**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 6**

**Episodes 436-561**

**Episode 436**

GREYSON

I pressed on, trying as hard as I could not to think about last night. But Cali was so close. I could smell her, I could hear her, if I wanted to touch her I could just turn around and—

No.

*Fuck*.

I’d almost ruined everything last night.

When she’d kissed me back, I’d thought it had meant she wanted me. She’d held me so tightly, and she’d seemed to just melt into my touch. But had I only been seeing what I’d wanted to see?

That had to be the case, because clearly I’d misread the situation. I heard her voice in my head, *I can’t do this. I’m sorry.*

She’d sounded so nervous, so worried. What had she been scared of? Me? Had she felt like she couldn’t say no to me? I had to admit, it had been disorienting—in a lot of ways, the train had kind of left the station for me. But I had absolutely no fucking interest in having sex with people who weren’t into it. Full stop.

But what I couldn’t shake was why? Was it Xavier? Was my half-brother still clouding her judgement? Did she still have feelings for him? Or was she scared of what he’d do if he found out we were together? She knew I’d protect her, right? But maybe she was worried he’d hurt himself.

I heard Cali’s soft steps behind me as I continued to snowball. The huffing of her breathing as she navigated the uneven terrain was absurdly cute. As much as I wanted to walk at her side, to catch her if she tripped over a tree root and see her face as she took in the unusual flora and fauna of the Fae world, I kept my distance.

It was better this way. Not just for me, but for her. If someone attacked us or we came across something dangerous, then I would be the first one to face it. I’d be able to keep her safe. This way, I wouldn’t have to shove her out of danger—I could just take it on myself without worrying about her.

But I knew that was just an excuse to stay away. Because I wasn’t strong enough to be close to her. And since I didn’t want to crowd her, it meant I had to give her some space. Even if it sucked.

As much as I wanted her, I couldn’t pressure her. I wouldn’t. And the space could help with that. Because the closer I got, the more I wanted her. She blacked out my vision completely. When she was in front of me, she was all I could see, all I could smell, all I could hear. Life became a tunnel that she was at the end of.

And I couldn’t afford to be distracted like that. Not if I was going to keep her safe.

Maybe when all of this was over—when the danger was gone and we were back in our own world and her mother was safe—then maybe I could quench my thirst for her.

“We’re coming up on the mountains,” Torin piped up, ruining my train of thought.

“Yeah, I can see that,” I grunted, looking at the snowcapped mountains ahead of us.

I wished I could say Torin had grown on me. He had not. Maybe if I hadn’t been in a crisis, I would have appreciated his curious nature and enjoyed his positivity. But I doubted it.

Torin took a few steps toward me. Which I wished he wouldn’t do. Had I not done a good enough job coming across as taciturn and uninterested in friendship? Because if I tried any harder, I was probably going to have to hit the guy.

“So, what’s it like?” he asked me in a low, conspiratorial voice.

“What’s *what* like?” I asked, exasperated but prepared for another long question about what it was like to be a werewolf.

“You know,” he whispered, jerking his head back and nodding toward Cali. For a second, I wished I’d let him die at the hands of Nybor and her Merry Women.

“No, I don’t know,” I replied through clenched teeth.

“You’re a werewolf and she’s Fae,” Torin said. “Is it magical when you, *you know*—”

Before he could finish, I’d grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pulled him close. We were both still walking—I didn’t want Cali or Astrid to notice, but I wanted Torin to never forget.

“Stop poking your nose into things that don’t concern you,” I hissed at him in as quiet, forceful, and menacing a voice I could manage. “If you don’t”—I choked up my grip on his shirt—“I’ll rip your throat out and you’ll have a pretty hard time healing after that, don’t you think?”

Torin nodded and I released him.

“Do I make myself clear?” I asked, voice just as quiet.

Torin nodded frantically. I knew I shouldn’t have been happy to see him like this, but it felt nice to take out my frustrations on someone besides myself.

“Great,” I told him, grinning. “Good to know we see eye to eye.”

Torin fell back several steps as we continued forward, and I vowed to enjoy the peace and quiet I’d get in his absence.

While looking behind me, I caught a glimpse of Cali, who was talking with Astrid. Her cheeks were flushed from the walk and Astrid was smiling as Cali told her some story.

I wondered what they were talking about. Was it me? And why did I care?

I turned back around and tried to shake it off. I focused on the mountains ahead. The moon buttercup was supposed to be up there, according to Gunhild. And if she’d lied to us, I’d make her regret it. It would mean one less Fae in this world—maybe it would do everyone some good.

God, I hoped that our trip up the mountain would be easier than our journey to it. I didn’t know how many more chaotic run-ins with magical, ridiculous people I could take. But even though almost every moment of this trip had been a headache in one way or another, I was still really glad I’d come with Cali. Being here for her, keeping her safe, helping her save her mother… it felt right.

I just hoped that leaving Joss in charge of the pack wouldn’t come back to haunt me. Especially with Silas out there. We just had to make sure we made it back in time.

The path started to descend in front of us. I scanned the terrain ahead, my heightened senses on alert for any signs of danger. I considered shifting—my senses were better when I was a wolf. But a wolf the size of a bear did have the downside of attracting a lot of attention. For now, it didn’t seem worth it.

I heard Torin shuffle toward me. I turned and saw that his head was hanging low. Clearly, he was still afraid after our last interaction.

“Umm, excuse me Greyson—Mister… uhh sir?” he started to blush through his botched preamble and I almost felt bad for him. Maybe I’d been too hard on him.

“What?” I asked, not wanting to scare him, but hoping he’d get to the point sometime this century.

“There’s supposed to be a bridge up ahead.” He pointed out in front of us. “And last time we tried to cross a bridge, it didn’t exactly go great…”

I sighed, remembering the rope bridge debacle. It would be preferable not to end up almost drowning again. The memory of almost losing Cali in the water was still painful to think about.

Also, if I were posed with the choice to either keep moving or rescue Torin *again*,I didn’t know if I’d be able to bring myself to save his ass. And that would likely piss Cali off, so I didn’t especially want to reach that particular fork in the road.

I’d just have to keep us all as safe as possible. Wonderful.

I slowed as a covered bridge came into view. It looked more stable than the last one had, but I was still wary. I’d been in the Fae world long enough to know that there was always a catch.

I slowed down, and the others caught up to me. I tried not to be hyperaware of Cali’s presence, but I couldn’t get over how close she was. If I just reached—

“That looks a lot stronger than the last bridge,” she quipped. “Right guys?”

“It does,” Astrid agreed. “But that’s not what I’m worried about.”

I turned to look at her, confused. I saw out of the corner of my eye that Cali was doing the same thing.

“What should we be worried about?” I asked, hoping she was just about to tell me she was afraid of heights or something else equally benign.

Astrid looked to Torin, as if she didn’t want to say it. He was looking at me like a kicked puppy. “*Trolls*,” he answered.

**Episode 437**

I felt myself make my scrunched up confused face. The one I made so often during calculus senior year that my friends started taking pictures.

“Trolls?” I echoed.

My first association with that word was still the little pink- and purple-haired plastic figurines I used to play with as a kid. The ones that sat on top of your pencil. Obviously, those were nothing to be worried about. What kind of trolls were they talking about?

“Don’t mess with trolls,” Astrid advised, her voice serious. “Sure, some of them are super nice and sweet. But they can also be huge, nasty, and deadly.”

Well, I didn’t like the sound of that. Hadn’t we been through enough at this point? Why couldn’t any part of this just be EASY FOR GOODNESS SAKE?

Speaking of not being easy, I’d managed to keep myself from staring at Greyson this entire time. And I was actually pretty proud of that. Because he was very easy to stare at.

But I knew I couldn’t let myself do it. Because I’d drawn a line in the sand last night. And either he was ignoring me out of respect for that… or he was a total dick who was incapable of hearing the word *no* and therefore *deserved* to be ignored.

I looked at the wooden bridge. I didn’t see any trolls. But that didn’t mean they weren’t there.

“Is there some other way around?” I asked. “Maybe another bridge?”

Greyson took out the map and we all scanned it. Torin traced a finger along the river, searching for anything we hadn’t noticed before. I watched carefully, doing everything but crossing my fingers. But no luck.

“There’s not another bridge on this map,” Torin sighed. “Which doesn’t mean there might not be one, but… we probably can’t risk it, right?”

Greyson nodded. He stood up to his full height and his eyes got all steely. Like they did when he was about to really throw his Alpha weight around. It was incredibly hot, and I found myself thinking more and more about last night and the way his hands had felt under my shirt.

“I’ll cross first,” he said, running a hand through his tousled hair in a way that I worried might kill me. “If it’s safe, you guys can follow.”

“Greyson,” I croaked, my voice cracking.

He looked at me and I felt myself blush under his gaze. Of course I couldn’t just talk normally. I had to let on how affected I was by him. I cleared my throat and urged myself to, just for once, *be normal.*

“Thanks for offering,” I didn’t look at him because I couldn’t. “But I can’t—We can’t risk losing you.”

I watched him, hoping he’d realize that he couldn’t just keep throwing himself into danger and expect to keep on living. We had to find a way to do this together. But he only looked out at the bridge, and I couldn’t help but feel like he’d rather be anywhere but with me.

“I should cross first,” I said, clenching my fists. “We’re only here because of me. All of you have been so amazing, but I can’t keep asking you to risk your lives for me. It’s just not fair.”

“There’s no way we’re backing out right now,” Astrid argued.

“We won’t just leave you,” Torin insisted.

“Shut up,” Greyson snapped at all of us.

I looked up at him, hurt that he’d yelled. His face softened.

“I’m sorry, I just…” He took a deep breath. “If there’s something under the bridge, we don’t want it to hear us.”

I nodded, appreciating that he just wanted to protect us. I admired that about him, the way he always looked after people. I just wished he wouldn’t be so rigid about it all the time.

“I’ll go first,” he told me, his gaze hard.

I reached out to grab him, to keep him from moving. It wasn’t until I touched him that I realized it was the first time I’d touched him since I’d crawled out from under his arm that morning. A sigh of pleasure almost escaped my lips when my fingers brushed against his skin. He was so warm and solid. Blood rushed to my cheeks when I remembered exactly how warm and how solid he was too…

But Greyson stepped back and tugged his arm out of my grasp. I felt a lump form in my throat. Did he really hate me touching him that much?

“I can’t allow that,” he told me.

“You can’t *allow* it?” I echoed, anger licking up my spine. I didn’t want to let my personal feelings get in the way, but I didn’t like being told what I could and couldn’t do. That was what had destroyed my relationship with Xavier. I’d thought Greyson was different.

“We have to go together,” I insisted. “It’s the only way this can work.”

“I agree,” Astrid said forcefully.

“Me too,” Torin said, much quieter than normal.

Greyson grumbled something that sounded like, “Fine.”

“There’s safety in numbers!” Astrid offered, smiling at me. I grinned back, happy to have her support.

“Then it’s settled.” I tried not to gloat, but probably didn’t succeed. “All for one and one for all.”

I set off toward the bridge, but then I felt Greyson’s unmistakable grip on my arm. My heart pounded at his touch.

I turned back to look at him, ready for a fight, but I was surprised to see that he was gazing at me earnestly. His brow furrowed, he wordlessly begged me not to go.

But if he cared about me that much, how could I let him risk himself for me? Didn’t he understand that I couldn’t bear to see him get hurt too? He couldn’t keep adding to the debt I owed him. If we were ever going to be able to actually try to pursue something real, I wanted us to be equals when we did it. I didn’t want to owe him something I could never pay back.

“Get out of my way,” I told him, as kindly as I could.

His grip on my arm loosened, but he didn’t fully let go. I decided that would have to be enough. I slid out of his grasp and made my way to the bridge.

After a few steps, he was at my side, walking with me. Silent, but there. Though I didn’t let it show, I felt relief wash over me. I didn’t want him risking his life alone, but I still wanted him by my side when I faced the trolls.

We slowed down as we reached the gravel road that led to the bridge. It was hard to see past the first few feet of the entrance. What if the trolls were hiding just out of sight? Waiting to pounce?

I looked around for a weapon. Maybe a big stick or a rock? But there was nothing but gravel. I wondered if it would be smart to grab a handful to throw in a troll’s face if it messed with us. That would be something, right?

“Okay guys,” Torin murmured, almost as if he knew I was freaking out. “*If* there are any trolls, and they’re mean—which they might not be—but just in case... Please remember I have healing powers. Just in case, okay?”

“Thanks Torin.” I was so grateful to have him with us.

And maybe any trolls we encountered *would* be nice! Maybe all of Astrid and Torin’s worries were based on awful stereotypes about the troll community. Maybe they were a peaceful people who would let us pass politely and without incident.

But given our luck, they were probably flesh-eating murderers. Rude.

Needing comfort, I looped my arm through Greyson’s. He looked down at me, surprised, but didn’t pull away. I was glad. I really needed him right now.

Seeing what I had done, Astrid linked arms with me on my other side. Torin linked arms with her. Together, we made a chain. And something about that made me feel like we were a little safer together than we were apart. Also like I was in *The* *Wizard of Oz*, but I was trying to not bring that up.

I took a big step forward and the others followed suit. We pressed forward, moving as one. I watched the bridge carefully as we moved toward it. It was made of wood, but it looked much more solid than our last bridge. Thank god.

I placed my foot on it and felt it creak. It continued to groan under the weight of my friends as they joined me. Luckily, the bridge was wide enough for us to move in unison. We walked slowly but surely across the bridge, and no trolls appeared out of nowhere to stop us.

Maybe we’d make it.

And maybe I’d just jinxed us by thinking that.

“HALT!” called a booming voice. “OR I’LL FEAST ON YOUR BONES!”

And then a troll emerged out of the darkness. It was huge and grey, with scaly skin that almost looked like stone. And it was lumbering right toward us.

**Episode 438**

XAVIER

*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 waited, eyes squeezed shut, teeth gritted, muscles tense. The cold water was sapping all the warmth from my body as I stood there with a snake fang clenched in one hand and my ex-girlfriend’s blood smeared on my other and tried to make magic happen through sheer force of will.

But nothing was happening. No bright lights as the rock split open to reveal a magical portal. No delicate, magical harp music welcoming me into the Fae world.

Just the sound of the surf crashing against the rock, the feeling of me freezing my ass off, and the cold, unrelenting, stone surface of Haystack Rock staring back at me like the immovable object it was.

*Reach the haystack, find the entrance, use the tooth and the blood. Stand there like an idiot, begging the universe to let you through the door. Never get into the Fae world. Lose Cali to your traitorous asshole of a half-brother and die knowing that you failed, that you lost the two loves of your life and each time it was no one’s fault but your own.*

There had to be another way.

“What the *fuck?”* I punctuated the last word by slapping the rock as hard as I could, as if that would crack it open. I slid my bloody palm against it. Trying one spot, then another, then another. Should I rub the snake tooth in the blood? Should I try to fit the tooth into the crevice?

But no matter what I tried, nothing happened. The rock just sat there. Huge and immobile and unyielding. Daring me to keep standing here and trying.

*Reach the haystack, find the entrance, use the tooth and the blood. Fail miserably. Drown yourself in the ocean because what is the point of living beyond this?*

“No,” I murmured, scraping my fingers raw against the rock’s unforgiving surface. “No no no no no no NO!”

I couldn’t give up. There had to be a way to get in with what I had. I didn’t have time to go find another witch or Fae to help me. If I did that, Greyson and Cali would definitely get together in the time it took. Or he could hurt her. I had to get to her now.

I couldn’t let her go. Wouldn’t. I had to find her, help her, tell her everything. That I’d been wrong. That I should have listened, should have been more honest with her, should have told her how much she meant to me. Told her I’d be lost without her. Because I was.

Panic wrapped its arms around my chest and squeezed. I gasped for air, feeling like I couldn’t take a proper breath. I punched at the rock, tearing my knuckles to shreds. Why wouldn’t it let me *in?* I’d followed the rules—it was supposed to work.

I kicked at the rock, pissed and scared. I was losing control, but I couldn’t help it. I didn’t know what else to do. I felt hands on me, pulling me back. I heard someone who sounded like Colton telling me to calm down, that we’d figure it out. But there wasn’t *time*.

“Fuck off!” I yelled, punching him in the face. Knocking him and Gabriel into the water.

“Xavier.” Mikah’s voice was clear and even, and I could tell he was trying to calm me down. “You need to listen to me—”

But I was beyond helping.

“Out of my way!” I yelled, shoving him into Gabriel, who almost stumbled back into the water. I felt a pang of guilt as I watched Mikah grab onto him and help him right himself. I shouldn’t have done that. It wasn’t their fault this wasn’t working. But I couldn’t think straight.

“It’s not working, X.” Gabriel’s eyes were somber. For once, he wasn’t dicking around. He wasn’t taking any pleasure in telling me this.

I stared at my bloody hands. I knew he was right. My chest was heaving like I’d run a marathon. I felt like breaking down and sobbing. I felt like the scared little boy my father had hated.

“The snake tooth must be fake,” Gabriel continued, his voice still measured and meant to soothe me. “Or that’s not Cali’s blood.”

I knew he was right, but the hopelessness was killing me. Every second that ticked by was another second Cali was with Greyson. Another second that anything could be happening to her.

“You’re letting your feelings for her fuck with your judgement,” Gabriel added. “And that’s no good. We’ve got to be smart, here.”

“We need to get off this shitty rock, get back to the car, and figure out what to do,” Colton chimed in. “Cali’s still the priority. We’ll just think better when we’re not freezing our balls off.”

I turned to Mikah, rage sparking inside of me. Why the fuck was he even here? He wasn’t part of this.

“Your Fae ‘friend’ lied,” I snarled. “This fucking tooth is bullshit, and it wasted all our time.”

“Don’t blame me,” Mikah spat, his hair still dripping with sea spray. “I had no idea.”

I shoved past him and made my way back toward the shore. I swam, hoping to burn the anger off with every stroke of my arms. But nothing changed. I was furious.

*Reach the haystack, find the entrance, use the tooth and the blood. Find out they’re both bullshit. Get a new artifact and possibly new blood. Go back to the haystack. Get into the Fae world only to find that Cali and Greyson are married with five kids.*

I wished I could claw my way into the Fae world. But I knew it didn’t work that way. I had to follow the rules.

We were silent as we reached the shore. The guys knew better than to talk to me when I was this mad. I started toward the car and was surprised to see a uniformed cop there, writing a ticket on his little clipboard.

“Hey,” I barked, storming up to him. “What are you doing?”

The cop looked at me from behind his aviators and placed his hand on his hip. His fingers resting on the handle of his gun, a clear act of intimidation. Little did he know, I had all the power in this situation.

“You’re in a no-parking zone,” he told me, indicating a nearby sign. “So I’m giving you a ticket.”

Colton opened his mouth to argue, but Gabriel pulled him back.

“We can deal with it later,” he muttered.

“Can y’all not read?” the cop asked, looking at our soaked clothing. “First you ignore the ‘No Parking’ sign, then the ‘No Swimming’ one? What exactly are you doing out here?”

And that was when I hit my boiling point. I growled menacingly and straightened to my full height. I wanted to scare him. I wanted to make him shrink into nothingness. If I couldn’t make the rock yield, I’d make *him* yield. Maybe then I’d feel less like a scared little kid.

“You’d better get in your car and get the fuck out of here,” I threatened.

The cop took out his flashlight and shone it in my eyes. “What did you say, sir?” he shouted, trying to regain the upper hand. But I wasn’t afraid.

Unable to restrain myself for another second, I lunged for the cop. But somehow, I ran smack into Mikah instead. I shook my head. He must have moved himself in between me and the asshole giving us a ticket.

“Get out of my way, bloodsucker,” I hissed.

Mikah shook his head, his gaze steely. “This has gone far enough,” he told me through clenched teeth.

Gabriel and Colton charged past us, each grabbing one of the cop’s arms to prevent him from going for his gun. They pinned him to our car. He wrestled against them, but was no match for their superior strength.

I shook out of Mikah’s grasp and turned to the cop. I’d have been lying if I’d said I wasn’t hungry for blood. I was angry, and this was the perfect person to take that anger out on.

