“Who?” I asked, my eyes narrowed in suspicion. I couldn’t help it—this was weird. Who could be possibly asking about me? I didn’t know anyone here.

“They didn’t say,” Lola told me, shrugging. “They’re right over there.” She gestured at a couple of people. “Do you recognize them?”

I frowned, shaking my head. “No.”

“Well, aren’t you going to go talk to them?”

I hummed. “I don’t like talking to strangers. Or people in general, really, but you guys kind of force me to pay attention to you. The Redwood pack is very needy.”

I was about to make a snarky remark about Colton, who was the most attention-hungry person I’d ever met, but stopped myself. I wasn’t about to open that can of worms—Lola would just start asking questions about him. About ‘us’. *Ugh.*

For now, Lola just rolled her eyes. “What am I supposed to tell those people, then? They want to speak to you. Stop being so antisocial!”

“It’s a true Rogue’s quality,” I told her dryly.

Lola stared at me. “*Maya*.”

“Ugh, fine.” Huffing, I headed toward the couple. The woman came into view, her eyes widening when she saw me. I legit had no idea who this person was. Didn’t I already have enough people pestering me without adding randos to the mix?

“Maya!” the woman exclaimed, marching toward me. “It *is* you!”

I stared at her dubiously. “Do I know you?”

**Episode 411**

XAVIER

Ava’s icy blue eyes made my breath catch. I hadn’t seen them for so long—hadn’t ever thought I’d see them again. I stumbled backward, falling to the ground. I was scared. Terrified, because this…

This couldn’t be real.

It had to be the drugs.

It was *totally* the drugs.

Or was I going insane?

I blinked hard. But Ava was still there, looking very real in a dark blue dress. She moved with grace, slow but purposeful as she stretched out her hand toward me. Before I could even process what she was doing, she gripped my forearm and helped me to my feet. Her touch felt so familiar.

So good.

She was as solid and real as the ground I was standing on.

*How?*

“Ava?”

She placed a slender finger over my lips, stopping me from speaking. Her pale blue eyes sparkled as she smiled, mischievous yet still somehow cold. They were so compelling that I felt trapped in them. Her skin was almost blindingly white—smooth and radiant. Her long black hair fluttered in the breeze, cascading over her uncovered shoulders, making her look like a goddess.

How was this possible? My mind was racing with possibilities. But were they really possibilities? Ava was dead.

*Because I’d killed her.*

But right then, with her hand against my lips, brushing her fingers over them before she lowered it, I had to second-guess reality. She was standing close to me, and her scent brought a flood of memories to my mind. They flashed before me, one after the other: the first time we’d laid eyes on each other, when I’d seen those eyes that had belied a warmth I’d never felt before; our first kiss during a harvest moon; waking up with her in my arms…

Waking up with her had always felt indescribable.

And then, I heard Ava’s soft voice in my ear. “I missed you too, X.”

I was trembling all over. I could barely speak, still shaken up from the realization of what was happening. How could this be real? It wasn’t. I hadn’t seen Ava’s face in two years.

“W-what’s going on?” I asked her breathlessly.

She just smiled. “We were bound to meet again, Xavier. You knew it was coming. I knew it was coming. And we both wanted it—we always have.”

She inched even closer, and the gorgeous symmetry of her face was blinding. Her beauty felt overwhelming, hard for me to process. I didn’t understand what was happening, and why I was feeling this way. I was out of my element. Pain, desire, rage, sorrow—the rush of emotions was so intense that it left me dizzy.

She made a move to touch me again, but I took a step back.

Her eyes widened in surprise, and then hurt. “Xavier,” she breathed. “Are you afraid of me?”

“I’m not afraid,” I said. I wasn’t sure if that was true or not. “I’m… surprised. I never thought I’d see you again. How…” I swallowed with difficulty. “How is this possible?”

Her smile was indulgent. “You don’t think I’m real?”

The way she looked at me made me feel smaller, somehow. Trapped. But then she brushed her hand against my cheek, and it sent a chill down my spine. The sensation was hauntingly soothing. “You look *good*, X.”

She moved even closer, her eyes fixed on mine, her fingers tracing a line from my jaw up to my hair. A chill went down my spine. It was hard to resist her pull, and I didn’t know exactly when I’d stopped fighting it. Cautiously, I dared to take her hand in mine—and any doubt I had of the reality playing out in front of me vanished.

Her skin felt warm, supple.

*Alive*.

When I met her gaze again, it was scrutinizing. She’d been speaking to me, but I’d been so fascinated by the feel of her skin that it was hard to focus on anything else.

“What?” I asked slowly. My voice sounded strange to my own ears.

“I want to know why you haven’t kissed me yet…” She trailed off, her plush lips forming an irresistible pout. The moment she uttered the words, my whole body went rigid. A deep desire stirred within me. She was beckoning me in a way that drove me mad.

“I want to,” I whispered. “I want to kiss you.”

“What’s holding you back, then?” she asked, tracing my cheekbone with the back of her hand. Her touch was so warm that I felt feverish. Her breath was hot, inviting against my lips.

The pull was intoxicating, but…

But there was something in the back of my mind, like a warning, saying that I had to keep away. That this wasn’t right.

That it was a trap.

Somewhere far away, a crow’s caw echoed.

“Something’s wrong,” I whispered to her. “Something’s wrong.”

She shook her head. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. You know you belong with me. Your wolf knows it, too.”

Her tone was soothing. Tender. The sunlight made her hair look like it was glowing. I couldn’t help but reach out and touch it. It felt soft. Real. Lacing my fingers with hers, I drew her closer, staring at her mouth.

“There’s nothing holding you back,” she murmured in a tone that made me feel hypnotized.

“Nothing holding me back,” I parroted her words, leaning forward to brush my lips against hers. Softly at first, slowly, until her mouth parted and her hands tangled in my hair, pulling me closer. The thrilling, all-consuming sensation returned. Kissing her was familiar and hot, and it certainly felt real when her tongue pressed my lips open. Our bodies molded together perfectly, her breasts flush against my chest. I wanted to touch them. A growl escaped from my throat. I wanted to touch her all over.

Just like I used to.

I closed my eyes and deepened the kiss, taking her lower lip between my teeth. It felt like it used to. Like she was here. She was in my arms, just like before. And then I heard her saying my name.

“*Xavier*…”

I didn’t understand what was happening—how could she be speaking while I was kissing her? And why did her voice sound so distant, so strained?

Why did her voice sound accusing?

An image of blood flashed inside my head.

*Blood everywhere everywhere everywhere…*

The sweet taste of her mouth, of our kiss, turned bitter. Coppery, just like blood. Just like *her* blood. My mouth flooded with it, and I broke our kiss. Nausea invaded my stomach, the horror of the memory vivid in my mind. I’d fought so hard to forget about it—to forget about the day I’d killed her.

When I turned to face her again, my eyes snapping open, Ava was staring at me. Her eyes were colder, angry. Her throat was torn open, and blood was pouring out.

“*Xavier*…”

My name sounded garbled, because she was choking on her own blood.

I hissed, recoiling in shock and fear, the taste of her fresh blood growing stale in my mouth. But suddenly, she could speak again. Her voice was high-pitched, cutting, like a knife. Mocking.

“What’s wrong, Xavier?” she said. “Don’t you like me anymore? Aren’t I pretty enough for you?” She pointed at her bloody neck, at the red that was falling, clashing against her pale body. “This is all your doing!”

My breathing was coming out heavy, wheezy. I felt more confused than ever.

I’d killed Ava.

I’d killed my mate.

But wasn’t… Wasn’t Cali my mate?

*Cali!*

My mind ached with the memory of her. *She* was my mate.

“Shit,” I mumbled, taking another step away from Ava. Her blue eyes were red-rimmed now, nearly the same color as her blood. She grabbed my shoulder, tight enough to bruise. The warmth of her touch had vanished—suddenly, she was ice-cold.

“No!” I panted, pushing her hand off me as I stumbled backward.

I had to get away from her.

Her radiant pale skin rippled, turning translucent, revealing her veins.

“Where are you going, Xavier?” she asked in a haunting voice that I didn’t recognize. It was horrifying enough to make me lose my footing again. I crashed to the ground this time, feeling my limbs begin to shake as she moved toward me.

Her mouth twisted into a chilling smile. Her slender, delicate finger looked bony now as she it pointed at me.

“Look at you,” she said, laughing. “What are you afraid of, huh? Did you do something wrong? Is there something you feel guilty about, Xavier?”

“Why are you doing this to me?” I gasped. I was still on the floor, lying on the ground. I couldn’t find the strength to move. My body felt heavy, aching. Ava slithered closer, glaring as she knelt before me. I was suddenly hit by the scent of death. Her sweetness was all gone. All that was left between us was fury and the bitter taste of blood. She looked into my eyes, the accusation in them obvious. And then, in a raspy tone, she whispered, “Why did you do it, Xavier? Why did you kill me?”

**Episode 412**

GREYSON

“COVER YOUR EARS!” Astrid screamed.

I didn’t need to be told twice. My hands came up to my ears, pressing firmly, but the ondines’ voices remained piercing. My hearing was too sensitive—no matter how hard I tried to block them out, they reached me, creating a weird fog inside my head. I needed earplugs, or those fancy ones that Ariana Grande had at her shows. The ondines’ voices vibrated, moving under my skin, making me feel drunk.

But despite everything, one thought remained in my mind.

“Cali!” I called, turning to her. If what Astrid had said was true—if these monsters lured people in with their voices and then drowned them—Cali could be drawn to them. Knowing her, she was definitely going to try to see them. She’d probably think befriending them would be an amazing idea. That girl was incapable of staying out of trouble and saying no to people and/or supernatural beings. I was pretty sure her parents must’ve spent their lives trying to stop her from bringing home strays and accidentally jumping out of windows.

“What? What are you saying?” she shouted, looking up at me with wide eyes, full of surprise and unease. I marched toward her, reaching out to cover her ears, but she pushed me away.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, shouting, “I can cover my own ears; you need to look after yourself!”

This was fucking ridiculous. I was here to protect her. When was she going to realize that I didn’t give a damn about anything else? Then again, those voices did sound very enticing…

NO.

I was thinking about Cali. Cali was the reason I was here in the first place. I needed to focus on her, but she was making that pretty hard by shoving me and continuing to scold me.

“OH MY GOD!” she hissed, fighting to remove my palms from her ears. “STOP OBSESSING OVER ME! YOU’RE GONNA DIE!”

“This isn’t working!” Torin said. He tore some cloth from his shirt, wadding it up before giving it to us.

The moment I let Cali go, she stuffed her ears with the cloth. She nodded shakily. “This is much better,” she told Torin. And then she turned to me. Her expression became aghast in one second flat. “Oh. My. GOD! Greyson, stop staring at me and cover your ears!” She thrust a couple of wads of cloth right in my face.

Shaken out of my stupor, which had either been a product of my worry about Cali or the ondines’ voices, I stuffed my ears with the makeshift earplugs, hoping they’d make the singing stop. A moment later, the voices were diminished…

Only to return, even louder than before.

The earplugs weren’t enough—the chorus started ringing in my head, growing more beautiful by the second. My mind started throbbing with the music, growing hazier and hazier.

“Greyson?” Cali said, grabbing hold of my arm. But her voice sounded like it was coming through a tunnel, far away, overshadowed by the gorgeous singing. “Greyson, can you hear me?”

My body was getting hotter by the second, my whole being gradually filling with a burning desire that overpowered every other thought. The singing, the sublime chorus of the ondines was the only thing that mattered to me.

I had to see the makers of this divine music.

I had to find them.

I had to offer myself to them.

Nothing else mattered.

My legs felt shaky, but they carried me easily toward the river.

“GREYSON!”

The only voices I wanted to listen to were the ondines’. But this voice… It was familiar. Soothing. I felt a twitch against my shoulder. A hand gripped me like a vice, and then someone inserted herself in front of me.

Cali?

Distantly, somewhere in the depths of my mind, I knew that this was Cali. Smart, stubborn, inventive, beautiful Cali. She was fighting to stop me from walking away, shoving me, begging me. She looked up at me pleadingly, screaming for me to listen, but I couldn’t. I was being drawn in by magic so powerful that it was poisoning my reason.

“Greyson! NO!” Muffled by the ondines’ music, Cali’s shouts barely reached my ears. She pulled at my hands, my arms, shoved at my chest, but it was like a fly trying to stop a bear.

“Do something!” Cali screamed over the music. She sounded broken, desperate. The hurt in her tone made me yearn, just as much as the ondines’ beautiful singing. A second later, Astrid and Torin grabbed onto me too. Nothing worked. My strength was no match for them. My body was no longer my own. It had its own will, determined to self-destruct as I moved ahead.

Nothing was going to stop me.

Nothing *could* stop me.

“Please! NO!” Cali grabbed onto my face. Were there tears in her eyes, or was I hallucinating? “You have to stop this!”

The music just wouldn’t stop. And I was helpless to resist it. I knew it would lead me to my death, but I just couldn’t stay away. I wasn’t as powerful as I’d once thought. I wasn’t powerful enough to protect Cali, and that infuriated any sanity I had left.

“We should tie him to a tree!” someone said. Astrid. Just like Cali’s, her voice sounded like it was coming through a tunnel. So far away, even though they were both right in front of me. Astrid and Torin fought to grab and pull me toward a tree, but I shoved them both away.

I was out of control.

I never lost control—I might not have ever wanted to be Alpha, but I’d always been capable. Feeling like this—like someone’s puppet, like a zombie dragging my feet toward the river—was fucking maddening.

I was lost inside my own head, drowning already as the sound overwhelmed my senses.

Being with Cali made me feel just as overwhelmed, sometimes…

Usually, being with Cali was the most important thing to me.

But why the fuck was she still angry with me?

Why were her new friends more important than our relationship? I’d helped her fucking escape. I was helping her get a cure for her mother, and she was just never happy with me. Why did things have to be so difficult? I wished I understood human women better.

I wished she’d forgive me, and I’d be able to kiss her again.

For a moment, I flickered back into myself. I missed kissing her so fucking much.

*“*GREYSON!” she sobbed, grabbing onto the sides of my face. “*STOP!*”

But I couldn’t. I was too close. The river was only a few feet away now, and the chorus was drawing me in like a moth to a flame. Cali disappeared from in front of me as I stepped into the water. And then I saw them, straight ahead.

Five long-haired, naked women, gathered on a rock in the middle of the river. Every one of them was gorgeous, all shapes and sizes and complexions, and singing the most divine melody I’d ever heard.

“Greyson!” Torin’s voice echoed near my ear. “You’re going to drown!”

“You’re going to die!” Astrid screamed.

I knew that.

Whatever was left of my mind knew that.

But still, I couldn’t stop.

I was moving deeper into the river when something cut through the chorus that had invaded my head. A distant, tiny whisper.

Cali.

*Stop! Please, Greyson, stop!*

She’d linked her mind with mine, and for a moment, I was relieved. For a moment, I could remind myself that Cali was the only woman for me, that nobody could ever hold a candle to her.

*Don’t let the ondines trick you!* Cali screamed in my head. *What am I supposed to do without you?*

I paused in the cold water. She was right—this was nothing but a trick. I knew that. I knew this was dangerous, and I was being tricked by magic.

*Come back, Greyson,* Cali pleaded. *If you can hear me, come back now. I need you.*

Cali needed me.

I needed her…

But I also needed to get to the music.

The cold water came up to my waist. My legs, usually powerful, were going numb. I was fighting the current, heading toward the ondines. I wanted to tell Cali that everything was going to be okay, that I could only ever want her, but the voices were drowning out everything else.

The song was drowning out everything else.

*Greyson! No! Please, don’t do this! Come back! You can’t leave me! You can’t hurt yourself like this!*

Cali kept shouting inside my head as the water reached my neck, and then it hit me. Cali… Why was she being so loud? Why was she yelling at me? Begging me? She wasn’t my mate. These gorgeous singing women were.

*I can’t lose you, please come back to me, Greyson…*

Cali’s voice reached my consciousness a second before I slipped under the water, the current devouring me whole.

**Episode 413**

MAYA

“I’m sorry, do I know you?” I asked the woman, taking her in.

I fought to find a memory of her, but came up blank. She was tall and slender, with rich golden skin and penetrating dark eyes. Her hair trailed down to her waist—curly, thick, and the color of rust. I couldn’t pinpoint her age—she could’ve been thirty or fifty, I had no idea. There was an imposing quality to her, though, something that made me watch her cautiously.

If we’d met before, how was it possible that I didn’t remember someone like her?

“You know me, Maya,” she said. “Or at least you did, once.”

I scowled. “When?”

She smiled at me gently. “A long time ago, before your grandfather kicked you out of the pack.”

“What do you want?” I said, bristling. “As you can probably imagine, I hate talking about my grandfather.”

The woman seemed suddenly sheepish. “Maya, we thought…” She moved closer, staring at me. “We thought you were dead.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Who’s *we?*”

“Oh!” she said, shaking her head. “Sorry—I’m Bethany.” She grabbed another woman and pulled her closer. This one was shorter, with an athletic build and beautiful hazel eyes. “And this is my mate, Adita.”

Adita smiled. “I’ve heard all about you, Maya. Can’t believe I’m meeting you in the flesh.”

For some reason, I really hated the sound of that. I didn’t want anyone to know anything about me.

“What have you heard?” I asked.

“It must have been horrible, being banished by your own grandfather,” Adita said gently. “What was that like?”

I looked between the two women, incredulous. Cali came to mind—she would probably have said that these women were acting like I was some sort of local celebrity or reality TV star. My pain had been put out there for them to consume and gossip about, and now they had the fucking nerve to ask me about it as if we were friends instead of complete strangers.

“As you can see, I’m not dead,” I deadpanned. “I’ve got to get going now. Later.”

But before I could turn around, Bethany kept talking. “I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to scratch at old wounds.”

I had to laugh. “Are you serious right now? I don’t know you, and I’m pretty sure you don’t give a shit about me.”

Bethany sighed. “Maya, it’s not—”

“Seriously, why on earth would I pour my soul out to you? And they say *I’m* the rude one!”

Both of them blinked at me like owls. “I’m really sorry,” Adita said.

I shrugged, crossing my arms over my chest. “You have three seconds to tell me what the fuck you want from me before I walk away. How’s that?”

Bethany hurried to speak. “I apologize if we seem nosy—”

“You really do. And in a very obvious way. You’re not even being smooth about it.” At least Cali was cute while she drilled me with random annoying questions.

“No, I totally get it!” Bethany continued. “We hate to make things awkward, but it’s just truly mind-blowing to see you. We were told that you’d died.”

At this point, with these annoying assholes bothering me, I almost wished that were true. “Sorry to disappoint,” I said sarcastically.

“Please, don’t get us wrong,” Bethany stammered. “We’re just wondering what you’ve been doing. How you’ve survived.”

“My main method of survival has been murdering anyone who asks me annoying questions,” I said in a completely serious tone. “I’m really good at it, too—there’s no trace of them left afterward. Occasionally, I also bathe in my enemies’ blood, which is why my skin looks so amazing.”

The two women laughed nervously.

“Come on, Maya,” Adita said. “Please talk to us. We were members of the same pack— that must count for something.”

These women were really pushing my buttons. I was always kind of mad at everything anyway, so their behavior was just stoking my rage up to a sizzling point. It took a lot of effort to keep it at bay, and my voice was still shaking and sharp when I spoke to them again.

“What pack are you talking about?” I snapped. “The same one that fucking abandoned me?”

The two women flinched. But just to make matters worse, someone else spoke. The worst possible someone, because I had the worst luck ever.

“Hey, Maya!” Colton said, sauntering over with a pretzel in his hand. “You gotta grab one of these before they’re gone.” He gestured at the pretzel.

I glared at him. “*What?*”

He grinned. “You know, this council might be made up of a bunch of dickheads, but they sure know how to make a pretzel.” He wiped mustard from his face.

I took a deep breath before rolling my eyes. Could this moment *get* any worse? But oh, it could, because Bethany and Adita’s faces had lit up with interest.

“Who’s this?” Bethany asked.

“Is he your mate?” Adita added.

“No!” I said hotly.

“Aww, babycakes, don’t lie!” Colton cooed.

Shaking my head and groaning, I watched as Colton wiped the mustard onto his pants like a fucking toddler and introduced himself. “Of course we’re mates!” He shook the women’s hands, grinning. “I’m Colton Evers, pleased to meet you lovely ladies.”

The urge to punch Colton was pretty hard to shake, so I settled for elbowing him. Hard. He seemed unaffected. Just like Bethany and Adita, whose expressions were full of excitement.

“How wonderful!” Bethany exclaimed. “I’m so happy for you, Maya!”

“That sounds like a personal problem,” I said, but they all pretended not to have heard me.

Bethany just barreled right on through. “I know what it’s like to live life wondering if you’ll ever find your mate, wondering who it might be.” She turned to the hazel-eyed beauty at her side. “But when Adita came into my life, I knew that all the worries, doubts, and frustrations were worth it.”

I squinted. “Were they, though?”

Colton barked out a laugh as Adita sniffled and stared at Bethany with what had to be the closest thing I’d ever seen to heart-eyes. “Oh, sweetheart. I’m so happy to have found you too. You’re everything to me.”

Moved practically to tears, the pair kissed.

“Look at them!” Colton cooed dramatically. “They’re so cute!” He winked. “This could be us, hot stuff.”

I wanted to puke from all this mates talk, honestly.

“Listen, lovebirds,” I told the two women. “I’m glad you two found each other, but please—don’t try to rub all your happy, sappy glitter all over me. I’d rather slit my own throat than deal with all this romance nonsense.”

“Aww, she’s so funny!” Bethany told Colton, grinning. “Don’t you love that she’s so funny?”

Colton placed a very muscular arm over my shoulders, winking. “My baby’s the best.”

I gagged, shoving him away.

“Was it like magic when you two found each other?” Adita asked Colton hopefully. I wished for the earth to crack open and swallow me, just to get this torture over with. But that didn’t happen, and then Colton decided to reply to her.

“The magic has yet to come,” Colton said, smirking. “But it will. Wink, wink.” And then he literally winked, because I was living my worst nightmare. I balled my hands into fists, fighting to keep my shit together. Never before in my life had I wanted to punch someone in the face as much as I currently wanted to punch Colton. Seriously, what was stopping me?

Oh yeah, there were witnesses, and Cesaries had kept the guillotine nearby.

No other reason.

“Oh, that’s so sweet!” Bethany gushed.

Eyeing the path that led back to the pack, I plastered a frosty smile onto my face. “For sure. It’s so sweet it's *sickening*.” Before any of them could say anything else to piss me off, I added, “*Anyway*, nice to catch up with you, or not, but I really have to go.”

The women flinched, and Colton chuckled. “Don’t fret, she’s like that,” he said. “Tough on the outside, but gooey as a s’more on the inside.”

My blood started boiling. Right then and there, I vowed that Colton would regret the day he’d met me as soon as I got him alone.

“Ignore him,” I told Adita and Bethany. “Either way, I think we’re done here. Thanks for filling me in, but I’m not interested in going down memory lane.”

“But Maya—” Bethany started.

I cut her off, seething. I couldn’t stand this. *Any* of it. “In case I was unclear, Bethany, here goes: I don’t give a shit about my grandfather, or anyone he’s connected to. You guys aren’t my friends, and you never have been.”

The two women stood there, gaping.

Tears of rage stung my eyes as I pushed past them, marching away.