I longed to rip him to shreds. How *dare* he get between me and Cali?

How had everything gotten so fucked up? It was like every moment I was away from Cali, my life got worse and worse. Now I was here and she was with *Greyson?*

My stomach twisted at the thought of them together. Were they sleeping together now? I wanted to puke. The idea of it was just *wrong*.

And this cop thought I was just going to let that happen?

I grabbed him by the throat and lifted him off the ground. He kicked jerkily at the air.

I could vaguely feel Gabriel and Colton pulling at me, telling me to let him go. But I shut them out. There was no fucking way I was stopping. Someone had to pay, and this human was both irritating and close at hand.

And then a cold blade was pressed against my throat.

“If you move,” Mikah said, “I’ll kill you.”

**Episode 439**

My jaw dropped as the troll lumbered toward us. It was at least ten feet tall, with large, bulbous limbs exposed by the torn, toga-like dress it was wearing. I assumed the troll was female, judging by her huge breasts and long, oily hair. She stopped several feet away, but still close enough that I had to crane my neck to look up at her. Close enough that a scent that reminded me of rotten garbage on a hot summer day filled my nose.

*Hashtag feminism? Lady trolls can smell bad too?*

A light breeze blew past, and I got a nose-full of said lady troll.

“Hurp.” I gagged.

The troll slammed a spiked wooden club into the floor of the bridge, making the whole thing shake and threaten to buckle. Clouds of dust wafted up around us, and I coughed on both the filthy air and scent of the troll.

*It’s like if Pig-Pen had a baby with a giant.*

I coughed again, my eyes watering, and forced myself to look up into the troll’s eyes. She glared back at me and bared huge, blackened, crooked teeth. Maybe this was just a misunderstanding. It was probably tough living in the Fae world and facing down Dark Fae all the time. Maybe if we explained that we weren’t any kind of threat, the troll would back down?

“Excuse me.” I coughed again and banged on my chest. Then I drew in a huge gulp of troll-tainted air and gagged. “M-my name is C-Cali.” *Don’t vomit, don’t vomit, don’t vomit*. “These are my friends, Greyson, Astrid, and Torin. We mean you no harm. We’d just like to cross the bridge to get to the mountain, please.”

The troll growled at us, and Greyson stepped in front of me. His body language promised violence, but that was exactly what I was trying to avoid. I put a hand on his chest and eased myself back in front of the group. “We’re not going to hurt you or anyone else. Will you please let us pass?”

The troll just raised her club again, snarling and pointing right at me. “Trespassers!”

I shook my head. “But we’re—”

Then she swung her club at me, so close I could feel the air rushing past my face. “Holy shit! Are you crazy?” I stumbled back—smack into Greyson’s warm, hard body. He helped me stand upright and then let go of me, and I immediately missed his warmth. Things hadn’t been the same between us since last night, and I didn’t know how to fix it.

*Not the time, Cali*.

Greyson stepped in front of me and glanced back at the group. “Stand back.”

My eyes widened. “What are you going to do?”

He rolled his eyes. “What do you think I’m going to do? Ask her to dance?” He turned back to the troll. “Want to tango?”

The troll spat on the bridge, a greenish lump of mucus. I felt my breakfast sliding back up my throat. I slapped my hands over my mouth. *Don’t vomit, don’t vomit…*

I glared at the troll. “That’s really gross!” Then I shifted my gaze to Greyson, carefully avoiding looking at the lump of troll loogie on the ground in front of us. “If you think you’re going to shift and fight her, forget it!” Sure, he was one of the strongest werewolves I’d ever met, but this was a mother-freaking ten-foot lady troll! I wasn’t sure that even his strength was a match for her.

“Should we let her club us to death?” he asked. “Which one us of will be first?”

“Why are you being such an ass?” I demanded.

Torin gently prodded my shoulder. “Um, guys, maybe now’s not the time to bicker like an old married couple?”

“We’re not married!” I snapped. We weren’t even mates. Not really. The thought twisted my stomach, and I didn’t know why.

“You’ve made that very clear already,” Greyson muttered. I didn’t think I was supposed to hear it. What was his problem? Was his ego so badly bruised after last night that he didn’t want me anymore?

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves. “You can’t just shift and attack everyone who gets in our way!”

“That *would* be cool to see though,” Torin chimed in.

Astrid shook her head. “Chill, man. Read the room.”

The troll slammed the club against the bridge again, and I yelped and grabbed onto the handrail. “Can you please stop doing that?”

“Quiet!” The troll snapped. “This is my bridge, and I’m in charge!”

I took a deep breath, and immediately regretted it. Did the Fae world not have deodorant? I slowly approached the troll, looking up at her. “What do you want in exchange for allowing us to pass?”

She scowled down at me, then glared at my friends. “You ask that, yet none of you look like you have anything to offer.” She scoffed. “Have you any gold?”

Oh. “Um.” I glanced back at Torin and Astrid, who stared back at me with sheepish expressions. Greyson just rolled his eyes. I turned back to the troll. “No, we don’t.”

“Typical.” The troll huffed. “What about cows? Sheep?”

“Do we look like shepherds?” Astrid drawled. “Do you see any livestock?”

The troll eyed us with utter disdain. “You’re absolutely worthless. Fine. What *do* you have to offer?”

Greyson growled under his breath. “Let me rip her to pieces so we can get the flower.”

Yeah, that was *not* going to happen. “How about we entertain you?” I asked the troll.

“Have you lost your mind?” Greyson hissed at me.

“Maybe she’s lonely and bored. She’s out here all alone, right? We could sing or something. I’ve seen *Glee*. I could probably do it.”

Greyson shook his head. “I don’t sing for trolls.”

Torin stepped forward a wide grin on his face. “I love to sing!” He drew in a deep breath and began to sing in a surprisingly rich tenor.

“When I came ‘cross the berries red,

My tongue began to cheer.

I picked them from the thorny bush,

My hunger’s end was near.”

Wow. He was *not* terrible. He should go on *The Voice*. He even made hand gestures to accompany the lyrics, and I could almost see the berries he was singing about.

“My teeth sank in, the juice so sweet,

But my luck, she took a turn.

For those sweet gems took out their trowels,

To plant me in my urn—”

“Stop!” The troll groaned, her huge hands covering her ears. “You’re poisoning my ears!”

I sighed. If she didn’t like Torin’s singing—easily the best thing we had available—then we were sunk. “We don’t have anything to offer, do we?” I asked my friends.

“You know my vote,” Greyson murmured. He never took his eyes off the troll.

I sized up the troll. She was huge. Tall and bulky—but maybe that would just slow her down? Could we outrun a troll? How fast could a troll run?

“Since you have nothing to offer,” the troll said. “I won’t allow you to pass.”

I’d known it was coming, but her words still sent panic rushing through me. We were so close! We’d been through hell to get to this damned mountain, and now this troll bitch thought she could just send us on our way? “You’re just a mean troll!” I yelled. “We need to get through! It’s a matter of life and death!”

“Speaking of death,” Greyson drawled. “We could end this right now.”

“No! There must be a way to get by without killing her.” Or, more likely, getting caught and watching as she ripped Greyson limb from limb.

“Which is more important, the troll’s life or your mother’s?” he pressed. “Because that’s what this all comes down to.”

I spun around and glared at him. “How can you be so cruel and heartless?”

“You’re doing it again,” Torin whispered. “Bicker, bicker, bicker.”

“SHUT UP!” Astrid and I screamed in unison.

Greyson just ignored Torin, never taking his eyes off of me. “Come on, Cali. You of all people know I’m here because of you. To help you get that flower.”

I swallowed roughly and looked away. I knew he was right; he’d been there for me from the very beginning, and he’d never left. I turned to the troll, giving her my best puppy-dog eyes. “Isn’t there something we can do? We really need to go up the mountain.”

The troll lumbered over and sized us up. The smell only got worse—partially from proximity and partially because I could feel her hot, smelly breath washing over us. God, had something crawled inside her mouth and died?

She muttered as she looked us over. Torin was “too skinny”, Astrid was “too sweet”, and Greyson was “probably meaty, but tough”. Then she stopped and stared at me. “Maybe annoying, but you’ll do.”

“What?” I gasped. “I’ll do what?”

The troll shoved her meaty finger in my face. “You’ll stay with me.”

**Episode 440**

XAVIER

“What the fuck are you doing?” I hissed at Mikah. The cold blade pressed hard against my throat, the pressure as sharp as possible without actually breaking my skin. I wanted to rip that traitorous vampire’s head clean off, but I knew if I made one wrong move, I’d probably end up with silver poisoning—or worse.

I shifted my furious gaze to Gabriel. “I knew we shouldn’t have trusted this bloodsucker.”

“Mikah,” Colton said, his voice deceptively soft, like he was trying to soothe a wild animal—even though he wasn’t far from one himself. He gripped the cop tightly. “If you don’t back the fuck up, I’m going to turn Mr. Law and Order into confetti. You understand me?”

The cop let out a scream, but Colton’s hand covered his mouth before it could carry.

“Shut up!” Gabriel snapped at the terrified human. He turned to Mikah, his eyes narrowed on the vampire. “No matter what you do to Xavier, you’ll still be outnumbered. Two against one.”

The vampire just laughed. “So the odds will still be very much in my favor.”

The blade pressed more tightly against my neck, and I breathed shallowly. I glanced around, my heart thumping in double-time as I looked for an opportunity to move, to break the bloodsucker’s hold without signing my own death certificate. I shifted in Mikah’s grip and let out a shuddering breath when the knife came just short of slicing.

Shit. He was serious.

“If you kill me, there will be a target on your back,” I tried, my voice weak and breathy. I’d never felt so vulnerable before, so conquered. One tiny wrong move and I was done. Mikah knew just as well as I did, the bastard.

Mikah snorted and shook his head. “You’re so naïve. I’ve been a vampire for a long, long time. There’s always been a target on my back; you and your precious pack aren’t special.” He leaned in closer, his breath washing over the shell of my ear. I fought the urge to shudder. “But this isn’t about me, Xavier. This is about you, and how you think you can just go around killing whomever you want, justified or not, without ramifications. I know you killed Tony—and now you're ready to do it again. I won’t allow that to happen.”

Where did this vamp get off, taking the high road? The humans he seemed so hell bent on protecting were actually his main food group. I’d be the first to admit that werewolves weren’t the safest bunch, but it wasn’t like we actually hunted and drained humans like Mikah’s kind.

Yeah, I’d killed Tony. And I didn’t feel an ounce of remorse. He'd touched Cali without her consent. He would have hurt Cali. He’d *wanted* to hurt Cali. And I was never going to allow that to happen. I’d kill him again and not lose sleep over it.

“And here I thought we were getting to like one another.” Gabriel moved just a little bit closer, stopping when Mikah glared at him.

“You’re such a fucking hypocrite,” I spat, careful not to move, even though I was practically vibrating with adrenaline and fury. “You’re not some hero or supernatural vigilante. You’re a bloodsucker. How the hell do you justify it when you feed on people? Or, let me guess, when it’s dinnertime, your morals don’t quite mean so much? You call it survival of the fittest? If that’s the case, you’re about to find out that you’re the weak link in the chain.”

“Nice touch, bro,” Colton said. “But everybody needs to calm the fuck down. How about this? We won’t kill the cop”—the human in his grip whined—“and you won’t kill my brother. Will that satisfy you, you fucking amateur Dracula?”

There was a long pause, during which I swore I could feel the blade begin to sink through my skin. No, I couldn’t let this vamp kill me. We’d come too far, been through too much for the journey to end here. Finally, Mikah eased up the slightest bit, though he still kept me at knifepoint.

“What do you have in mind, wolfboy?” Mikah drawled.

“Why don’t you start by putting the goddamn knife down?” I snapped.

“*If* I put the knife down and let you go, will you all calm the fuck down?” Mikah asked.

I gritted my teeth. “Yes.”

Colton nodded. “Of course.”

“Undecided,” Gabriel drawled. “But sure.”

Finally, I felt the knife’s silver edge moving away from my exposed throat. I took in a big gulp of air, breathing properly for the first times in several minutes.

The cop’s eyes were wide as saucers, and he tried to say something behind Colton’s hand.

“Shut up,” Gabriel hissed.

Slowly, carefully, Mikah stepped back, putting some much-needed space between himself and the trio of pissed off werewolves. But if he thought I wasn’t going to retaliate, then he was dumber than he looked.

I didn’t hesitate to lunge at him, shoving him back and following up with punches to his stomach and face. To his credit, he recovered quickly and threw a right hook that I never saw coming. Pain lanced up the side of my jaw and I snarled, jumping out of his reach when he came at me with another jab.

We stared at each other, circling with fire in our eyes. Gabriel might have liked to think we were becoming friends with Mikah, but the truth was, that wouldn’t be happening anytime soon, if ever. My anger began to wane, and our circling slowed. We watched each other warily, but the red haze was beginning to recede from my vision. Suddenly, instead of fury and bloodlust, I just felt tired.

As much as I wanted to rip Mikah’s head clean off, that wouldn’t help me find Cali. None of this was getting me any closer to her. I needed to refocus.

“Come on, Xavier!” Colton called. “You can take him. Show him who’s the dominant species!”

I came to a halt and waved him off. “Not today.”

“Bummer.” Gabriel sighed. “I wouldn’t have minded seeing Mikah get staked.” He nodded back to the cop, who looked like he was going to pass out from fear. “But what about him?”

Laughing, Colton shoved the cop forward. “Maybe vampy would like a little taste of blue blood?”

“Enough,” Mikah said. He looked tired, too—maybe even more so than me. “I’m tired of your jokes. They’re not even good.”

“Then what do you have in mind?” Gabriel asked. “Put him on ice for a late-night snack?”

Mikah pushed past me and stepped in front of the cop. The human shied away, but Mikah grabbed his face and forced him to meet his eyes. “I need you to look into my eyes, and if you blink even once, I’ll turn you over to these murderers,” Mikah said, his voice soft, betraying the gruesome threat in his words. “Understood?”

The cop nodded in terror, and Mikah swooped in, moving within inches of the cop to stare directly into his eyes.

“Are you going to kiss him?” Gabriel asked. “The suspense is killing me.”

Colton snorted. “Jealous?”

Mikah didn’t look away from the cop. “If any of you say one more thing, I *will* rip your throats out.”

Gabriel chuckled, but didn’t say anything else.

The vampire leaned in even closer to the human, so they were almost nose to nose, staring into each other’s eyes.

I frowned. This was getting weird, even for us. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Mikah waved me off. “I’m erasing his memory. He won’t remember anything about this encounter.”

Colton leaned over to me and whispered, “Can he actually do that?”

Mikah broke away from the human with a shuddering breath. “I just did. Hello, Officer, thank you so much for the directions. We got really turned around.”

The cop blinked at us, clearly confused and disoriented. “Um, no problem. Have a nice night.” He stumbled to his police cruiser and drove off, leaving us alone.

Gabriel’s eyebrows lifted. “That was impressive. Good job, Mike.”

Mikah eyed him, nodding slightly, and then leaned hard against the car.

“Oh, he doesn’t look so good,” Colton said.

I had to agree. Mikah had looked tired before, but now he looked completely wiped out from whatever the hell he’d done to that human.

“It can be… draining, to erase someone’s memories,” Mikah mumbled.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Thanks for doing that. I’m sorry, I, uh, lost my cool back there.”

“Why don’t we hit the road and head back to the house?” Colton suggested.

“Oh, yeah. Maybe we can snag a witch on the way who can actually help us get into the Fae world,” Gabriel added.

I blew out a breath. “Yeah, maybe. But I’ve kind of had it with witches.”

I slid into the back seat of the car with Mikah next to me and Gabriel in the front passenger seat. I couldn’t help but feel defeated. We’d gone to all that trouble with Lottie, going out to Haystack Rock, and nothing. Nothing at all. And there was no way to even let Cali know I was coming for her. I would find her. I had to.

Colton hopped back into the driver’s seat, and as we pulled out of the beach parking lot, Mikah collapsed against my shoulder. I shoved him off. “Back off, man.”

Horror shot through me as Mikah suddenly turned on me, his eyes red and his fangs glistening.

**Episode 441**

I shoved the troll’s meaty finger away. What the hell did she mean, I was staying with her? NO fucking way in hell would I be staying HERE of all places.

“I’m not going to be your hostage!” I said. “I need to go up the mountain!”

The troll snarled at me, her hot, sour breath making me gag. “You stay!”

“No!” Maybe I *could* try to outrun her. It couldn’t hurt. It would be better than sticking around and breathing in rotten troll on this bridge until the end of time.

Torin stepped up, his eyes wide and guileless. “Take me, Lady of the Bridge.”

Astrid pushed him out of the troll’s reach. “No, take me!”

I stared at the two of them. We’d only known each other a few days, but they’d dropped everything to try to help me find the moon buttercup and save my mom. They’d put their lives in danger, they’d been taken captive by the Dark Fae, and they’d almost been executed. They were some of the best friends I’d ever had, willing to sacrifice everything for someone they barely knew. And now they were tripping over each other to offer themselves up to this nasty troll?

Tears filled my eyes. What had I done to deserve these two?

“Take them both!” Greyson snapped. “I don’t care, but don’t you dare touch Cali.”

I spun on him with a growl. “Are you really going to pull that bullshit again?” After all the time we’d spent fighting about it, how could he still be so heartless? Was he actually this cold and cruel, or was he just stupid? I thought I’d made it clear that I wouldn’t tolerate him tossing my friends aside. Which part of that was so damn confusing for him?

I spun back to the troll, a new determination straightening my spine. She wasn’t taking me—or my friends. “Why do you even want me?” God, I hoped she didn’t want to eat me.

The troll smiled. “Company. We can hang out.”

Oh. Well then. That was surprising, but it still wasn’t gonna happen. There was no way I was wasting any more time hanging out with a club-wielding troll on some old bridge in the middle of the Dark Fae territory. What would we even talk about? Maybe I could introduce her to soap, or some kind of Fae world Febreze?

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I… I don’t know your name?”

“They call me Heather,” she grunted.

*Heather*? I’d been expecting something more along the lines of Astrid or Gunhild. Something strong like ‘Urgha’, or something guttural that sounded kind of like a cat clearing its throat. But *Heather?* A classic mean girl name? All right. I could work with that.

“Well, Heather,” I continued, “here’s the damage: I’d love to hang out with you, but the fact is, I can’t. I have plans.”

Heather’s eyes narrowed. “If you have nothing to offer, then you will stay.” She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world—a truth universally acknowledged rather than the stubborn blackmail of a murderous stink monster.

*Cool it, Cali. That stink monster has a name.*

Still, there had to be something I could offer. After everything we’d been through, all the magical creatures we’d met, had we really not picked up *anything* that could help? I wished I’d managed to snag one of Spout’s cupcakes before we’d crawled out of the well. Heather probably would have loved it.

The only thing of value I had, technically, was my pendant. But as soon as the thought occurred to me, I felt sick for even considering it. No way would I give up my mother’s necklace. Not for anything. I’d take the long way around to the mountain through the fires of hell before I handed over that pendant. But what about the gem that Grandma Wrenthorn had given me? Rose quartz had to be something special here—especially since it glowed when the Dark Fae were near. Except, that was exactly why I needed to hold onto it. It had helped us before, and it would surely help us again before our journey was over. What else did I have?

Oh, what about the water the ondines had given me? They’d said I’d know when to use it, hadn’t they?

I reached into my satchel and pulled out the vial of water, holding it out to Heather. “How about this?”

“What are you doing?” Greyson demanded.

“Trust me,” I whispered. “The ondines said I’d know when to use it, so… I don’t know. Now seems as good a time as any!”

Heather leaned closer to study the vial. “What is it? Is it a magic potion? Can it add sparkles to my hair? Will I be able to predict the future?”

“All of that, and more!” I said with a grin, doing my best to imitate the actors I’d seen on infomercials. *And it’s all yours for one low payment of letting us get the fuck off this bridge!* Heather leaned in even closer, almost bent in half, her giant form blocking out the sun over my head. I yanked the vial back. “But only if you agree to let us pass unharmed.”