But then, a moment later, Bethany called from behind me. “But what about Wren?”

*Wren.*

I froze.

Turning around, I walked back and got right in Bethany’s face. “What do you mean? What *about* my sister?”

**Episode 414**

XAVIER

I stared up at Gabriel, panting.

My friend had a bemused smile on his face and was eyeing me curiously. “Hey, man.” He giggled. “You okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” I gaped at him. “Which is entirely possible.” He took a drag from his joint and then dissolved into more giggles. “This is some seriously awesome weed.”

Still panting, I looked around, confused.

Ava was gone.

I had, truly, seen a ghost.

Still sick to my stomach, I fought to even out my breathing.

“You don’t look so well, bud,” Gabriel said with raised eyebrows. “Here, let’s get you up.” He held out a hand to help me up. I grabbed it, letting him haul me to my feet. I was so shaken that I was about to ask Gabriel if he’d seen Ava too, but I stopped myself.

It had to be the drugs. There was no other explanation.

Ava hadn’t been real.

But deep inside, I felt a chill like I’d never felt before. A sense that something was deeply wrong—that something was *about* to go wrong—and I wouldn’t be able to stop it.

“You gonna come back inside?” Gabriel asked, eyeing me curiously. “The party’s getting pretty wild.”

I swallowed, pausing to think. I didn’t care about the party, even if it was calling to me. I didn’t want to go in there. It was the same feeling that I’d had earlier, while kissing Ava in my dream. Cali was the reason why I wouldn’t let loose, why I hadn’t been able to lose myself in Ava.

*Cali.*

I could kid myself and say it was the drugs, but that would be a lie. The truth was that no matter the relationship we’d once had, being with Ava—even if it were possible—was wrong. She and I had ended a lifetime ago, when she’d betrayed me. When I’d killed her. We’d never had a real future. We’d been broken, destined to fail from the start. What I had with Cali was entirely different.

*Cali.*

“Hey, earth to Xavier!” Gabriel waved his hand in front of my face. “You sure you’re okay?”

I waved him off, grunting. “Stop fucking fussing over me.”

“I can’t help it,” Gabriel said, smirking. “You’re my BFF.”

I ignored Gabriel’s words. I was dealing with a crisis here. My vision about Ava, be it a hallucination or a dream, had definitely been something new. I’d never thought of her that way again after what she’d done to me. After her death.

The drugs had to be messing with me.

Or, even worse, maybe Lottie had used some sort of Fae magic on me just to fuck around. I hated Fae, they were no-good irritating meddlers, every single one of them—

Then again, Cali was part Fae, and I didn’t hate her. I loved her. I loved her more than I’d ever thought I was capable of loving a person.

It was all so complicated that it made my headache and dizziness ten times worse.

“Are we gonna keep standing here like we got detention at recess?” Gabriel pressed, snorting. “Why won’t you come back inside? What the fuck is up with you?”

“I wanna leave,” I managed to say. My voice sounded scratchy, as if I hadn’t used it in a while. I had to get the hell out of this haunted place. I didn’t have time for digging around in graveyards—because that was where Ava needed to remain. In a graveyard.

“What are you talking about?” Gabriel scoffed. “Why do you want to leave?”

“We need to get the artifact that Lottie agreed to give us and get the fuck out of here,” I said. My head was still throbbing, but I was starting to feel a little more lucid.

Gabriel, on the other hand, looked completely baked. He laughed. “You’re such a fucking party pooper!”

“I mean it, Gabe,” I said. “The longer we wait, the longer…”

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “What?”

The longer I waited, the longer Cali would stay with Greyson. And I’d be damned if I allowed that to happen.

“Hey, look at that!” Gabriel shouted as I headed toward the house to confront Lottie about the artifact. When I turned back to face him, I saw him bent over, touching and smelling a pink flower.

Seriously.

“Have you lost your mind?” I asked, as patiently as I could.

“Huh?” Gabriel gave me a dopey smile. “Look at this beauty! It’s the best flower ever! I should take it home and feed it, don’t you think? Keep it as a pet or something.”

I couldn’t believe this was happening right now. “Gabriel—”

“Don’t you think it’s a pretty flower?” Gabriel demanded, suddenly angry.

I had to play along before he decided to murder me because I didn’t like his fucking flower pet. “Right. Yeah. It’s gorgeous.”

Gabriel grinned, and just then I remembered something else. The kiss between him and Mikah. Had that been a dream, too? Had it been the drugs?

“Hey, did you and Mikah kiss tonight?”

Gabriel, who had sat down on the ground and was sniffing and licking at the flower’s petals, looked up at me. “Huh? What kiss? What are you talking about?”

“*The* kiss. You and Mikah.”

Gabriel snickered. “Man, you’re crazy!” He offered up the flower to me. “Want a taste?”

The petals were covered in Gabriel’s spit. Disgusting. I was supposed to be the crazy one here, right?

“Stop making out with that fucking flower and come with me,” I snapped, grabbing Gabriel by the arm to haul him up.

He snickered, letting me manhandle him. “I love it when you’re rough,” he said. “But like, not you. I don’t like *you* that way—I just like it when men are rough with me in general.”

I could have lived my whole life without learning my best friend’s bedroom kinks, but here we were.

“Shut up, *please*,” I said, groaning. “We need to get to Mikah, get the artifact from that drug-dealing Fae, and get the hell out of here.”

“Why’d you ask if Mikah and I kissed?” Gabriel scrunched up his nose. “Do *you* want to kiss someone? Like Cali?”

The second her name left Gabriel’s mouth, my mind went straight back to the first time she and I had kissed. It had been incredible, like fireworks. Intense and charged—more charged than anything else I’d ever felt.

I needed to do this for Cali.

“Stop rambling and let’s get going,” I snapped, pulling Gabriel toward the house.

He laughed, nuzzling at his flower. “Whatever you want. You’re the boss.”

When we walked back into Lottie’s yurt, I took a moment to let Gabriel go and make sure I was focused. I didn’t need to inhale any more drugs. I had to get shit done. But it quickly became obvious that that was going to be far more difficult than I’d anticipated, given the chaos going on in the room.

Mikah was drinking straight from a wine bottle, Lottie was making out with both of her guys, and Gabriel had dumped his flower to nuzzle a happy-looking alpaca. The air was so thick that I felt drugged all over again. The room started swaying, and it felt like I was walking on sponges. The drug, whatever it was, was coming and going in waves.

Speaking of waves, I wondered if Cali liked surfers.

I could try surfing at some point, just to figure out if I’d be any good at it. I’d seen plenty of giant waves off the coast of South Africa. Cali and I could take a vacation there together, and I would surf and she would watch me and clap. Or touch herself, prepping for when I’d get out of the water and fuck her right on the sand.

Sounded like a good time.

“Amazing!” a voice commented, crackling into rich laughter. It cut off my thoughts, the sound filling the room and echoing off the walls. I was shaken up enough to remember my real plan here: get Gabriel and Mikah, get the artifact, and get the fuck out.

“Hey!” I barked, walking up to Lottie. I could suddenly walk straighter, which made me certain about my earlier assessment—the effects of the drug came and went in waves. Lottie broke her kiss with one of her men and turned to face me.

Her pretty lips were swollen. She ran her tongue over them before she spoke. “Xavier…” She looked at me up and down, her shiny eyes stopping at my mouth, my chest, my abs, and then lingering on my crotch. They stayed there as she continued speaking. “*So* glad you decided to join us.”

She reached out for me, looking hungry, but I pushed her hand away. “No.”

She arched an eyebrow, her gaze smoldering. “No?”

I stepped closer, straightening to my full height. I glared down at her, making sure to be as intimidating as possible. I knew how to do that better than anyone. “I want what you promised me, and then we’re leaving,” I declared.

Lottie smiled, and trailed her hand over my chest, her eyes sharpening on me. “*Leaving*? Oh, dear… Who said anything about leaving?”

**Episode 415**

GREYSON

My head was under the surface.

Cold water flooded my senses, but even then, I could still hear the orchestral voices of the ondines, as clear and seductive as they had been above the water. I opened my eyes, looking around in the stream. The water was clear, gorgeous, but I had to hold my breath. I had to. Right?

Then again, the water felt so inviting, so comforting.

There was nothing to be afraid of.

Nothing could ever harm me in here.

A groggy memory surfaced in my mind—of myself as a baby, being held by soft, warm hands. A soothing voice, being rocked back and forth as I drifted off to sleep. The image and feeling came from somewhere way deep within me, from a place that I hadn’t been able to tap into before. The soothing voice, the warm rocking of my body, a body that used to be tiny before it had grown into a machine prepped for destruction—that was all from before. From a long time ago, before Silas, before Cali.

I lolled underwater, surrounded by the enchanting music, ignoring the way my lungs burned as I held my breath. And then another voice pierced my consciousness. Cali’s.

It had to be Cali’s.

She was the one on the rock, waiting for me, calling for me. She was the one lying there, combing through her hair, her legs crossed coyly.

There was nothing in this world that I wouldn’t do for her.

If I could just hold my breath a little longer, I’d be able to reach her, wrap my arms around her, protect her, have her, *take her*. Just ahead, only a few feet away, I saw glimpses of her naked legs, beckoning me, and the sight drove me mad with lust. I had never wanted anyone as much as I wanted her.

But when I reached for her, it felt like she was just beyond my touch.

No matter how hard I tried, no matter how hard I swam, I couldn’t reach her.

It was as if I were stuck in a dream, moving toward something that I couldn’t get close to. The burning in my lungs intensified, so painful that it felt like they were about to burst. I needed to breathe. To breathe in Cali. To smell her, to feel her lips, run my hands through her hair. But first, I needed air. I had to stay alive—just to be with her, if for nothing else.

But where was the surface?

I couldn’t tell which way was up.

Everything looked the same in the sparkling blue of the water. My lungs screamed in protest, my head turning heavy as my vision began to fade. It was like the beginning of a movie, when the lights dimmed…

Only there was no movie, and the screen before me went black.

Drowning, I discovered, was like falling asleep.

I felt myself drifting off, a slow-motion kind of fall through deep brilliant blue that resembled a sea of clouds. The ondines’ voices swelled in my ears, the melody as intoxicating and sweet as ever, but then something interfered with the sound.

*SPLASH!*

A frantic splashing, someone calling my name, someone shouting, “Cali, come back!” in a voice that sounded fuzzy in my ears.

Where was Cali going?

“No!” That was Cali’s voice, desperate and pained. “Greyson!”she screamed, and then I felt a hand grabbing me, pulling at me hard.

I knew that touch. I’d made it. I could have her now. *I would do* anything *to have her,* was my last thought before I broke the surface.

I gasped, choking and coughing, water blurring my vision.

“Greyson!” Cali’s voice was clearer now, pristine. Was I dreaming? Was this really Cali? Someone had their arms wrapped around me, holding onto me as I fought to breathe. Her embrace was tight as she caressed my arms, my face.

The singing had stopped, and I couldn’t help but wonder why.

The voices had been so lovely… I missed them already.

But when I looked up at Cali, I realized that she was the one I’d missed the most. Her eyes were wide, lips parted. She was stunning, even in her fear. “Come on, come on, you gotta stand up!”

I frowned, my chest still heaving. I looked down, taking a moment to realize that I was on my knees. How was that possible? I’d been underwater just a few moments ago. What was happening?

“Are you okay?” Cali asked me, pushing my hair back from my forehead. “Can you breathe?” I nodded as she pressed her fingertips into my chest, sniffling. “Oh my god, I thought you’d lost your mind! Why were you crawling?”

I was stunned. *Crawling?*

“All you had to do was stand up,” Cali said, wiping her eyes. “All you had to do was stand up!”

Confused, I looked past her. The five ondines—the otherworldly naked women who’d been singing for me—were staring at us, wide-eyed. I looked down at myself and realized I was entirely naked.

“Are you okay?” Cali asked, for what felt like the tenth time. Cupping my chin, she pulled me around to face her. “Please, talk to me.”

I cleared my throat. My voice felt raw. “Why are we standing in the river?”

Cali shuddered. It looked like she was holding back tears. “You almost drowned,” she said, a sob hidden in her words. She leaned down, kissing my cheek, my forehead, the corners of my eyes, peppering kisses all over my face like she couldn’t get enough.

*I* definitely couldn’t.

I grabbed her by the waist, pulling her down to me so I could kiss her right on the mouth. She tasted so good, so sweet—the feel of her was a breath of fresh air, all on its own. I squeezed her against me, relishing the feel of her soft body against mine. One of my hands stayed in her hair to keep her in place, to keep her open for me as I devoured her mouth. My other hand reached for her waist to keep her close, flush against me. I wanted her.

I wanted to kiss and touch and fuck her, right here, right now.

For a moment, with her writhing against me, lost in our kiss, I thought that I could do it. That I didn’t give a fuck about the ondines watching, or whoever was shouting at us from the bank—I needed to tear Cali’s clothes off and make her mine.

“Greyson!” she choked out, shoving at my chest so she could pull away and breathe. I didn’t stop, mouthing at her neck, grabbing onto her and holding her tight against me. “Oh my *god*, will you *calm down?* It’s really not the right—”

“Is he okay?” someone asked from a few feet away. Torin.

“He sure looks okay!” Astrid said, her eyes wide with amusement. “And really happy to see Cali!”

Cali’s cheeks had turned so red, she looked like a cherry.

“I want you,” I growled against her mouth, and she squeaked.

“Greyson, this really isn’t the time!” she repeated. “You almost drowned! I was so worried, I just, I thought—”

The second I saw tears fall from her eyes, I was shocked out of my lust-driven haze. “Hey,” I whispered, caressing her cheeks. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m here.”

She sniffled, more tears trailing down her cheeks. I kissed her forehead before looking around. The five ondines were still watching us with unabashed interest, and then I realized…

I realized how shallow the water was.

“It’s only a couple of feet deep.” I paused, clearing my throat. “How could I have drowned? What happened?”

Scowling, Cali pointed behind us. “They did it!”

I turned to face the ondines. They all collectively gasped in disbelief. “*Us?*” they all said at once.

Irritated, Cali pulled the wads of cloth from her ears. “You’re ondines, right? Your singing lured him into the river. He literally almost died because of you!”

The five ondines looked at each other, seeming aghast and a little offended. “*What?*” they asked as one.

“If you could stop talking all at once, that would really help!” Cali snapped, pulling me closer to her. I nestled my cheek shamelessly against her own, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“We weren’t trying to lure anyone!” one of the ondines said, placing a defensive hand on her chest. There were glittering specks of gold in her eyes. “We were only practicing for the choral contest next week. Sorry if you misunderstood.” They eyed me with interest as the golden-eyed one continued. “Not that we’d *mind* inviting you for tea one day.”

I suddenly wished I had clothes on—even the silly tights Astrid had first conjured up for me. I moved behind Cali, covering myself under the water.

“Hey!” Cali yelled indignantly, waving at them. “Stop looking at him like that—you’re not inviting him for tea—or anything else!”

“Oh, we’d totally invite you too,” the golden-eyed one told Cali, grinning.

Another one glanced between us. “You two are so beautiful together.”

“Do it again,” a third ondine demanded excitedly.

I frowned in confusion. “Do *what* again?”

The ondines grinned at each other and then, in their captivating voices, they began to chant. “Kiss, kiss, kiss!”

It became a brand new kind of chorus that moved through my ears and invaded my body, bringing back my yearning for Cali tenfold.

“Hey, wait a—”

Before Cali could finish her sentence, I spun her around, pressed my body against hers, and kissed her.

**Episode 416**

MAYA

Bethany’s expression turned to fear when I faced her again. I had a pretty good idea why—I was probably staring at her like I wanted to murder her. Which was true.

“What about my sister?” I repeated, my voice sharp as I grabbed Bethany’s arm.

“Wait,” Colton piped up from behind me. “You have a sister?”

I realized that I was probably scaring the shit out of Bethany, so I let go of her arm after noticing Adita walking up to us once more. I shot a glare at Colton. “This is none of your business.”

“How come your mate doesn’t know that you have a sister?” Bethany asked, still looking pretty startled.

I couldn’t believe this chick. “For the love of god,” I snapped, “will you stop it with all the nosy fucking questions? What is your *problem?*”

Adita was here, reaching out to brush her fingers over Bethany’s arm. “Are you okay?”

“Fine, sure,” Bethany said, still a little shaken.

“We should go,” Adita said to the other woman, glaring at me.

“Ya *think?*” I snapped.

Adita huffed, wrapping her arm around Bethany before leading her away.

“What about your sister, though?” Colton asked.

“Shit!” I hissed under my breath, rushing to catch to the two otherwise super annoying women. “Hey, hi again—I’m sorry,” I told them, blocking their way. “I’m sorry for being so rude, it’s just that I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately. With my mate and all. He’s a handful.”

Bethany looked sympathetic and like she was about to ask me what kind of sex positions Colton and I preferred, because she was clearly that much of a gossip. But gossips could be useful. “Wren,” I said. “My sister. What do you know about her?”

Even uttering my older sister’s name filled me with a sorrow so deep that it hurt.

“Well—” Bethany started, but Adita cut her off.

“We shouldn’t be talking to her,” she said, gesturing at me. “She seems pretty unstable.”

“That’s true,” I said, looking between them. “I *am* pretty unstable. Off the rails…” My voice lowered, turning threatening. “So if you don’t want to see *real* crazy, you’d better fucking tell me everything you know about Wren.”

“Yeah,” Colton said, walking up to us. “I want to hear it, too.”

I spun around to face him, shoving him away. “I told you to stay the fuck out of my business!”

Colton smirked. “I like it when you get mad.”

I shoved him once more. “I’m gonna deal with you later.” I faced Adita and Bethany again, cracking my neck. “You two. *Spill it*.”

“Definitely unstable,” Adita muttered, looking at me suspiciously.

“I don’t know much about Wren, honestly,” Bethany said. “Only that she left the pack shortly after you did.”

I gulped. “Left? What do you mean?”

Bethany’s voice became hushed, conspiratorial. “She went Rogue.”

I couldn’t wrap my head around this. Wren went Rogue? It didn’t make any sense. If she’d wanted to go Rogue, why hadn’t she left earlier? With me?

“Where is she now?” I asked the two women, who shrugged. Somewhere off in the distance, there was a low rumble of thunder.

Colton tapped me on the shoulder. “The rest of the pack is ready to leave. We’d better get going.”

I shook him off. “I’m having an important conversation here—can’t you see that?”

“And there’s bad weather coming, can’t *you* see *that?*” he replied. Just as he spoke, the sun disappeared behind an ominous-looking green cloud. A sinister shadow fell over the four of us and the wind picked up with a high-pitched, shrieking sound.

“Rain’s coming,” Adita told me. “We don’t know anything else about your sister.”

Bethany nodded. “We gotta go. You all better get moving if you want to miss the storm.”

“But—”

Colton grabbed me by the arm, pulling me away with him. “Nice to see you!” Bethany called after me.

I felt the urge to flip her off but stopped myself and thanked her instead. She hadn’t been that bad, after all. A little too curious for my taste, but not bad. She *had* told me the first thing I’d heard about my sister in years, after all.

“Let go of me,” I snapped, pushing Colton’s hand away as we walked toward the Redwood pack.

“Maya,” he muttered. “If you need to, you can talk to me, you know. About your sister.”

His tone was suddenly so sincere, so wholesome, that for a moment I was struck silent. Shocked. Then I shrugged, ignoring him. Joss started barking orders about leaving for the pack house.

“Follow me!” she said, and shifted. The rest of us shifted too, ready to travel back. This was much better, thank god. Being a wolf was something I enjoyed—something that I understood and relished. It was peaceful.

At least at first.

Then rain began to pelt down, and the pack sped up under Joss’s lead. For a moment, I thought things were going well despite the rain, but then a gust of wind sent a huge tree crashing to the ground directly in front of me. Gasping and whimpering in shock, I flinched back.

The pack sped speed up in front of me, not seeing that I’d been cut off by the tree. I managed to push it aside and was ready to chase after them, but the rain and the wind were making it hard to see them in the fading light.

*Let’s get out of here!*

There was someone else’s voice in my head. Colton was linking his mind with mine—and then he was there by my side. A gust of wind blasted us, pushing me into him. I shoved him away, just as a hailstone the size of a baseball crashed to the ground beside us. For a second, I was stunned. But then I snapped out of it and turned to Colton.

*Where’s the pack?* I asked, linking my mind with his.

*They didn’t realize you’d been cut off and kept moving,* he replied in my head. *But I know the way to the pack house, don’t worry.*

I was about to tell him that nothing ever worried me, but he took off before I could. He started running in the direction the pack had gone, and I followed. Both of us were fighting the wind when there was a loud *CRACK!*

Colton shoved me out of the way as another tree came crashing to the ground inches away from us, right where I’d been standing. Before I could process that the infuriating dumbass had probably just saved my ass, a tree was ripped up from the ground. I screamed, my wolf yelping in fear.

Colton helped me up.

*We have to get out of here!* I screamed in my head.

He shook his head. *We don’t have time—we need to find shelter.*

More hail exploded on the ground as Colton led me deeper into the woods. It was almost as dark as night, but the thick foliage provided some shelter from the hail and the wind. The noise was still loud, and holding the mind link with Colton was hard.

*We should go left!* I yelled at him.

*No, right!*

We continued fighting as we navigated the woods like it was a warzone. A lightning bolt struck a tree, sending a shower of flaming embers right at us. I felt them burn against my fur as I ran after Colton. Despite the cover of the trees, heavy pieces of hail still found us, bruising my shoulders. One was so massive that it knocked me to the ground, where I sliced my leg open on something sharp. Probably a rock.

Whining, I regained my footing and raced to catch up with Colton. We got deeper and deeper into the woods without finding any cover, and soon the hail began to give way to heavy, relentless rain.

*What the fuck are we gonna do?* I asked Colton through our mind link.

Before he could respond, he was knocked down by a falling branch that came out of nowhere.

*Shit!* I rushed up to him. *Are you hurt?*

He grunted but didn’t reply. He shifted back to human form, and I had to do the same, just to help him sit up. “What’s wrong?” I asked, shouting to be heard over the rain.

His face was twisted in pain as he shook his head. A fierce sense of worry invaded my insides, but I ignored it. No time for that now.

“Here, let me help you!” I grabbed his arm and pulled him up to his feet. I looked around—we had to find shelter, otherwise we were screwed.

“Maya…” Colton was breathing heavily.

I was about to tell him something stupid like ‘everything’s gonna be okay’ when I saw it. Straight ahead, there was an opening in the rocky face of a ridge.

“I got you,” I said under my breath. I thought he heard, because he held on to me tighter as I helped him walk toward the opening and into a cave.

Finally. No more of that godawful fucking wind.

“Ugh!” I groaned as we both collapsed to the ground. Colton was oddly silent, but I could feel him shaking beside me. We took a moment to catch our breaths, just staring up at the rocky ceiling. We were okay. I glanced at Colton, who was groaning softly. But it looked like he’d be okay.

Thank god.

*BOOM*!

There was a thunderous explosion, and a cascade of rocks sealed us into the cave.

**Episode 417**

Greyson’s naked body pressed against me as he deepened our kiss with a vigor that knocked the air out of my lungs. He felt hard and hot all over—his mouth, his grip, his chest, the friction our bodies created where he brushed against my stomach, demanding and desperate…

*I want him*, I thought frantically. *I want him so much.*

For a moment, all I could do I was grab onto him and whimper, rejoicing in the onslaught, but then I heard a weird little chorus of giggles in the distance.