Heather eyed me skeptically. How did a lone troll in the middle of east Jesus nowhere get to be shrewd? It wasn’t like she could be getting tons of visitors.

“It looks like plain water,” Heather said.

I swallowed roughly, but maintained that icky salesman’s smile. “Looks can be deceiving.”

Next to me, I heard Greyson snort, and I glanced over at him. Case in point. How long ago was it that I’d thought he was just a Rogue? Scary and intimidating and ready to betray just about anyone to get what he wanted? Yeah, he was still intimidating sometimes, and we were still working on the whole ‘not giving Astrid and Torin up to every bad guy we came across’ thing, but there was definitely more to him than met the eye.

“If this turns out to be ordinary water,” Heather warned me, “I’ll make soup out of all of you.”

I grimaced. “That’s pretty gross, Heather.”

She shrugged.

Greyson growled, clearly ready to attempt to rip the troll to pieces, but I placed a hand on his shoulder. We were so close to getting off this bridge and moving on with our journey. “This is my final offer, Heather. The vial for our passage. Do we have a deal?”

The troll reached out and snatched the vial from my hand. “Deal!”

But she stayed exactly where she was—blocking our way.

“Uh, excuse me!” I called up to her. “We need to get going.”

Heather shoved a hand into our path. “Hold on. I want to see what this water does.”

Shit. “Um, that wasn’t part of the deal.”

Greyson shook his head. “I’ve had about enough of this.” He took a step toward the troll. “You got what you wanted, now get the hell out of our way.”

Heather didn’t seem even remotely intimidated by what I liked to call Greyson’s ‘scary murder voice’. She kept one hand stretched out in front of us, blocking the way. “I’m making sure I didn’t get ripped off. Fae can be deceitful.”

“Hey! I’m not deceitful!” Except I *had* kind of lied to her about the ondine water. I had no idea what it did. I imagined myself opening up one of those gigantic, leather-bound dictionaries and flipping to ‘D’. And there, next to ‘deceitful’ would be a picture of me, smiling sheepishly, holding an empty vial while an enraged and smelly troll raised her club behind me—

*Get it together, Cali!*

Okay, so maybe I wasn’t, like, the Mother Teresa of the Fae. Or the half-Fae. Whatever. But what choice did I have? Besides, I didn’t know that the water *wasn’t* magical. Maybe it would make her sparkle or something.

Heather pulled the stopper from the vial and sniffed at the contents.

I tensed as I watched her. Would something happen? If the ondines had gone to the trouble of giving me the vial, that had to mean the water did something, right? They wouldn’t have just sent me on my way with a glass tube of ye olde H2O. Probably. Heather *had* said that the Fae were deceitful. Mikah had practically said the same too. Maybe the ondines had lied to me…

No, I couldn’t think like that. Not when I needed to push through for my mother. The vial had to do something.

Heather’s eyelids began to flutter, and she dropped the vial and the stopper back into my hand.

“What’s happening?” I demanded.

Heather broke into a huge smile, and her body jerked.

“Is she having a laughing fit?” Astrid asked. “Or maybe some kind of stroke?”

“Heather, do you smell toast?” Torin called, his hands cupped around his mouth.

The troll didn’t answer. Instead, her eyes rolled back into her enormous head and she wobbled left and right—and then, without warning, pitched forward.

“Timber!” Torin shouted, yanking Astrid out of the way of the falling behemoth.

Greyson slammed into me, shoving me out of Heather’s path. My hands burned as I skidded across the ground, and I watched in horror as Greyson was crushed beneath the massive troll.

**Episode 442**

MAYA

I paused in front of the pack house, watching as Lola lovingly wrapped her arms around Jay and pulled him in for a kiss. Those two were disgustingly lovey-dovey on a good day, so I shouldn’t have been surprised by their face sucking and constant need to touch each other. I also probably shouldn’t have been staring like it was some new, interesting experience. If I wanted to see ‘*Jayla*’ in action, I just had to walk through the pack house with my eyes open on any given day.

The two of them were disgusting, almost a spectacle. And yet… I couldn’t help but wonder what that was like—to have someone waiting for you, wanting you, made with you in mind. To have the other half of your soul walking around in someone else’s body—someone who cared for you just as much as you cared for them. Someone with whom you felt whole.

I shivered and shook myself.

It sounded like a pain in the ass. Weird, codependent bullshit. I was fine on my own, and I always had been. I’d always had to be. My life had been one long sink-or-swim scenario, with nobody around to pull me out if I started sinking.

No, I didn’t need what Jay and Lola had. And truthfully, I didn’t want it. I wouldn’t have known what to do with it, even if I did have it. At least I’d never have to worry about hurting someone’s feelings or disappointing them. Or being hurt by someone in return.

It was better to be alone.

Jay turned back to me. “Maya, you can head inside.”

I sighed. *Might as well*. I didn’t want to head in and talk to anyone, but I wanted to stay outside and watch the two mates slobber over each other even less. I moved past them, rolling my eyes at their still-linked hands.

*I wonder how long they could go without touching if they really put their minds to it? Ten minutes? An hour? A day?* I snorted to myself. There was no way those two could make it longer than an hour.

Lola stopped in front of me. “Where’s Colton?”

It was the exact question I’d been hoping to avoid. I didn’t want to talk about Colton, didn’t want to think of him. And I sure as shit didn’t want to remember our time together in the cave—even though the memories were annoyingly insistent, demanding to be reviewed and replayed ad nauseum.

I shrugged. “Who cares?”

“I do.” She frowned. “He’s part of our pack. He’s my friend.”

“Colton went with Xavier,” Jay said, tugging Lola closer, as if the inches separating them had been too much.

“Why?” Lola asked.

“I’ll explain later, but right now I need to go talk to Joss.” Jay pulled her into a deep, long kiss, and then headed inside. Gross.

I started to follow him, but Lola stopped me again. The bitch was asking for my attention in all the wrong ways. “What?” I snapped.

She folded her arms over her chest. “Why are you always so cold to me? What did I ever do to you?”

I bit back a groan. Feelings. Between Cali and Lola it was always feelings this, feelings that. God it was exhausting. All I wanted was to take a long, hot shower and go to bed. Hashing things out with Lola, of all people, was at the absolute bottom of my priority list.

“You’re just annoying,” I said shortly. “You’re all annoying.”

I hoped my bitchy reply would scare her off, but she just shook her head like I’d disappointed her. “That’s what I’m talking about. We barely know each other and it seems like you hate me.”

“I don’t think about you enough to hate you,” I said honestly. “But if you can give me time, I’m sure that can change.”

In all truth, I had nothing against Lola. It wasn’t personal at all. She was simply part of a pack I had a long history of problems with, and since I was probably doomed to spend the rest of my days loitering around said pack, it didn’t seem like my baggage with the Redwood pack or Lola herself would be going away anytime soon.

Lola glared at me. “Well, maybe we can hang out then. How about we shift and run through the woods together and braid each other’s fur?”

I honestly couldn’t tell if she was being serious or not, and that more than anything had me backing away. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Why don’t you stop pretending you don’t care about anything or anyone? Like, what’s with you and Colton?”

“Don’t you *ever* ask me about Colton,” I snarled.

“Why?” She perked up suddenly. “Did something happen out there? Why didn’t he come back here? Where’s Xavier?”

“I warned you—”

Lola crossed her arms, raising an eyebrow. “I’m not going to stop until you give me some answers.”

I let out a sigh. Lola wanted the truth? Fine. It could be her problem, too. “You want to know the truth? Xavier is losing his fucking mind, ranting about going to the Fae world for some reason. Probably because Cali’s run off with Greyson. Whatever his reasoning, he’s fucking nuts and I need a shower. Happy?”

I brushed past her and walked into the house. As the screen door smacked shut behind me, Lola spun around. “And what about Colton?”

I stopped and glared at her. “I hope he dies.”

I stomped up the stairs, but even through my fury and all the racket I was making, I could still hear Jay murmuring quietly to Joss in another room. Somewhere else in the house, I could hear the others—Mrs. Smith, Rishika, Sage, and Zainab—talking and laughing together. Like a real pack.

I wondered what that felt like, to be a single wolf in a pack and still feel like you had a place? Things between me and Colton were utterly fucked, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t long for some kind of place to belong—despite Lola’s obnoxious questions and Colton’s general 10/10 asshole behavior. Maybe I could give the Redwoods a chance?

I let the thought simmer as I bounded up the stairs.

Yeah, wishful thinking.

I wasted no time stripping down in the bathroom and jumping into the shower, turning the water up as high as I could stand. I lathered up a washcloth and scrubbed my skin until it was pink and soft, trying desperately to ease the tension in my limbs, to wash away any memory of Colton.

But no matter how high I turned up the water, I couldn’t burn the images of Colton away. I smacked my hand against the tile as a wave of memories assaulted my brain. How good he’d felt inside me, thick and hot and touching places I’d never been able to reach on my own—

*Stop it!*

Unfulfilled desire coiled between my legs. My clit pulsed hungrily, begging for attention, and I felt my nipples pebble under the spray. Ugh, why.

I took a deep breath, reminding myself how much I hated Colton. He wasn’t special. And the sex hadn’t even been that good. It’d just been a long time since I’d had any. I’d had to do all the work anyway, as usual.

Except when his hands had locked onto my hips, urging me to move against him, to take him faster and deeper and harder—

“Fuck!” I hissed with a groan as steam built up in the shower.

My fingers slid down the plane of my stomach, brushing over my wet curls and slipping effortlessly between my folds. I was wet there, too, and it wasn’t just water. I slid two fingers deep inside myself, carefully curling them just right and slowly rocking my hand. My palm brushed against my clit with each rotation, and my fingers slid and bumped against my g-spot. I braced myself against the shower wall, and soon my hips were working in time with my hand.

I just needed to get off. Scratch an itch. And then I could move on. This wasn’t about Colton. It was just pure lust—no faces or identities attached.

But it was all too easy to imagine that face exactly where my hand was. Colton’s tongue would lap me up in all the right places, getting me nice and ready for his big cock until I was telling him to fuck me. But he wouldn’t let me. Not yet. Only when I was begging would he then slide home—

“Oh *god*,” I whined, humping against my fingers harder and faster, my wrist rocking, my hand rotating against that sweet spot as I imagined Colton fucking me. I imagined his growls vibrating through me, his cock hitting just where I needed him, his teeth sinking into my shoulder—

My orgasm hit me so hard my vision flickered, and I leaned hard against the shower wall, my legs shaking like I’d just spent the day running at full speed. I slid down to the floor of the shower as a wave of exhaustion washed over me.

I could still feel that need simmering low in my belly—it wasn’t fully satisfied.

I let out a breath. I’d never made myself come so hard in my entire life.

And I’d done it while thinking about Colton.

“God dammit.”

**Episode 443**

“Greyson!”

I scrambled to my feet, my scraped and bleeding hands forgotten at the sight of Greyson’s splayed legs poking out from underneath Heather’s prone body.

“Greyson!” I screamed again. *No, no, no, no!* This couldn’t be happening. He wasn’t supposed to die! I slipped my fingers underneath a meaty troll shoulder and lifted with all my might—my knees, my legs, my back, and even my soul. I had to get her off him. I had to save him. He’d come so far to be here with me. He couldn’t just die here, squished like some sad knockoff of the Wicked Witch of the East.

If I clicked my heels together, would I wake up back at the pack house, in my own bed, before any of this had ever happened?

My back popped, my arms felt like they were being ripped from my body, and my knees finally buckled. I collapsed onto the dirt next to Heather and Greyson. It was impossible. It was like trying to lift a building with my bare hands.

Torin and Astrid rushed over and helped me back to my feet. “Come on,” Torin said, “we’ll lift together.”

The three of us crouched at Heather’s shoulder, hoping to lift her just enough that we could pull Greyson out. But even our combined strength, two Light Fae joining forces with a half-Fae, wasn’t enough. She was completely deadweight now.

We stumbled back, and true panic began to set in. Greyson was trapped, probably being slowly crushed to death. Or maybe not so slowly. Heather looked like she weighed an easy ton. How much weight could a werewolf take before his bones were ground to dust? I glanced around helplessly, desperate for any solution. Could I use my Fae powers? Did they even work like that? I didn’t know enough about them. How to use them, how to control them. What if I screwed up and caused the bridge to collapse? Or what if I killed Greyson? If he wasn’t already dead…

No, he couldn’t be dead. I’d feel it, right? I’d know if he were dead. If this *due destini* thing was real, then it was possible he was also my mate, and I’d know if his lights had been snuffed out.

Wouldn’t I?

I took a deep breath and tried to mind link with Greyson.Who absolutely wasn’t dead. *Greyson? Greyson, can you hear me? I’m going to get you out, okay? Just hold on—*

His voice barked through my mind*. Get out of the way, Cali*.

I blinked, and relief rushed through me just as quickly as the confusion that set in. Out of the way? What was he talking about? *I’m not leaving you here. I’m trying to help you.*

*I don’t need your help,* he insisted. *I’m getting out from under here, but I don’t want to hurt you. Get off the bridge. Now.*

I hesitated. I couldn’t just leave him to die. There was a small flicker of movement in the corner of my eye, and I saw Greyson’s legs move. Just a little at first, more of a twitch than anything else. I stepped back and held my hands out to Astrid and Torin. “Guys, get back. Something’s happening.”

And then Heather’s body began to rise, as if some greater force was pulling it up. Was that… Were my powers pulling her away from Greyson? Could they even do that without my knowledge?

Greyson’s straining voice called out to us, muffled by Heather’s limp body. “Get off the bridge!”

Torin, Astrid, and I rushed back onto solid ground and watched as Greyson appeared in the space beneath Heather, on his knees, pushing the troll’s full deadweight up with his powerful arms.

Slowly, with his arms taut, his veins bulging, and his face tense with determination, Greyson rose to his feet. He was doing it. He was lifting Heather’s body. He was carrying a ten-foot troll.

It was somehow the hottest thing I’d ever seen in my life.

I stared at him, open-mouthed. I’d always known he was strong, but this was a whole other kind of strength. He was like a real-life Hercules—only with better hair. Though I wouldn’t have minded seeing him in gladiator sandals and a big shiny chest plate—oh, and one of those little Spartan skirts, like in *300*.

*Not the time, Cali! Keep it in your pants, pick your jaw up off the ground, and focus!*

Greyson steadied himself, Heather’s body held above his head. The troll’s back was brushing the overhead frame of the bridge, which began to creak and crack from the pressure.

“Watch out!” Greyson shouted. And then he threw Heather’s body away with a resounding BOOM!

The sound seemed to go on forever, deafening and deep, leaving a silence in its wake that was so intense, it felt like the entire world was holding its breath.

The bridge shook, crackling some more. Oh god, was it going to collapse with Greyson still on it? I rushed forward, but Astrid caught my arm and yanked me back. When the dust settled, I saw that the bridge was still intact, though a little worse for wear. I locked eyes with Greyson. He was panting, his face coated in dust and sweat, but he was alive.

Somehow, he’d survived. He’d saved himself. Fresh tears sprang to my eyes and I gave him a watery smile.

“Whoa!” Torin called, letting out a booming laugh. “Did you see that? Can I learn to do that? Maybe I need to go to the gym. Will you be my trainer?”

I pushed past Torin, who continued on, asking how many reps he’d need to do to lift a troll, and threw myself into Greyson’s arms. He smelled a little bit like troll, but I didn’t mind. He was alive. He was pressed against me, his chest heaving against mine, his heartbeat thrumming under my ear. I squeezed him harder, burying my face in his chest.

He didn’t hug me back quite as tightly, but that was okay. He wasn’t outright rejecting me. When I finally let him go, he let out a long breath. His face was red and sweaty, but his expression was cold enough to freeze the river raging beneath us. “Never underestimate me again.”

I froze. An apology immediately rushed to my lips, but I stopped myself. Why was he acting so distant with me? He’d almost died just now, and the possibility of losing him had almost driven me crazy. Didn’t that mean something to him?

“And don’t scare me like that,” I said, returning his attitude.

Greyson turned to the others. “Stop staring. And no,” he said, cutting off Torin’s likely slew of questions about cardio and protein shakes, “I will not be your trainer. We’ve got a mountain to climb, so stop dicking around.” He brushed himself off and moved past the group, leading the way down the trail.

I swallowed back the emotion clawing up my throat. “What about Heather?”

He spun around in a blink, and I actually flinched back from the intense anger on his face. “Please don’t tell me we can’t leave her behind.”

He was right, of course. It wasn’t like the troll had been our friend to begin with, and even if she were interested in joining us, in helping us get the moon buttercup, it wasn’t like we could carry her along until she woke up.

I took one long last look at Heather, who was snoring on the bridge, each breath sounding uncannily like a race car. Then I jogged to catch up to Astrid and Torin, who were following Greyson at a distance.

I wanted to pull Greyson aside, ask him if we could talk about what had happened on the bridge, or—probably the bigger issue—about what had happened last night. But with the mood he was in, I wasn’t sure that even his feelings for me would protect me from his anger. I didn’t want to push him.

No, it would be better to let him cool off a bit. Then we could talk. Though I had a feeling that for Greyson, talking about *feelings* was going to be harder than lifting a ten-foot troll.

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We followed Greyson for a long while. Slowly, the forest began to thin out as the trail gently sloped upward. The sunlight hit us head-on, no longer filtered through gaps in the forest canopy, and I let out a long overdue breath. The sky above us was blue, so much like home. I could almost close my eyes and pretend I was back in the human world, walking through the woods around the pack house.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a moment to just breathe and take in the scenery. The mountain loomed ahead of us, its peak so high I couldn’t quite see the top. Would I have trouble breathing up there? Did the air even get thin in high elevations in the Fae world?

I glanced down at my worn sneakers. They weren’t exactly mountaineering boots. Wouldn’t I need one of those pickaxe things, too? And some rope?

Even though I’d drifted to a halt, the others were still forging ahead, led by Greyson. He’d been avoiding me for miles now. Maybe now would be a good time to talk. It would probably be better to clear things up down here, rather than when we were halfway up a mountain.

I jogged to catch up to him, and he slowed to a stop.

“Are you ready to talk now?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. He wasn’t even looking at me. Emotion surged through me—I *hated* this. Why wouldn’t he talk to me?

I followed his gaze and gasped. We were standing on the edge of an endless field of flowers. My heart swelled as I looked at the moon-white blossoms. We’d done it! We’d found the moon buttercup—millions of them!

I raced toward them without a second thought, but my feet immediately started feeling heavy, like I was wading through mud.

And then my knees buckled, and the world went black.

**Episode 444**

XAVIER

I shoved Mikah back in disgust. “Back. The. Fuck. *Off!*” I held Mikah at arm’s length, even as his fangs snapped at me. *Fucking bloodsucker.* “Gabriel! Mikah’s lost his shit!”

Gabriel spun around in the passenger seat, but his expression was more consoling than accusatory. “Mike, put the fangs away, buddy! Nobody wants to see that shit!”

“Or become a snack,” I chimed in, glaring at the vampire as he sank back against the seat.

“Aren’t you already?” Gabriel asked, winking at me. “Don’t worry, Xavier. Even if Mikah doesn’t take a bite, I still think you’re a snack.”

I rolled my eyes. “I should throw you both out of this car and never look back.”

I eyed Mikah warily now that he was slumped down. He didn’t seem quite as interested in draining the life out of me anymore, though his fangs were still out and his eyes were still blood-red. Who knew he’d listen to Gabriel, of all people?

Colton, still in the driver’s seat, glanced over his shoulder, his eyes wide. “Um, are you gonna stake him, or what?”

But then Mikah gasped and his fangs receded, his eyes shifting back to their normal color. He slumped against the car door, breathing heavily. Being a vampire, Mikah was naturally a bit more ashen, but his skin had gone a completely sickly shade. Like he truly *was* a dead man walking.

“What’s wrong with you?” I demanded. We weren’t just going to politely ignore the fact that he’d tried to drain me. If he was a threat to us, or if he couldn’t keep his fangs under control, then he could walk to his next destination.

Mikah panted for a few moments, struggling to speak. “I… I need… blood.”

Fucking great. Our resident bloodsucker was freaking out because he needed to eat? What kind of vampire got low blood sugar? Or, would it be low blood… blood? “You could have had the cop,” I snarled. “Or what was left of him, if you hadn’t stopped me.”

Mikah just shook his head, looking like he was going to pass out or have some kind of seizure. “I *need* blood,” he said again. Truly, he had a one-track mind. “I’m w-w-weak from the… the memory w-wipe.” He shuddered and groaned, his tone shifting to something low and desperate. “*Hungry*.”

His fangs slid out again, and his eyes shifted back to red as he rocked back and forth in his seat, groaning and gasping.

*Jesus*. I actually preferred him cool as an undead cucumber and holding a knife to my throat. This spectacle in front of me was equal parts embarrassing and creepy as fuck.

I turned to the guys up front. “Uh, yeah. I can’t spend the next however many miles in the back seat with this guy. We have to do something. He’s starting to majorly creep me out.”

Colton glanced up and met my eyes in the rearview mirror. “Open the door and push. Turn him into roadkill.”

Next to me, Mikah’s rocking got worse, along with his hangry moaning. He sounded like a wounded animal. I grimaced and inched away from him until I was pressed up hard against the door. Then grunts joined the symphony of weird-ass vampire sounds, and I started wishing for death.

Pushing him out of the car was starting to sound better and better.

“I wonder if vampires can drink werewolf blood?” Gabriel mused.

My head snapped up, and Colton and I both stared at him in horror.

“*Why?*” Colton shuddered. “Are you planning to offer up your neck to Moaning Myrtle back there?”

“No, of course not,” Gabriel said quickly. Maybe a little *too* quickly. “I was just wondering.”

“I c-can drink from werewolves,” Mikah rasped. “But it won’t s-stop the hunger.” He keened and panted for a beat. “I need human blood.”

I watched him suffer on his side of the back seat. This was easily the most awkward and horrifying thing I’d ever seen. Why did people think vampires were sexy again? Sure, werewolf transformations could be a bit gruesome, but at least we didn’t look and sound like screaming raccoons.

Mikah’s arms wrapped tight around his midsection, and he started chanting under his breath in that low, otherworldly voice. “Hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry…”

I met Colton’s eyes in the mirror again. Okay, so first thing, we needed to find Mikah a pint. Then I’d get one too. Not blood, of course, but liquor. And then I would drink until the memory of this weird-ass car ride was wiped away.

I scoffed at Mikah. He wasn’t so high and mighty now that it was feeding time. “So, you never did answer my question. Do you think it’s okay for you to drain and kill a human, but not okay for me to kill one?”

Mikah’s eyes flashed, and for half a second I thought maybe he was going to attack me again. But then he drew in a shuddering breath and closed his eyes. “I need to rest,” he murmured, sounding normal again.

I cocked my head to the side.

“Is this like a Jekyll and Hyde situation?” Gabriel asked from his spot up front.

Mikah didn’t respond. His body had gone completely limp. No more shuddering. No more rocking. And—thank god—no more moans or creepy voices. I slowly reached out and poked his shoulder. Nothing.

I poked harder, and his limp form crumpled against the door.

Colton’s eyes were wide in the rearview mirror. “Did he just *die?* I thought he’d turn to ash or a bat or something.”

I watched Mikah for any sign of life. Which was ironic, considering I was pretty sure he’d never been alive to begin with. I caught the shallow rise of his chest and sighed. “Unfortunately, he’s still breathing.”

“Just let him sleep,” Gabriel said. “Maybe it will revitalize him. At least he won’t take a bite out of any of us.”

I shrugged. The bloodsucker wasn’t the only one who needed rest. I wouldn’t have minded catching a couple hours of sleep while Colton drove… But then I glanced over at the unconscious vampire sharing the back seat with me. Yeah, there was no way in hell I was taking a cat nap next to the guy.

“Gabe, switch seats with me.”

Gabriel snorted. “What’s wrong, Xavier? Scared of the big bad sleepy vampire?”

“You know Mikah better than I do. You two can cozy up back here.”

He smirked but jumped over the seat to babysit our hungry, hungry vampire. I shoved past him and climbed over the seat, breathing a sigh of relief to finally be putting some distance between McFangy and my neck. The seat separating us wouldn’t do much, but it was better than nothing.

I’d put my head back and was starting to close my eyes when I sensed my brother’s eyes on me.

“Keep your eyes on the road,” I snapped.

“You gonna tell me?” Colton asked.

“Tell you what?”

“You’ve been acting weird.”

I cracked my eyes open and laughed bitterly. “And here I thought you didn’t care enough to notice.”

Colton shrugged. “We’ve got a lot of time to kill, and I know you too damn well. Spill it.”

I sighed. This was pretty much the worst possible moment to get into this, but Colton was right. We had a lot of road ahead of us, and he had a knack for annoying me into giving in. Maybe it was time to skip the bullshit and tell the truth. “I’ve been seeing Ava.”

“Huh? You must be tripping. You killed her, remember? Like, ripped her to shreds.”

I glared at him. “Thanks for the details, but I remember well enough.”

Colton shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“Ew, you’re not one of those necrophiliacs, are you?” Gabriel said from the back seat. “Because I’m going to have a problem with that.”

This coming from the guy who might’ve stuck his tongue down a vampire’s throat. I scoffed. “Shut up, Gabe.”

“Xavier, what are you talking about?” Colton asked. “How can you be seeing Ava?”

“I’m pretty sure it was from a bad trip at a weed farm.”

“Wait, what? I’m sorry, back it up. You went to a *weed farm*? Without me? What the fuck, man?”

I frowned. “Seriously? *That’s* what you’re worried about?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“It was pretty awesome,” Gabriel chimed in. “I was chatting it up with an alpaca.”

*And you made out with fancy fangs back there*, I thought.

“So, you imagined you saw Ava? Probably LTG,” Colton said.

“Probably *what*?” I asked.

Colton shrugged. “Latent guilt complex.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re a dumbass. What in the fuck are you babbling about?”

“It’s a thing,” he said. “Look it up.”

I sighed. It was definitely not a thing. “I know seeing her wasn’t real, but we thought Silas was probably dead, too, and now he’s back. Do you think it’s possible that Ava didn’t really die?”

Colton shook his head. “Trust me, dude, she’s dead. Like *dead* *dead*. But I can see how our dear Dad’s return might be getting to you.”

Maybe Colton was right. For once.

I didn’t have time to think more on it when a blood-curdling scream echoed from the back seat. I spun around, all thoughts of Ava forgotten.

Mikah’s fangs were back out, and he was lunging toward me.

**Episode 445**

GREYSON

I lunged and caught Cali in my arms before she could hit the ground. “Cali?”

Nearby, Torin’s and Astrid’s bodies smacked against the ground. They’d dropped like flies—and they were out cold.

“What the hell is happening?” I murmured.

I looked down at Cali, limp in my arms. She was breathing evenly, and I could hear the steady thump of her heartbeat. A sigh of relief slipped through my lips. She was just… asleep? Somehow, she looked even more beautiful when she was sleeping.

I grimaced at the thought. Wasn’t that what stalkers and serial killers said to their victims? *Way to make it creepy, Greyson.*

But there was some truth to it. Asleep like this, her expression was smooth, unbothered. Like she was feeling something akin to peace. I resisted the urge to trace a finger across the fine line on her forehead, one that I’d become very familiar with during our journey. It had all but disappeared, now that she was asleep.

I tried to remember the last time I’d seen that serene expression on her face and came up short. It had been one garbage fire after another from the moment we’d stepped foot in the Fae world. Even though she’d done her best to stay optimistic and roll with the punches, everything we’d gone through had clearly taken a toll on her.

She’d never admit it—would probably brush it aside and offer me one of her goofy, happy smiles if I asked about it—but she was just as tired as I was.

“Cali,” I murmured to the sleeping woman in my arms. “Wake up, love.”

She didn’t so much as twitch.

I tried to mind link to her. *Cali. Love. Can you hear me? Are you all right? Talk to me.*

Either she was ignoring me or she couldn’t hear me. What could have done this? One moment she’d been fine, more or less, and the next her body had crumpled. She’d been running toward those flowers, the moon buttercups, and the joyful, relieved expression on her face had made every moment of this shitshow worth it.

I gently adjusted her in my arms, cradling her head, and drew my fingers down her cheek. “Cali, wake up.”

Nothing.

I sighed and glanced over at Torin and Astrid. Nobody had been there to stop their fall, so gravity had taken over. Astrid was crumpled in an uncomfortable-looking tangle of limbs, and Torin was just face down in the dirt, little puffs of dust billowing up around his face with every breath. Despite the almost violent way they’d fallen, neither of them seemed to be in pain.

What had done this to them? Could it have been the troll? Some kind of failsafe spell for people who crossed the bridge without Heather’s consent?

No. Trolls were nasty, beefy, dangerous monsters, but I was fairly sure they couldn’t do magic. Why would they bother with clubs and threatening people if they could just cast a spell whenever they needed?

I glanced around again. Were there Dark Fae nearby? Had they cast a spell on us? I gently eased Cali’s body down onto the field of the flowers and searched her bag for the quartz. Thank god she hadn’t given it up to Heather. That would have been the worst decision she’d ever made—which was saying something.

I pulled the gemstone out of the pack, but it wasn’t lighting up. No Dark Fae.

Then I smelled the air around us. I hadn’t noticed it before—I blamed it on the hint of troll stank that clung to my skin—but beyond L’Air du Heather, there was a sweet floral scent in the air. I glanced around at the millions of moon buttercups. Could the scent of the flowers be affecting the others? Or maybe it was some kind of pollen thing that only affected Fae? That would explain why I wasn’t out cold with the rest of them. Perhaps my werewolf blood gave me immunity to whatever the hell was going on here.

I was reaching for Cali’s bag to return the gem when it began to glow in my hand. “Shit,” I muttered. So there were Dark Fae around, after all. Cute.

I spun around, eyeing the field and forest and listening for any sound of incoming Fae. I didn’t see them, and I couldn’t hear them, but something told me they were coming for us. And we were out in the open. Easy pickings. I needed to move everyone to cover, and fast.

But which way to run? I could backtrack into the forest, or chance running through the flowers in the hope of finding some cover farther away. I swung the quartz around in an arc. The light grew stronger when it was closer to the woods.

*Great. The fucking creepy-ass woods. Now we know where* not *to go.*

I shoved the gemstone back into Cali’s bag and tensed, ready to shift. Then I stopped. I was still somehow wearing those damn Fae clothes, and while I didn’t consider myself a vain man, I was pretty much done taking chances on Astrid’s glamour spells.

I quickly stripped down and tucked my clothes into Cali’s bag, secured it around her waist, and shifted. The sound of bones cracking echoed through the seemingly peaceful meadow, and I paused to listen for any additional movement.

Too close for comfort, I could hear the steady beat of footsteps heading our way. Shit. I could try taking whoever it was down myself, but I was outnumbered, and Cali and the others weren’t in a position to be helpful. If anything, they’d be a liability.

But I couldn’t leave them. If I did, I’d never hear the end of it from Cali, especially if there were Dark Fae around. But I couldn’t fight the Dark Fae and protect Cali and the other two at the same time. And that was assuming they wouldn’t just wipe the floor with me. The most difficult fights I’d ever been in had been with Fae. Surely the Dark Fae would be no exception.

I’d just have to try to outrun them.

I used my snout to heft Cali, Torin, and Astrid’s limp bodies onto my back and broke into a run. Almost immediately, Torin’s body slid off and bounced along the ground. He didn’t wake up—or so much as snore—when his head smacked against the dirt.

I wanted more than anything to leave him behind. I wasn’t built to be a fucking pack mule.

But if I did, Cali would never forgive me.

Fuck. *Fine*.

I slowed and turned around, collected Torin, and started off again, all too aware of exactly how much those few precious seconds had cost us. The Dark Fae were still heading our way, and they weren’t slowing down.

I knew this trip had been a bad idea. Dangerous. Reckless. Probably futile. I should have stopped Cali from going. When was I going to stop being so soft on her? It didn’t help her. If anything, it enabled her reckless behavior.

But this wasn’t just about Cali. It was about her mother, too.

*Damn it.*

If Cali survived this, I just hoped that it would be worth everything we’d gone through. That she’d make it home in time to save her mother.

Up ahead, I saw a thick grove of trees and headed straight for it, careful not to run so hard that my cargo bounced off again. Maybe we could take shelter in the branches and the Dark Fae, if they chose to follow us this far, would just pass on by.

I entered the grove and felt like I was stepping into a shadow, the trees were so thick. I slowed down to find a spot where we could take cover.

Then a groan echoed through the grove, coming from one of the Fae on my back.

I stopped and lowered myself closer to the ground. Torin slid off with another groan, followed by Astrid and Cali.

Cali’s eyelashes fluttered, and she finally opened her eyes. “Where… where are we? What happened? Why are you a wolf?”

I shifted back to my human form and Cali sat up in alarm. “Did you eat Heather?” she demanded.

I shook my head and opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn’t. A wave of emotions rushed over me, too strong and varied for me to parse. That line was back on her forehead and I didn’t trust my voice with her right now. I looked away.

*Come on, Greyson. Pull yourself together. She’s safe. For now.*

“That was fun.” Torin smiled sleepily. “Can we do it again? Only next time, can I be awake?”

“Greyson?” Cali asked, her voice soft, like maybe she knew I was on the verge of a complete meltdown. “Where are we?”

I felt exposed with her eyes on me. Too exposed. I needed to get dressed. I was somewhere between yelling at her how much I cared about her and kissing her and never stopping. Didn’t she get that?

I tugged on my pants and found my voice. “The flowers made you all pass out.”

Cali jumped up. “Did you get them? The moon buttercups?”

“Those weren’t moon buttercups,” Astrid said.

“Oh.” Cali’s face fell.

“Keep your voices down,” I said. “There are Dark Fae following us.”

And then I almost jumped out of my skin when a voice sounded behind us.

“It’s about time you got here.”

**Episode 446**

XAVIER

Before I could even get Mikah’s name out, the vampire slammed me against the dashboard. The force of it had us both sliding across the front seat and into Colton, and the car swerved wildly as he tried to get his bearings.

“I’m driving here!” Colton cried. “Could someone please fucking stake that bloodsucker?”

Mild-mannered Mikah was gone, and so was the sad, weak, embarrassing creature that had been tucked away in the back seat. Now it seemed like Mikah was possessed by a goddamn demon. I’d never seen him like this, so wild and bloodthirsty.

He’d always seemed so in control, even when he was fighting, even when he had a knife pressed to my neck. Now, he looked absolutely unhinged. The vampire hissed, his fangs snapping mere inches from my neck as I tried to keep him at bay. I hated to admit it, but the bloodsucking bastard was strong—strong enough that even keeping him just outside of biting range was making my arms shake with exertion.

I didn’t know how much longer I’d be able to keep him off me. How stupid would it be if things ended this way? I’d made it so far. I’d hung out with a witch, partied with a Light Fae. I’d survived silver poisoning—twice. Fought in and lost a Lupo Finale, fought an incubus and a million other dangerous creatures.

I’d been lucky to find love twice.

But here, in the back seat of some old car, I was about to die from being stupid enough to trust a vampire.

Mikah slammed me harder against the dashboard, grunting and snarling, a predator wild with bloodlust.

Okay, I’d been stupid enough to trust a very *hungry* vampire.

How would Cali react to the news of my death? Would she miss me? Would she be heartbroken? Would she even care? Or was she truly with Greyson now, in every sense of the word? God, I wanted to see her, just one more time…

Fuck this guy.

Mikah snapped at my neck, and I felt the tip of one sharp fang skim over my skin. Enough with the pointy things being shoved against my throat, already! I wasn’t ready to call it quits just yet.

“Gabriel!” I shouted. “Get this asshole off me!”

Gabriel was already reaching over the seat, and his hand shot out to grab Mikah’s arm—except in the struggle he grabbed my arm instead, and rather than gaining a few inches of breathing room between myself and the most recent threat to my life, I was yanked *toward* the famished vampire who was trying to make me his afternoon snack.

I jerked my arm out of Gabriel’s grip. “Get off me!”

Mikah went in for a killing blow, and it was only thanks to my quick reflexes and years of fighting and killing that I was able to get my fist up in time to knock him back. Pain flared through my knuckles and down my wrist. Fuck! It was like punching a truck.

Mikah snarled, holding his bleeding face, and I slid back against the passenger-side window as the car swerved violently and came to a screeching halt, throwing me against the dashboard again and propelling Mikah into the back of my seat.

Thank god. Now that I finally had some space from the bloodthirsty vampire, I didn’t waste any time scrambling backward and groping for the door handle.

I heard Colton’s door open.

“What the hell?” I shouted. “You’re *bailing* on us?”

But then Colton was on the other side of the car, pulling Mikah out by his legs and slamming him to the ground. I finally got the door handle to unlatch and all but fell out of the car onto my ass. I stumbled over to where Colton had Mikah pinned, and tried to help Colton control him.

Gabriel sauntered over like it was no big deal that our resident bloodsucker had gone nuts. “Mikey, calm down, man. We’re friends, not food.”

I glared at him.

“Hold him down,” Colton said. He jumped up and dashed off.

Great. Back to square one. Me versus the feral vampire. Mikah lunged against my grip, almost bucking me off in one try. “Fuck! Gabriel, get your ass over here. He’s stronger than he looks!”

Gabriel kneeled down beside me and together we managed to keep Mikah contained, but only just. I glanced around. “Where the hell did Colton go?”

He emerged from the side of the road, a large, pointed branch in his hand as he sprinted back over. “Let’s stake this sucker and get this over with. Out of the way!”

Gabriel jumped up to block Colton, and I cursed as Mikah tried to take another bite out of me. “What the *fuck*, Gabe?” I demanded.

“Yeah, what the fuck? Get out of my way,” Colton snapped.

Gabriel held up his hands. “Hey, I know Mikah’s gone maybe a little mad. But we don’t have to kill him. Can’t we just put him in the trunk for now?”

The formerly well-mannered vampire was snarling and spitting and writhing in my grip. He honestly resembled some kind of furious, bloodsucking badger more than the Mikah we’d come to know. “You want to put a bloodthirsty vampire in the trunk of our car?”

Gabriel shrugged. “He just needs to feed.”

“Why are you defending him?” Colton demanded. “He’s trying to drain and kill us! Not ten minutes ago, he had a silver knife to Xavier’s throat.”

I watched Gabriel’s face as he considered a response. Even through the haze of whatever Lottie had roofied us with, I could still remember the druggy kiss between him and Mikah. And, judging by the way the werewolf was standing in front of Mikah now, that kiss hadn’t just been a drugged-out mistake. Was Gabe just denying it? Or maybe I’d really been that high… I sighed. Now wasn’t the time to unpack whatever kinky shit was going on between those two.

“Mikah dealt with the cop so we wouldn’t have to,” Gabriel finally said. “He’s more useful to us alive than dead.”

Colton glanced at me for confirmation, and I nodded. If Gabe really did have feelings for Mikah, we couldn’t kill him without risking a whole new set of problems. Colton reluctantly tossed the branch away.

I smirked at Gabriel. “You always did have a knack for talking around the truth.”

Gabriel shrugged.

Colton jogged over to the trunk and opened it. “How long do you think he’ll be like this?”

“He just needs to feed,” Gabriel repeated.

Colton grimaced. “Well, he’s not feeding on me.”

I chimed in. “Or me.”

I hoisted Mikah up, prepared for him to try to rip a few new holes in my body, but the vampire had finally stopped fighting back. Thank god.

“You Evers brothers are a bunch of wolf weenies,” Gabriel said, and offered up his wrist. “Go ahead, Mikey. Drink up.”

I couldn’t hide the revulsion that flashed across my face. When I’d thought they’d be doing kinky shit… I gagged as Mikah reached for Gabriel’s wrist, cradling it gently, lovingly. Then, with a savage groan, he bit down and began to drink.