*Huh?* I frowned. *What the hell is that?*

And then I was yanked right out of the moment when I realized that the freaking ondines were watching us like stupidly beautiful Peeping Toms. Had their angelic chanting driven Greyson to kiss me? I winced at the thought, pushing him away. He stared at me, panting, licking his lips. He was so gorgeous it hurt to look at him. I wanted to kiss him, and he wanted to kiss me too, but I hated to think that this moment between us had been the result of magic.

I was so fucking done with magic right now.

Couldn’t these mer-freaks just leave us *be?* I would’ve given anything to be alone with Greyson right now, to touch and kiss him all over. But I couldn’t—not like this.

*UGH!*

“Why did you stop?” One of the ondines tittered happily. “You two looked like you were really enjoying each other. Show us more!”

I turned to glare at them while grabbing onto Greyson at the same time. His bare skin felt so good it was hard to stay focused, and I hungered for him like never before. But I forced myself to keep my sanity. I told myself that any moments between us had to be our own. Greyson was my business. He wasn’t here to be ogled by their greedy, luminous eyes.

“Show’s over, sorry,” I told the ondines, trying to keep my voice as neutral as possible. I assumed that directly attacking them would probably not go down so well. Who knew how powerful they were? I didn’t want to find out, especially not after I’d seen the effect their singing could have on Greyson, an Alpha.

It was really hard for me not to tell them to go to hell after that little stunt, even if it had been accidental.

“Aww, that’s too bad,” the golden-eyed one said, pouting. “Maybe you guys can stay for our concert, though? We don’t get many visitors!”

“I’m sorry, we can’t stay. We have to go and it’s kind of urgent,” I said carefully.

“We know about your quest,” one of the ondine said.

“What? You do?” Maybe going on quests was a super usual pastime around these parts.

Greyson shook his head, like he was still fighting off the haziness. “We should…” He cleared his throat. “We should head back to shore.”

He stood, rising from the water like freaking Poseidon, and reached out to hold my hand. His touch was soft but firm, his grip making me feel like he never wanted to let me go. The sensation made me smile involuntarily.

I couldn’t stop glancing at his hard-on either, because he was *glorious*.

*Am I seriously salivating right now?* I thought, appalled by myself and my horniness. *GET A GRIP, CALI!*

Really, the most interesting part was that Greyson was making no move to cover himself. It was probably because he was still dizzy from the singing. We faced the bank, where Torin and Astrid were waving for us, when I heard the golden-eyed ondine’s voice again.

“Wait!”

“Oh my god, what now?” I hissed under my breath. Greyson’s lips twitched as I turned around. When I spoke, it was in the most casual way possible, and while trying not to scream at them for almost drowning my man. “Yes?”

“We have a gift for you,” the golden-eyed ondine said with a smile.

I glanced at Greyson, who was scowling. Clearly, he didn’t want to take any chances with these creatures. Honestly, hard same.

“I assure you, our gift will be helpful in your quest,” the golden-eyed ondine added.

“But I didn’t tell you what our quest actually was.”

The ondine just smiled enigmatically. Greyson seemed as lost as I was.

“Give us a moment,” I told the ondine, turning away from her to conspire with Greyson. “What do you think?” I whispered.

“I have no idea what’s happening,” he whispered back. “But either way, can we trust them?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “But if they really are offering something that can help us get the moon buttercup, isn’t it worth the chance?”

Greyson just scowled.

I thought of my mother and made up my mind. “I’m doing it.” I faced the rock again, and the golden-eyed ondine gestured for me to come closer. I started to walk toward them, but Greyson gripped my hand tighter.

“I’m coming with you,” he muttered.

It felt good to have him by my side. My feet slipped on the rocks, but he steadied me. When we reached the ondines, their leader reached for my hand and helped me onto the rock, along with Greyson. They were all even more breathtaking up close. I wondered if it was a glamour, or if they were just naturally this stunning.

The ondines’ leader picked up a vial and handed it to me. “Use this when you need it.”

Puzzled, I examined it. “Use it for what? Is it some kind of secret potion?”

The ondine smiled. “You will know when to use it.”

Greyson gave a low grumble.

“Right,” I said. “Um, okay… thank you, I guess?”

All the ondines smiled at the exact same time. It was pretty creepy, though they would have made one hell of a synchronized swimming team.

“No, thank you for entertaining us!” they said all at once. And then, with a sort of fluttery wave of their hands and bodies, they slipped from the rocks and disappeared into the water.

“Wait! Where did they go?” I asked. The ondines had already vanished, becoming one with the stream.

“I don’t know, and I don’t wanna find out,” Greyson told me. “Let’s go.”

I turned to face him. He looked so pale it made my stomach churn. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that,” I said as he helped me through the water.

“It’s fine.” He looked down at the water, entirely focused on helping me keep my balance.

“Weren’t you scared?” I asked quietly.

He scoffed. “Of course not. I’m never scared.” Then, in a lower voice, he added, “Unless you’re the one in danger.”

I kind of wanted to start crying all over again. He was so sweet sometimes, it made my heart ache.

“Grab onto my arms,” Greyson said, turning around to lead the way through the stream. I did as I was told, but I couldn’t help but glance down. His shoulders were perfection, made of cords of muscle. His arms were just as perfect. My eyes trailed down lower… Yep, I had to admit that his ass was spectacular. Butt cheeks sculpted by the gods, and all that. I kind of wanted to bite him all over, because I was a pervert, and—

And that was all I was gonna think about THAT.

“You okay?” Greyson asked, not looking back.

“Yep,” I squeaked.

As we got closer to the riverbank, Torin and Astrid reached out and helped us climb out of the water.

“What the heck happened?” Astrid asked, looking both intrigued and alarmed.

“Are you okay?” Torin asked. “What did they give you?”

I examined the vial of clear liquid. “I think it’s a vial of… water.” I frowned. “Which seems pointless. We totally deserved a magic wand or a flying carpet after the shit they put us through.”

Greyson snorted as I glared at the rock. Instead of thinking about the ondines, though, my mind was flooded with images of my kiss with Greyson. Maybe it had been the ondines’ magic, but I’d enjoyed every moment of it, and I couldn’t wait to do it again…

Even if I still hadn’t forgiven Greyson about the way he’d treated Astrid and Torin.

It could be said that I was stubborn and petty and didn’t have my priorities straight, but I never said I was a saint.

“Can you do something about this?” Greyson asked Astrid, gesturing at his bare body. His, uh, *crotch area* was relaxed now, but Astrid was still staring at it. Her cheeks were flushed.

“Right,” she said, clearing her throat. “Of course.” She manifested a loincloth for him, which made him growl.

“Stop messing around,” he ordered. “Try again.”

“I just thought it’d be a shame to cover you up when you’re so—”

“Astrid. Clothes. *Right now*,” Greyson demanded, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Blushing even harder, Astrid did her thing again. Moments later, Greyson was back in his tight leather pants and flowing white shirt. He let out a long-suffering sigh. “Better than nothing. Let’s get going.”

The second we started walking, Torin started jabbering. “So how was it underwater?” he asked excitedly. “Did it feel like you were drowning?” He continued rattling off questions while Astrid moved closer to me, waggling her eyebrows.

“So how was it?” she whispered. “With Greyson?”

*Oh, god!*

“Um, I really didn’t mean to put on a show,” I mumbled. Whatever had happened between Greyson and me would stay in the river.

“You know—” With a frown, Astrid stopped talking. “Hey, what’s that?” She pointed at my pocket. “Did you catch a pixie?”

I looked down, realizing that my pocket was glowing. Nervously, I reached in and removed the quartz my grandmother had given me.

*Oh, shit.*

“Stop!” Everyone turned to stare at me, and I raised the glowing quartz. “This is a warning,” I said. “There are Dark Fae nearby.”

**Episode 418**

XAVIER

I glared at Lottie’s palm, planted on my chest. Did she think I was about to be one of her boy toys? Growling, I slapped her hand away. “We made a deal,” I snapped. “Give me the artifact.”

Lottie laughed as I said ‘artifact’ and transformed into an Egyptian mummy. I fought not to flinch back, reminding myself that this wasn’t real. I had to ignore it. I couldn’t let her scare me. I couldn’t let her force me into this nightmare.

“What’s the rush, Xavier?” Lottie said in an alluring tone. “I thought werewolves *loved* to play.” She brushed her mummified finger across my jawline, and I shoved her hand away. Again. If this woman thought I’d get turned on by an actual corpse, she was out of her fucking mind.

“I don’t have the time for this,” I declared. “Honor your side of the deal, or else.”

“Hey!” snapped one of the men Lottie had been sucking on. “Back off!”

I snarled, trying to stay focused as another wave of the drug crashed over me. It made the room vibrate.

“What’s the problem here?” Mikah asked, sauntering over. The air around him was shaking.

I was fucking high as a kite.

“*That’s* the problem.” I pointed at Lottie, sneering. “You’d better fix it, or I will.”

Mikah grabbed my shoulder, squeezing. “Take it easy, man.” He turned to Lottie, keeping his tone cool. “Xavier might be a brute, but he’s not in the wrong here. We did have a deal, Lottie. You give us the artifact and we’ll introduce you to Bucky D.”

Bucky D was a big werewolf drug dealer. I didn’t want to know what would happen if Lottie met him, but it was none of my business anyway.

“Actually, no,” Lottie said, smirking. “That wasn’t the deal. You introduce us to Bucky D first, and *then* you get the artifact.”

“That’s bullshit!” I growled, ready to pounce, but Mikah held me back. “I need the artifact right now!”

Lottie shrugged. “Too bad. I’ve changed my mind. Besides, our agreement wasn’t a *promise*.” Her smile grew menacing. “It’s not binding.”

I felt Mikah tense.

“I want you all to leave,” Lottie said in a bored tone, waving us off. Cracking my neck, I reined in my temper. I wanted to fucking maim her, but I had to exhaust all other possibilities first, because I needed that artifact to get to Cali.

“I’m not going anywhere without the artifact, Lottie,” I said. “And that’s a fucking promise.”

Lottie smirked at me, looking me up and down like I was a snack. It made my stomach clench. One of her men stepped between her and me, his expression menacing.

“And how exactly do you think you’re gonna be getting that artifact?” he asked me.

Lottie’s other man joined the first. “The only thing you and your friends are going to get is *this*.” He raised a knife with a silver blade, just as the drug made my vision blur again.

“Don’t—” I choked out, shaking my head. “Don’t threaten me, or you’re gonna regret it.”

The two men laughed. The bigger one raised a silver-tipped stake and pointed at Mikah. “I’d love to kill them both.”

A new wave of dizziness hit me. It was as if the drug was getting fiercer by the moment, and I hated it. Before I could speak, though, Gabriel strode over, scowling. “What the fuck is going on here?” he demanded.

Alarmed, Mikah looked between me and Gabriel, realizing we were three seconds away from trashing the place, before he looked at Lottie again. “Lottie, come on,” he said, in his most appeasing tone. “I thought we were friends? This was supposed to be a simple deal—what the fuck?”

Shaking my head to try to regain some of my clarity, I stared at the silver-tipped blade that one of Lottie’s men was holding. I shared a look with Gabriel, who had a familiar glint in his eye.

We both knew there was no backing out of this.

We both also knew that, drugs or not, we were pros at stuff like this.

The tension in the air rose as Gabriel straightened to his full height. He was massive, bigger than both of Lottie’s men. “Step back, blood boy,” he told Mikah, cracking his neck.

Mikah’s eyes widened. “Hey, no, take it easy.”

But I’d had fucking *enough*. Who did these Fae think they were? I hadn’t come all this way to be tricked and toyed with. No way. With one last look at Gabriel, I shoved the blade guy back and shifted into my wolf form, feeling the power coursing through me. In an instant, I felt a million times better. In charge.

Unstoppable.

At the same time, Gabriel kicked the guy with the stake and shifted too. We’d both turned into wolves before either of Lottie’s men could recover, and then we attacked in perfect synchronization. I ripped the blade guy’s throat out in seconds and turned to help Gabriel, but he’d already torn off the stake guy’s head.

Easy as pie.

Growling, we both turned to Lottie. Mikah was standing between us, a sheepish expression on his face. “Uh,” he said to Lottie, clearing his throat. “I guess this changes things?”

Silently, Lottie blinked at me. I snarled, taking a step closer to her. Mikah placed a hand on my fur, shaking his head. “We don’t need to go to such extremes.”

I paused. I knew that if I killed this Fae, it would be much harder to get an artifact and get to Cali. Also, the woman looked pretty calm considering she’d just witnessed cold-blooded murder. Who knew what kind of magic she had up her sleeve to defend herself? She was way too unfazed.

Weighing the pros and cons, I decided to shift back.

A moment later, Gabriel did the same.

“So?” Gabriel asked Lottie, smirking. “Don’t you have anything to say to us?”

“I think the balance of power has changed,” Mikah said, gesturing to the bloody corpses.

“Maybe now we can have that artifact,” I added. “Unless I need to add in another ‘please’?”

Looking between the three of us, Lottie’s calm expression turned to utter indifference. She shrugged. “Fine, I guess. But you guys didn’t have to be so dramatic about it. You’ve gotten blood all over my yurt.”

Gabriel shot me a look. Yeah, Fae were even crazier than werewolves.

Turning to a cabinet next to her, Lottie removed a snake fang from one of the shelves. She offered it to me. “Will this do?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “Is it artifact-y enough for you?”

“How am I supposed to know?” I glowered at her. “Fae artifacts aren’t exactly my wheelhouse.”

Lottie grinned, self-satisfied. “Then I guess you’ll have to trust me.”

Gabriel scoffed. “Sounds great.”

“We don’t think that’s likely,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes. Mikah seemed to be suppressing a laugh. “It’s a Drakaina fang, you clueless werewolves,” Lottie said. “You can only find them in the Fae world.”

“What’s a Drakaina?” I asked.

“Big bad reptile monster,” Mikah said. “I don’t think we’d like to meet one.”

“So kinda like a dragon? Dragons are pretty fucking cool,” Gabriel said excitedly. Both Mikah and I ignored him.

“Be careful with the tooth,” Lottie said as she handed it over. “It may still have venom in it.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. If this Fae bitch was trying to kill me, she had another thing coming. “If this is some kind of trick, I’m not going to be happy.”

Lottie smiled, checking me out for what felt like the tenth time tonight. It creeped me the fuck out. “You’re welcome to ry anytime, sweetheart,” she said.

*Ick.*

“Let’s get out of here,” I told Gabriel and Mikah. We backed out of the space quickly and headed outside. I felt much better now that I was back in the forest, breathing in fresh air. The taste of blood in my mouth had subsided, too.

“That was wild, huh?” Gabriel asked Mikah, nudging him. “You having fun?”

“At least hanging out with you assholes hasn’t been boring,” Mikah said snootily.

Gabriel laughed.

“Hate to interrupt your bonding,” I said, “but I wanna head to Haystack Rock before Lottie tries to stop us.” I was about to shift when I heard a loud ringing sound. What the hell?

I glared at Mikah. “What the fuck kind of magic is *that?*”

Mikah arched his eyebrows at me, nodding toward my bag. “Just your cellphone.”

Gabriel cackled as I rolled my eyes. I pulled the cell out of my bag, grunting. It was Joss. What now?

“What do you want?” I snapped into the phone.

“You’d better watch your tone, Xavier,” she snapped back.

I didn’t have time for this.

“Look, Joss, I’m not in the mood. If this isn’t an emergency, you’d better just—”

“Something’s happened,” she said, cutting me off. Her voice had a hint of worry in it. “Colton is missing.”

**Episode 419**

MAYA

I leapt back as a final wave of rock and mud sheeted down, covering the last of the light filtering through the rocks and completely sealing us in. I stared at the now-solid wall of rock in absolute disbelief.

Colton turned to me. “Well, Maya, I think we’re officially fucked.”

He wasn’t wrong.

I shoved past him, striding toward the rocks. “Stop being such a useless dick, Colton,” I snapped, fear coursing through me. “We’re fine. All we have to do is dig ourselves out.” I looked back at him. “You can dig, can’t you?”

He took a step toward me and then stopped, glancing down at his leg. Blood was streaming from the cut in his thigh, where the branch had gouged him. “Yeah, I’m fine, by the way. Thanks for asking. It’s always great to have a friend check in on you.”

Rolling my eyes, I turned back to the wall. All I needed to do was move some rocks. It shouldn’t be that hard. I started pushing the nearest one, but—try as I might—I just couldn’t get it to budge. Not even an inch. I tried a different grip, planted my feet, and pushed with all my might.

Nothing.

I was strong as hell, but these rocks weren’t going anywhere. They weren’t even particularly big rocks individually, but they’d been compressed into a solid wall, so trying to push one was basically like trying to push the entire accumulated mass. The math just wasn’t in my favor.

“Could you maybe help me out, here?” I snapped, glancing over my shoulder. “Nothing wrong with your hands, is there?”

With a heavy sigh, Colton limped over. “You’re wasting your time,” he sang, under his breath.

“On the count of three,” I said, ignoring his comment. “One, two, three.”

We both pushed with everything we had. I knew Colton was trying hard—sweat was beading on his upper lip and his face was turning red—but nothing happened. The rock didn’t move a millimeter. Even the pebbles surrounding it stayed in place.

“*Again*,” I grunted, though my head was starting to pound with the effort.

We tried again, and again the rock didn’t move.

Sweat was starting to pour down my face, and Colton was pale from the pain in his leg.

“One more time,” I said, refusing to give up.

We pushed, my leg and back muscles screaming with the effort, but it was no use.

“Stop,” Colton panted out, sliding down the rock to sit, grasping his leg. “Just stop, Maya. It’s not working.”

Exhausted, I dropped down next to him and tipped my head back against the rock wall.

Beyond the wall of debris, I could hear the storm raging outside. The wind screamed through the trees, and branches groaned. As I listened, I heard a sudden snap, followed by a thud. Then there was a crack of thunder that shook the ground beneath us.

“Looks like we’re stuck here for a while, at least,” Colton said softly, looking into the darkness of the cave ceiling.

“*A while?*” I snapped, glaring at him. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? How do you expect us to get out of here? In case you haven’t noticed, we’re kind of buried alive here.”

“Maya, calm down,” Colton said, not at all helpfully.

I jumped to my feet. “Maybe if we shift we’ll have a better chance of getting through.”  
 Without waiting for a response from him, I shifted and attacked the wall, searching for a weakness. It wasn’t working—I could feel that. The wall didn’t appear to *have* a weakness, but I refused to give up. I kept at it, clawing at the stone until my paws began to bleed, shredded by the jagged stone.

“Maya.” Colton laid a hand on my fur. “Stop. You’re hurting yourself. Just stop. It’s no use.”

I shifted back and hissed in frustration. “*You’re* no use,” I snapped, glaring at him.

He pressed his lips together. “Why don’t we just wait out the storm before we try to move anything?”

“Why?” I demanded.

“Because even if we *could* get out, it’s still terrifying out there. We’d be in the same crappy situation that drove us in here in the first place.” He looked around at the small, damp cave. “At least we’re dry in here.”

I rolled my eyes. “Great,” I muttered.

“And by the time the storm is over, I bet my leg will have healed,” he added.

He was right, but I didn’t want to admit it, so I turned away, edging as far from him as I could, moving across the small cave to the opposite wall.

It was quiet for a long moment.

“So,” Colten said suddenly, breaking the silence. “Just the two of us. All alone.”

I glared over at him. “Don’t even go there, Colton.”

He grinned. “Actually, I wasn’t even thinking about that, Maya. Get your mind out of the gutter. I was just thinking that with the two of us alone, it’s the perfect time for a heart-to-heart. I was wondering about your sister.”

“Colton—”

He ignored me. “Why haven’t I heard you mention her before? What was her name? Robin? Magpie? Bluejay?”

“It’s *Wren*,” I growled. “And she’s none of your fucking business.”

Colton looked at me for a moment, then stood and limped over.

I drew back as he dropped down next to me. “What are you doing?”

“It’s just so we don’t have to shout,” he insisted, settling in.

I glanced sideways at him as he adjusted his hurt leg. He was a wet, bloody mess, and he still looked unbelievably hot. His hair was wet and mussed by the wind, yet still looked like he’d just stepped out of a two-hundred-dollar hair appointment.

I looked away, irritated. No one had a right to look that hot in a cave, and I was pissed. Why did I keep letting myself do this? As much as I hated the sight of him, I kept finding my gaze skimming down the curve of his nose, or watching his lips when he spoke.

“What’s she like?”  
 I was staring at his lips. “What?”

His brows drew together. “Wren. What’s she like?”

I pulled my eyes away from his mouth. “I told you. She’s none of your business.”

Colton sighed. “Whatever, Maya,” he finally said, dropping his head back against the cave wall.

The only sound was the raging storm outside, but I was barely paying attention. All I could think about was the tiny distance between us. I could reach out—I wouldn’t even need to straighten my elbow—and touch him.

Heat started to rise in my cheeks and I shook my head, desperately casting around for a topic of conversation that didn’t involve my sister. “Are you worried about Xavier?”  
 He looked over, surprised. “Why would I be?”

I shrugged. “Running off with that kill-happy mercenary, Gabriel? I’d be worried.”

Colton laughed. “He’s fine. Xavier can take care of himself.”

I nodded and we lapsed into silence. I leaned my head back against the wall, relieved that the conversation seemed to be dying. I closed my eyes, letting the cool surface of the stone cool my head, which felt hot and very, *very* confused.

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When I opened my eyes again, there was something warm against my shoulder. I looked down and found Colton snuggled against me.

A jolt of irritation surged through me, and I shoved him away.

He yelped as he rubbed his elbow. “What the hell was that for?” he asked angrily, looking up.

“I’m not your goddamn pillow,” I snarled. I got to my feet, listening. “Seems like the storm’s dying out.”

We could still hear the thrum of steady rain, but the wind was no longer howling and there were only occasional—and distant—rumbles of thunder.

Colton nodded. “It sounds like it’s moving away.” Then he grinned. “But what’s the rush?”

“Stop acting like you’re on some kind of vacation, man.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you planned this whole thing. But frankly, you’re not smart enough to pull off something like this.”

This seemed to finally accomplish what I’d been trying to do: it pissed Colton off. “What the hell, Maya?” he snapped. “You honestly think I would have *planned* to get stuck with you?”

I tried to keep my eyes on his face and not let them travel downward to his very naked, very ripped body. I forced my gaze to stay above his chest—his tan, perfectly chiseled chest. “Please,” I said, trying to focus. “You’ve been trying to stick it to me since the day we met.”

Colton got to his feet, which made it significantly harder not to look at him. He took a step toward me, his eyes burning. “You want this, Maya,” he said, his tone low. “Why don’t we just get it over with?”

My heart was pounding, but I put a hand on his chest. I could feel the beat of his heart beneath my hand. “One more step and I swear I’ll rip your throat out.”

Colton scanned my eyes, smirking. “You have the horniest horny-eyes I’ve ever seen, Maya.”

My face flushed, hot as lava. It was partly from embarrassment, partly from fury. I was taking a step toward him, ready to tell him where to go, when there was a clap of thunder just overhead. Lightning flashed through the miniscule crevices in the walls, lighting up the dim cave.

Colton’s eyes were on mine, and I watched them go big in the sudden light. He reached for me, his hand moving toward my waist. I could sense it rather than feel it, so I knew when it stopped, inches from my body. It was like he was waiting for permission. I looked down at his hand, frozen in place. I wanted him to touch me. I wanted him to touch all of me.

I looked back up into his eyes. “Touch me and I will kill you.”

**Episode 420**

We all looked around nervously, eyes on the trees surrounding us. Everything was quiet, but the light from the quartz clutched in my hand continued to grow more intense. There were Dark Fae around somewhere. I squinted against the brightness and looked away, searching for any sign of movement in the forest.

“There,” I breathed, pointing to a whisper of movement just beyond a thicket of pine trees. “Right there.”

Greyson put his arm around me protectively. My heart was thumping hard, and the weight of his arm calmed me a little. It felt good just knowing he was there beside me.

Torin and Astrid stepped closer and the four of us formed a circle, our backs to each other, facing the trees surrounding us and tensed for whatever came next.

Then, from straight above us, there was a sound like the blast of a horn. We all looked up into the sky, baffled.

“What the hell was that?” Torin muttered, looking around.

As though in answer, at least a dozen people dropped down from the trees. As they stood, I realized they were tall, powerfully built women, all with long, dark hair and stern faces. They wore what looked like armor, fashioned out of thick leather—breastplates and pieced skirts that allowed them to move freely—and every single one of them was holding a bow. And each of those bows was nocked with an arrow and aimed straight at us.

Next to me, I felt Greyson stiffen, the way he always did just before he shifted. Him being so on edge made me feel even more anxious. My mind was whirling, trying to assess the danger, but my thoughts were interrupted.

“Welcome to Rosver Forest, newcomers,” said a low, musical voice.

We all looked over as another woman dropped down from an aspen close to us. When she rose to her full height, I could see that she, like her companions, was tall and statuesque, with dark hair that shone like mahogany. She had a small, mischievous smile on her face as she looked us over, and—this was hard to miss—a bow in her hand and a quiver of arrows slung across her broad back.

“Who are you?” I asked, trying to sound braver than I felt. “What do you want?”

The woman scanned me, then the group. But her eyes stopped moving when she reached Greyson and her brows pulled down in confusion. “What’s with the pirate?” She looked around at her sisters. “We’re nowhere near the ocean.”

Greyson growled deep in his throat, and I felt it more than heard it.

“*Chill out*,” I hissed. We needed to assess the danger of this situation before anyone did anything rash.

The woman took a step toward us. “I am Nybor of Rosver.”

She said it with so much confidence it was clear she expected us to know who she was. I hazarded a glance at Torin and Astrid, but if I’d been hoping they’d be able to fill me in, I was doomed to disappointment. They looked just as confused as I was.

They also looked worried.

*That* made me uneasy.

“So,” Nybor said, strolling around the four of us. “What do you have to offer?”

“What?” I asked.

“Not that it really matters what you *offer*,” she continued, ignoring me, “because we’re going to take whatever we want anyway.”

“Oh,” I said, realization dawning. “So you’re just a bunch of thieves. Is that it?”

I was mad. Furious, really. Why the hell was this journey so damn *hard?* All I wanted was *one dumb flower!* And it was for a good and worthy purpose. In stories, that was the kind of crap that usually protected people. So why the hell did I keep running into trouble?

Nybor looked slightly offended. “We’re not *thieves*,” she scoffed. She adopted a lofty expression. “Some think of us as heroes. We take from the haves and give to the have-nots.”

That rang a bell and I looked around at the arrows pointed at us. “Oh,” I said, “I get it. You’re like Robin Hood!”

Nybor glanced at her companions, a look of uncertainty passing across her face for the first time.

“You know, Disney! The hot fox?”

Nybor glared at me. “What is this *Robin Hood?* And what is a *Disney?*”

“Well, those are really two different questions,” I said, taking a step forward. “The legend of Robin Hood obviously pre-dates the Disney movie, but—and this might be an unpopular opinion—that movie really is the story’s best—”

“Cali, stop,” Greyson sighed, seizing my arm and pulling me back. He looked up at

Nybor. “What do you want?”

“What have you got?” Nybor asked, turning to him with a smirk.

“Nothing,” I said. I shook my head. “I hate to disappoint, but we don’t have anything.”

Nybor looked at me for a moment, then waved her hand. Her band of Merry Women took a step forward, tightening their circle around us. “We’ll be the judges of that.”

She began pacing around us again, scanning us all from head to foot.

“You don’t dress like have-nots.” She looked at Greyson. “Leather pants.” Her eyes ranged to Torin. “Satchels. You’re living the dream, aren’t you?”

I groaned. “This isn’t a dream. It’s a fucking nightmare.”

Nybor’s face froze. She took a step toward me, her face inches from mine. “You have no idea what a nightmare is, girl, until you have to give up your hard-earned wages to support someone else’s vanity war. The government taxes us to death to fund their war. They expect us to *pay* for the privilege of a bloody death on an unnamed battlefield, or to stay home and watch our children starve to death. *That*,” she breathed, her wild eyes bright, “is a fucking nightmare.”

“I-I’m sorry,” I stammered, terrified of the look in her eye.

She looked at me for a moment longer, then stepped briskly away. “But we’re going to change all that.”

Now that she was out of my face and I had a chance to think about what she’d said, it made a lot of sense. I’d never learned about a war that didn’t feel senseless to some degree, but this one—between the Dark and the Light Fae—felt especially so. No one even knew how it had begun, or why they were still fighting.   
 “Listen,” I said slowly. “I get what you’re saying. It sounds horrible. But we’re not even from here—”

“Yeah, that much is obvious.” Nybor laughed, turning back to me. She gave me an assessing look. “You seem smart. You must be the leader. So, who are you? And where do you come from?”

I opened my mouth to answer, then paused, thinking quick. How much should I tell her? Could she be useful?

Nybor rolled her eyes. “Out with it, girl. I haven’t got all day.”

“I’m Cali,” I started. “Cali of… Duluth.”

“Where is Duluth?” Nybor asked, the word sounding foreign in her mouth.

“Minnesota,” I said quickly. “The Midwest. In the United States.”

Nybor raised her eyebrows. “That’s a mouthful. But one thing is obvious, Cali of Duluth. You’re from the human world.” Her eyes went to Torin, Astrid, and Greyson. “Not sure about these three, though. Tell me, where did you get that?” she asked, turning back to me and pointing at the pendant around my neck.

Reflexively, I covered it with my hand. “It’s nothing. Just something I picked up in a bargain bin at Target.” Nybor looked flummoxed by my answer, like I’d just told her the necklace was from the moon. “It’s not worth anything.”

Nybor eyed me keenly as I slipped the pendant beneath my shirt. “You’re awfully protective of something you claim is worthless, Cali of Duluth.”

“Listen,” I said shortly, beginning to feel irritated, “we’re looking for something and kind of in a time crunch and we don’t really have time for this. We don’t have anything of value so why don’t you just *leave us alone*?”

I’d gone too far. I knew it immediately. There was a gasp from one of the women surrounding us, and Nybor’s eyes narrowed.

“Do you think I’m a *fool?*” she asked coldly, moving forward. “Do you think I’m so foolish that I don’t recognize precious Fae metal when I see it, Cali of Duluth?”

“I—”

“*Give it to me!*” Nybor screamed, and, before I could move a muscle to react, she reached forward and snatched the pendant from around my neck.

I screamed as the chain bit into my skin and then broke. “Give that—”

Nybor raised her hand and there was an explosion of thick blue smoke that obscured the clearing in an instant. There was a flurry of movement beneath it.

“*Give it back!*” I roared, stepping forward with my arms outstretched, reaching for the thief. The smoke was thick and choking, and I coughed as I walked through it.

But a moment later the smoke cleared, revealing an empty forest.

**Episode 421**

XAVIER

The trees flashed by like a blur as I raced through the forest, Gabriel and Mikah right behind me. All I could think about was Colton. Joss hadn’t given much detail, just that Maya and Colton had been separated from the pack during a storm.

I knew Colton could look after himself—god knew I’d seen him get out of situations that should have killed him more times than I could count—but my heart still pounded when I thought about him being missing. I hoped he and Maya were together. Those two were constantly at each other’s throats, but they’d look out for each other when they had to.

But there was something else. A thought that kept popping up in the back of my mind, and I just couldn’t ignore how nervous it made me feel.

*Silas.*

My father had crawled out of the woodwork, and now Colton had disappeared. Was that a coincidence? Were they connected? Could Silas have something to do with Colton’s disappearance? The thought of it made my blood boil.

I didn’t know the answer, but the question made me speed up. I heard Gabriel growling behind me. I was going too fast and he was pissed about it, struggling to keep up, but I didn’t care.

We were getting closer to the old lodge where the Pack Council always met, and I slowed my pace. I didn’t want to, but the woods were a mess and I couldn’t run full tilt. Splintered trees lay everywhere, making the path nearly impossible to use. The underbrush was beaten down, crushed like it always was after hail. There was nothing now except light rain and the very distant rumble of thunder, but the storm that had passed through must have been a big one. Had he been caught in it?

As we emerged into the clearing, I looked at the old lodge. Or rather, what was left of it.

The building had been rickety to begin with, but now it looked like nothing more than a pile of splintered timber. Debris was everywhere—broken tiles from the roof, tree branches, razor sharp planks from the lodge… The place looked like a fucking war zone.

It was impossible to move quickly through the chaos, so I shifted back to human and surveyed the damage.

Gabriel and Mikah stopped next to me.

“What the hell happened here?” Gabriel said, his voice hushed as he looked around.

I shook my head. “The storm, I guess.” And it might have been, but I couldn’t help but wonder if Silas had a hand in this, too. The destruction of the lodge reminded me of Big Mac’s house.

There was movement within the lodge and, senses on high alert, I walked over. I peered through the doorway and saw a knot of councilmembers slowly picking their way through the debris, speaking in low voices.

I walked toward them, curiously eyeing what looked like the storm-ravaged remains of a guillotine, and approached an old man who was surveying the remains of the lodge with a grave look on his weathered face. “Hello?”

The man looked up at me and, to my surprise, a spark of recognition glowed in his eyes. “Good god. You must be Xavier.”

“What?” I asked, shocked.

“Xavier, isn’t it? Silas’s son?”

I bristled. Not exactly what I wanted to be known for. “Who are you?”

“I’m Cesaries—I lead the Pack Council. You’ll have to excuse my forwardness. I just see the resemblance.”

“Listen,” I snapped. Did he have to keep mentioning my father? “I don’t really have time to talk about that old bastard, okay?”

Cesaries shook his head darkly. “I don’t blame you for that. Silas is a very dangerous man. I always hoped his sons would realize that and choose a different path.” He peered at me, his eyes sharp and probing. It was like being examined by a bald eagle.

“I’m nothing like my dad,” I growled.

*But Greyson is.*

The thought flashed unbidden across my brain.

“I’m heading out,” I said, moving to pass the old man.

He looked past me and, when his expression darkened, I turned to see what he was looking at. Gabriel and Mikah had just walked into the ruined lodge.

“Why did you bring a vampire here?” Cesaries demanded, turning to me.

“I didn’t bring him,” I said, glaring back at Mikah. “He came on his own.” I was turning to walk toward them—and away from the annoying presence of Cesaries—when Jay appeared in the door.

“Hey,” I said, hurrying over. “Heard anything from Colton?”

Jay shook his head. “No, man. We’ve been looking. We doubled back once we realized we’d lost him and Maya.”

*Shit*. I looked the lodge over, then the destruction outside. Had Colton and Maya simply been separated from the rest of the pack by the storm, or was something else going on? Was this a trap, engineered by Silas and Greyson? Could Joss be in on it?

My mind spun as I considered the possibilities. Could this be a way to split up the pack and make us all more vulnerable?

I turned to Jay. “Tell me again what happened.”

“What’s there to tell?” Jay asked, looking confused. “Colton and Maya were bringing up the rear as we were running, and we lost track of them in the storm.”

“Are you *sure* they’re missing?” I demanded.

Jay was baffled. “Of course they are. They never made it back to the pack house. What are you even asking? I was there, man. That storm was insane. One of the worst I’ve ever seen. Wind, hail, thunder, lightning—it was raining in sheets and so fucking dark I could hardly see my hand in front of my face. It’s amazing the rest of us made it back.”

Gabriel and Mikah had walked out of the lodge and were looking out at the woods. I walked to stand with them. The woods looked quiet now, but the storm had left an inescapable path of destruction.

Colton was somewhere in those woods—at least I hoped to god he was—and I had to find him. I’d just taken a step toward the trees when I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I turned around to see Cesaries, staring at me from the doorway of the ruined lodge. His beady eyes were trained on me, like he was trying to see into my soul, but I turned my back.

Fuck him.

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As we walked through the woods, I breathed deeply, searching for Colton’s scent. But it was impossible; even if Colton *had* been here, I’d never know. The rain had washed everything away.

“Any footprints?” Gabriel asked, coming to stand next to me.

I shook my head, toeing the muddy ground with my boot. “Between the rain and the hail, the trail’s just mush.”

We moved slowly through the woods, fanning out to cover as much ground as we could. But without a scent or footprints, there wasn’t much to go on. We knew the general direction Colton and Maya would have traveled, but they’d been in their wolf forms, which meant they wouldn’t have been confined to the trail.

My eyes were open, and every other sense was on high alert. If this was some kind of trap set by Silas, I needed to be able to spot it before I fell into it. I needed to be extra careful.

Mikah stopped just ahead of me and looked around thoughtfully. “The storm was pretty bad, right?” he asked, looking over at Jay.

Jay nodded, rubbing the back of his neck.

“So maybe they ran for cover,” Mikah said, peering through the trees. “That’s what I would have done. Is there some kind of shelter around here? An old cabin or a cave or something?”

Jay shot a look at me and, reluctantly, I nodded. I hated to admit it, but the bloodsucker was making sense. “I’m not that familiar with this area—I haven’t been here in a long time. But there might be something. Maybe an old hunting cabin?”

We all looked around, searching for some kind of structure.

“Up there.” I said, pointing up ahead. There was a ridge with some likely-looking rock formations.

Mikah nodded. “Let’s give it a try.’

We made our way through the trees toward the mountain ridge. The granite walls of the cliffs were high and solid. There was no cave where two people could be hiding. There looked like there might have been an opening in the rock at some point, but a rock fall had sealed it up.

I sighed, disappointed. I wanted to find Colton, and I’d thought Mikah might have been onto something, but he wasn’t. We were back at the beginning. “Let’s go, this isn’t it,” I said heavily.

But just as I turned to leave, I heard a long, loud scream from the other side of the rock wall.

“That’s him,” I said, spinning around. “Colton!”

**Episode 422**

I scrabbled at my neck, desperately searching for my pendant even though I knew it was gone. My heart pounding, I coughed, trying to clear the blue smoke from my lungs. “Oh my god,” I gasped out, panicking. “Oh my god. She stole it. That Robin Hood *bitch* stole my pendant. I *need* it!”

Torin and Astrid exchanged a look.

“That necklace?” Astrid asked. “I thought you said it was worthless. You basically said it was a piece of junk.”

“And how’d you get it at target practice?” Torin asked, confused.

“Haven’t you guys heard of lying?! It wasn’t a piece of junk,” I snapped. “I lied because I didn’t want that Wonder Woman thief to take it. It’s important to me and I need it back!”

“Cali—”

“You don’t understand!” I snapped, on the verge of tears. “It was my mother’s pendant. It’s the only thing I have of hers.”

“Oh no.” Astrid’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, Cali, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, sorry, Cali,” Torin said, looking grave.

They both looked so sad it made the tears in my eyes begin to fall, and I buried my face in my hands. I felt Greyson’s arms around me, drawing me into him.

“It’s okay, Cali,” he murmured, stroking my back. Feeling his arms around me just made me cry harder. I just felt so safe with him so close. “We’ll get it back.”

I raised my wet face and looked around at the empty forest. “How?” I asked. “How will we get it back? How can we even find them? They didn’t leave a map, Greyson. They just disappeared. They could be anywhere in this fucking place.”

His eyes were steady on mine. “Then we’ll look everywhere.”

I dropped my chin, but he put a finger beneath it and raised it so my eyes met his.

“You can do this, Cali. I know you can.”

I wasn’t so sure. But his eyes were so steady and so determined, I felt my own confidence grow.

“Yeah,” I said, taking a deep breath and swiping the tears from my cheeks with the back of my hand. “You’re right. We’ll find them. Because that’s *my* necklace, and I’m not going to let some wannabe Robin Hood take it from me.”

“Seriously,” Astrid asked, looking curious, “who *is* Robin Hood?”

“Let’s do it,” Torin said in a firm tone. “If I had something that precious from my family and someone took it from me, I’d do anything to get it back.” He looked at Astrid. “You in?”

“Of course,” she said, nodding.

I was really touched they were all willing to help me find the pendant, and glad that we were all on the same page. But, as we looked around the forest, I got the feeling we all had the same sinking thought.

“But where the hell do we start?” Torin whispered.

There was nothing around us but trees. Aspens and pines that shook prettily in the breeze, but provided no clues about where the thieves had gone. And there were no sounds other than the call of birds and the gentle rush of the river.

“I wish I had some kind of Fae power that would help me right now,” I said, looking around fruitlessly.

“Me too,” muttered Astrid. “I mean, we have some, but glamour and healing aren’t going to do us much good right now.”

She glanced at Greyson, like she was wondering what he could do, then looked away. Maybe she’d decided that being hot wasn’t going to be so helpful, either.

But a thought struck me and I spun around, grabbing Greyson by the ruffles of his pirate shirt. “*You!*”

“Me what?” he asked, looking surprised.

“You can *track* them!” I exclaimed, like I’d just cured cancer. “You have a super sense of smell, right? You can track the thieves with your werewolf nose!”

Greyson looked around, then shrugged. “I can try.” And then he shifted.

“For the love of—good thing we’re not wasting *real* clothes on you,” Astrid said loudly. “Ever hear about a little something called finite resources, Greyson?”

Greyson’s silver fur shone bright in the sun and the muscles of his wolf moved beneath it, quiet and deadly strong. He raised his long nose and sniffed the air. Then, without hesitation, he moved forward.

Torin darted a glance at me. “Did he smell something? Should we be following him? What’s going on right now?”

I wasn’t totally sure, but I watched as Greyson paced toward the trees.

*I picked up Nybor’s scent. Stay close and be careful.*

“Let’s follow him,” I said.

The three of us followed Greyson into the trees, hurrying to keep up with his long strides. He would lope along for a while, then pause, sniff the ground, sniff the air, and correct his direction through the trees.

*Thank you, Greyson. Thank you for believing in me. And helping… with everything*, I thought, tears springing to my eyes as I watched his powerful body moving through the trees ahead of me.

I didn’t receive a message back from him, but I was filled with a sense of comforting warmth, and I was sure he’d sent it. I watched as he paced through the underbrush, filled with a sense of gratitude that he was here. He’d given up a lot to be with me. And, as the warmth he’d given me dissipated, I began to think about the rest of the pack. And to wonder how they were going to react when we got back.

Specifically, how *Joss* was going to react. I mean, she’d flipped out when she caught him in my room. Our return from this little road trip probably wasn’t going to be met with a welcome-home party.

Greyson pawed at the ground in front of an aspen. I wondered if he’d been thinking about Joss. Did he regret choosing Joss as his Luna? Did he regret not choosing me?

We followed Greyson for a long time, trying to move quietly and quickly, stepping over fallen trees and hopping across streams. When Greyson finally slowed to a stop, I lifted my nose into the air and sniffed, just like Greyson had been doing.

There was a smell of burning wood, like a campfire.

Torin and Astrid were both curiously sniffing the air, too.

“Something’s on fire,” Torin said, looking around.

I stepped up to Greyson and put a hand on his back, his fur down-soft beneath my hand. But he didn’t look back at me. All his attention was focused ahead of us, and I followed his gaze.

Through the trees I could see a column of smoke rising into the bright, blue sky. Now that we’d stopped crashing through the dense underbrush, I could hear other sounds too. There was music—something played on a stringed instrument that sounded a bit like a guitar. There was laughter, too. The sounds of people talking and calling out.

“Wait, are the thieves actually that dumb?” I asked, puzzled.

“What do you mean?” Astrid asked. “How are they dumb?”  
 I pointed to where the smoke was billowing into the sky. “Are you kidding me? It’s like they’re advertising. *Nybor and her Merry Women right here! Visitors welcome!*”

Torin looked into the trees. “Well, they’re here. *We’re* here. Should we get closer, or are we waiting for an invitation?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “Let’s go. But we need to be careful.” I glanced at Greyson and saw that the fur at the nape of his neck was standing on end. “Super careful.”

We moved cautiously through the trees, Greyson still leading the way. For all his bulk, he was silent as he stepped through the brittle branches and dried leaves of the underbrush. Torin and Astrid and I tended to be a lot louder, so we had to move more slowly.

The trees thinned out as we got closer, and soon we could see the party. The thieves were gathered around a roaring fire, over which someone was roasting a pig. It looked like the Merry Women were taking turns turning the spit, and everyone had a tankard in hand. There was a barrel of whatever they were drinking, and the women kept walking over to top off.

Anger bubbled up inside me. It was infuriating to see those bastard thieves standing around, eating and drinking and laughing like they’d done nothing wrong.

“So,” Astrid said quietly, crouching next to me. “What’s the plan here, Cali?”

“Yeah,” Torin said, coming to join us. “Presumably, I don’t have to remind you that Nybor and the rest of those ladies have some serious weaponry. They had those bows, but I have a feeling they’re just the beginning of their armory.”

“And they kind of outnumber us,” Astrid added.

“By a lot,” Torin said. He glanced at Greyson. “Even taking the werewolf into account.”

I stared into the clearing where Nybor and her Merry Women had started to dance, thinking hard.

“I have an idea,” I said.

**Episode 423**

MAYA

Colton’s hand twitched, just a little, but I grabbed it tight. “I mean it,” I said. “I will kill you. Your body will rot here for all eternity.”

Colton smirked. “Yours too, Maya.”

I glared.

His smirk grew. “You’re always threatening to kill me. Is that a thing with you?” He smiled wider. “I’ll bet you say that to all your mates.”

A growl rumbled through my throat. “Why, for the love of god, did I have to be mated to *you* of all people?” I raged.

He shrugged. “Must be destiny.”

He was smiling, joking around like he was having a good time in here, and it made me crazy with rage. I pushed his hand away so hard he stumbled from the force. “I swear to god, Colton, you take one step closer and I’ll rip your goddamn throat out and use your bones to dig my way out of here.”

He narrowed his eyes, looking—for the first time—slightly annoyed. “I don’t know why you’re acting like this is my fucking fault, Maya. I didn’t engineer this situation. It’s not like I conjured up that storm.”

“Yeah, but you’re not exactly complaining about it, are you?” I snapped.

“Oh, yeah,” he scoffed, “because this was my fucking dream. To be trapped by a rockslide in a damp cave with a pain in the ass like you!”

“*You’re* the pain in the ass,” I snarled, spinning away from him. I couldn’t look at him anymore. The way his eyes burned when he got mad was… It was too much. I couldn’t keep up my own anger when I looked at them. They were too distracting. It made me want to do things to him. I’d rather have stared at the blank stone wall. At least looking at the spreading dampness kept my head clear.

He was quiet for a moment, but when he spoke again his voice had regained its teasing quality. “Remember the last time we were stuck in a cave together?”