Yeah, I was going to vomit.

To his credit, Gabriel didn’t even flinch when Mikah’s teeth sank in. He merely eyed me and Colton lazily, as if to say, *You see? Not so scary.*

I rolled my eyes. If he wanted to be the macho dumbass who let a vampire drink from him, I wasn’t going to stop him. Still, the bored and almost indulgent expression on Gabriel’s face as Mikah drank from him made me wonder: had they done this before?

After another few intensely awkward moments punctuated only by the wet sucking sounds coming from Mikah’s mouth, Gabriel pushed him off. “Okay. That’s enough. Take it easy.”

“Can we trunk him *now*?” Colton asked.

Mikah staggered around a bit. He seemed to have some of his strength back, and he wasn’t using it to try to eat any of us—thank god. He waved us off. “I’ll be okay.”

I scoffed. Yeah, right. We were *not* going to let the parasite who’d just spent several agonizing minutes trying to eat me back into the car like a regular passenger. He’d lost those privileges the moment he’d decided to turn me into a snack.

“For how long?” I demanded. “I swear, Mikah, if you try that shit again, I will stake you with the first piece of wood I find, no matter how good Gabriel’s next speech is to keep you alive.”

Mikah shrugged. “Fine.”

I turned to Gabriel. “You get to sit with him this time around, and if he tries anything, well… try not to let yourself get eaten, all right?”

Gabriel saluted me. “I’ll watch him like a hawk.” He escorted Mikah back into the car, and I began to follow. Colton grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

“We can’t bring Mikah back to the pack house. Let’s not forget what he is—a vampire. There’s no way the others will be chill living with that.”

Shit, he was right. I sighed. “What do you propose?”

He glanced at the car, where Gabriel and Mikah were talking quietly in the back seat. “We split up.”

**Episode 447**

I really wished that, for just a little while, the Fae world could stop surprising me.

Like, *Hey, girl. We know you’ve been having a rough time, what with your mom telling you she’s dying and finding out your grandma’s some kind of royal Light Fae and figuring out you have powers and saving your friends from executions and being thrown down a well and fighting for your life pretty much nonstop and then watching your maybe-mate almost get crushed by a roofied troll before you had a chance to really work things out, so for the next thirty minutes, we’re going to let you chill out and drink some tea and maybe do some skincare or something. You know, some* you *time.*

But alas, the Fae world seemed intent on continuing its bid for the worst place I’d ever been to.

*Congrats, Tallahassee, Florida! You’re officially second worst!*

I spun around, tensing, ready for the grove to be swarmed by Dark Fae. But there was nothing around me but trees. Maybe I was imagining the voice? Or maybe it was an aftereffect of the flowers?

Astrid looked over at me, her eyes wide. “Who said that?”

*Okay*… Not imagining it then. Great.

Greyson, now dressed in his sexy pirate outfit again (*note to self: ask Astrid to make him a sexy Hercules outfit*), moved closer to me. Despite the shitty situation we were in—one that seemed to be getting shittier with each passing moment—I felt something like relief slide down my spine. He wasn’t keeping his distance anymore. Maybe, if we survived whatever was coming next, we could finally talk. Work things out, whatever that meant.

The voice slipped through the trees again. “Don’t look so surprised. Haven't you ever spoken to a tree before?”

My eyes widened. Yeah, I had to be tripping on some weird pollen hallucinogen from those flowers. Astrid had said they weren’t moon buttercups. Maybe they were some kind of Fae peyote. “Trees don’t talk,” I said, more as a reminder to myself than anything else.

“These ones do,” Torin said.

Trust Torin to believe the weird ethereal voice in the creepy-ass Dark Fae woods. If he ever came to the human world, he’d end up in someone’s murder van by the end of his first day.

Hesitantly, I turned to face the closest tree. “Were you expecting us?”

There was a long, low groan that made my hair stand on end, and I shrieked and jumped back. Greyson’s hands rested on my hips, steadying me. I allowed myself exactly one second to savor the heat of his hands sinking through my clothes and then I stood upright, glancing around warily.

“That’s just an oak tree,” the voice said, almost soothing. “It hasn’t spoken for a hundred years.”

There was collective laughter from somewhere, but I’d never found anything less funny. I’d seen some weird, creepy shit, but this was crawling its way to the top of the list. I turned back to the voice, trying to follow it through the trees. Was it coming from one tree, or many?

“Looking for me?” the voice said.

It was coming from a large, gnarly tree with a twisted trunk and layers of peeling bark.

“That’s right. Here I am,” the tree said.

I blinked, and the tree blinked back, staring at me through a pair of wizened eyes, seemingly carved into the wood. I gasped. “How is this possible?”

It was the makings of a horror movie, or at least some uncanny valley CGI stuff. I knew I should have been terrified, that I *had* been terrified mere moments ago, but I felt that panic seeping out of me. My heartbeat began to slow, and suddenly I wasn’t a half-second away from sprinting out of the woods shrieking at the top of my lungs.

The tree watched me with kind, warm eyes. Eyes that reminded me of Mrs. Smith. I relaxed a little bit.

Oh, I wished I had a cup of her white chocolate mocha. It would have been a perfect pick-me-up, after everything the group had been through. Torin and Astrid would have loved it, obviously, and even Greyson wouldn’t have been able to deny how good it was. Warm, chocolatey goodness—

*Focus, Cali. Come on!*

Greyson put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. “Don’t trust it, Cali. It might look like a nice old grandpa, but who knows what it’s capable of?”

The tree chuckled. “Werewolves are such a suspicious bunch, aren’t they? Even so, perhaps he’s right to warn you. From what we hear, you’ve been through a lot.”

I frowned. “How do you know what I’ve been through?” Could the trees read my mind?

“We heard your story from the trees in the woods, and the trees beyond those. Our roots spread deep and wide in this world, enabling us to talk to each other. We’ve had our eyes on you since you first arrived,” the tree answered.

*Um, what?*

Heat rushed into my face. Had they seen what had happened between me and Greyson? All our little almost-hookups? Oh god. These weren’t nice, grandfatherly trees. They were creepy Peeping Toms!

The tree laughed. “Don’t worry. It’s our little secret.” The tree’s eyes shifted to Greyson. “I can’t say I blame you. He’s quite a prize.”

I was blushing so hard my hair was at risk of catching fire. *If I could just go ahead and die now, that would be great.*

I couldn’t look at Greyson, not with this pervy tree undressing him with its eyes. Though, I guessed it didn’t need to. This creepy tree—along with all the other pervy trees in this entire world, apparently—already knew what he looked like without clothes.

I had to hand it to the Fae world—it had a real knack for coming up with new and creative ways to torture me.

Greyson, thankfully, wasn’t paying attention to the sexual harassment tree. He’d turned to look back the way we’d come. It seemed he could hear something that I couldn’t. “We have to get out of here,” he said suddenly. “The Dark Fae are coming.” He grabbed my hand and started to pull me away.

“There’s no need to run,” the tree said. “You’re perfectly safe in these woods.”

Yeah, like I was going to take the tree’s word for it. I turned to Greyson. He was right, we didn’t know what the trees were capable of. “How do we know who to trust?”

It was a question that had been nagging at me since the day I’d met Colton and Xavier, and I still didn’t have an answer. Things with Xavier had fallen apart, and I honestly didn’t know where I fit in the pack anymore. If I’d ever fit at all.

Once upon a time, I’d even thought Greyson wasn’t worthy of my trust. And yet he’d done everything in his power to protect me. He was still doing it. Did that mean I could trust other people? That maybe even these creepy trees were telling the truth?

I bit my lip.

“We don’t trust anyone,” Greyson said simply, and I realized that was truly how he saw the world. As a scary, dangerous place with threats around every corner and nobody to count on but himself. Did he even trust me?

I swallowed roughly, afraid of the answer.

“I’m going to shift again, and we’ll get the hell out of here,” he continued, oblivious to my internal struggle.

“Where will you run?” the tree asked. “You have crossed into what is now known as Dark Fae territory. Do you think you will find safety anywhere within this realm?”

Greyson pondered this for a moment, then blew out a breath and shrugged. “I don’t know, but it’s stupid to stand here and do nothing.”

“I disagree. It would be foolish to run. Especially when we can protect you,” the tree said.

I glanced at Greyson. Should we run, or should we stay? Maybe the trees weren’t lying. Maybe they had some kind of ward or glamour that would protect us from the Dark Fae. If we stayed, we’d be safe, protected—even given some space to rest. If we ran, we’d just be giving ourselves up to the Dark Fae.

Greyson turned to the tree with a snarl. “You’re just stalling for time. You’re probably working with the Dark Fae.”

That made a lot of sense. If the trees truly knew everything, then they’d make great spies for the Dark Fae. And with how thick the forest was here, even trying to run would be difficult. The idea that the trees could be trapping us, stalling us until reinforcements came, was a logical leap, and I understood why Greyson had made it.

But I still didn’t believe that the trees were evil. How could *trees* be evil? There was something about the tree we’d spoken with—something about its voice, its eyes—that told me I could trust it. Even if it didn’t have the best manners.

Suddenly, voices and shouts rushed through the trees. I grabbed Greyson and he put a protective arm around me. Before I knew it, we were surrounded by armed guards. They’d gotten here so fast, I didn’t know what to do.

I looked at the tree, stunned. “Did you do this to us?”

**Episode 448**

MAYA

After pulling myself back together, I wrapped a towel around myself, brushed my teeth, and stumbled to my bedroom to put on some clothes.

Dressed in leggings and a soft T-shirt, I lay back on my bed, staring up at the ceiling, trying to resist the urge to touch myself again. I was completely exhausted from the day, and I’d just had a great orgasm back in the shower. I *should* have been relaxed. But I felt fidgety.

I should have been drifting off to sleep. Especially now that the pack was safe, or relatively so, and I’d given myself some very intimate self-care.

But my time in the shower hadn’t provided the relief I was looking for. Like it hadn’t been nearly enough. If anything, the orgasm had felt like an appetizer, and my body was ready for the second course. My fingers slid under the waistband of my leggings to rest against my abdomen, just below my belly button. I could get myself off again, but god, it seemed like so much work. And while my body was keyed up and ready for round two, I was beyond exhausted.

I slid my hand out of my leggings and rolled onto my side. Plus, if I was being honest with myself, there was another reason I wasn’t as satisfied as I should have been. And that reason was a pain in the ass named Colton.

He’d been haunting my thoughts ever since we’d been trapped in that cave together—whether I was in the shower or not. Now that my body knew how it felt to fuck him, it wanted more. Even though repeating the experience was easily the dumbest thing I could possibly do.

Actually, sleeping with him in the first place had been the dumbest thing, but there was no going back on that now. Was it because we were mates? Was that why I wanted him so badly? Some weird combination of pheromones and werewolf bullshit?

Colton was the ultimate distraction—even when he wasn’t around, he still managed to screw things up for me. The familiar burst of anger had me curling tight on my side. How in the world had I ended up with a mate like him? Was there just something wrong with me? Something that made it so I hated my mate instead of loving him? Lola and Jay had clearly never been anything like Colton and me. They’d probably had the whole love at first sight thing. The perfect mates who were totally in sync and loved each other with every piece of their hearts.

It was hard to imagine that something like that was even within the realm of possibility for me. Sure, just looking at Lola and Jay together gave me a sugar rush, but at the same time… Could I have that? Or something like it? Would I even *want* that kind of relationship with another person? And if so, could I ever imagine having it with Colton?

The thought made me gag. God, no. *Fuck* no. He was so immature. And his brothers weren’t much better. Xavier was too serious, too bossy and broody. And Greyson… Cali could have him. She could have them both. Good luck with that, and good riddance.

I rolled onto my back again, trying to imagine once more what it would be like to share my life with Colton—and fighting the urge to throw up the entire time.

*Gross*.

But I couldn’t deny what had happened in the cave. As hard as it was to admit, I had wanted him, and him alone. Because the truth was that while I’d wanted to fuck, I hadn’t just wanted *anyone*. I’d wanted Colton. And that thought made me want to tear my hair out. Made me want to run away and never look back. Made me want to find that little bastard and wring his neck.

*Or,* my hungry, aching pussy reminded me, *you could just hate-fuck him.*

I blew out a breath. No. Never again. Once had been enough—once had been too much. I glanced over to my nightstand and grabbed a book. Maybe I could read to purge myself of Colton. I sat up, made myself comfortable against my pillows, and began to read.

I made it about two pages before I gave up and tossed the book onto the floor. The book was boring—and stupid. It was about some rich dude who’d disguised himself to find ‘the One’. I scoffed and rolled my eyes. As if there was a ‘One’. The one person meant to be with you forever, meant to love you and want you and grow old by your side…

It sounded kind of like having a mate, actually. Assuming you actually liked your mate, of course. Assuming he wasn’t a giant ass-hat who pissed you off simply by breathing.

No, Colton wasn’t my One. He couldn’t be. If he was, I’d kill myself. No, wait—I’d kill *him*. Why should I suffer any more than I already had because of that idiot?

I stretched out, trying to ease my body toward sleep. Maybe that was really what I needed—some proper rest. A solid eight hours, and I’d wake up feeling normal again. God knew, I deserved some rest after everything that had happened recently.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, allowing my head to sink into the pillow.

Almost instantly, my mind was assaulted by images of Colton and me in the cave. Really, the whole thing had been made impossibly worse by the fact that people knew what had happened. People had *heard* what had happened. Which meant that by now, the whole pack probably knew.

I took a deep breath. *You’re Maya. You’ve faced far worse threats than Colton, and you’ve made it this far on your own. You don’t need him or anyone else.*

I closed my eyes, focused on counting my breaths, slowing them down, evening them out, and finally fell asleep.

I felt like I’d just dozed off when I heard his voice. Colton’s voice. Was I dreaming? Was haunting my waking hours not enough? Now he’d slid into my subconscious to visit me in my dreams, too? Fuck.

My eyes slowly opened and I blinked drowsily, my body and mind still caught in that half-life between waking and sleep. No, that *was* Colton’s voice outside my bedroom door. I’d recognize his voice anywhere, though I’d never in a million years admit that to him.

I sat up slowly, listening. He was talking to Rishika in the hall, probably telling her how amazing he’d been when he’d fucked me.

Just like that, anger spilled back into my veins, and I was awake. It was time to put a pin in this—I couldn’t go on this way.

I got out of bed, wrapped myself in a blanket, stomped to the door, and swung it open.

Colton turned to look at me, and everything took on that hazy, dreamlike quality again. Was I really awake?

God, he looked hot. Totally fuckable. I shook my head. What the fuck was I thinking? And why was he there in the first place? Wasn’t he supposed to be off trying to break into the Fae world or whatever Xavier was yapping on about?

Dreams didn’t have to make sense, I forgot.

Colton’s eyebrows lifted. “Do you need some—”

I cut him off, grabbing him by the neck of his T-shirt and yanking him into my bedroom. I kicked the door shut behind us and slammed him down onto my bed. His eyes were wide, surprised. He opened his mouth to speak, but I clamped my hand over it.

“I need you to shut the fuck up, okay?” I let go of my blanket, crawled on top of him and kissed him hard, our lips mashing together, my teeth nipping at his full bottom lip.

In the back of my mind, I’d been expecting Colton to push back on this spontaneous bone session, but instead he kissed me with the grateful desperation of a man lost in the desert who’d just found an oasis. He was thorough, his fingertips pressing against my cheekbones, his lips moving against mine, varying the angle and pressure as if my mouth were unexplored territory and he wanted to make sure he didn't miss anything.  
  
I gave as good as I got, holding him close, dragging my teeth over his bottom lip. He hummed in appreciation, deepening the kiss and rolling us over so he hovered over me. My hands slid under his shirt to explore the lines of his back. My fingernails dragged over his skin, and he broke the kiss with a moan, his fingertips dancing over the backs of my thighs, sending chills down my spine.  
  
God, I hated him—but I loved that sound. My fingernails dug into his lower back, pushing him down as they drew angry lines across his skin. That noise escaped his throat again, and his hips found that perfect fit between my legs. I felt him pressing against me, hard and insistent. Maybe I wasn’t the only one who was feeling hard up after the cave.

Dream me could certainly hope so. If I woke up with a shredded pillow, oh well. Collateral damage.

That thought did weird things to my mind though, and I finally broke away from his mouth to come up for air. If it was a dream, dreams could be honest. My lips found his ear, and I said, “I hate how much I want you.”

**Episode 449**

MAYA

“I hate how much I want you,” I said, my voice shaking. I had straddled his lap and was watching him as he lay on the bed underneath me, at my mercy. His eyes were hot, mouth parted, so gorgeous that I wanted to devour him. I had never desired or resented anyone so deeply in my whole goddamn life.

And then he made things even worse by *speaking*.

“All I’m hearing is that you want me,” he said with a cocky smirk. Sliding his hands up my sleep shirt, he cupped my breasts. His touch felt so good that I was flooded by the desire to kill him even more.

“Oh my god, shut up!” I hissed, slapping his hands away before reaching for his pants. In record time, I tore off my panties, ripped his zipper open, and sank onto him with a groan. The stretch and fullness of him inside me was incredible. The sounds we both made at the contact were guttural, getting wilder and wilder as I started moving on him, shaking all over.

“You love riding that thick cock, don’t you?” Colton asked gruffly, squeezing my hips hard enough to bruise. “I bet I’m the best you’ve ever had.”

“Didn’t I *just tell you* to shut up?” I choked out, torn between need and fury. Undeterred and grinning, he leaned up to kiss me, but I shoved him backward, done with his bullshit.

“You’re so fucking hot when you’re mad, it’s like—”

I cut him off, covering his mouth with one palm while I kept the other on his chest, pinning him down. His heavy hands gripped my hips even harder. His eyes were full of amusement and *excitement*.

What a damn mess.

“When I say shut the fuck up,” I hissed, “I mean *shut the fuck up*.” I couldn’t help but squirm, my body urging me to start moving again. To ride him. The pleasure of him inside me, bare and hot and hard, was difficult to resist. But I still managed to speak. “Are we clear?”

I could feel him smiling under my palm. He then mumbled something—it was muffled by my hand, but he was *still talking*. I had repeatedly warned him, hadn’t I? He had a death wish, so killing him wouldn’t even be my fault.

Before I could tell him that, though, he thrust upward while guiding my hips to where he wanted them, sliding me up and down with a viciousness that made me jolt and moan. My hand slipped from his mouth, and I had to hold on to the headboard with both palms to keep my balance.

Just to make matters worse, the second I released his lips, he *laughed*.

“I love it when you talk dirty to me,” he said, panting. “If you want me to shut up, there’s a price.”

He tore my sleep shirt off, which meant he could easily touch me anywhere he wanted. That was a problem, but also a perfect answer to all the prayers I hadn’t wanted to be sending up. He grabbed my hip with one hand to urge me on and slipped the other to the point where our bodies were joined, using his thumb to rub me off. He kept going, craning his neck upward to mouth at my breasts. I was set off just moments later, my need so easily handled and teased out by him that I felt like crying.

“There you go,” he whispered against my heated skin. “So fucking hot.”

I moaned when he grabbed my waist with both hands, keeping me hovering over him before he arched up to torturously hit the same spot inside me over and over again. I was holding on to the headboard so tightly that it cracked. When I orgasmed this time, it hit me hard enough that my eyes watered.

Colton grabbed my nape, pulling me forward for the kiss I’d denied him earlier. I couldn’t stop whimpering into his mouth, chasing the taste.

“You feel amazing,” he whispered when we came up for air, his breath hot against my lips.

I was so far gone I didn’t even tell him to fuck off.

Fighting to gather my bearings, I rolled off him. I was panting hard enough that it felt like my lungs were about to crack. That itch of no satisfaction was completely gone now. But a dull ache told me it’d be back. I was looking up at the feeling, still shivering, when I felt him turn onto his side. I glanced at him. He was facing me, his eyes dark.

I didn’t move.

Actually, I fucking *couldn’t* move.