“Shut up,” I snapped.

But he didn’t listen. Big surprise. “You were so worried about me when you thought I was hurt. I’d never seen you like that before.”

I *had* been worried—scared out of my mind, actually—but the last thing I was going to do was admit that to him. “You probably faked that injury to trick me into caring about you.”

“Well,” he said, and I could practically hear the smirk in his voice, “did it work?”

I turned back to face him, rolling my eyes. “It did not.”

He looked at me for a moment, his grin widening. “Come on,” he said. “You can admit it to me, Maya—you want me, don’t you?”

“I’d rather take a bullet to the head.”

He held up and arm and flexed, the defined musculature of his bicep pulling away from the bone and sinew. I stared at it, fascinated. You know, by the biomechanics.

“Look at your face,” he said, laughing. “You can’t resist these guns.”

“I’ve had enough of your shit,” I said. And before he could react, I lunged at him and shoved him back, slamming him into the rock wall.

He was surprised for a moment, then he pushed back, grinning. He reached for me, trying to take me in his arms, trying to control me. I fought and had the upper hand for a moment, but Colton was strong. And determined. I fought hard, but he pulled me close.

So close. Close enough to kiss.

Or bite. Either option felt possible.

Like he knew what was running through my mind, he smiled at me. A smile that made my damn heart race. “Fuck you,” I muttered, struggling to free my arms from his grip.

This only made him smile wider, and he tightened his grip. “Is this what you want, Maya?” he asked, panting with the effort of fighting me. “Total control?”

“Yes,” I snarled.

“Over what?” he asked. “Over me? Over life? You can’t control it all.”

*Yes*. The answer to those questions was yes, too. I wanted control over it all. And over myself. But his eyes, his smile, his hair, his body… Everything about him made me feel like I didn’t have control over myself, and the thought enraged me. Without another thought, I braced my feet and pushed as hard as I could. The force of it slammed Colton to the ground, and I jumped on top of him, straddling his hips.

I was angry enough to bite, to hurt, to rip his fucking throat out—but something held me back. I was on top of him, both of us panting. We were both naked, skin to skin, and I could feel his chest heaving against my breasts. My eyes flicked down to his lips, which were inches from mine.

When my eyes moved back up to meet his, his gaze was no longer mocking. He looked at me, something dark and hungry burning in his eyes.

“I don’t mind this,” he said, his voice a low rasp.

Somewhere in the distance there was a rumble of thunder, culminating in a loud crash. There was an electric charge in the air and, before I could even think, I pressed my lips against his. The second our lips met, an electric jolt surged through me.

I pulled back, gasping.

“Did you feel that?” Colton asked.

I nodded, slowly.

“Are we really doing this?” he asked.

I nodded again, though it felt slightly like my body had stopped taking cues from my brain. I was just tired of fighting it, this pull I felt toward him. I was tired of fighting myself. But I hated him, hated the way he was always pushing my buttons, hated the way he knocked on every closed door I had. I hated the way that smirk on his face made me want to devour him whole.

So, when I leaned down to kiss him, there was nothing gentle about it.

He was ready for me, giving as good as he got. His tongue pushed through my lips, sliding against my tongue, claiming me. I bit down on his lower lip hard enough to taste blood and felt him suck in a breath—whether from pain or pleasure, I didn’t know.

His hands slid around my waist and gripped, pulling me harder down onto him, like he wanted to feel my weight against him. I could feel him growing hard beneath me and I pulled away from his mouth and dropped to his neck, my tongue finding the hollow of his throat.

“*Fuck*,” he said slowly, and his hands moved to curve around my ass. “God, Maya, what else can your tongue do?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I snapped, covering his mouth with mine again, just to keep him from talking.

He rolled me over with a muffled laugh, bracing his hands on the other side of me. “I absolutely would,” he murmured against my lips. He moved his kisses to my ear, then down my throat. I liked the feel of my breasts against his chest, and was about to say so, but then he moved his mouth to my nipple and I quickly shut up. He tongued over the tiny bud, then let his teeth graze across it.

“Oh god,” I panted, but Colton laughed.

“Oh, Maya, I’m just getting started.”

As he moved to the other side, his finger ran down the seam of my sex. He moaned. “God, you’re so wet.”

I was too turned on to care that he smiled at this. I glanced down at his length, rock-hard against my hip. “I’m not the only one.”

“No you’re not,” he said, grinning.

I was distracted enough by his smile that when his fingers entered me, I wasn’t expecting it and I jumped.

He paused, a flicker of uncertainty passing over his face. “You okay?”

I pushed myself down, driving his hand deeper into me. “Just fuck me already.”

He chuckled and began to move his fingers in slow, teasing circles. I closed my eyes with a sigh.

“Open ‘em,” he said, his voice husky. “I want to see your eyes, Maya. I want to see where you go when I touch you like this.”

Under any other circumstance, there was no way I’d take an order from Colton. But when he was touching me like that, I was willing to make a one-time exception. I looked into his eyes and he stared back, biting his lip when I moaned with pleasure.

“You keep doing that and I’m going to come without you ever touching me,” he said, stroking his finger right over my clit.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I said, though it was getting difficult to string words together. I tightened my grip on the curve of his ass, yanking him against me. It felt amazing, but it wasn’t enough. “I want more,” I panted out. “I want you in me, Colton.”

Color rushed into his face at this, and his cock throbbed against me. The feel of it was almost too much and, using all my strength, I rolled us over and straddled him again. I lifted my hips slightly, and he grabbed them and yanked me back down as hard as he could, filling me so completely I cried out from the pleasure of it.

“Like that?” he asked, panting as he held me close.

I nodded, too far gone to speak. This was what it was like to be completely owned by someone. To be completely in someone else’s power. It was wild and heady and fucking terrifying.

I rode him hard and he kept his hands on my hips, maintaining our rhythm. I was teetering right on the edge of climax when he reached up and roughly grabbed my breasts, his thumbs rasping over my nipples. It was too much. Too good.

“You’re fucking mine, Maya,” he grunted. “Mine.” He bucked his hips, plunging deeper into me, and I couldn’t do anything but nod.

I’d fought against this for so long, but giving into it felt so fucking good. The waves of ecstasy began small, deep in my belly, building into a crescendo that shattered me, reduced me to a being more feral than my wolf. I was panting and screaming and clawing at Colton’s chest as I tumbled in the unrelenting surf of my climax.

Beneath me, Colton was moving faster, panting my name. Then his muscles quivered and he pulsed into me, yelling as he reached the peak.

**Episode 424**

XAVIER

The scream rattled my bones and I paused for a moment, listening hard, waiting to hear it again. But nothing came. I dove at the rock, scrambling, desperate to move it. Was Colton trapped under the rock? Was he hurt?

Gabriel and Mikah appeared next to me and started to shift the rock. We had to work carefully. If we shifted the wrong stone, the whole lot would come crashing down—on us, or on him.

“*Colton!*” I called, my voice hoarse. “Colton! If you can hear me, say something!” I paused, waiting. “Colton!”

There was no response.

I looked up at the wall of fallen rock. If he was trapped under this, then he was crushed. Dead. But I’d heard him. I knew I had. He was alive. I just had to get to him.

“Faster,” I barked at Gabriel and Mikah, who silently obeyed. “*Colton!*” My voice was raspy and my fingers were starting to bleed as I pulled at the sharp rock. But I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. I had to find Colton. He was my brother. I couldn’t even imagine losing him.

Who would that leave me with? Greyson. Silas.

Fuck that.

“Did you hear that?” Mikah asked, pausing and looking around.

“What?” I asked.

“Listen,” he said, leaning closer to the rock wall. “Did you hear it?”

“I didn’t hear shit,” I snapped.

“Hang on,” Gabriel said, standing straight. “I think I heard it, too.”

“Heard what?”

Gabriel shook his head, furrowing his eyebrows. “It sounded like someone said—” He glanced at Mikah.

Mikah nodded. “Yeah, like someone said, *get the fuck off me*.”

“What?” I asked, shocked.

“That’s what I heard,” Mikah said.

“Me too.” Gabriel nodded. “Listen.”

This time, I heard it, too. There, in the silence of the forest, beyond the patter of gentle rain on the leaves, there was laughter.

I stared at the rock wall, astonished. “Did I just hear someone fucking *giggle?*”

“I heard it, too,” Gabriel said.

“It sounded like Colton, but how is that possible?” I asked. “How could he be *laughing* under all this rubble?”

As one, Gabriel and Mikah shrugged.

With a frustrated huff, I turned back to the rocks. “Colton? Colton! Are you in there?”

There was a pause, and my heart beat hard. Then…

“Yeah! I’m in here. About time you showed up!”

I turned to Gabriel and Mikah. “He must be on the other side of the rock fall. He must have made it into a cave or something just before it all fell. He sounds okay.”

“He sounds fine,” Gabriel said, nodding. “Let’s just get to him.”

“Colton, we’re coming, but we have to move a lot of this rock. Hang on, okay?”

To my surprise, Colton laughed again. “Take your time!”

Then I heard another voice. And, unless I was mistaken, it was Maya’s. “Fuck off.”

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It took a long time, but we managed to clear the smallest bits of debris. With that gone, the real source of the problem made itself clear: there was a giant, mountain-sized boulder blocking the mouth of the cave. There were smaller rocks wedged in on all sides, but we couldn’t even get to them without moving the boulder, which was approximately the size of a small cottage.

I put my shoulder to it and pushed, but it didn’t give—not even a little bit.

“Come on, man,” Gabriel said, a whisper of his smirk on his face. “I know you’re strong, but you’re not moving that thing without a crane.”

“I don’t have time for that,” I snarled. “I have to move it, Gabriel. It’s the only way to get to my brother. How about the peanut gallery gets over here and helps me?”

Gabriel shot a look at Mikah, but he only shrugged and stepped forward.

“Just tell me what you want me to do,” he said.

“We need to create some counter-pressure. The way the boulder’s shaped, I think we can kind of pry it out. If I pull from this side and you two push from that side, I think we can get it moving.”

“Great,” Mikah said wryly. “I love team projects.”

Gabriel and Mikah pushed and I pulled with all my might. Finally, as the sweat dripped from our foreheads, the rock shifted.

Slightly.

I huffed, letting go. “We need more leverage. This isn’t going to work without a fulcrum.” I looked around the woods, then zeroed in on a downed tree about fifty yards away. “That’ll work,” I muttered.

I picked up the tree like it was a fallen leaf and carried it back to the cave. I wedged the sharp, broken end of it between the wall and the rock, shoving it in as far as I could manage.

“One! Two! Three!” I shouted at Gabriel and Mikah, and they pushed with all their strength. I pushed the tree, driving every bit of force I had against the damp wood.

The tree began to snap almost immediately.

“Keep pulling!” I yelled at Gabriel an Mikah. “Keep going.”

The sound of the wood giving way sounded like the report of a gun as it echoed through the quiet woods.

Then, with an ear-splitting crunch, the tree gave way and snapped in half.

“Fucking hell!” I yelled, trying to get my feet under me as I stumbled forward, propelled by the sudden change of force.

“Xavier!” Gabriel shouted.

I spun around, furious, and found him pointing at the rock.

The tree lay broken on the ground, but, above that, the rock had moved. Not much, but enough to reveal a slim opening into the cave beyond.

I was the first one through, and looked around the dim gloom of the cave.

When my eyes finally adjusted, quite a scene met my eyes: Colton and Maya were both there, both looking whole and unhurt, though Colton had some dried blood on his leg. But they were sitting on opposites sides of the cave, as far away from each other as it was possible to be in the small space. Colton looked amused, but Maya was determinedly not looking at anyone. She was sitting with her legs crossed and her arms across her chest, covering her breasts.

I stared between the two of them, confused. Since when was Maya embarrassed about being seen naked?

Then I noticed the tension in the musty air, as thick as humidity—and realization dawned. “Are you kidding me?” I asked Colton, raising my eyebrows. “You two finally decide to hook up, and you do it in here? Really?”

Maya swiveled to look at me, her glare poisonous. If looks could kill, I’d have been a fucking goner. Like, a bloody, dismembered heap on the ground.

Behind me, Gabriel and Mikah clambered into the cave.

As soon as Gabriel’s feet hit the rocky ground, he looked around, sniffing the air. “It smells like sex in here.”

Colton chuckled. “You like that, Gabriel, you should have been here a few minutes ago. You missed quite a performance.”

“Why don’t you go fuck yourself, Colton,” Maya snapped, her voice thick with anger.

“Well, I would,” he said, laughing, “but you were considerate enough to do it for me. Pretty thoroughly, I might add.”

Maya looked like she was gearing up for another attack, so I put up my hands, silencing both of them.

“Enough. God, will this shit between you never end? I thought all you two needed was a good fuck, but congrats, you’ve just proved me wrong. Let’s get you out of here. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Colton smiled as he got to his feet. “Aw, you care about me. That really warms my heart. Of course, you could have helped me warm a few other parts if you’d just waited a few more minutes before you charged in like the cavalry.” His grin widened as he looked at Maya. “We were about to go for round two.”  
 Maya leapt to her feet and stormed out of the cave, shoving Colton hard in the shoulder as she passed.

I shook my head as Colton laughed. “When are you ever going to grow up, man?” I asked.

“Probably never,” he said airily. Then he winked and threw an arm around my shoulders. “So, I guess this cave-crash was fair payback for all those times I accidentally walked in on you and Cali, right?”

*Cali*.

The sound of her name made me freeze. I’d been so focused on Colton and making sure he was safe, I’d stopped thinking about anything else. But now that I knew Colton and Maya were okay, I had other things to do. “I gotta go,” I said, stepping away from Colton and back toward the cave opening.

Colton looked puzzled at the sudden change in my expression. “What’s up? You still on that job with Gabe?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m on a new job.”

“What is it?” Colton asked, looking suddenly anxious.

I met his eyes. “I’m going to kill Greyson.”

**Episode 425**

My reflection wavered as a breeze disturbed the smooth surface of the pond. I turned, looking at my face from one angle, then another. I had to give it to Astrid—she really put the *glam* in glamour magic. Thanks to her, I was wearing a long, flowing gown the blue-grey color of shallow water. My skin was glowing like it was dusted with shimmering diamonds, my lips looked red as cherries, and my hair flowed down my back, thick and lustrous, like I was starring in a shampoo commercial.

Astrid’s touch was subtle—if I looked hard enough, I could still see myself in there. But it was me with the volume turned way up. It was like an actress was playing me in a movie. It was me at golden hour, through an Instagram filter. I stared at the reflection in the glassy water, admiring the glossy hair that flowed down my back. I wished I could look like this all the time.

But now was not the moment for this kind of vanity, so I turned away, intending to thank Astrid for the magic. Instead, my gaze locked with Greyson’s. He was sitting a ways away, staring at me. What did he think of my new look? There was an intensity in his eyes that made my stomach flip. He looked like he was seeing through me, somehow. Reading me like a book.

I knew the answer to my question—I could see it in the naked hunger in his eyes, but I still wanted to hear him say it. I put a hand behind my head, puffed up my hair, and pouted as sexily as I could. If that was even possible... “What do you think?”

A smile curved up his lips. “Words wouldn’t do you justice, love.”

I smiled, a burst of butterflies fluttering in my stomach, but then I heard his voice in my head.

*If this were some other place, some other time—trust me, Cali, I wouldn’t need words to show you what I mean. I still haven’t made it up to you, have I?*

“Why is your face so red, Cali?” Astrid asked. She was standing further away, looking me over with the critical eye of an artist surveying her work.

“Oh you know, no reason!” I said, putting my hands over my hot cheeks. “Just so warm here, wow.” I looked over as Torin reappeared in the clearing. He looked me up and down and gave a low whistle of approval.

“Wow,” he said appreciatively. “You look amazing, Cali. Why won’t Astrid do that to me?”

My eyes flicked over to Greyson who was now glaring at Torin. *Down, Alpha.* I thought to Greyson, biting my lip to keep from laughing. *He’s just being nice.*

Greyson’s voice came to my head. *I’ll show him being nice.*

“You want to be a goddess, too, Torin?” Astrid asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Torin declared. “Sometimes. Which is something you might have known about me if you’d ever bothered to ask, *Astrid*.”

“I do ask!”

“Well not enough!”

I shook my head at their bickering. “Thanks for this, Astrid,” I said. “Your glamour magic is on point. Do you think you can keep it going long enough for this to work?”  
 Astrid nodded. “Yeah, I don’t see why not. As long as you stay close enough.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “God, I hope this works. I *have* to get my pendant back from those thieves.” My hand went to my neck on reflex, though I knew there was nothing there. “It just *has* to work.”

Greyson walked up to me. His eyes ranged across my face, then traveled south, taking in the rest of me. “Listen to me,” he said, looking into my eyes again. “Your plan isn’t the best plan I’ve ever heard—”

“I hope you’re getting to the pep-talk part soon,” I interrupted.

“—but it is a plan. And we’re going through with it,” he said, his eyes boring into mine. “I’ll do whatever I can to help you.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “But you didn’t have to say it. I know I can count on you.” I smiled. “It’s practically the only thing I *can* rely on, right now.”

Greyson leaned down and kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes, reveling in the soft pressure of his lips. He lingered for just a moment, then, taking a deep breath, he stepped back and shifted.

“Wow,” Torin said, staring at Greyson’s wolf with wide, amazed eyes. “I don’t care how many times I see that, it will never get less cool. Mind blowing, man. Absolutely.” He looked back at Astrid. “Do you think I could be turned to a werewolf?”

It felt like my heart stuttered to a stop. I turned to Astrid, waiting for her answer.

But she just shrugged. “I have no idea. Maybe.”

Torin looked back at Greyson, a dreamy look on his face. “Wouldn’t that be amazing? I mean, to be able to run through the woods as a wild animal. Just imagine.”

“Yeah, I will, but maybe not right this minute, okay?” Astrid said, walking over to him. She stood right in front of him and spoke firmly. “Right now, you are going to go out there and keep your eyes and your ears open, okay?”  
 Torin nodded. “I promise,” he said solemnly.

Astrid raised an eyebrow. “Now remember, you just made a promise to a Fae. And you know what that means. No screwing around.”

My chest tightened as I looked between Astrid and Torin. “I want to thank you two for doing this. I know you don’t have to. You didn’t have to do any of this.”

“Cali—” Astrid started.

“You *didn’t*,” I said firmly. “But I want you to know how grateful I am that you’re here. And no matter what happens after this, I’ll never forget you. Either of you.”

“We feel the same way,” Astrid said quietly.

Torin nodded. “Absolutely, Cali.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “It’s time.” I turned toward the campsite and the distant sounds of the partying Merry Women.

It was time, but my heart still pounded as I walked toward their camp. Greyson stuck to my side, silent and hulking. I felt better having him there, and I let my hand brush against his fur as I walked, but I was still scared.

There was so much that could go wrong. There was actually very little that *couldn’t* go wrong.

I glanced at Greyson’s silver fur, glistening like precious metal. What if something happened to him? What if he was injured again? Or worse? How would I ever forgive myself? How would I be able live with myself?

Greyson came to a stop, close enough to the fire to see everyone clearly, but behind a cluster of trees that hid us from view. This was it. My throat was suddenly very dry, and my hands began to sweat.

Astrid’s eyes were wide as the new moon, but she nodded. “We’ve got this, Cali. Go for it.”

I let myself be buoyed up by her confidence and nodded back. Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I stepped out into the open and walked straight toward the campfire. It took every ounce of courage I had, but I tried to affect an air of confidence and poise as I glided toward the Merry Women. I tossed my head, the mane of hair heavy on my back, and let Astrid’s brilliant disguise fill me with even more confidence.

As I drew closer, I couldn’t help but notice that there seemed to be more Merry Women than I’d anticipated. Certainly more than we’d met in the forest with Nybor. I should have expected it, but I hadn’t, and my step faltered.

*You can do this, love. Keep moving, Cali.*

It was the sound of Greyson’s voice in my head, saying my name, that got me moving again. He was there for me. He had my back.

I kept moving forward until someone saw me. After that, heads began to swivel in my direction. The party stopped as awareness of my presence spread through the clearing like wildfire. The Merry Women all seemed to tower over me as they stared, amazed, as if they’d never seen anything like me before.

An eerie silence filled the woods. Even the birds had stopped singing. But I kept my cool and surveyed the crowd with proud, assessing eyes.

Finally, Nybor stepped forward. “Who are you?” she asked, her voice echoing through the stillness.

Oh shit.

I hadn’t come up with a name! *Why* hadn’t I come up with a name? My name was the first thing Nybor had asked me when we’d met the first time; why hadn’t I realized that she was sure to ask me again?

I had to say something. The silence was starting to get weird. I raised my arms dramatically and looked down my nose at Nybor.

“I am Tinker Bell,” I thundered. “Goddess of the Forest!”

**Episode 426**

XAVIER

Colton raised an eyebrow. “Wait, I’m going to need you to say that again. Because it *sounded* like you just said you were going to kill Greyson, and that can’t be right.”

“You heard me right,” I growled.

“Is this because he and Cali ran off together?” Colton asked. Even in the dimness of the cave I could see that his expression was cautious, like he was afraid I was going to explode.

“How the hell do you know about that?” I demanded. “How does everyone fucking know everything before I do?”

Colton shrugged. “I just hear things, man. Through the grapevine or whatever. But trust me, I’m not happy about it either. You know what I think of Greyson—he’s an asshole, a liar, and I don’t trust him whatsoever. But are you sure that going after him is the right move?”

“Why?” I snapped. “Feeling sentimental about our dear brother, Colton?”

“No,” Colton said evenly. “You know I’m not. But he’s the Alpha, man. You know what that means.”

“I wouldn’t care if he was the next Dalai Lama, man, I’m going after him,” I snarled.

“Xavier—”

“I don’t care, Colton!”

“Maybe you *should*!” Colton exploded. “Xavier, listen to yourself. You can’t just kill an Alpha because you’re jealous—”

“This isn’t about *jealousy!*”

Colton shook his head. “Like hell it isn’t, Xavier. You’ve been so consumed—”

“This is about our father!”

My words bounced around the small cave and Colton stared at me, shock written all over his face.

“What did you just say?” he asked quietly. “Our *father*? What the hell does Silas have to do with this? I thought you said—”

“Did you know he was back?” I asked, though I didn’t need to. Colton was a bad actor and it was clear from the look on his face that this was news to him. He had no idea our dear old dad was back on the scene.

Colton shook his head mutely.

“I think Greyson—*the precious Alpha*—knew about it,” I said, my hands balling into fists at the thought. “And I think he’s working with him.”

Colton’s eyes went big with surprise. “Whoa. That’s… something else.” He thought about this for a moment, letting it settle in. Silas had been out of our lives for a long time. I knew from experience that it took a second to wrap your brain around the idea that he was back. But when Colton shook his head, he looked decided. “If that’s true, man—if Greyson is working with Silas—then count me in on your Greyson hunt.”

“Hey, listen, fellas, I’m all for brotherly bonding, but are you two planning on being cave dwellers forever?” Gabriel called out, interrupting us. “I don’t want to freak anyone out, but if any of these rocks decide to shift again, we might be shit out of luck.”

“We’re coming,” I said, walking to the mouth of the cave.

“Besides,” Gabriel said, looking around, “I don’t like chilling in other people’s sex dens. It’s my own or none at all.”

I groaned, but Colton just laughed.

“It was pretty hot in here,” he said to Gabriel. “Pretty wild, too. *Feral*. I’ve got the bruises to prove it.”