Tentatively, he reached out to stroke my hair, brushing it off my forehead. The urge to bite his fingers surged up, but his touch was different than usual. Softer. More sensual.

It wasn’t *entirely* horrible.

“Why are you doing that?” I asked. My voice sounded raw.

He arched an eyebrow. “Do you like it?”

I paused. “It’s okay.”

He snorted. “Roll over.”

I blinked at him slowly, much the same way a tiger looked at its prey. He rolled his eyes. “I promise I’m not gonna do anything weird.”

Vaguely appeased, I rolled on my stomach. He sat up and moved closer, then used both his hands to massage my neck and shoulders. It was a strong kneading motion that made my limbs turn into jelly in less than a minute. I groaned, satisfied and soothed in a way that I’d never felt before.

I wasn’t about to acknowledge it, so I asked a question instead. “Where did you learn to do that?”

He smiled. It was so beautiful, but also infuriating. “I’ve picked up some things on my travels.”

Okay, but what did that mean? That he’d fucked every woman he’d ever met while taking up jobs all around the world? I wouldn’t have put it past him. He was a dog—and that was yet another reason why things between us could never work. As if I’d want a man I could never trust.

Before I could say anything snarky, though, he hit a particularly sore spot on my back and I decided against being sarcastic. His touch felt so good that it was in my best interests to shut up right now, so I did.

“You like that?” he asked. When I moaned in response, he chuckled, the bastard. He stood on his knees and kept massaging me, his powerful hands kneading and rolling my flesh. It was infuriatingly perfect.

*All* of Colton’s skills in the bedroom were infuriatingly perfect.

I hated him more than ever.

He kept going for a few minutes, stopping only to ask me if I liked it—probably because he wanted to hear my humiliating admission. And then he stopped. He *dared* to stop, roll over on his back, and say, “Okay, your turn.”

“Really?” I scoffed. “I’m not your personal masseuse.”

“I’m not yours either, but I did do it.” He paused. “Come on, *please?*”

Rolling my eyes, I was about to tell him to fuck off when my gaze fell on his muscular back. It was illuminated by the soft moonlight that was filtering in through the curtains. As annoying as Colton was—and he was super annoying—he *was* a pleasure to look at. And to touch.

I ran my fingers over his smooth back. It was a definite ego boost for me when he shivered, reacting to my touch.

“Harder,” he said gruffly. “I can take it.”

I bet he could. I hated the thrill that went through me.

Ignoring the way his voice made my spine tingle, I shifted and straddled his back, starting to massage him in earnest now, rubbing every muscle. He tensed for a moment before liquefying. I didn’t have the time to gloat, though, because a moment later, he tensed again.

“Stop,” he said.

I scowled. “I thought you were enjoying it.”

“I was,” he muttered, “but I’d rather see your face.” He flipped over and pulled me into a kiss. It was teasing, a playful brush of his lips and tongue, and it made me sigh. I wished I was up for a repeat of earlier, but I felt beyond exhausted. He could probably sense that, because he didn’t protest when I broke the kiss and rolled onto the bed to lie beside him. I could feel him staring at my profile, his breathing even. The moment between us was intense, yet soothing. We were co-existing so peacefully that I could barely process what was happening.

This dream was becoming way too much for me. That was the only thing that made sense.

And okay, maybe Colton was a total dick, but for one night, I was going to allow myself the pleasure of dreaming about him, of feeling his warm body next to mine. It would be like a treat that I shouldn’t want, but that I’d indulge in for just one night.

When he placed an arm around me and moved to tuck his chin against my shoulder, I felt the urge to push him away. But I contained it. This was a dream, and it felt good. Maybe I would wake up tomorrow and look back on it as a nightmare, but for now, I was going to enjoy it.

Taking a deep breath, I cuddled closer to him and closed my eyes, taking in his scent and warmth.

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I jerked into wakefulness. There were no arms wrapped around me. I was alone. It *had* been a dream, and I was relieved… and shamefully disappointed. It’d been one of the most vivid dreams I’d ever had. Did mate shit do that to you? Completely get in your head and go fucking wild?

I moved to get out of bed, but then I felt a man’s hard body press close behind me, spooning me after swinging an arm over my waist. All my thoughts shattered.

I spun around, gasping, eyes wide.

Colton lay there. Naked and sleeping and…

*Fuck*. It definitely had *not* been a dream.

**Episode 450**

I gasped, backing into Greyson as the Dark Fae guards closed in on us, their weapons drawn. I felt him tense behind me, which only made me freak out more.

*Was he right? Were the trees on the side of the Dark Fae? Was I just straight up lied to by a fucking TREE?*

I tried to calculate the time it took to chop a tree down, but I didn’t have time for dramatics. One of the Dark Fae guards—a painfully pretty, severe-looking guy—spoke up. “You have violated Dark Fae territory and will be brought before the court to be sentenced as spies.” He nodded at his men. “Seize them!”

Greyson growled behind me.

“I have something to say first!” I yelled, before he could eat anyone.

The guard gave me a weird look, gesturing for his men to pause. “Yes?”

“We’re not spies,” I declared, huffing. “I mean, do I LOOK like a spy?” I gestured at myself. The leader raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve seen spies that look even weaker than you do,” he said solemnly.

*Rude!*

“*Excuse* me?” I made a move to smack him, infuriated. “I could be a spy! I’m not weak! If I learned anything in college it’s that femininity isn’t weaker than masc—”

“*Cali!*” Greyson hissed and grabbed me by the arm, pulling me back.

“So are you a spy, or not?” the Dark Fae asked me suspiciously.

“Oh yeah, no. I’m not,” I said, turning to one of my tree “friends.” “Tell them, Woody!”

There was near-total silence, broken only by some frogs croaking in the distance. Clearly, they didn’t realize the severity of the situation.

I wasn’t a big fan of alcohol, but I could use a drink right about now. *Why trees, WHY?* I thought to myself in despair, pressing my lips together to hide their trembling. How were we going to get out of this?

In the meantime, the Dark Fae guards started snickering among themselves.

“Looks like you’ve got nothing,” the leader said, shrugging. “Trees don’t talk to just anyone, and you’re not that special, *spy*.”

“You’ve already caught us, okay? You don’t have to be so mean about it!” Astrid spoke up to defend us, clearly appalled.

She was very sweet, but the Dark Fae guards didn’t give a shit. There was a reason why they weren’t called the Sweet Fae, I guess. They grabbed Astrid and Torin, who shouted, “You won’t take me alive!”

They took him alive and tied him up very easily.

But as the guards reached for me, Greyson jumped in front of me, swift as a sword.

“You’re not touching her!” he said, shoving the guard back.

If Greyson shifted, he’d be in major fucking trouble. Also, there were a bunch of arrows aimed at us, and we didn’t know if any of them were laced with silver. The last thing I wanted out of any of this was him to get hurt.

“Greyson, please,” I whispered, patting his muscular shoulder. “Take it easy.”

Greyson snarled, and before I could say anything else, a guard grabbed my arm. Only a second later, Greyson—of course—lunged for him, slamming into the Fae’s body and knocking him to the ground.

“Greyson, wait!” I gasped, but he wasn’t listening.

I was pushed back as a trio of guards attacked him all at once, clearly having realized that he would be a tough one to control. “No!” I screamed at them, looking around for something to throw at their heads. “Let him go—he’s not a spy, dammit!”

They ignored me and tied him up, five of them fighting to control him while another guard grabbed me.

“Let him go!” I screamed again, fighting to help him, but the Fae grunted and held me tightly enough to bruise.

“Watch out for this one,” the leader of the guards said, slightly breathless after taking a step away from a still-snarling Greyson. “He’s strong.”

“Fuck you!” Greyson spat.

“Where do you think you’re taking us?” I demanded, shoving at the guard who’d grabbed me. “Where is this court?”

“All your questions will be answered once we get to the village,” the leader said.

“*What* village?” I demanded as they hauled us all off together. Greyson’s eyes were pinned to me the entire time, even as he fought against the ropes. He was like a caged predator, and it hurt to see it. I was so glad that he hadn’t shifted—I didn’t want to know how excited these Dark Fae would be over catching a werewolf.

But I was *not* glad that the guard hadn’t answered my question.

“Hey, I asked you something! What village are you taking us to?” I demanded, but the guard was busy talking with the others.

Was there a chance that we were going to be brought back to the village where Torin and Astrid had nearly been burned alive? Because if so, that was a hard pass for me. I saw Torin and Astrid’s alarmed expressions as they exchanged a look. I could tell that they were thinking the same thing. I felt so horrible for dragging them into this mess.

I shouldn’t have accepted anyone’s help.

And I was so far from my mother. The thought sent me into a panic. How was she doing right now? Was she okay? I’d been so selfish to bring others on this journey that was mine alone.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered to them before turning to Greyson once more.

His grey eyes had turned dark and narrow. I heard his voice in my head, the mind link as strong as ever. *Don’t worry, love. We’ll get out of this, I promise.*

I sniffled, feeling a guard’s sword digging slightly into my back.

*Thank you, Greyson*, I thought at him. *But I’m really worried. We were so* close*. I can’t believe the trees threw us to the wolves. Oh oops, metaphorically... You were right about them.*

It pained me to do so, but I broke eye contact with him and looked ahead. My gaze fell on one of the trees. Where had its eyes gone? Those kind, gentle eyes that I’d believed in. Had I imagined them? No, the others had heard the tree speaking, too. They’d heard the tree’s pretty promises and lies. Anger rising inside me, I glared at the entire forest.

“How could you do this to us?” I yelled, my voice echoing. “We haven’t hurt you; we never would! IS THIS THE THANKS I GET FOR RECYCLING?”

The guards started chuckling again. These assholes probably didn’t even know what recycling was. They began to march us away, and Greyson instantly started struggling to break the rope, knocking down a few of the guards in the process.

They looked like actual bowling pins in the face of his strength.

“Whoa!” I gasped as more guards attacked him, trying to pin him down.

The leader pointed a sword at Greyson’s throat. “Maybe we should just take care of this one now.” He arched an eyebrow. “Before he causes more trouble.”

My stomach dropped. Losing Greyson? Not a fucking option in this world.

The guard’s evil comrades cackled once more. I felt cold sweat gathering on the back of my neck. “No!” I screamed, struggling to free myself from my own captor. “*No*, let him go! He has nothing to do with any of this!”

With the help of another five guards, the leader shoved Greyson against a tree.

“Are you seriously going to kill him?!” I shouted, enraged. “Right here, right now? What about the court—don’t we deserve a trial?”

The guards all ignored me. Was democracy not a thing here?

*This can’t be happening!* I thought, panic taking over.

My heart was beating so hard that it felt like I was about to die. My eyes felt hot, my body filling with anguish as Greyson struggled against the guards’ hold. Seething, I glared up at the tree. “Are you really going to let them murder him?” I shouted, helpless and furious.

The second the words were out of my mouth, the ground started shaking, like it was alive. I gasped, trying to stand still. The guard who was holding me fought to steady himself, along with all the others. I turned to face Astrid and Torin, who had matching puzzled expressions on their faces.

“What’s happening?” I choked out, looking around. An earthquake was the last thing we needed right now.

“Ah!” My guard tripped over a rock and tumbled backward. This was my opportunity! I spun around, grabbing his sword after he fell to the ground.

“Oh, how the tables have turned!” I yelled at the rest of them, waving the sword around. I was probably the single worst person to have this thing. “You made the wrong move trying to hurt Greyson. Now I’m going to single handedly—”

I didn’t finish my sentence, mainly because I lost my step when something snake-like erupted from the ground beneath my feet, climbing up into the sky. Gasping, I was knocked to the ground as more snake things burst from the dirt all around me. My back scraped against the rough earth, the impact of the fall making it hard to breathe.

“WHAT IN THE FU—” I choked on my own words as the snake things sprang up toward the sky. They swayed and moved for a second before rattling together, twisting down and racing toward the ground all at once, like arrows.

When I realized that they were heading straight for me, I could do nothing but scream Greyson’s name.

**Episode 451**

XAVIER

Running through the forest always felt good. I’d shifted into my wolf form, just to make things easier for myself. Just to clear my mind. My return to the pack house had only heightened my worries. Had only made me miss Cali even more. I knew my wolf did.

I’d gotten used to having her there, to hearing her laughter, to seeing her move around the kitchen and trip over random shit. I’d gotten used to her warm smile and open arms, and I’d loved every second she and I had spent in that house. I would always cherish every moment with her—even the bad or annoying parts of our relationship.

Why had I pushed her away and right into fucking Greyson’s arms?

What the fuck was *wrong* with me?

I should’ve stayed back and dealt with any doubts and problems I’d had with Cali—*not* run away like a little bitch. Who knew how badly Greyson had poisoned her against me by now?

My thoughts racing, I ran faster and faster, pushing myself further away from the pack house. I’d never expected to go back there without Cali. I’d never expected all my plans and efforts to go to shit—especially considering how hard it had been to get that Drakaina tooth and deal with that treacherous Fae, Lottie. I’d even tolerated Mikah to get what I wanted—though I had to admit, that there had been times when he’d been useful.

Bottom line, I’d never expected to return from that rock empty-handed. The way I’d had it in my mind, I was going to enter the Fae world without a hitch, kill Greyson, and bring Cali home. Happily ever after or whatever.

But Lottie had lied.

I should have paid her a visit on my way back and made her pay for her deception. Nobody crossed me and lived. Though I had to admit that maybe, just *maybe*, Mikah was right in general: I couldn’t go around killing people because I wanted to. Still, it could be very effective. And if anyone deserved to die, it was Lottie. She’d lied to me, deceived me, and drugged me.

And if all that wasn’t fucking enough, Lottie was responsible for Ava. Or at least for my visions of her, since I’d gotten high at that damn yurt. I’d always tried not to think about Ava, locking her up in the dark place in my mind where I kept all the bad things that had happened to me, but now she was haunting me. Memories of her kept popping up at random, torturing me.

However, Ava wasn’t the only bad memory that had been taunting me lately.

Silas was out there, too, and the big fucking difference between him and Ava was that he wasn’t dead. Though I wished he was. I’d have to deal with him, too. After Lottie. He was a million times harder to find and hurt, though. He was a vicious monster, and the thought of him being on the loose made me feel anxious in a way that I’d only ever associated with him.

Maybe it was good that Cali wasn’t here. At least that made it harder for Silas to get to her. Although having Greyson with her could actually be worse—Greyson wasn’t all that better than dear old Dad.

If Cali were with me, I would’ve been able to protect her. I would rather die, let myself be tortured day and night, than let anything bad happen to her.

Without realizing, I’d taken a turn and was finishing my rounds. The pack house came back into view, and I slowed my pace. Shifting back into human form, I moved up to a tree and picked up the pair of sweatpants and T-shirt I’d left there, putting them on. Jay’s beat up car was still on blocks, and seeing it reminded me of my own car. It had been destroyed by the Manus Cruentae. The thought of going car shopping when there was so much shit going on made me grit my teeth together. My car had been a good one, too, and finding something that I’d like as much would probably be a pain in the ass.

Huffing, I headed into the house and went straight to the kitchen. I was parched.

Mrs. Smith was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking from a cup. She looked up, smiling at me. “Well, look who’s here.”

I gave her a nod, guzzling down two water bottles, one after the other.

“How did your trip go?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It was a waste of time,” I grumbled, leaning against the kitchen counter.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. She looked like she meant it.

“Yeah, well.” I frowned, shrugging.

Picking up a thermos, she poured something hot and delicious-smelling into a clean cup. “Here.” She gestured at the hot beverage. “This might make you feel better.”

“I doubt it,” I scoffed, but still picked up the cup to take a sip.

I had to admit it—this lady really knew how to make a mean mocha.

“So?” she asked me, smirking.

Rolling my eyes, I snorted and took a seat next to her. “Okay, this is really good.”

She grinned.

For a long moment, we drank in silence. My interactions with Mrs. Smith had always been interesting, if not borderline a little awkward. Colton called her a MILF and Jay always said that she was nice, but I mainly saw her as a person who knew a lot. And she’d always looked out for Cali.

“Why didn’t you tell me my father was back?” I asked her, feeling a tightness in my throat. I didn’t accuse her of keeping me in the dark or anything of the sort. I didn’t feel close enough to her to do that. I didn’t usually feel close enough to anyone to feel betrayed by them—Colton and Cali being the only clean-cut exceptions.

“I didn’t know he was back for sure,” Mrs. Smith said, sighing. “I’m still not certain, actually, and I didn’t want to worry everyone. Silas is the kind of man who makes people lose their composure at the drop of a hat. I’d hate for him to cause complete pandemonium before even making an appearance.”

I watched Mrs. Smith carefully, waiting for her reaction as I uttered my next words. “He *has* made an appearance, and he *is* back—for real. Silas destroyed Big Mac’s house.”

Mrs. Smith gasped. “*What?*” She’d gone pale. “Is she… Is MacKenzie okay?”

I took in Mrs. Smith’s expression, realizing that she was most probably not lying to me. She hadn’t known anything about this.

“We found her hiding in a mirror,” I said.

“How was she?” Mrs. Smith asked, squeezing my shoulder. Her eyes were wide with alarm. “Did she seem okay?”

“She looked unhurt, but she was scared,” I said. “And I can’t blame her—my father’s style is very ‘take no prisoners’. If he’d found her…”

Mrs. Smith rubbed her forehead, nodding in silent agreement. She leaned forward, staring at me. “What are you planning to do?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“That’s it?” Mrs. Smith asked incredulously.

“I’ve spent the last few years thinking that my father was gone for good, hoping maybe even dead. Right now, I’m processing.”

*Processing all the ways I could kill him.*

“You realize that if he’s gone after Big Mac, he’s going to come after us—all of us,” Mrs. Smith said, her voice cracking.

I took a sip of her delicious mocha, nodding. “If I can kill my mate, I can kill my father. I’ll be happy to see him torn limb from limb.”

That answer seemed to appease Mrs. Smith somewhat. “I doubt anyone would disagree with that.”

“Why did Big Mac have to hide from Silas, though?” I asked. “Why did he target her? What did she ever do to him?”

She gave me a sideways look. “Big Mac isn’t one to make friends easily.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What does that mean? She’s your friend. You care for her—and you know more than you’re telling me.”

Mrs. Smith set her jaw. “You’re not my Alpha. I don’t have to tell you anything.”

The way she said that cut deep.

“Well, you’re going to have to trust me sooner or later—especially if Silas comes back,” I said sharply. “I have the strength to deal with him, and you’re going to need me. And I’m loyal to this pack. Don’t forget that.”

Mrs. Smith stared at me defiantly. “Well, he’s not here right now. And Greyson is still the one in charge of the pack.”

Slamming my hand on the table, I got to my feet. “Greyson has *never* cared about this pack,” I said, going to the sink and dumping out the rest of my mocha. I didn’t fucking want it if this woman was going to defend Greyson. “He’s *killed* members of this pack, he’s—”

“Says the man who killed his mate,” Mrs. Smith interrupted coldly. I tensed. *That was different*, I thought. “You know things are often more complicated than they seem.”

I shook my head bitterly. “No. This is pretty clear. I’m hardly winning Person of the Year, but I don’t kill anyone who doesn’t deserve it. Greyson is a murderer, and he’ll get a murderer’s end,” I said. “He’s taken Cali from me, and he’s taken this pack, but I’m not going to let him take *anything else*.”

Mrs. Smith stared up at me, her expression alarmed but determined. “Are you sure Greyson is who you think he is, Xavier?”

**Episode 452**

Screaming, I rolled to avoid being speared by the snake-like things that were bearing down on me.

*I’M NOT GONNA TURN INTO KEBAB TODAY!* I shouted inside my head.

But the second I moved, the thing veered away with a *swoosh*. And then it wrapped itself around the guard that was closest to me. I gasped, looking at it more closely and finally realizing that this thing wasn’t a snake.

It was, in fact, a root.

*Did the trees come through?* I thought.

There were screams and groans from the other guards as more of them were wrapped up in the roots.

“What is *happening?*” I whisper-hissed to myself as a root grabbed a guard by the back of his pants and swung him around. “Greyson?! Where are you?”