“Can you stay focused?” I snapped. “We need to get going.”

“Going? Where are we going?” Colton asked, looking surprised.

“Greyson and Cali went to the Fae world,” I explained, “so we’re going to follow—”

“Hang on!” Colton said, looking startled. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“What?”

He looked at me like I had a second head growing out of my neck. “Are you out of your fucking mind, Xavier? The Fae world? You want to go to the *Fae world?* I mean, is that even possible? And that’s just the *first* problem!”

“I’ll tell you all about it on the way to Haystack Rock,” I said as I climbed out of the cave.

Colton scrambled out after me. “Xavier, wait. I want to help you, but you have to fill me in. There are lots of gaps in this story.”

I shook my head, biting back my anger. “Cali isn’t human.”

Colton waited, like he was expecting me to go on. “She’s not? Then what the hell is she?”

“She’s part Fae.”

Colton’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. Jay stared at me, dumbfounded. Even Maya gasped.

“Did Cali tell you this?” Maya asked.

“No,” I ground out. “I found out from Big Mac after Mikah pulled her out of a mirror.”

This statement was met with utter silence.

Colton looked at Gabriel. “What the hell happened to my brother, man? Did he fall off a cliff? Was he in an accident?” He gestured to me. “This screams traumatic brain injury.”

“Listen,” I said shortly. “I know you’d prefer to have story time here in the forest, but I don’t have time to waste. We have to get going. I’ll fill you in on the way.”

“Let’s hope so,” Colton muttered. He turned to Maya. “Listen, when you get back to the pack house, just tell them we went on a trip to the lava fields, okay?”

“Excuse me?” Maya snapped.

I looked at the look that passed between the two of them and my stomach sank. This wasn’t going to be good.

“What?” Colton asked, clueless as ever.

This question seemed to piss her off even more. “I am not the Evers boys’ *errand girl*, asshole. And I’m not going back to the pack house. I’m coming with you.”

*Shit*. This was definitely not going to be good. It wasn’t that Maya wouldn’t be an asset—she was strong and fast as hell and literally never backed down from a fight—but the thought of listening to her and Colton arguing nonstop through what was probably going to be a pretty perilous journey did *not* sit well with me.

In fact, it made me want to puke.

Colton laughed. “I get it, Maya. I get why you’d want to tag along. Adventure and whatnot. And” —he smirked as he flexed his bicep—“after you got a taste of this, of course you’ll be hungry for more.”

Fury sparked in Maya’s eyes like a lightning storm and she stepped up to Colton, getting right in his face. I didn’t know Maya as well as Colton did, but if someone looked at me the way she was looking at him, I wouldn’t be smiling.

“You are so fucking full of yourself,” Maya spat venomously. “Let me tell you something, Colton Evers: you’re the fucking scum between my toes.”

“Wow,” I breathed.

Maya’s gaze flickered over to me, then back to Colton. She took a step back. “You know what? I’ve changed my mind. You couldn’t make me go with you if my life depended on it.”

“Maya,” Colton started in a would-be-placating tone.

“In fact,” she added, “I’d rather be dead than with you.”

Her words hung heavy in the damp air of the quiet forest.

After a long, silent moment, Jay shifted uncomfortably. “You can come back to the pack house with me, Maya. If Silas is back, the pack should know about it.”

“I’m not going back to the pack house,” Maya said, taking another step back.

“Why not?” Colton asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Because I’m not a Redwood,” she said flatly.

Colton’s eyes darkened. “Of course you are.”

“No,” she said, more firmly. “I’m not.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Colton said, staring to look agitated. “If you’re not a Redwood, then what are you?”

Maya’s eyes darted around the group, then back to Colton. She shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said, her voice thick with pain. And, without waiting for anyone to respond, she turned and ran from the clearing.

“Whoa,” Jay said under his breath.

“I’m going after her,” Colton said, striding forward.

I caught his arm. “Hang on, man. You might want to hold that thought.”

Colton looked back at me. “And why would I want to do that?”

I looked into the woods in the direction Maya had disappeared. “It sounds like she’s working through some shit, Colton. You need to give her some space.” I could see Colton was hurting—it was obvious in his eyes—and I tried to keep my tone kind.

But it was lost on him and he shook my hand off his arm. “You want me to give my mate *space*, Xavier? Are you fucking kidding me? Tell me, how much *space* would you recommend? About the same amount you gave Cali? Is that the right amount of space?”

My blood turned to ice. “You’re going to want to stop right there, man,” I said, my voice cold.

But Colton’s eyes were wild. “God, I can’t seem to remember. How did that work out for you and Cali? All that precious space?” He pretended to remember. “Oh yeah! That’s right! She’s off Faeing around with Greyson—”

I didn’t let him finish. “You asshole,” I snapped. Then I brought my fist back and smashed it into his jaw.

**Episode 427**

It was hard to tell how my act was going over. I held my arms up, trying to look imposing and majestic as I glanced around, trying to gauge a reaction. The Merry Women were staring at me.A little too intensely, but I guess I was creating quite the spectacle.

But *Tinker-Fucking-Bell?* I could have kicked myself. I couldn’t have come up with something better? Literally *anything* would have sounded more impressive. Now that the moment had passed, dozens of better ideas were running through my mind. *Cleopatra*, *Aphrodite, Ariana Grande*—fucking *Xena, Warrior Princess* would have been an improvement.

A breeze stirred the leaves in the trees surrounding the clearing and, as if reading my thoughts, Nybor stepped forward, a skeptical look on her broad face.

“What was that?” she asked, her eyebrow arched in disbelief. “Tinker-what?”

I could feel my face begin to flush. This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be. I was thirty seconds into this plan—I couldn’t let it go off the rails this early. I hadn’t even gotten started!

“I am the great Tinker Bell of the Forest!” I said, trying to sound grave and imposing even though I felt like peeing my pants. “*Obey me!*”

There were a few gratifying murmurs, as though the Merry Women were a little nervous.

Nybor didn’t look worried, though. She took a step toward me. “Of what forest, now?”

Nope. I was not going to be taking questions. This was not the time for a Reddit Q&A. “Do not question me!” I yelled. “Or there will be consequences!”

It was time for phase two. I waved my hand through the air in a complicated pattern. It was total bullshit, but I was trying to mimic what I’d seen other witches do when conjuring a spell.

When I heard the crack of a stick behind me as Greyson walked slowly toward me in his wolf form, I knew it had worked. The Merry Women gasped in horror at the sight of him and moved back in fear. I saw a few dart glances toward the forest surrounding their clearing, like they were considering running for it.

“*She’s conjured a wolf!*” someone yelled.

“*That’s not an ordinary wolf, it’s* huge!”

This was met with another round of gasps and a muffled scream. The women continued to back up as Greyson advanced on them, throwing in a few snarls for effect. I thought he might have been laying it on a little thick, but it was getting the job done, for which I was grateful. My heart was still beating hard, but at least it had stopped racing. It was working. This batshit plan of mine was actually working, and no one could have been more surprised than me.

I tried not to smile as I stepped toward Nybor. Greyson was at my side in an instant, matching me stride for stride. I brushed my hand against his soft fur, letting it comfort me and fill me with confidence and a sense of security.

By the time we reached the huge bonfire in the center of the clearing, I was feeling almost calm, though I could feel the eyes of Nybor and the Merry Women on me. On me, Tinker-fucking-Bell of the Forest.

Nybor stared at me. “So, Tonkerball, what is it that you want from us?” The question should have sounded challenging, but I could hear a slight tremor in the voice of the once-arrogant thief. “We are but humble women.”

“I have come for a tribute,” I said, slowly scanning the women clustered in the clearing. A few shrank back as my eyes moved to them. “Yes.” I thought quickly. “A tribute to show… *respect.* Respect to me, Goddess of the Forest.” I was just improvising at this point, and resisted wiping beads of nervous sweat from my forehead.

Nybor looked confused. “Why would you need proof of that? Everything we have, we distribute to the needy. We serve the forest and remain its friend. What more can we do to show respect?” she asked, looking around at the other Merry Women as if appealing for support.

She made some solid points. It sounded like they were running a pretty reputable non-profit out here and I hated to mess with them, but I *needed* my pendant. I swallowed hard. This was going to be a harder sell than I’d anticipated. I probably should have given this part of the plan a little more thought. Maybe written a few things down. I just hadn’t thought about push-back from the Merry Women. In my head I’d just walked in here, waved my arms, and Nybor had tossed my pendant back to me. In reality, things were not going as smoothly.

Perhaps Greyson could sense I was struggling, because he rose onto his hind legs. He was enormous, nearly blocking out the sun, and cast a shadow over me. He tossed back his head and howled, the sound deafening in the small clearing.

The Merry Women covered their ears and looked at each other, terrified. Even Nybor took a frightened step back.

“You’re making my wolf angry,” I warned. “You won’t like him when he’s angry.” I stared around the clearing. “You’re not going to like him *at all* when he tears every one of you limb from limb. He’s very protective of me.”

That part, at least, wasn’t a lie.

Nybor looked around, fear darkening her face. She gestured to the others. “Come, bring what you have.” She looked at me. “We have but little, my lady. We have already distributed most everything we had.”

The Merry Women hurried off and, satisfied, Greyson dropped back to all fours and moved back, waiting.

A half-dozen of the women hurried forward and dropped small bundles of cloth at my feet. They looked so scared—all of them trembled as they drew near—and they scurried away so fast, I almost felt sorry for tricking them.

But they had my pendant, I reminded myself, and they hadn’t treated us with much mercy. I kicked the bundles open, scanning the contents, looking for my pendant.

There were golden cups and chains. A small ruby ring sparkled next to a set of skeleton keys. There were a few coins—copper, from the looks of them—and what looked like a tarnished silver pocket watch. Or perhaps a compass. There were some small knives and I almost reached for them, thinking they could come in handy, but I stopped myself. That wasn’t what I’d come for, and Tinker Bell was Goddess of the Forest, not a petty thief. The Merry Women had collected an impressive array of spoils, but my necklace wasn’t there.

Kicking the loot aside, I turned to Nybor. “This won’t do. This won’t do at all, I say.”

Nybor looked a little nervous. “This is all we have, my lady. These are the tributes we have to offer you.”

“You’re *lying*,” I spat. I took a deep breath. It was important that I stayed calm. I closed my eyes and furrowed my brow, like I was concentrating very hard. “I sense something more. I sense…” I paused for dramatic effect and heard Greyson give a small, irritated huff next to me. “A pendant.”

When I opened my eyes, Nybor was looking terrified. Which was good. It meant I was on the right track, and she hadn’t already unloaded it somewhere.

I paced forward. “I want the pendant that you stole.”

Greyson snarled.

Nybor had gone white and her fingers fumbled with the neckline of her shirt. “I am so sorry, my lady. Please forgive me. I forgot about it. It was but an accident.”

“*Where is it?*” I demanded.

She felt fruitlessly at her neck, then looked down at the pouch at her hip. “It is here,” she said. She fumbled in the pouch and finally pulled out the necklace.

My heart lifted as she held the pendant up. It caught the light and sparkled.

I was just reaching for it when I heard a shout from behind us, back in the forest. Something washed over me, quite suddenly—a wave of energy—and I shivered from head to foot.

*Oh shit*. I looked over my shoulder, realizing with a jolt that the shout had come from the exact spot where we’d left Astrid and Torin.

*Do you think you can keep it going long enough for this to work?* I’d asked, back at the pond.  
 Astrid had nodded, confidently. *Yeah, I don’t see why not. As long as you stay close enough.*

As long as I stayed close enough.

What had just happened?

I looked down, a feeling of dread settling in my stomach, and confirmed my fears. My water-blue dress was flickering, and I could only imagine the rest of the glamour was doing something similar.

I looked up in time to see Nybor’s eyes narrow dangerously. “This is no Goddess of the Forest,” she hissed. “It’s *you!* Cali of Duluth!” She looked over her shoulder at her Merry Women. “Grab her!”

**Episode 428**

GREYSON

I reared back and snarled as the women began to press forward. If they took one more step toward Cali, I was going to start ripping out throats.

Nybor, fear and anger in her eyes, was still holding the pendant. “Attack! she screamed, while making no more toward Cali or me. “Get her!”

Cali was starting to panic—I could feel it.

*Get the pendant.*

She didn’t respond, but she’d started to tremble.

*Get the pendant, Cali. Let me take care of the rest.*

She lunged toward Nybor, ripping the pendant out of her very surprised hands.

The Merry Women gave a shout and began to charge in earnest. They were scrambling for their bows and quivers, which they’d taken off. But they regained them and raised their weapons, training them on Cali.

I threw back my head and howled for all I was worth, raising a sound that felt like it was coming up from the very depths of my soul. This achieved what I’d hoped for—the Merry Women stopped their advance, unsure for long enough that I had time to lower down so Cali could hop on. She seemed to understand what I was doing and, with no further instructions, she hopped on my back. As soon as I felt the weight of her body against me, I leapt up and took off at a dead sprint. I needed to get her out of there—I needed to keep her safe.

*Shit.*

Astrid and Torin.

I changed direction, circling back to the woods where we’d left the two of them. It didn’t take long to find them, but when we did, they’d been flanked by two guards.

*Hold tight, Cali. Keep low.*

When I felt her arms tighten around me, I charged the guards. I howled and snarled, showing my teeth and letting foam fall from my mouth. It would have terrified people more stalwart than the ones guarding Astrid and Torin, and they scampered away, scattering like dry leaves in a strong wind.

“Get on!” Cali screamed to Astrid and Torin, somehow anticipating exactly what I was thinking.

“Yes!” Torin said, his eyes lighting up. “Cool!”

He gave Astrid a leg up and I waited impatiently for them to climb aboard, keeping my eyes trained on the Merry Women as they sprinted toward us. Their arrows were poised to fire, aiming at me—at Cali.

They let fly and—Astrid and Torin safely on my back—I dodged the volley of arrows and lunged for the woods, sprinting as fast as I could. I was slower than usual, weighed down by my three passengers, but I pushed hard, running through the thick trees. Branches and thorny bushes snagged the skin beneath my fur, but I didn’t let that slow me down either. I needed to get us to safety, and I was going to keep running until I found it.

After a while, the trees started to thin. Given how fast I was moving, we were far beyond the reach of Nybor and her Merry Women. I slowed my pace and, panting hard, finally slowed to a stop. I bent my legs low enough so my passengers could slide off. They slid down my fur, landing hard. They must have been holding on tight, because they were breathing hard, too.

When they were all off and standing safely on the scrubby grass, I loped back a few hundred yards, scanning the forest, making sure we hadn’t been followed. Nybor undoubtedly knew the forest well, and I didn’t know how fast she could travel using her blue smoke magic. I kept my eyes open, ready to pounce on the first person—guard or otherwise—I saw.

I stopped, listening hard to the silence of the trees, hearing past the birdsong, waiting to hear the snap of a twig as someone paced quietly through. But there was nothing. There was nothing but birds, and the sound of the wind moving through the leaves.

Lifting my nose into the air, I sniffed. Nothing but the smell of the earth. We were safe.

With a sigh, I shifted back and strode back toward the others, following the sound of their hushed conversation.

All three looked over as I drew close.

“Greyson, I’m so sorry,” Astrid said, her eyes bright with tears.

“We didn’t see them!” Torin cried, still looking spooked. “They were so sneaky. I had no idea how sneaky they could be. Walking around the forest on their silent little feet. How do they do it?”

“It’s okay,” I said, wiping my arm across my forehead.

“But it wasn’t all bad,” Torin said, his eyes bright again, “I did manage to grab this!” He held up a leather satchel, like the ones all the Merry Women had been wearing.

“When did you grab that?” Astrid asked, looking surprised.

Torin shrugged. “You know, when I was…” He gestured vaguely. “Giving them a run for their money.”

Astrid rolled her eyes. “What’s in it?”

“I don’t know. I hope it’s food!” Torin said, opening the satchel. His face fell. “Oh, it’s not food.”

“What is it?” Astrid asked, stepping forward.

“Clothes,” Torin said flatly. He looked at me, “I guess this is yours, man.” He tossed the satchel and I caught it easily.

“Don’t worry about it,” Cali said, shaking her head in disbelief, like she couldn’t believe we had gotten away. “We did it. We actually did it. I didn’t really think it was possible, but we did it.” She looked at me. “And we couldn’t have done it without you, Greyson.”

She held my gaze as I stepped toward her. Our gazes locked. We stared at each other for a moment, and it felt like the world got quieter around us. Astrid’s glamour was gone, and Cali was back to her natural, stunningly beautiful self. She was holding the pendant close to her chest, a brilliant, triumphant look on her face. She was breathing hard, smiling. At me.

I didn’t even think about it. I needed her near me. I needed *her*. I stepped toward her and pulled her close, crushing my lips to hers.

“You’re incredible, Cali,” I breathed, speaking against her lips.

Blood rushed into her cheeks, making them bloom like roses. *I* had done that to her. I loved that I could do that to her, and I smiled, wondering what else I could make rosy.

“Hey, listen, Greyson,” Torin said cluelessly, stepping forward. “Some of those moves back there were next level. That howl was something else. The way you can just make people leap back in fear… You think you can teach me to do that?”

“No,” I said, keeping my eyes on Cali. I loved the way she felt, her body tucked against mine.

“Torin,” Astrid said, grabbing for his arm. “Maybe we should go, you know, collect some food or something.”

“What?” Torin asked, looking at her, confused. “Now?”  
 “Yes,” Astrid said firmly. “I think I saw some cherries over here. Come help me find them.” She dragged the thickheaded Fae away into the trees.

I watched them until they were out of sight, then looked back at Cali. She was looking up at me, and there was something in her eyes I couldn’t identify.

“You went back.”

“What?” I asked uncertainly.

She tipped her chin in the direction Torin and Astrid had disappeared. “You could have left them, but you went back.”

I cleared my throat, uncomfortable beneath the searching look in her eyes. “Well, they have their uses. Torin’s a healer, and Astrid has that glamour magic. Plus, if it came to a fight, it’s better to have some numbers and—”

Cali pressed a finger against my lips. “I know why you did it. You pretend to be a big bad wolf, Greyson.” She placed her palm flat against my chest. “But deep down, you’ve got a heart of gold. I can feel it.”

I stared at her for a moment, looking into her eyes as she looked into mine. I picked up her hand from my chest and kissed her palm. “I have to stay away from you,” I said, my voice husky. “You’re going to ruin my reputation with talk like that.”

Her face flushed again. I watched, transfixed, as the blood moved gracefully across the curved planes of her face.

Uncomfortable under my gaze, she took a step back and reached for the satchel of clothing Torin had thrown me. I’d tossed it to the ground.

“Maybe we can find some clothes for you,” she said, avoiding my gaze and busying herself rifling through it. “Some real clothes.”

She pulled up a pair of brown pants and a white shirt and held them up, pressing them against my body as though checking the size.

But the feel of her hands on me was too much. The scent of her was too much. The sight of this beautiful, enchanting, bewitching half-Fae in front of me was just *too much*. I tugged the clothes out of her hands and dropped them to the ground. I pulled her close, fitting the length of her body against mine. I pressed my lips to hers, feeling her mouth open beneath the pressure of my tongue. I couldn’t help myself. I’d tried so hard with this girl, but I couldn’t wait any longer.

“I need you, Cali,” I whispered. “Tonight. I want you *tonight*.”

**Episode 429**

XAVIER

My hand stung after colliding with my brother’s thick head, but I couldn’t have cared less. Colton stumbled backward, cupping his jaw, his eyes wide. But I didn’t give him any time to recover. I rushed him, tackling him to the ground, ready for the fight to begin in earnest.

I was so angry I couldn’t see straight. Cali had run off with Greyson to the Fae world. She’d kept her Fae ancestry a secret. And I only had myself to blame. It felt like someone was shoving burning hot coals into the hole in my chest where my heart used to be. I didn’t need to be reminded of it. Least of all by my asshole brother.

Colton could never let anything go. Even when we were kids. Hell, especially when we were kids. He always needed the last word. It was like he’d never had a thought he didn’t deem the most important one in the world. More than once, I’d wondered how many hours of my life I’d spent cleaning up his messes, and defending him when people were put off by his immaturity.

Maybe I was distracted by all the bullshit going on in my life, or maybe I was still feeling the effects of the silver or the drugs, because Colton managed to catch me off guard and clock me right in the face. I flew off him and landed on the ground with a thud that knocked the air out of my lungs.

“You’re the one who needs space,” Colton spat at me.

I spluttered, gasping for air. I hated that I’d let him get the best of me like that.

Even though the right side of my face stung like hell and I could feel my eye swelling, I jumped on him. It had been a long time since Colton and I had fought, but the muscle memory was still there from when we were younger. It was something I knew how to do. Something I could control.

Unlike Cali.

Fuck.

Maybe I’d made a mistake giving her space. Especially because she hadn’t seemed to want it. She’d been trying so hard with me and I kept pushing her away. Only doing what was easy, but not opening up. But it wasn’t like Colton had any fucking right to judge. He and Maya were even more of a shitshow than Cali and me. At least Cali and I were capable of having a conversation without screaming at each other.

Colton’s longest relationship was with his right fucking hand. So it wasn’t like he had any experience dating. Just fucking experience. Who was he to try and tell me how to live my life?

“Guys, cut it out!” Jay shouted as I struggled to pin Colton’s arms to the ground with my knees.

I could hear Gabriel laughing.

“Honestly, this is fun.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “It’s as good a way as any to sort out your shit.”

“Seems like exactly how *you* would sort out your shit,” Mikah fired back.

Honestly, I wished I could beat the shit out of all of them. I didn’t want to hear another person comment on the way I’d decided to live my life. I just wanted to find Cali and fix whatever had broken between us. I couldn’t afford to waste time with these idiots.

In that moment of exasperation, Colton managed to elbow me in the gut. I flew off him and crashed into a tree, wood splintering all around me. My head smacked against the tree trunk, and my ears rang. Pain radiated through me, but I did my best to ignore it. I could deal with it later.

Colton got to his feet and spat fresh blood onto the ground. I was happy to see a purple welt blossoming on his jaw. Going for the face was the best way to fuck with Colton. He couldn’t pass a mirror without stopping to touch up his hair or admire that day’s outfit. Now, every time he checked himself out for the next day or so, he’d see a big reminder to keep his mouth shut.

“You’re being a dick!” Colton shouted at me. “I’m fucking sick of you blaming everyone else for your mistakes.”

I rose to my feet, every muscle in my body screaming at me to stop this fight. But I ignored them.

“You’re just saying that because you’re gonna lose,” I taunted. Colton always forgot that fighting was a mental game. The real way to beat him was to get him to lose focus.

Colton clenched his fists, preparing himself for my next strike. I saw Gabriel smirking behind him, and Mikah watching with interest.

“You wanna put money on this?” Gabriel asked Mikah.

“Would you be shocked to hear that I wouldn’t trust you to pay up?” Mikah replied dryly.

“Why don’t you just admit it?” Colton brushed his hair out of his eyes. “You’ve been treating your mate like shit, and she got fed up and ran off with someone else. Who would blame her?”

I clenched my jaw so hard my teeth threatened to shatter. Maybe Colton *had* learned about the mental component. Because what he’d just said hit as hard as a well-placed punch. Not just because it hit me where it hurt, but also because he wasn’t entirely wrong.