“Cali!” Greyson’s voice startled me. He jumped over to me. I was still sitting on the shaky ground. He was free now, looking like the warrior that he was. “Are you okay?” he asked, reaching out to hold my hand.

I nodded shakily. Then, holding my breath, I looked around. The guards were being wrapped up by the roots at an alarmingly quick rate. The roots were like eels, swimming through the air with ease. It could be nothing else but magic.

“This is amazing!” Torin bellowed, gesturing at the trapped guards. “It’s like they’re in cages.”

“Bet you regret being mean to Cali now, huh?” Astrid wagged her finger at the leader of the guards, who spit at her.

“Ugh, *gross!*” she told him, rolling her eyes. Perhaps my generally exceptional behavior was starting to rub off on her. I was proud of my creation, one hundred percent.

Meanwhile, Greyson was checking me for injuries, like I was a doll. Blush crept up my cheeks as he patted down practically every part of me.

“I’m okay,” I mumbled, hoping he wouldn’t look at my face.

“You’re okay,” he said, tilting my chin up to look at my right cheek. It sounded like he was saying it to himself as much as me. He really was a worrywart. It was cute. Also, super hot. I had so many complicated feelings for him, and they were all *great.* Mostly.

“We need to get out of here,” he told me.

“I thought you’d never ask,” I said.

We all kept watching in amazement as the groaning, shouting guards were entirely immobilized by the roots. I looked up at the tree, full of hope. “Are you doing this?

Out of the blue, the tree’s eyes reappeared…

And then it winked at me.

I gasped. “Did you see that?” I asked Greyson.

He arched his eyebrows at me, but before he could make one of his usual snarky comments, the ground shuddered once more, harder than before. My mouth dropping open, I watched as the guards were lifted up high above us in the makeshift root-cages. They were helpless, fighting to twist free but unable to do so, stuck in a maze of roots.

*The tree came through!*

“Amazing,” I said under my breath before turning to Greyson. “I was RIGHT!”

He looked entirely unimpressed. “Okay, yes.”

I faced the tree, beaming. “Thank you so much! That was incredible!”

“And high on theatrics,” Greyson grumbled dryly from behind me.

“Excuse me, though,” I said to the tree. “I was wondering—why did you help us?”

The tree’s eyes were kind. “Because you needed our help, and we can tell you’re not part of this infuriating war. We can see what’s in your heart, dear girl. It’s not hatred.”

Of course trees were pacifists.

“Thank you for your help,” Torin told the tree politely, “but I was a little disappointed that Greyson didn’t go all *wolf-rawr* on the guards.”

Greyson rolled his eyes, grabbing my hand to pull me to my feet.

“What?” Torin said defensively—to both Greyson and the tree. “It’s always exciting to see everyone shit their pants when they realize that he’s a WEREWOLF!”

Astrid shushed Torin, elbowing him. “Ignore my friend, dear tree. He occasionally enjoys chaos.” She pointed at herself. “We’re both also very grateful for your help.”

“You are welcome, both of you,” the tree said happily.

I felt all warm and fuzzy inside. “I feel like we owe you and your friends, but what could we possibly give you? What do trees need beyond sunlight, dirt, and water?”

The trees tittered. It sounded like a bunch of leaves all rustling at once, which was super cute.

“I’d at least like to thank you formally!” I said, when they didn’t ask for something. “Maybe I can perform a ritual dance or recite something for you? What about the poem on recycling that I learned for my second grade summer recital and weirdly still remember?”

Greyson huffed. “*Cali*. We have to keep moving. Now that we’re not being attacked or tied up, we can’t waste any more time.”

The trees tittered in amusement again, and I ignored the grumpy werewolf.

“Do you have a name?” I asked the tree.

“I do,” the tree said, clearly delighted. “My name is Mercutio.”

“Huh, that’s funny,” I said. “I remember reading one of Shakespeare’s plays in high school—*Romeo and Juliet*. It had a character named Mercutio.”

The tree shook with laughter again, some of its golden leaves falling down. “That’s me.”

“You went to high school with her?” Torin asked the tree, confused.

“No,” the tree said. “William—Billy, we used to call him—named the character after me. That was over 450 years ago, now! Seems like yesterday.”

“This is not very interesting or useful,” Greyson the party pooper said with a huff. “We have to go, Cali. *Now*.”

I shot a glare at Greyson and turned back to Mercutio. “You knew Shakespeare?”

“Of course. He was Fae, like you,” the tree said, his voice full of mirth.

*Well, I’ll be damned,* I thought, stunned.

“I have so many questions right now,” I told the tree, about to take a seat and launch into a proper chat with Mr. Mercutio.

Of course, Greyson couldn’t let anyone have a nice time.

“What’s wrong with you?” he snapped, fire in his eyes as he looked between me and the tree. “We just got attacked,” he said, pointing to the dangling guards above us, “and there are probably more guards where they came from. This isn’t English Lit—we have to *go!*”

I groaned, yanking my arm from his grasp. “Excuse me? Stop being so rude! We almost died, and I want to hear a nice story to celebrate being alive!”

The fire in Greyson’s eyes shifted and he looked at me like he’d rather be doing *other things* to celebrate being alive. I looked away so quickly I got a whiplash.

“I have to apologize for Greyson’s poor manners,” I told Mercutio, my cheeks flushed. “But he’s not completely wrong. We unfortunately do have to get going, because we have a mission to complete. Before we go, though, isn’t there anything we can do to thank you?”

Greyson started ushering me away, his hand hot on the small of my back.

“I don’t need anything,” Mercutio said. “But perhaps you have something more to ask of me?”

That made Greyson stop. “Ask him,” he whispered. “I know you want to.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I hissed. *Ugh, why did he have to know me so well?*

Turning away from Greyson, I stared at the tree, clearing my throat. “Um. Actually, we need a moon buttercup flower. Do you know where I can find one? We’ve gotten mixed reviews.”

Torin and Astrid nodded at me encouragingly while Greyson peered at Mercutio. The trees around us stirred, sending a cascade of leaves down on us. I sensed a nervous tension in the air.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Mercutio asked me. “There are lots of pretty flowers around.”

“I don’t just want a pretty flower, unfortunately—I don't care if the moon buttercup looks like an old toad. I need one because it’s a matter of life and death,” I explained honestly. “It’s my mother.”

Mercutio paused, his eye studying me. “You’ve already risked so much to get this far. Who am I to get in your way?”

“Exactly,” Greyson grumbled. “If you can see Cali’s heart, you should know she’s not one to let go of something.”

I stepped on his foot, but he didn’t even flinch.

“Keep following the path you were on,” Mercutio said. “At the top of the mountain, you will come to a rocky plain. The moon buttercup grows wild there.”

“What do they look like?” I asked.

“They have seven white petals with a blue center,” Mercutio said.

Greyson stared ushering me away again. *UGH!*

“Let’s go,” he said. Not repetitive *at all*.

“Thank you so, so much,” I told Mercutio, whose eyes seemed to be smiling.

“Thank you, wise tree!” Astrid told him as we started walking away.

“Thank you!” Torin said, then he looked up at the guards. “Bye, suckers!”

God, were Astrid and Torin my PEOPLE or what?

While a frowning Greyson basically dragged me away, I waved at Mercutio, smiling. “Thanks again! You’re awesome!”

But then the tree spoke once more. “There is one last thing: Picking a moon buttercup can cost you your life.” Its voice had lost its earlier smooth cheerfulness. “Make sure you ask nicely first.”

**Episode 453**

MAYA

What was happening right now might not have been a dream, but there was no fucking way I’d let it become my new reality.

“Asshole!” I snapped, shoving Colton’s arm away from me.

“What?” he yelped, startled and whiny—like the kind of puppy you stopped bottle-feeding. *Disgusting*. “What are you doing?!” he spluttered, looking at me with a frown. “I’m trying to sleep here!”

I glared at him. “You can do that in your own bed.” I shoved him again. This time, my shove was hard enough for him to tumble off the bed and onto the floor.

How *sad*. For him.

“What the *hell?*” Colton snapped after landing on his ass, gazing up at me with wide eyes. “What’s your fucking problem?”

Clearing my throat, I covered myself with the sheet. “You heard me. Get. *Out*.”

He huffed, stomping to his feet. “But I was having such a nice dream!” He pointed at his face. “Do you really think I maintain this flawless complexion without getting quality sleep every night? Now you’ve broken my REM cycle!”

“I’m going to break a whole lot more than your cycle if you don’t get going right now,” I snapped. “In fact, *how* did you get here in the first place?”

Colton had opened his mouth to speak, but he paused, crossing his arms over his bare chest. The sight of him was so distracting that I wanted to gouge my eyes out. Or his. “Were you drinking last night?” he asked me, frowning. Oddly enough, he looked worried. “Because I didn’t smell any alcohol on your breath, and I only accept enthusiastic consent, but—”

“Wait, why are even you asking?” I asked, eyes narrowed.

He flopped down on the bed, still fucking naked. “You dragged me in here last night. Practically begged me to sleep with you.”

I gasped, appalled. “What the fuck?” I shouted, punching him on the arm. “That’s total bullshit!”

Colton snickered like the fucking ten-year-old that he was on the inside. “Okay, calm your tits, I lied about the begging part. But you did pounce on me—like, you rode me. *Hard*. You were the one on top, sweetheart.”

I froze.

The staggering realization that my dream had in fact been reality dawned on me. I HAD enthusiastically consented. But I’d also thought it was a dream. I thought back to the night before, the pieces finally coming together.

*Fuck.*

“You know,” Colton muttered, leaning closer with a sly smile, “they do say that morning sex is a great way to start the day…”

He reached to touch my breast, and I slapped his hand away.

He laughed. The bastard! “For someone who was so obsessed with cuddling last night, you sure are feisty right now.”

I gasped, appalled for what felt like the millionth time in the past few minutes. “*What?* I would never!”

Colton smirked. “Gotta admit it, I was surprised—not by you trying to bone my brains out, but the cuddling… You couldn’t get enough of it.”

I gagged.

He patted my shoulder as I wheezed. “It’s not usually my thing, you know,” he added casually. “I like to shoot and scoot. But you looked so warm and fuzzy, I decided to stick around.” He winked. “You’re welcome.”

I growled, shoving his hand away, then his face, but he kept fucking *laughing*. And the worst part wasn’t even the laughter. The worst part was that I could now remember how amazing it had felt to fuck him, and how amazing it had felt to lie with him, and I *hated* it. I hated how good it had felt.

This could *not* be happening!

Maybe I was having one of those *Inception* moments—a dream within a dream. If that was the case, then it was high time to wake this shit up.

“You’re terrible!” I jumped out of the bed, my only goal to get far away from him. I realized too late that the sheet was stuck under Colton’s ass, and now…

Now, I was naked.

Colton arched an eyebrow, letting out an appreciative wolf-whistle. “Are you up for another go round? Cause as you can see,” he said, pointing south, “I’m ready, willing, and able.”

My whole face on fire—from fury or idiotic lust or both—I averted my eyes. “I’ll bite that off if you don’t get out right now,” I warned, grabbing a robe to cover myself.

“Aww, really?” Colton said, rolling onto one elbow. “Because I don’t think you want me to leave at all.”

I faced him, determined to look at his face only. “Did you not hear me? This isn’t a game, Colton, I’m literally going to fucking kill you if you don’t get out!”

He pouted, much like the massive child that he was. “But I don’t get it. It makes no sense—you’re the reason I’m here in the first place. You wanted me. You got me. And now you’re acting like ​I ​did something wrong.” If all *that* wasn’t enough, he finished off his little sad tirade with, “I had an awesome time last night, didn’t you?”

I had no idea what the hell to say—or how to deal with a Colton who wasn’t being a cocky dipshit, and who actually looked genuinely upset. The only thing I knew for sure was that I was way too conflicted to keep him around right now. Memories from last night kept popping up in my brain. How gorgeous his back had looked under the moonlight, the sensual touch of his fingers, the way he’d kissed and touched me…

If my face had been red before, my cheeks were now probably entirely aflame.

“Why can’t you *just go?*” I asked, but my voice was lower. Definitely not as mean as usual. I couldn’t bear looking at him in that moment, so I turned to face the window. The sun was just rising, and my day had already gone to shit. “That’s how a one-night stand fucking works!”

I heard the bed creak, followed by his heavy footsteps. Instead of walking out the door, though, he got closer to me. He came up behind me, so close that I could sense the heat of his bare, muscular, powerful body. His voice low and rough, he whispered against my ear. “Why should I go? Are we going to live our entire lives in denial?”

My every nerve ending was on high alert at his proximity, at the heat and vulnerability in his tone. He touched my shoulder, sliding the robe off my body and down to the floor. I had to bite my lip to stop myself from doing something ridiculous, like moan at his touch. I could feel the fire igniting within me—wished so hard that I could put it out and put a stop to this—but his fingers, his breath on my neck, his lips on my shoulder… They had me *weak*.

I could barely process the feeling.

I started shaking when Colton pressed gently against my back, his other hand falling to my hip. His grip wasn’t as hard as the night before, but it was still maddening. “I want to stay, Maya. But if you really need me to go… I’m gone.”

“No,” I said suddenly.

“So you want me to stay?” he asked.

*Yes.* I held my tongue.

His hand moved toward my trembling stomach. “Didn’t you enjoy last night?” He pulled my hair to the side, mouthing at my neck. His hand moved lower, between my trembling legs. “Didn’t you like it when I made you come on my cock? When I touched you right here…”

He started rubbing circles at the apex of my thighs, feather light and teasing. I gasped, grabbing onto the windowsill to keep myself upright.

“Didn’t you like riding me, pinning me to the mattress?” he breathed. “Because I loved it, Maya. I loved everything about it. If you let me, I’d fuck you day and night, because nothing else feels this good.”

“*Yes*,” I said, my voice a whisper. I hated myself for it. “Please.”

He licked and nibbled up my neck, his hand moving to work between my legs so masterfully that it was hard to maintain control. “There you go,” he whispered, his words hot against my neck. “I love how wet you get for me.”

It was hard to keep my hips from twitching toward his hand, chasing the feeling. My head fell back against his chest, my breath in short bursts. I was going to come. *Shit*. He was going to make me orgasm in fucking *seconds*, and I was helpless to deny him.

I could no longer stop the moan that escaped my lips.

When he heard the sound, when he felt me shudder, he grabbed my shoulders, turning me to face him. I wanted to scream at him for stopping—I’d been *so close*. My back to the window, he caged me against it in the gentlest way possible, staring down into my eyes. My chest was quivering, and I couldn’t look away from him.

“Aren’t you tired of the games?” he murmured. That obscure, shocking vulnerability of his from earlier was back. I could see it in his face, feel it in the soft, firm way he was holding me. “Why are we fighting this, Maya?” he asked quietly. “Let’s make it official. Let’s really be mates.”

**Episode 454**

MIKAH

When I woke up, my head was pounding. It took me a minute to properly take in my surroundings. I was in the car. The radio was playing country music, which was a cacophony for the senses. The windshield was dusty. Overly dusty, in fact. I made a mental note to clean it. I liked things clean in general.

Speaking of dirty things (likely with constant dirty thoughts), Gabriel was driving. He was… whistling cheerfully along with the atrocious tune. Not that I cared. He looked fine. Not that I cared, again. His profile was appealing and shapely. Good for him. A strong profile helped people get promotions and recognition from their peers. Not that he needed that kind of thing as a mercenary, but anyway. He hadn’t realized I was awake yet, which was a good thing, because I needed a moment to remember what the hell had happened.

*Hunger.*

I hadn’t been able to control my hunger.

*Werewolves.*

I’d attacked the werewolves.

*Split.*

Gabriel and I had split off from Xavier and Colton, at the twins’ suggestion.

I was glad they’d left. The fewer werewolves the better—I’d never felt comfortable around their kind, especially the likes of the Evers brothers. They were always too quick to turn to violence (like animals), had short tempers (like toddlers), and were full of themselves (like eternal self-absorbed teenagers). They were a liability through and through. Not that Gabriel *wasn’t* a liability, but at least he didn’t seem all that eager to stake me. For whatever reason.

I ran my tongue over my teeth, realizing that my fangs were out. I could remember why, now: I needed to feed. And soon. There was a strange taste in my mouth. I looked over at Gabriel again, and then it hit me.

I’d drunk Gabriel’s blood.

*Yuck*.

But I’d been desperate, okay? I’d had no choice. I’d known that it wasn’t going to curb my hunger for the long term, since only human blood could stem the craving. But the only thing I could recall right now was that as soon as I’d felt Gabriel’s blood on my tongue, the smell and taste had been intoxicating. *Weirdly* intoxicating.

I’d had werewolf blood before, and it had never been that good. I was sure that this didn’t mean anything, though. It was just a random occurrence. This was Gabriel’s blood we were talking about, after all. The guy was a reckless jackass. Top-shelf arm candy, but shallow as a cereal bowl, not to mention dangerous.

No matter his cheerful country song whistling and outstanding side profile, Gabriel was a mercenary. And last I’d checked, mercenaries weren’t known for their kindness and compassion and sparkling personalities. They were brutal, opportunistic killers.

Oddly enough, though, Gabriel had changed since the last time I’d seen him, in Vancouver. He seemed suspiciously less prone to murder and madness, which was… worrisome. I didn’t like it at all. Didn’t trust it at all. The last thing I’d ever do was trust Gabriel, anyway.

Even if his blood was absolutely delicious and the taste was lingering in my mouth.

I craved more.

Swallowing, I looked away from him, out the window. I took in the scenery, orienting myself. We were approaching Tahoe.

“Take the next exit,” I told Gabriel in a scratchy, dry voice.

He jumped. “Jesus *fuck!* Do you ever make any noise?”

“No,” I said truthfully.

He glanced at me, chuckling. “When the hell did you wake up, anyway?”

“I’ve been awake for a while.”

“I thought you were in a coma,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “Which would serve you right, considering you tried to kill me and my friends last night. Your vamp hormones were a little out of control.”

I scoffed. Even that required more effort than I was comfortable with, but I fought to sound stronger than I felt. Not only because I didn’t trust the werewolf next to me, but also because this was a matter of honor. Despite my need to feed, I wasn’t weak.

“It wasn’t hormones,” I said. “It was the inevitable. I’ve wanted to kill all three of you from the moment I met you.”

“Ouch!” Gabriel winced mockingly, snorting. “That cuts me deep, man. I thought we’d made progress, here.”

I rolled my eyes. The haughty smile vanished from his face, and when he spoke, his expression was severe. “The next time you try to pull shit like that is gonna be your last.” His tone shifted, a mixture of an accusation and a whine. “Look what you did to my wrist, you insatiable leech!” He held up his hand, taking it away from the wheel. He immediately lost control of the car, which swerved, because it was far from a fucking Tesla.

“Hands on the wheel, asshole!” I snapped, tearing my eyes away from the two nearly-healed puncture wounds on Gabriel’s otherwise unmarred skin. The memory of the taste and feel of it, the hot liquid warmth spilling down my throat, made me shudder.

Thankfully, Gabriel assumed I’d flinched because I hated his driving.

“Don’t be such a drama queen,” he said, laughing.

“Keep your hands on the wheel and stop acting like a fucking child!” I snarled.

The dickhead rolled his eyes. “Don’t ever tell me how to drive, or *else*—”

“Or else what?” I scoffed.

He lifted both hands off the wheel, jammed his foot on the gas, and closed his eyes.

Gasping, I grabbed the wheel with one hand, trying to keep the car in check.

This was *exactly* why I could never trust Gabriel.

“You’re a menace,” I spat. “You think we have the luxury to go looking for another car?”

Gabriel laughed, rolling his eyes. “Oh, come on. I’m just fucking with you!”

He shooed me away and regained control of the car by taking the wheel—like the driver of any automobile should. *Shocking*.

“I hate you,” I said, huffing.

“Right back atcha,” he replied cheerfully.

This was a nightmare. Thankfully we were almost at my ‘friend’s’ place, so it would end soon. If I stayed in here with Gabriel much longer, I’d either go mad or kill him. Or both, in either order.