I’d been careless with Cali when I shouldn’t have been. She’d asked for things I didn’t know how to give her, and instead of taking the time to learn, I’d assumed she didn’t really need them. And then she’d left.

But I’d be damned if I let Colton act like Dr. Phil for pointing that out.

“Like you treat Maya any better?” I fired back, barking out a humorless laugh. “Didn’t I just see her storm off all pissed at you for, what? The millionth time?”

“This is why I don’t date straight dudes,” Gabriel piped up. “They have zero security in their masculinity, so they pull shit like this instead of just talking.”

“Hey,” I barked, pointing at him. “Shut the fuck up, Gabriel. No one asked you right now.”

“Or what?” Gabriel laughed, holding his arms out. “You’ll fight me next? Dude, this isn’t about me and you know it.”

I paused, feeling my heart rate slow down as I considered his words.

Fuck it. Gabriel was right. This wasn’t about him. It wasn’t even about Colton. Well, it was a little about Colton—he was being an asshole. But it was mostly about Cali. And the mistakes I’d made with her.

I’d gotten so wrapped up in my own shit, I’d forgotten to think about what Cali must have been feeling. I hadn’t considered her perspective in all this. On some level, I’d decided that since we were in my world, I always knew best.

Obviously, I didn’t.

Colton must have seen something change in my expression, because he lowered his fists slowly.

“Look, man.” He gave me a tight smile. “No one said having a mate was easy. It’s not like we were given any instructions. But we’re both trying to figure it out as we go. We don’t need to make it harder for each other.”

I nodded. “Mate shit is fucked up enough on its own,” I agreed. “Adding a relationship to it just makes it harder.”

Plus, like it or not, I had Colton to thank for finding Cali in the first place. I would never have met her if he hadn’t discovered her online. What were the odds of something like that even happening, anyway?

And if that wasn’t amazing enough, Cali was my second mate. My second chance. My relationship with Ava had failed spectacularly, but life had given me another shot. And I’d blown it.

Maybe it was too late for me to get Cali back. I probably didn’t deserve her. A better guy never would have left her in the first place. But I wasn’t just some guy, and she wasn’t just some girl. We were mates. And that meant I had to try to make things right.

I had to go to the Fae world, get rid of Greyson, and bring her back.

Colton approached me tentatively.

“Don’t fucking hit me, dude,” he warned, hands out.

“Don’t say something stupid and I won’t,” I replied, sounding just like my fifteen-year-old self.

“Glad to see the little brotherly spat is over,” Mikah smirked.

“Now that you two are no longer trying to kill each other,” Jay said, “I’m going to head back to the pack house. I’ll warn Joss and everyone about Silas, okay?”

“Good idea.” I nodded. “You should go now. This doesn’t involve you. In fact, all of you guys should go back. I’ve got this.”

Colton shook his head. “In what fucking world would I let you do this alone?” he asked. “I’m going with you to the Fae world.”

“What about Greyson?” I asked. “He’s your *Alpha*, after all.”

Colton just grinned. “If you don’t kill him, I will.”

**Episode 430**

Greyson held my face in his hands as we kissed. His rough, calloused thumbs rubbed over my cheekbones like I was something precious. But his kiss was hungry and desperate, like I was his first meal in days.

I couldn’t think straight. Thanks to the fire growing between us, my thoughts were moving at roughly the speed of molasses. Every moan he pulled out of me drizzled gasoline onto the fire. And as good as it all felt, I couldn’t ignore the panic building inside of me. Something felt wrong. A voice in my head was telling me I would drown soon if I didn’t come up for air. I fisted my hands in Greyson’s shirt to keep them from shaking as I gasped for air against his lips.

Greyson must have sensed my nervousness, because he pulled back a bit to look at me. He cupped my chin and I leaned into his touch, letting him hold me.

“What’s wrong, love?” he asked, his voice way more tender than I would have expected.

Everything. Nothing. Kissing Greyson felt incredible. Even better than I’d thought it could feel. But knowing he wanted me now, *tonight*… It made me dizzy. I felt shy—like I’d felt with Xavier the first time.

I always thought that after you started having sex you kind of hit this threshold and plateaued and became No Longer Insecure About Sex. And maybe that was how it worked for other people. But not for me.

Holy shit, I felt lightheaded.

I put a hand on Greyson’s chest to steady myself.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that I knew exactly why I felt so uneasy. It was Xavier. Being on the verge of my first time with Greyson was flooding me with memories of being with his brother.

I’d alternated between feeling so giddy I could have screamed and so nervous I’d thought I was about to throw up. Xavier had been as patient as he could. When he’d put his head between my legs, I’d thought I might die of embarrassment. It was so intimate. All my instincts had told me to push him away, but… I’d trusted him. And I was so glad I had, because he’d made me feel incredible.

And yeah, I’d had sex now and Greyson had already seen me naked—and liked what he’d seen. But that was so, so different from sleeping with him. I didn’t know if I was ready to trust him like that. Especially when I’d had trust like that with his brother.

I took a step back, my head spinning. My body wanted this so, so badly. My knees were practically jelly from Greyson’s touch. And I wanted to trust him. But part of me wasn’t ready to.

God, why did everything have to be so complicated?

“It’s my mom,” I explained, opting for the less than honest truth as I took a step back. “I have to save her. There isn’t time to spend doing… anything else.”

Greyson smiled at me, and I felt warmth spreading out across my chest.

“You’re right,” he told me, serious but warm. “Getting the flower is our number one priority. I haven’t forgotten. Although looking at you right now, love, I get the feeling that I could if I let myself.”

I felt myself blush and stared down at the boots Astrid had conjured for me so we could sneak into my grandmother’s manor. It felt like that had happened a year ago.

“But are you sure there’s not something you aren’t telling me?” I could sense the smirk in his voice. He knew very well that there *was* something.

“Why do you have to make this so hard?” I mumbled.

“It’s possible that I like to see you squirm,” he admitted. “You’re incredibly sexy like this, just so you know.”

I swallowed. It was more of a gulp really. Sexy? Me?

Greyson just saying that word made my hormones rocket into the stratosphere. But the fact that he was using that word to describe me… I felt so desperate for him that it scared me. That my body could act so separately from my mind made me feel wildly out of control. I found myself wondering if he could *smell* how he affected me.

Greyson took a step toward me, closing the distance between us, and leaned in, his lips parting. My mouth went dry and I wondered if I had it in me to push him away again.

I squeezed my eyes shut, letting him flip the coin for me. But when his lips met my forehead, a wave of relief washed over me.

“You’re off the hook, love,” he whispered. “For now.”

I opened my mouth to say something. I wished I were the kind of girl who always had a witty retort or something sexy to fire back at her multiple conquests. But I was not that girl. I was me. So instead I just made an awkward noise as my throat constricted, and basically ran away from him to go see Astrid and Torin.

Astrid took in my mussed hair and bruised lips with raised eyebrows, but I ignored her and made a beeline for Torin.

“Hey Torin.” I barely recognized the sound of my voice, it was so chipper and strained. “Why don’t you ask Greyson about shifting? I bet you have like *so* many questions.”

“Really?” Torin broke into a huge smile. “Thanks, Cali!”

I sighed as Torin bounded off to pelt Greyson with questions. Even though I could hear Greyson groaning, and could practically feel his eyes boring into my back as he glared at me for sending Torin his way, I felt relieved.

I needed some space to focus. I was here to get the moon buttercup and save my mother. I couldn’t let anything interfere with that. Even if ‘anything’ was over six feet tall and practically had an eight pack and had some kind of magical access to a hitherto undiscovered spot on my neck that—if kissed—made my knees give out completely.

“So, what’s the deal?” Astrid whispered conspiratorially. “You look like a startled deer. It’s like you and Greyson have never had sex before. Which obviously you have, but—”

“What?” I squeaked, thrown. “No! We haven’t—We’ve *never*.”

“Really?” Astrid asked, giving me the side eye. “Because that’s not what it looks like to me. Even Torin said you two looked like you were about to start in on each other in the river just then.”

I winced. Did Torin think I was a slut? Did they use that word here? If so, that was not very sex positive of him. But to be fair, how sex positive was I if I was scared to get down to business with my potential werewolf soulmate?

“Well, we haven’t,” I whispered forcefully.

“Wow.”

“We’ve only kissed,” I went on. “And a few other things… But the kisses have been good. Like, *really* good. But that’s not the point. I came over here to talk to you about the moon buttercup. Do you know how far away we are?”

“Wow, what a subtle change of subject.” Astrid clearly couldn’t help herself.

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest. “Do you think it’s going to be dangerous getting there?” I asked, persistent that we talk about this and not my sex life.

“I mean, I assume it won’t be easy.” Astrid shrugged. “We still have a ways to go. And who knows what’s between us and that flower?” Astrid lowered her voice even more and leaned in so I could hear her. “I’ve heard stories, you know.” She paused, like she was waiting for my anticipation to build. “Awful stuff. Ogres and trolls… But who knows? Maybe they’re just stories.”

I sighed. For a brief moment, I let myself believe she was talking about a Shrek-like ogre rather than one that would probably disembowel me on sight. But I knew better. The Fae world sucked.

But I wasn’t going to let ogres or trolls or fire-breathing dragons stop me. I was saving my mother. Full stop.

“Whatever it is,” I said, lifting my chin, “we’ll handle it.”

“You’re pretty fearless for someone from the human world,” Astrid told me, smiling.

I wondered if I was fearless or just foolish. I looked around as the woods got darker, trying not to think about the possible ogres and trolls ahead.

“Should we stop for the night?” I asked.

Greyson didn’t reply. He just stared at me with a slight smile. For a second, his gaze made me so nervous that I thought I’d rather face an ogre than look back at him. I hoped no one could see me blushing in the dark as I avoided his gaze.

“Why don’t we set up over there?” Torin pointed to a space up ahead where the trees formed a little circle. “We can get up first thing tomorrow. A good night’s sleep will do us all good, right?”

“I agree,” Greyson replied, not taking his eyes off me. “A good night’s sleep would be perfect.”

“Maybe we should have rotating guards,” I heard myself say, my voice wavering. “Greyson, you could take the first shift.”

“I can do it,” Torin offered. “Greyson was wounded, and he had to shift. He needs the rest most, right?”

“Right,” I nodded, cursing Torin’s practicality. “Astrid, can I sleep with you?”

“Better not,” Astrid told me. “I toss and turn a lot. I’ve elbowed exes in the eye before.”

I nodded, feeling my palms start to sweat. How was I supposed to avoid Greyson if no one would help me?

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest when he took me by the—sweaty—hand. He looked down at me, his gaze a bit softer but still intense.

“You’re not sleeping alone,” he told me. “Come with me.”

**Episode 431**

MAYA

Fuck him.

*You actually did,* said a voice in my head that sounded suspiciously like Colton.

I ran through the woods, still fuming from my last interaction with him. I couldn’t believe I’d caved and slept with him.

I mean, sure, it had been hot. Arguably some of the best sex of my life.

But of all the hot guys I could have had steamy cave sex with, why did it have to be Colton? *Why* had I picked such a conceited, gross man-child?

I mean, I knew why. He was my mate. Through no choice of my own, we were connected by a magical bond that made me want to jump his bones in spite of every stupid, selfish, crass word that came out of his perfect lips. And I hated that I couldn’t just hit a switch and shut it off. I’d really thought I was strong enough to resist all this mates shit. Especially since Colton was always spouting inflammatory nonsense.

But the cave…

Maybe it was the cave’s fault. I could plead some kind of temporary insanity induced by the near-death experience and the confined space and the hormones. And yes, I’d known we’d eventually find a way out. But there was a small chance we could have died in there. And almost dying can make you do crazy shit. And if I wasn’t in my right mind… This didn’t have to count, right?

Right.

And now, just like every girl who’d ever slept with Colton, I was getting as far away from him as possible. And who could blame any of us? Sure, sex with Colton was good, but the pillow talk was shit. Really, *any* kind of talk with him sucked. And talking to him just now had made me want to kill him more than I already did.

How could someone who constantly acted so immature be that passionate in bed? Well, in this case, passionate in cave.

Did all dumb fuckboys with commitment issues grip your hips hard enough to bruise while kissing you so sweetly and so delicately that you’re almost brought to tears? Did they all brush the hair away from your face so they could look into your eyes? Did they all say your name over and over, and make it sound like one of the most beautiful sounds in the world?

Plus, with my anger and Colton’s know-how (let’s be honest, the boy got around), we were kind of the perfect match.

*Perfect match?* Oh my god. I sounded like a middle schooler. What was *happening* to me?

It was the understatement of the century to say I shouldn’t have slept with Colton. And I definitely shouldn’t have slept with him without making him wait a lot longer. Because he nowhere near deserved me. And I didn’t deserve him! I deserved way, way better.

And there was no reason why I shouldn’t go out there and find my person. Someone just as hot—if not hotter—who had brains and common sense, and who made me laugh.

So that was what I vowed to do: to go out there and find someone I deserved… and hook up with them repeatedly until the memory of Colton faded away.

I grinned at the thought of it.

Because in addition to being what I deserved, finding someone else would totally make Colton jealous. At least I hoped it would. It would be fun to see his stupid face get scrunched up with anger. To watch him puff out his chest trying to one up my new conquest.

But he’d only really get jealous if some part of him wanted me. And if some part of him *did* want me—in an actual, real, not-just-one-time-in-a-cave sort of way—then why didn’t he say something?

I groaned loudly in frustration. I needed to get away from him.

I slowed as I continued my run toward the pack house. I wasn’t sure if I should go back. I wanted my stuff, but I didn’t want to see anyone. Especially now that they were all sure to be gossiping about me and Colton.

But if I hurried, I’d be able to make it back before he and Xavier returned from whatever doomed harebrained scheme they were getting into right now. The thing they had in no way invited me to. Which I was fine with, because I didn’t actually feel like saving their skins for the millionth time.

But I couldn’t shake what Jay had said to me. That I belonged with the Redwood pack. Something about it had gotten under my skin.

Maybe it was because Jay was one of the few pack members I liked, though I wasn’t sure why. He *was* mated to Lola, after all, who was nosy and loud and *very* convinced she was the funniest person in the world. But still, the idea that I could belong in a pack with someone like him, someone reliable and kind… It was nice. It was what I’d been looking for.

But Jay was wrong.

I didn’t belong with the Redwood pack, no more than I belonged with the Samara pack. I’d poured everything I had into finding a place, only to learn I didn’t belong anywhere. Everything that had happened over the last few days had made that clear. I couldn’t even make a home with my own mate.

But if I left, where would I go?

To figure it out, I’d have to go out on my own again, though the thought of going Rogue again wasn’t necessarily appealing.

Those women had told me that my sister, Wren, was a Rogue now. Was that true? They’d seemed a little batty, so it wasn’t like they were the most reliable source.

But what if she *was* out there somewhere? If she was, it meant she hadn’t bothered to look for me. But then, why would she? She hadn’t done a thing when I’d been kicked out. None of them had. No one had looked for me, or reached out, or tried to help.

“Welcome back, crushing loneliness,” I grumbled. “Oh, how I’ve missed you.”

I felt tears prickling, and I sucked in a deep breath to keep from doing one of those horrible shaky sobs. Then I did what I always did when I felt like collapsing under the weight of all the indifference of everyone I’ve ever cared about—I vowed to find my place in the world. To find a sense of belonging. Wherever *that* was.

But my silent vow was interrupted by the sound of footsteps behind me.

“Colton, if that’s you,” I snarled, “I swear to god I’ll bash your fucking head in.”

I waited, fists up. A fight would give me an enemy, and an enemy would keep me from thinking about all the shit that kept me up at night.

But then Jay appeared. He seemed surprised to see me. Maybe it was the death threat. But that hadn’t been intended for him, so how spooked could he really be?

“I thought you’d hit the road.” He adjusted his eyepatch. It was clear he still wasn’t used to it and I felt my heart twinge a little. That couldn’t be easy.

I shrugged, not wanting to divulge my plans—or lack thereof. I wondered how Jay was always so calm.

“Hey,” I said without thinking. “You have an annoying mate. How do you handle that?”

Jay raised his eyebrows.

“Colton always gets under my skin,” I explained. “But you and Lola make it work. How do you do that?”

Insults aside, Jay seemed to appreciate my question. He pursed his lips while he thought on it.

“I guess I just don’t see the point in fighting with the people I care about,” he answered gently.

“Well, I don’t give a fuck about Colton, so…” I shrugged again.

“No offense, but it kind of looks like you do.” Jay held out his hands, like he knew this opinion would make me want to strangle him. “Maybe that’s what makes you so angry. Maybe if you accept that you and Colton are mates, you might want to kill him—and all of us, really—a lot less.”

I scoffed. “I can’t even picture a world where I’m not mad at Colton,” I told him. “He has a face you can’t help but want to punch, and that’s not even acknowledging the shit that comes out of his mouth.”

“Look, I’m not a therapist,” Jay said.

“Obviously,” I interjected. But rather than get mad, Jay kept talking.

“I just know that I love Lola, with all my heart.” He avoided my gaze. “I know that sounds like a fucking Hallmark card, but it’s true. I wish I had real advice to give you, but I basically just never get mad at her. And the few times I’ve gotten close, I just remind myself how much better my life is with her in it. And then the anger kind of just… goes away. I’ll never stop fighting for her. Ever.”

I reflected on this. What would it feel like if all the anger inside me was gone? Not turned to sadness. Not numbed with drinking, or hookups with people I didn’t give a shit about. But replaced with something warm.

Before I could stop myself, I found myself wishing I could feel that way. And wishing that I had the option to feel that way about someone who wasn’t Colton.

“What do you say, Maya?” Jay offered me his hand, an understanding smile on his face. “Aren’t you tired of being Rogue? Why don’t you come back to the pack house with me?”

**Episode 432**

GREYSON

Cali stared at my hand, wide eyed. Something about the way she looked at me made me feel like the hunter who’d killed Bambi’s mom. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing at her stricken expression. Was this the same girl who’d saved my life with a saw?

“You’re not afraid to touch me, are you?” I asked, making sure to keep my voice gentle. The last thing I wanted was her to feel afraid of me.

Cali avoided my eyes. If I hadn’t known better, I would have thought she was *very* interested in her boots. Her cheeks were turning pink. I couldn't help but smile. I knew my attention excited her to the point of nervousness. It felt good to know I affected her. It made me want to show her exactly how *good* it could feel.

But I wished it didn’t result in her shutting down like this.

I was a wolf. I liked the chase. And Cali played cat and mouse better than most—even if she wasn’t always aware that she was playing. Sometimes *because* she wasn’t always aware she was playing. And no matter how frustrating it could be to wait, I knew she’d be worth it.

I beckoned for her to follow me through the trees to a soft patch of grass, a respectful distance away from the others.

I found myself wondering how grass grew here in this place where the sun probably rarely reached the ground. I was curious about how a lot of things worked in the Fae world, but I knew I couldn’t waste time figuring them out. I had more pressing matters to attend to.

My hands itched to guide Cali with a hand on the small of her back. I wanted to touch her, to lead her, to feel reassured she was safe because I was touching her. But I held back.

“Why’d you bring me here?” Cali asked, finally breaking her silence. Her cheeks turned bright red, and she looked down at the patch of grass like it was going to bite her. “Shouldn’t we all stay together?”

“We’re only a few feet away from the others,” I reminded her. “And I thought maybe a little privacy could allow us to pick up where we left off. Also, the further away I am from Torin, the fewer questions he can ask me about being a werewolf.”

“The only thing I want to pick up is sleep,” Cali told me emphatically, propping a hand on her hip.

I chuckled at her pose. I could tell she was trying to sound more confident than she felt. It was so unbelievably cute, it kind of made my heart melt.

“And I admire your determination,” I admitted. “But I can’t say it’s not frustrating.”

“What do you mean?” Cali blinked up at me, confused.

As if she didn’t know how much I wanted her. How everything she did only endeared her to me further. How almost everything she did felt like an act of seduction…

I took a step closer and looked into her eyes, wishing I could tell her this in a way that wouldn’t scare her off even more. She tried to avoid my gaze, but I cupped her chin, tilting her face up so she had no choice but to make eye contact.

“I think you know what I mean,” I whispered, before leaning in and kissing her softly. “And that too long ago now, I said I would make it up to you.”

She made a tiny noise of surprise that turned into a muffled hum of pleasure as her lips shaped themselves to mine. I swelled with pride at her response. She *did* want this. Maybe as much as I did.

Control was begging to let go.

I licked at the seam of her mouth, urging her lips to part for my tongue. She opened her mouth to me and I growled, pleased she had given me what I wanted. I felt her shudder against me. Did this feeling scare her?

I clenched my fists at my sides to restrain myself, even though the Alpha in me was begging me to throw caution to the wind and devour her. I didn’t want to be a saint. I wanted to be a sinner over and over again.

But I couldn’t give in to the lust—to the hunger she brought out in me. I’d worked so hard to try and shut that part of me off. To keep a wall between us. And I’d learned how to do it. It had felt impossible at first, but eventually I’d learned. For a while.

But as skilled as I’d become at denying myself her company—her touch, her gaze—I had no idea how to restrain myself now. She felt too good. I’d felt her hands on me and needed more.

I wrapped my arms around her, delighting in how tiny she felt in my arms. How dear, how perfect, how *mine.*

Her chest was pressed flush against mine, and I could feel her nipples hardening through the thin fabric of her top. I groaned against her lips and she wound her arms around me.

“Your body is so responsive,” I murmured between kisses, one of my hands moving to squeeze her nipple through her clothes.

“Yeah.” She shrugged, obviously embarrassed.

“I love it,” I told her. “I want to make you feel good, Cali. I want to *know* what makes you feel good…”

Something I’d said must have sunk in because she nodded. Her lips bruised and her pupils blown, she looked almost drunk on the moment. I was sure I looked the same.

I led her down to the soft grass, and she didn’t pull back. Whatever concerns she’d had before seemed to fade away. She lay down underneath me and pulled me down on top of her.

I let myself look down at her for a moment. There was just enough light to see how perfect she looked with her hair spread out on the grass. I traced her jawline with my index finger, then I drew a line down her jaw, her throat, her chest, between the valley of her breasts, and down her stomach.

She leaned in to my touch, arching her back to meet me.

I brought my lips back to hers and she responded in kind by raking her fingernails down my back.

*Fuck it, I’m a sinner.*

I kissed her hard and she held me close, her lips moving urgently against mine. Unable to keep still, I trailed a line of kisses onto her cheeks, beneath her ear, and down her neck. She moaned when I licked at her pulse point, and it only spurred me on more.

I bared my teeth, letting them graze along her neck, silently asking her permission.

“Please,” she whined.

That was all I needed to hear. I bit down gently on her neck, resisting the urge to bite her harder. To mark her as mine. The image of her at my side, her throat covered in marks *I* had made, popped into my head, and it took all the restraint in the world not to make it a reality.

I could taste salt on her skin, feel her heart beat against my own, hear her breath hitch when I touched her just right. Every one of my heightened senses was working overtime to learn what she needed.

She raked her nails down my back again, and I hissed at the pain. I felt my Alpha rise up inside of me. I reached down and parted her thighs, trying my best not to wrench them apart. I felt her freeze under me for a second, and wondered if I’d ruined it all. I wanted to move at her pace, but fuck if I wasn’t dying for more of her.

But then she hooked her ankles behind my back, pulling me toward her. I pressed my hips flush against hers and she pressed back. She moaned, making me feel frenzied as I rolled my hips into hers, as she ground against my hardening cock. I wanted to drown in that sound. I wanted to pull it out of her until she lost her voice.

I let my fingers trace over the strip of exposed skin at her waist where her shirt had ridden up. God, she was soft. Was there any part of her that wasn’t perfect?

I let myself inch the fabric up her torso, praying with each breath that she wanted this as badly as I did. I didn’t want to stop. I wanted to make her *feel everything*. I wanted her to surrender everything to me.

I let my fingers brush against the underside of her breasts. I wanted these fucking clothes off her perfect body. I remembered seeing her naked at the lake. The memory of her bathed in moonlight, so surprised but still so open…

I hoped that was the Cali I had tonight.

Almost as if she’d heard my silent wish, she tore at my shirt. Our chests were flush against each other, and the friction of her skin against mine was delicious. The air was full of her scent and I wondered if it was possible to overdose on a person.

She took my hand, and for a moment, I worried again that I’d pushed her too far. Was she going to ask me to stop? But just as I resigned myself to a night of blue balls and keeping a respectful distance, I realized she was moving my hand on its way between her legs.

“You’re sure?” I whispered against her lips. I had to know she was giving me her trust.

She took a shuddering breath, her chest heaving. She looked up at me and gave a small nod.

I stroked her through her clothes, trying to show her what I’d give her if she really meant it. If she really let me in. I slid my fingers underneath the waistband of her pants, delighting in the feel of her thighs pressing against my hips, and the way she squirmed as I took my time. God, how it would feel to be between them. *Mercy*.

She kissed me hard, impatiently guiding my hand to her soaking wet core. I had made her like this. The Alpha inside me rose up, proud.

But then her grip loosened on my wrist, and she froze. Heat was still radiating between us as I pulled back and searched her face for an explanation.

**Episode 433**

XAVIER

As we stepped through the portal, I glanced back at my crew of misfits. I’d come to the Fae world to snatch my ex-girlfriend out of my half-brother’s clutches, and my only allies were Gabriel, Colton, and Mikah. Two unreliable and cocksure werewolves who’d never met a fight they wouldn’t plunge into (and lose) head first, and a cryptic bloodsucker I mostly just wanted to punch.

I took in the woods surrounding me, trying not to be disappointed. I was in an entirely different world, but it looked the same as the one I’d lived in my whole life. No cotton candy-colored trees or purple skies or whatever. But I wasn’t here to sightsee, so I had to get moving.

Mikah looked around us suspiciously. “This was too easy.”

“What about this was easy?” Gabriel cried out, like he couldn’t believe what Mikah was saying. “We had to go to a witch and get blood. We had to go to your Fae friend and trip our balls off and agree to deal with her. And *then* I had to ride all the way here with you going exactly the speed limit the WHOLE FUCKING TIME!”

I rolled my eyes. They’d basically been arguing since we’d left Big Mac’s. It was clear something was going on between them. Maybe they just needed to kiss, like I’d hallucinated. Normally, Gabriel’s hook ups were a distraction when we were on a job, but at this point I couldn’t imagine anything more distracting than their bickering.

“Forgive me for not wanting to get pulled over by a cop in the *car we stole*,” Mikah hissed.

“How about you guys shut up for like five minutes before I smash your skulls together?” Colton grumbled.

I looked around, itching to start covering ground. But there was nothing but identical forest everywhere I looked. I didn’t know what exactly I was looking for. It wasn’t as if there was going to be a ‘Your Mate Is Probably Rounding Third Base With Your Asshole Half-Brother HERE’ sign. But maybe something could point me in the right direction.

Up ahead, I saw some movement in a thick patch of trees. A gleam of light hit a pair of eyes. Someone—or something—was watching us.

“Shut up and stay here,” I grunted at the guys before taking off toward the thicket.

“You leaving me in charge while you’re gone, bro?” Colton quipped.

“Don’t make me smash *your* skull,” I snapped, walking off.

My senses were on edge. The rustle of the leaves in the wind, the crunch of my boots hitting the dirt… The noises only got louder as I walked into the darkness. Gabriel, Colton, and Mikah’s voices faded behind me as my eyes adjusted.

I ended up in a small clearing between trees. I scanned the area for movement, but everything seemed still.

“Hello?” I called out. “You can come out.”

I inhaled deeply, trying to see if I could pick up a scent. Immediately, I was shocked to realize I could smell—

“Cali,” I breathed. “Cali, you’re okay. You’re safe now. I’m here.”

And then she was there, stepping out into the dim light. Naked, luminous, and beckoning me closer, her arms outstretched.

I took a step forward without thinking. I was drawn to her. I needed to hold her, to touch her. But instead of coming closer, she turned her back on me. I felt my heart break, just a little bit.

I reached out to touch her shoulder, wanting to pull her to me. I couldn’t believe how smooth her skin was. God, I’d missed touching her. She felt so fucking good. The thought of any other man getting to feel her like this made me see red. I’d kill him.

I turned her to face me, trying to be as gentle as I could. I wanted to see her face, to trace her lips with my fingertips.

But when she turned around, she wasn’t Cali.

I was looking at Ava.

“What the fuck?” I blurted out.

Was the Fae world messing with me? Was Cali not actually here? Was all of this just an illusion? Had we walked into a magic forest or something? Or was Ava somehow… here? I wanted to pull her out of the woods and bring her to Gabriel. Ask if he could see her too.

But then she laughed at me. That throaty, vibrant, shoulder-shaking laugh I used to love pulling out of her. I stared at her.

She took a step toward me and brushed her fingertips across my face. In spite of myself, I sighed at her touch. It was so surreal to see her, I couldn’t help but lean into the familiarity. She circled her arms around my neck, pulling me close. I could feel her breath tickling my neck.

“Why do you look so surprised, X?” she asked, her fingers sliding through my hair. “Didn’t you come here looking for your mate?”

I didn’t know what to say. I felt dumbstruck. As shocked as I was, her presence felt like a warm bath I couldn’t help but sink into.

“It’s always been me,” she crooned. “And it always will be.”

“This can’t be real,” I murmured, but she just smiled at me.

She certainly felt real, though. Logically, I knew Ava was dead. I’d killed her myself. Every moment of her death was seared into my memory. But she was *here*. I could see her and feel her and smell her.

Her naked breasts brushed against my chest. Her lips grazed my neck, and for a moment it all felt so familiar and right I didn’t know what to do. But then I remembered Cali.

Ava was my past. She’d been perfect for the old me. But Cali was who I belonged with now. I started to push Ava off, feeling worried and out of control. None of this was right.

And then I felt teeth rip into the flesh of my shoulder. Pain burned through my arm and my chest, radiating from her bite. I screamed as blood spilled out of me.

I shoved her away, but she kept coming back. I felt the life leaking out of me as I got weaker and weaker. She dug her claws into my arms and bit into my throat and—

I jerked awake in the back seat only to find Gabriel staring at me, confused and annoyed.

“What the fuck was that, X?” he asked. I shuddered at the nickname only he and Ava had ever used.

“You almost blew my fucking eardrums out,” he chastised, and I shook my head to try and reorient myself into the real world.

“I was dreaming…” I managed to say, my mouth sour with sleep and my head still foggy.

“I hope it wasn’t a wet dream,” Gabriel quipped. “This car’s interior can’t handle that.”

I sat up, ignoring his bullshit. I was in the back seat. Mikah was driving, and seemingly unperturbed by my outburst. Gabriel was in the passenger seat, stuffing his face with snacks he and Mikah must have picked up at a gas station while I was sleeping. And Colton was wedged into the back seat next to me, still dead asleep.

I looked out the window at the deserted road we were driving on. The sun had almost set, and I tried to remember what it had looked like outside before I’d passed out.

“Are you sure we’re not going the wrong way?” Mikah asked, glancing down at the huge paper map in his lap. “Because it feels like we are.”

“Like you would know.” Gabriel scoffed. “Have you ever even been here?”

“I haven’t, but I know that you need to move toward your destination rather than away from it,” Mikah retorted.

“Sure you’re reading that map right, chief?” Gabriel glanced at Mikah sideways.

I heard the paper map crinkle as Mikah rotated it.

“You know, there are maps on that little electronic square in your pocket,” Gabriel reminded Mikah, sarcasm dripping from every word. “It even shows you a little drawing of a car going the way your car is actually going. Ever heard of Google Fucking Maps? Pretty incredible.”

“Shut up,” Mikah snapped. “I like hard copies.”

“How long was I out?” I asked, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

Gabriel shrugged.

“Thanks,” I said sarcastically.

I leaned to the side to look out the windshield. We were approaching the coast.

“How far to Haystack Rock?” I asked.

“Should be coming up to it any minute,” Mikah replied.

How was the vampire the only helpful person here?

“You sure?” Gabriel needled. “I thought we were moving away from it.”

I touched the vial of Cali’s blood and the snake tooth in my pocket. I was happy that they were still there. With my luck, they could have evaporated somehow.

“Looks, there it is right now,” Mikah said, sounding relieved to have an excuse to get out of this enclosed space with Gabriel.

I looked up and saw it. A huge rock, silhouetted against the last orange sliver of sun in the sky. It loomed over us, dark and ominous. Fog surrounded the foot of the rock, making it look even creepier than it already was.

Mikah whistled low as he stopped the car. He turned around to face me, eyebrows raised. “Well, bud. Looks like we’re here.”

**Episode 434**

“I’m sorry,” I whispered between heavy breaths as I looked into Greyson’s eyes. “I can’t.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, completely dazed.

I let out a shaky breath. “I can’t do this. I’m sorry.”

Every part of my body that wasn’t touching Greyson ached. I wanted to wrap myself around him and never let go—but I wondered if even that would be enough. I felt like there was a fire coursing through me that threatened to destroy the entire forest, and there wasn’t enough water in the world to put it out.

But what if I wasn’t quite ready to let everything burn?

I sucked in a shaky breath, trying to silence the voice in my mind that was screaming at me to climb Greyson like a tree. All of this was moving so fast.

I knew we had to stop. But the way he’d been *touching* me…

*No!* Stopping. We were stopping. I was stopping this.

It was just really hard to remember why.

Oh right, the fire. The fire that was likely to consume me and annihilate my judgement if I didn’t put it out right now. Every second I let it rage, the roar of the flames got louder and louder. That roar was drowning out the tiny, tiny voice in my head that was crying at me to slow down. Reminding me that I didn’t actually know Greyson all that well. That I’d just gotten out of my first big relationship. That I was here to save my mother. That I’d probably prefer *not* to have sex with someone for the first time in the *woods*.

Greyson was frozen above me. He looked stricken, like I’d dumped a bucket of ice water on him. Which I sort of had. He stared down at me, so shocked that he couldn’t move. I wondered if anyone had ever turned him down before. Judging by his expression, I’d have said no.

I could see his gears turning, and I was sure he was wrestling with his wolf. No, not his wolf—his inner Alpha. Alphas did what they wanted. Basically, no one ever said no to them. And when someone did, it usually didn’t work out well for them.

And even though Greyson had only recently become an official Alpha, he’d always had it in his blood.

But he was also the person I’d known all this time. The person I’d fallen for.

I knew he respected me. That he would never, ever hurt me—Alpha or not.

But that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be angry. Or hurt. Or that he wouldn’t turn cold and start shutting me out. Or decide I just wasn’t worth all this trouble.

I looked up into his eyes. His pupils were still blown, and I could see the hunger underneath the shock. I could feel how much he still wanted me. It was intoxicating. But it also made me wonder if there was any way I wouldn’t disappoint him, if we slept together now.

Finally, he rolled off me. I shivered as the cold air rushed in. Already, I wished I could pull him back on top of me. That I could snuggle under the weight of that incredibly strong, powerful Alpha body. Had I blown my chance to ever feel that way again?

But I knew I couldn’t reach out for him. That would just take me right back to where I’d started. Back into the fire.

It was only then that I realized I’d been holding my breath since I’d asked him to stop, and I took a deep gulp of air. As I heard myself gasp, I wondered what the hell I was doing. Wasn’t this what I wanted? Shouldn’t I just go for it? Was I making a huge mistake?

“Greyson I…” I began, unsure of what else to say, but knowing one of us had to say something.

Greyson sighed. He turned to face me. Not ready to look at him just yet—partially out of embarrassment and partially out of fear that I’d immediately jump his bones—I looked up at the trees. I watched them sway gently in the breeze and forced myself to just keep breathing.

“Well, that wasn’t the way I’d envisioned this night going,” Greyson admitted, voice soft. “But I get it.” Gently, he took me by the chin and turned my face toward his. He leaned in and gave me a slow, gentle kiss. “I’ll wait until you’re ready,” he said softly. “I promise.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, relieved.

“But I’m warning you,” he added, a smile in his voice, “the longer we wait, the harder it’s going to be to resist what’s between us. We’re inevitable, love. It doesn’t matter how long we put it off, it’s going to happen. And when it does…”

I let out a small gasp in spite of myself. I didn’t want to give myself away, but his words hit me deep. He’d told me something I already knew, something I’d been fighting to deny since I’d met him. He knew me.

And that was terrifying.

Greyson rolled onto his back.

“It’s okay.” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than me. “They say abstinence makes the heart grow fonder, don’t they?”

I playfully shoved his shoulder as he chuckled. “That is NOT the saying and you know it.”

Then I felt anxiety tightening in my chest. “But do you think you’ll only wait for so long?”

Greyson just chuckled again. “Do you not understand what ‘inevitable’ means?”

“Of course I do,” I said, bristling.

“Then you have nothing to worry about.”

I bit down on my lower lip, worrying it between my teeth. I was glad to hear he wasn’t going to go out looking for other girls—or god forbid Joss—but his words were as thrilling as they were scary. I wished I had the time to sit with what he’d said. To process it. But being in such close proximity to him always put my thoughts through a blender.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Why don’t you get some sleep?” he said. “And don’t worry about ogres or trolls. If one dares try to mess with you, I’ll serve it up for breakfast.”

I giggled softly and scooted closer to him. I cupped his face between my hands, and I couldn’t keep my eyes off his lips. They were so close. Less than an inch of movement would have us kissing again. But instead, I just smiled.

“Thank you,” I told him. “For everything.”

I laid my head down on his chest and closed my eyes. The woods were quiet, and Greyson’s body was warm. It was the perfect combination for sleep. And I couldn’t help but think about that as I drifted off.

When I blinked myself awake in the morning, I was pleased to feel Greyson beside me. One of his arms was draped over me like a shield. I felt safe, warm, and completely peaceful.

Flashes of last night flooded my mind. I couldn’t believe how close we’d come to sleeping together. It was shocking to know I had the willpower to step back from that kind of precipice. I was actually a little proud of myself. He was a *man*. And a half. Whew.

I lifted Greyson’s arm and slid out of his grasp, careful not to wake him up. I clambered to my feet and stretched, feeling shockingly well rested after a night on the ground. Maybe Fae grass was softer than real-world grass.

I walked through the woods, wondering if Astrid and Torin were awake yet. I doubted I was the first one up. I tended to like my sleep more than most people.

I came upon Torin, sleeping sitting up against a tree. His gentle snores made me smile. Was it Astrid’s turn to watch for ogres?

I gently shook Torin’s shoulder, and he opened his eyes.

“Hey Cali.” He smiled sleepily. “What’s for breakfast?

Before I could answer, I heard a rustling on my right and saw Astrid hurrying into our clearing. Her arms were full of what I assumed had to be fruit, but they were all different colors, sizes, and shapes than what I was used to.

“Are those safe for us to eat?” I asked, mesmerized by the fruit of the Fae world.

Astrid scoffed. “They’d better be—I just bought them at the market.”

“What market?” Torin asked, sitting up straighter.

“It’s just over the hill.” Astrid pointed back over her shoulder. “There’s also a tea place if anyone’s interested.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised. “You guys have tea?”

“Of course,” Astrid said. “Want to go?”

But before I could answer her, I heard Greyson behind me. His heavy steps were unmistakable.

He cleared his throat. “Come on. Let’s get going.”

And, without stopping, he started walking.

I stared at his retreating back, stung. Wait. Had he seriously just not even looked at me? Was he angry about last night? Had all that ‘inevitable’ stuff just been bullshit to sleep with me?

Had I ruined everything between us?

**Episode 435**

XAVIER

I jumped out of the car while it was practically still moving and hurried over to the water’s edge. I looked out over the water. The surf was high and the crash of the waves against the rock was loud. Sea spray misted around me as I got closer.

I tried to shake the memory of my dream. The relief of seeing Cali. The confusion when she’d turned into Ava. The way their scents had mingled in the air around me, drowning me in grief and regret. Two relationships I had ruined. One I would never fix, and the other slipping out of my grasp, more and more every second. I had felt so rocked by seeing both of them that I’d let my guard down. And then came the pain. The shock and agony of the memory of Ava’s teeth sinking into my shoulder made me shudder.

But it was just a dream. I needed to focus on real life. On the relationship I could still save. On Cali.

Behind me, I heard the car doors slam shut. Gabriel and Mikah approached me, each standing at one of my shoulders. I tensed. I really didn’t want to hear them fighting anymore. It was starting to feel like foreplay, and that shit was private.

“It does kind of look like a fucking haystack, doesn’t it?” Gabriel mused. “Only without the hay. You know, ‘cause it’s a rock.”

“Gee,” Mikah snarked. “You can’t believe what you read—werewolves *are* deep.”

“Will you two shut the fuck up?” I snapped, feeling like an exhausted dad with a bunch of rowdy teenagers on a school trip. If those teenagers were really horny for each other. Maybe it was a less-than-perfect metaphor.

Almost as if he’d heard me think that, Colton picked that moment to stick his head out the window of the car.

“Is that the big rock?” he asked.

I flipped him the bird without looking back.

“It really looks like a haystack!” he called out, unbothered.

“Right?” Gabriel called back over his shoulder.

“A real meeting of the minds,” Mikah muttered under his breath.

I didn’t have time for this. I needed to find the entrance. Maybe there was some kind of secret cave over on the side. But even with my sensitive eyes, I couldn’t really make anything out through the fog that was rolling in.

“Looks like this is a wash,” Gabriel commented. “We’ll have to wait until the tide goes back out. Then we can get a better look.”

“I’m gonna stay in here,” Colton called from car. “Get some more beauty sleep. No way I’m gonna sleep out there and get sand up my ass. Never have sex on a beach, boys.”

“When he’s right, he’s right,” Gabriel clapped me on the shoulder before turning around to head back.

“Great, more time in the car,” Mikah grumbled, following suit.

“Do whatever the fuck you want,” I told them, bracing myself for the cold and stepping into the water so I could get a better look. “I’m going now.”

Gabriel guffawed at me. “Wait, are you actually going to get all wet?” he asked, incredulous.

“Dude are you in the water right now?” Colton called from the car. “What the fuck?”

“I didn’t come all this way to get scared off by a little water,” I called back. “If the two of you want to get back in the car and make out while my brother watches, go for it.”

Gabriel and Mikah groaned.

“Personally not my kink!” Colton yelled. “But thanks for the offer!”

I ignored them and waded out into the deepening surf. I clapped my hand over the pocket that held the blood and the snake tooth, protecting them from the water as I trudged forward.

The rock was completely obscured by the fog. Everything was white. I didn’t like being blind. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. But I knew that if I kept moving straight ahead, I couldn’t miss it. The water was up to my chest at this point so I just started to swim, my clothes billowing around me as they were saturated with water.

“Ugh, fuck it,” I heard Gabriel groan from behind me.

“Hold up, dude.” Colton sounded both closer and extremely annoyed. “We’re coming in too.”

But I kept swimming. I couldn’t wait and risk the current pulling me out of place. I had to keep my path straight so I could reach the haystack.

*Reach the haystack, find the entrance, use the tooth and the blood,* I chanted in my mind over and over again as I swam toward the rock. *Reach the haystack, find the entrance, use the tooth and the blood.*

I thought about what came next. Entering the Fae world. Would it look like our world, or would it be impossible to navigate? I saw a flash of my dream again, Ava charging at me in the woods. What if it was even worse I’d dreamed?

But I couldn’t think about that.

*Reach the haystack, find the entrance, use the tooth and the blood. Get to the Fae world, find Cali, deal with Greyson.*

Phrased like that, it almost seemed easy. I knew it wouldn’t be. Cali had a huge head start, and she could be anywhere. And once I found her, would she even want to see me? Or would Greyson have his claws in her so deep, there’d be nothing I could do?

The water got choppier, and I strained my eyes trying to see through the fog. But it was no use. I was totally blind at this point. I’d just have to swim until I ran into the rock.

*Reach the haystack, find the entrance, use the tooth and the blood. Get to the Fae world, find Cali, deal with Greyson. Keep her safe.*

I tightened my fist around the blood and the tooth. I couldn’t lose them. Without them, I’d come out here for nothing. They were the key to saving Cali. Because I had to save her. Greyson was dangerous. Even if she didn’t want me back, the least I could do was protect her from him.

I heard splashing behind me as the guys caught up.

“What’s the matter, bloodsucker?” I heard Gabriel taunting Mikah. “Can’t keep up with the werewolves?”

“I’m perfectly capable of keeping up,” Mikah snapped back.

And just then I felt my knee scrape up against something hard. I reached down, trying to figure out what I’d found. But then a wave slammed into me, smacking me against a hard surface. Haystack Rock.

I’d found it.

But now the ocean was walloping me into it repeatedly. My mouth was full of seawater and I coughed and spluttered, trying to right myself.

“Stay back, guys” I called out. “The current is—”

“Stupid fucking rock!” I heard Colton scream, a few feet to my right.

I couldn’t help but smile. Looked like he’d found it too.

I scrambled to get my footing, slipping and sliding against the rock until I managed to stay still. I climbed up onto the little island around the base of the rock.

I looked up at the rock, its face disappearing into a shroud of fog.

“Hey,” Gabriel called from beneath me and I snapped back to the present.

I reached down to offer my hand.

“This road trip fucking blows, man,” Gabriel grunted as I pulled him up.

Mikah was next, a pinched expression on his face. He looked like a cat in a bathtub, and if I’d liked the guy, maybe I’d have found it kind of endearing.

“We are waiting for low tide before we go back,” Colton yelled at me as I pulled him up last. “I am not going through that shit again!”

“Where do you think the entrance is?” Mikah asked me, ignoring everyone else.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m not even sure what it would look like.”

I wished I’d asked Nneka more about how to do this. But in fairness to me, she had been trying to murder me at the time.

What would Cali do?

What had she *done*? She’d gotten in. Maybe I just had to think like her. I started working my way around the rock, scouring its cold, slimy surface for an entrance. I didn’t know what it would look like, but maybe I’d know it when I saw it.

I paused for a second and sniffed. Maybe my nose could lead me there. I could smell the dirt and the salt and… Cali.

I took another deep breath. It was her. It was Cali—I knew her scent anywhere. Sweet and a hint of that eucalyptus mint shampoo she loved. I could follow her scent to the door. I shuffled around a corner of the rock and found it. A crevice. Cali’s scent didn’t go any further than there. This had to be the entrance!

“I found it!” I called out. Gabriel, Colton, and Mikah trudged over. They looked cold and pissed, but relieved to be out of the water. I could tell they weren’t happy with me, but I couldn’t have cared less.

I opened the vial of Cali’s blood as carefully as I could. Then I dripped some of it onto my palm and pressed it into the crevice as I held the tooth in my other hand. I closed my eyes tight and prayed for something to happen.