“So who’s this dude we’re seeing?” Gabriel asked casually, like he hadn’t just tried to crash the car. “A former teacher? An army buddy? A snack?”

I glared at him.

Gabriel winked. “Snack in the literal sense, of course.”

“Can you shut up for once?”

“Nope,” he replied, shrugging.

The hunger was beginning to overwhelm my senses. It was hard to keep my frustration and annoyance at bay, and the werewolf wasn’t helping. I took a deep breath. If I could just keep it together until we reached Horse’s, everything would be okay.

But if I couldn’t…

I clenched my jaw, and my eyes drifted to Gabriel’s neck. His strong, muscular neck… I could almost see the veins flowing and singing beneath his spotless skin.

“Okay, don’t look at me like that,” Gabriel said in a voice that was weirdly squeaky.

“Like what?” I scowled, dragging my gaze up from his neck.

“Like *I’m* the snack,” he said, alarmed. He pointed at his mouth. “You’re getting all fangy again, and it’s making me nervous.”

I rolled my eyes, looking away from him. “Make sure you get the next exit.”

Gabriel silently did as he was told. I was surprised by that, and made a mental note to look at him like I wanted to eat him more often if it was going to shut him up. We exited the highway, following the road to a fork, and then moving on to a dirt road for a couple of miles.

“I wasn’t gonna attack you,” I said after a while. I wasn’t sure why I felt the need to clarify.

He shrugged. “All good.”

After that, by some miracle, Gabriel remained silent.

When I finally spotted our destination, I sat up straighter. “Hey,” I said, pointing at a mailbox. “This is it.”

Gabriel continued following orders, and I remained shocked but didn’t show it. My hunger was my biggest concern. He steered the car to an unpaved driveway, which led to a trailer home on cinder blocks.

After putting the car in park, Gabriel turned to face me. He raised an eyebrow, suddenly as cocky as ever. “Not exactly four-star lodgings, is it?”

This werewolf was insufferable. I preferred it when he was scared of me. “Stop talking,” I ordered, the hunger burning my throat as I exited the car.

Gabriel’s scent had been maddeningly enticing.

I headed for the trailer home, familiar as ever, and rapped on the door.

It slowly opened by itself.

“Horse?” I called, looking inside.

No response. My head was starting to hurt. I needed to feed, so without further ado, I entered the house as cautiously as possible. “Horse?” I called again.

And then I saw the back door swinging open as someone frantically ran away from me.

**Episode 455**

GREYSON

I led the way up the mountain with Cali, Torin, and Astrid in tow. The more distance I put between us and those guards, the better. Also, between us and the talking trees. They’d also been pretty annoying. What the hell kind of name was Mercutio, anyway? Also, hadn’t Shakespeare killed off Mercutio in that play? It didn’t take a genius to assume that Shakespeare must not have liked Mr. Tree all that much, if his first urge had been to fictionally murder him.

I glanced over my shoulder at Cali. She was scowling at the ground, looking pouty and cute. She kept up with me with ease, but I knew she’d tire sooner rather than later. I’d have offered to carry her, but she probably would have told me to fuck off, so I’d discarded that idea. We’d fought enough today already. It had all been the tree’s fault. Was it my imagination, or had Mercutio been hitting on her? It was the chatty intellectual guys with the weird names that you had to be most careful of.

At least Torin had stopped with the stupid questions. Was the man deluded enough to think we were friends or something? I didn’t *do* friendship. If Torin hadn’t shut up on his own, I would’ve silenced the annoying Fae myself. For good.

I didn’t like chatty Fae and trees, and I didn’t like being here either. There was too much uncertainty. I had to keep my senses dialed up to a hundred at all times, because the territory wasn’t only unfamiliar—it was also supernaturally unpredictable. At least in the human world, you didn’t have to worry about suave talking trees.

“Hey,” Cali said, walking next to me now. I’d sensed her quickening her pace to come up to me, and had slowed down to make it easier on her. I would never admit that to her, of course, because she’d throw a fit about not being weak again, and I wasn’t in the mood.

“So you’re talking to me now?” I asked, glancing at her. “I thought you were mad because I was mean to Mr. Tree.”

She elbowed me, rolling her eyes. I smirked. She was so fucking cute. But then she had to ruin it. “Actually, it’s Mercutio that I wanted to talk to you about.”

Fuck this shit.

“Do you have any idea what he meant at the end?” she asked, looking up at me hopefully. “*Who* am I supposed to ask nicely before picking up a moon buttercup?”

“I don’t know,” I grumbled, raising an eyebrow. “You should’ve asked your friend to elaborate.”

Cali scoffed. “Why are you making such a big deal out of this? Mercutio was very charming!”

Well, wasn’t *that* a bunch of bullshit. *I* was the charming one around here, when I felt like it. When I felt like it, no motherfucker was more charming than me. I could woo the pants off of anyone.

Admittedly, Cali had proved to be a little difficult in that aspect of things… But the point still stood.

“Whoever we have to ask for the moon buttercup, they’d better be accommodating,” I said, moving the subject back to the flower. “I’ve had enough of this. I want to get back to the real world ASAP.”

“Um, excuse me? This *is* the real world.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know what I mean. I prefer the *other* real world.”

Cali pouted, crossing her arms. I wanted to tell her not to do that because it wouldn’t help her balance as she walked, but I wasn’t about to offer unsolicited advice and have her implode. Plus, I liked the way her tits got pushed up when she did that.

I wanted to put my mouth all over them.

“Greyson?”

“Mmm?” I asked, snapping my gaze up from her cleavage. She hadn’t noticed how distracted I’d gotten. Good.

“Why do you like the other world better, anyway?” she asked, frowning. “It’s not like everything is so great there. Rogues, vampires—it’s every bit as dangerous there as it is here.”

“True,” I conceded. “But at least in my world, I know what the dangers are. Here, it’s all over the place. I worry that a magic gigantic strawberry’s gonna pop up any second and ask for a fucking blood sacrifice or something.”

Cali raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you think that’s a little extreme?”

“You know what I mean.” I gestured behind us. “We just escaped from Dark Fae guards who were held prisoner by talking trees. I almost drowned in two feet of water because of some ondines. And before that, an odd-looking creature kept crying because you wouldn’t eat their cupcakes while hanging out at the bottom of a well. Not to mention the rope bridges here are shit! Or the fact that Astrid and Torin nearly got fried alive. Or the massive troll who—”

“I get your point, Greyson,” she said, cutting me off.

“All in all, this place is *outrageous*,” I said.

Cali opened her mouth as if to protest before thinking better of it. She offered a long-suffering sigh. “Okay, it’s weird! But at least now we’re close to the moon buttercup, right?”

Shrugging in response, I eyed the slope ahead. I wondered how much farther we had to go to reach the plain. I hated being out in the open like this, but I didn’t see any other option. I’d agreed to stick by Cali and see her through this.

In theory, of course, I could let her go on alone and return to the pack.

I belonged there, not here in this nightmarish world. But the truth was that wherever Cali went, I had to be there too. I could never leave her here all alone—it would be too dangerous. I needed to protect her, and yet being around her was dangerous for me, too. My judgment was skewed— instead of thinking about myself, about the bigger picture, about why I was really the Alpha, about Silas—I thought about her, 24/7. It was all-consuming. ​

My gut throbbing at the thought, I glanced at her.

The light hit her face in such a way that I had to look away. She was so beautiful that it was breathtaking.

“What was that look?” Cali asked me suspiciously.

She’d noticed. I cleared my throat. “Just making sure you’re keeping up. The air is getting thinner up here, and it’ll only get worse.”

She took a deep breath. “I can handle it.”

Of course she would say that.

“But I promise I’ll let you know if I feel like I’m going to faint,” she added.

I flinched, turning to her with wide eyes. “Did you just admit that you’re not invincible?”

She scoffed, poking my arm with a grin. She looked fine. Chipper. I couldn’t help but remember how anxious I’d felt when I’d seen her fall in that flower field earlier. I didn’t want to feel that way *ever* again.

“Greyson?” Her voice was gentle, quiet.

I faced her, and she took my hand. I wanted to pull away—I couldn’t be distracted right now, not when we were out in the open—but the contact was so amazing that I couldn’t resist. Touching her felt different after she’d told me that she couldn’t move forward with our relationship just yet, but still…

Still, the feel of her was intoxicating.

“I thought you’d run away if I touched you,” she said jokingly, squeezing my hand.

I snorted. “I’m only holding you so *you* won’t run off and find more trouble.”

She smiled cheekily. It was gorgeous.

“Hey, lovebirds!” Astrid called. She and Torin caught up with us just as a fork appeared in the road up ahead. We all paused to study it.

“We should bear right,” Astrid said.

“No, we should go left,” Torin said.

My gaze followed a path that disappeared into a wooded slope. The other cut through a grassy field. “Map, please,” I said to Cali.

“Great idea,” she said and promptly offered me the map. All four of us studied it.

“It looks like both paths converge up ahead,” Cali said, frowning.

I shook my head. “I don’t like being out in the open, though.” I gestured toward the wooded pathway, steering them toward it. “Let’s go left.”

“Aha!” Torin gloated to Astrid. “Told you so, didn’t I?”

Astrid rolled her eyes. “So what? I’ll get you next time.”

The two of them started arguing, but I ignored them. I didn’t have time for this. The only childish BS I tolerated was Cali’s, and that was because I’d die without her. So yeah. Priorities.

I pressed ahead, keeping up my pace with Cali by my side. She kept shooting me coy glances, and that made me feel all warm inside, which was, indeed, distracting. But if I was going to remain an Alpha, I’d need to learn how to operate around Cali at all times… Wouldn’t I?

“I wonder if these trees can talk?” she wondered, when we reached the edge of the woods.

“I sure hope not,” I grumbled, even more distracted now. I didn’t need any suave trees hitting on my girl. Again.

“What was that?” Cali asked.

“Nothing,” I said innocently, about to head into the woods when I suddenly realized something.

There was silence behind us.

Astrid and Torin were no longer arguing.

“Hey you guys, let’s—” Cali stopped talking when we turned back to face our companions. She gasped. “They’re gone!”

**Episode 456**

I gasped, looking around with wide eyes. “Wait, where did Astrid and Torin go?” I turned to an equally stunned Greyson. “They were just behind us!”

“Cali…” Greyson’s tone was a warning. “Whatever happened to them, we really don’t fucking want it to happen to you, too.”

He had a good point, but I ignored him. I noticed that there was something on the ground a few yards off. “Look! There’s something over there!”

He said, “Cali, *wait*. Don’t—”

Too late! I was already running over to the thing on the ground. I slowed down, my heart pounding when I realized what it was.

Torin’s hat.

*Oh my god!* I thought to myself. *What’s happening? Where are they?*

“Greyson!” I called, still staring at the hat. “Grey—”

A hand suddenly clamped over my mouth. The darn werewolf had appeared next to me and covered my mouth to shut me up. “Keep quiet,” he whispered. “We don’t know who or what took them. We don’t need to attract attention.”

I realized he was right. Even though I rarely listened to him, he was actually a pretty good strategist. I should tell him that at some point, actually. In the meantime, though, we had some serious shit to deal with.

“But where are they?” I whispered back. “Maybe the Dark Fae guards escaped, followed us, and took Astrid and Torin prisoner?”

“I don’t think so. That would’ve been impossible to pull off without making any noise, so—”

Before Greyson could finish his sentence, I’d already grabbed a duckling-shaped rock from the ground. I held it like a weapon, my eyes darting around to see if I could spot one of those horrible guards. But there was nothing. I turned to Greyson. His silver eyes were focused on the ground, and he sniffed the air.

“Are you getting something?” I whispered.

He stared at me, shaking his head. “It’s like they’ve vanished.”

“How could they just vanish into thin air?” I hissed. “Did the earth open up and swallow them whole?”

“I don’t know,” he said, scowling. “But whatever happened, we can’t just stand here in the middle of the road. We should look for shelter in the woods—if someone is after us, it’s too dangerous to be caught out here in the open.”

My stomach clenched. This place really was dangerous. At least in the other world, people didn’t just vanish! Though Big Mac’s house had.

This was all so fucking confusing. *UGH!*

“We can’t leave, though,” I said, looking around again. “I need to find them.” When I faced Greyson again, I saw the conflict in his face. “I know you don’t care about them…”

“You *do*, so I’ll make an effort,” he murmured. “I’d do anything to help you.”

His words made my heart pound. I squeezed his hand in thanks. “Maybe you could shift?” I asked hopefully. “Maybe your senses will be stronger then, and that could help you find them? Sniff them out?”

He raised an eyebrow. “*Sniff them out*?”

I huffed. “You know what I mean.”

He paused. “You have a point. And I’ll be much better equipped to handle any threats as a wolf.”

He took a couple of steps back from me, taking his usual shifting stance. But then I thought of something. It was a miracle that I could think at all while he was standing there all intense and gorgeous, but I managed it. I deserved a medal.

“Hang on,” I said, pointing at his pants. “You might want to save those.”

He rolled his eyes, snorting. “Right. Wouldn’t want anyone eyeing the goods.”

He was being sarcastic, but I agreed with his words. Nobody was allowed to eye the goods. Only me. Though when he did remove his pants, I felt compelled to turn away, blushing.

“Nothing you haven’t seen before,” Greyson muttered, amused.

I waved him off. “Stop it!”

Snorting, Greyson shifted. When I turned back to face him, a massive, glorious silver wolf was in his place—equally impressive as the human version of Greyson, but for entirely different reasons. The wolf started sniffing the ground, and I kept my attention on him.

“Are you picking up their scent?” I asked him.

Greyson’s wolf yipped. I took that as a no.

“Wait, you’re trying to follow their footsteps?”

Greyson’s wolf let out another yip that sounded like a little baby growl, so I gathered that I was messing with his concentration. Touchy wolf. Annoyed, I crossed my arms and looked around. I wished I could do something.

*I really, really hate feeling useless*, I thought, stewing. It reminded me of the way the Redwood pack used to constantly mock me. If only they knew what I’d been through, they’d be choking on their words now.

“That was quite impressive,” said a voice, scaring the shit out of me. “Haven’t seen that in a long time.”

I spun around, but I couldn’t see anyone. “Who said that?” I demanded. “Who are you?”

Greyson’s wolf looked toward the woods. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the trees. All I could see was trees, too…

Trees!

“Greyson, it’s the trees!” I whisper-shouted at the wolf and raced toward the woods.

Judging from the low snarl coming from behind me, Greyson didn’t like that. Oh well.

“Which one of you said that?” I called, looking around at the forest. “Which one of you talked to me?”

“HOW DARE YOU ENTER MY HOME?” the voice boomed.

*HOLY SHIT!* I thought, jumping backward. The air around me was vibrating. I took in harsh breaths as I came to a sudden stop, almost tripping over a rock.

“I…” I gulped, gazing at the forest. “I’m sorry… I didn’t think that… The other trees were nice, so…”

The voice burst into a merry laugh. “Just messing with you, kid.”

I gaped at the trees for a long moment. *Seriously?* I thought. *My friends are gone and this tree is in the mood for games?*

Fighting to hide my annoyance—mainly because I’d seen what trees could do to people—I looked around once more until my gaze fell on a pair of twinkling eyes. This tree was smaller than Mercutio, with more leaves. It had a very playful vibe. At least it hadn’t attempted to attack me with its roots yet, so… yay?

“Um, hello there,” I said, clearing my throat. “I was just wondering what you meant earlier. Did you see what happened to my friends?”

The eyes crinkled, offering up some hardcore smizing, and a root poked out of the dirt. I held my breath as it brushed against my calf.

Shifting back into human form, Greyson ran up to me. “Stay away from her!” he growled at the tree.

“No, it’s fine,” I breathed, relieved as I realized that the root was examining my calf—much like a curious cat would. It was a tiny root, too. “It’s kinda cute. Friendly, like baby Groot from *Guardians of the Galaxy*,” I explained to Greyson, gesturing at the cute root as I placed a calming hand on his shoulder.

“Right. Adorable,” Greyson scoffed. Leaning forward to speak into my ear, he hissed in a barely audible voice, “Who the *fuck* is Groot?”

Before I could even begin to answer his question—how fucking *could* I go over the 20-something movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe?—the tree spoke again. “Sinkhole!”

I looked at the eyes, confused. “Sinkhole?”

“Your friends were sucked up into the sinkhole,” the tree explained.

“Unbelievable,” Greyson grumbled. “And you ask why I prefer the other world?”

He had a point right there.

“I can’t believe it—the earth actually *did* open up and swallow them whole,” I said, aghast. “But shouldn’t there be an actual hole or something?” I demanded, looking back toward the trail. “There’s nothing there!”

“Oh, it’s a shifting sinkhole,” the tree said cheerfully. “It moves around, searching for food.”

Searching for FOOD?

“Wait…” I blinked in horror. “It ATE my friends?”

The tree’s leaves ruffled in what felt like amusement. “Oh, don’t be too alarmed! It’s okay. The digestion period for sinkholes is quite long. Several weeks, in fact.”

“So I can save them?” I asked hopefully, vibrating with elation. I wouldn’t be able to go on living knowing that Astrid and Torin had died because of me. This was my chance to save them! “Can I get them out?”

“Cali, no—” Greyson started, but I waved him off.

“It’s possible,” the tree replied. “You’ve probably got enough time, but—”

I didn’t wait to hear the rest. If there was a chance to save them, I was going to take it.

“Cali, *wait*!” Greyson called after me, but I wasn’t listening. I raced up to the spot where I’d found Torin’s hat and looked around. Where was that darn hole?

“How dare you take my friends? Show yourself, you cowardly sinkhole!” I bellowed.

Shockingly, the ground before me began to tremble, forming a massive hole that resembled a mouth.

Without thinking, I dove right into it.

**Episode 457**

MAYA

“Let’s be mates,” Colton whispered.

Mates? *MATES?*

The word hit me like a brick to the face.

“Oh my fucking god!” I snapped, shoving Colton back. “We spend one night together and you want to make it official? Have you lost your mind?”

He looked at me, wide-eyed. “Why is it such a bad idea—”

“This is ridiculous!” I huffed. “I guess I should’ve expected it from you, because *you are* fucking ridiculous, but what about me?” I pointed at myself. I was so infuriated by this man-child’s idiocy that I was speaking more to myself than to him. “How could I have let it come to this? I should *never* have given in!”

“Uh,” Colton said awkwardly. “But I thought it was what you…” He squinted. “What you wanted?”

This kid REALLY didn’t know how to read the room.

“WHAT I *WANTED?*” I hissed, shoving him back again, because the dickhead had tried to grab me. Absurd! “Do you think I’m so weak that I need you to be my mate? Do you think that I’d *die* without you?”

Colton crossed his arms, smirking and shrugging at the same time. “Something like that.”

I couldn’t help but notice that he—amazingly—still had a fucking hard-on, despite everything. The guy was a machine. I’d never despised another being so much. Balling up my fists, I had to stop myself from punching that smug look off his face. Why did he *always* manage to say the wrong thing at the wrong time?

“Listen to me, you absolute fucking moron,” I hissed, getting all up in his face. “What happened last night, what happened in the cave, was just *physical*. Nothing more, nothing less. A physical need that needed to be fulfilled. End of story.”

He made a sad expression, exaggeratedly jutting out his lower lip. “So you used me?”

“Yes. Obviously!”

He broke into a shocking—and disgustingly beautiful—grin. “I’m down with that.” He moved closer, lowering his face to my eye level. “You can use me anytime, baby,” he muttered, glancing at my lips.

Before he could fucking touch me again and turn my brain to mush, I smacked his chest, pushing him off. “Don’t you *ever* call me that again or I’ll tear your dick off,” I declared.

His *still-hard* dick. My treacherous body was still aching for release from earlier, from his touch, and I could remember how amazing it felt to have him inside me. His erection was offensive, honestly. Like, why the fuck was he still hard? What was wrong with him? Jesus Christ, it looked so good*…*

*Fuck!*

“Okay, okay,” Colton said, putting his hands up. “Sorry. Maybe you have a point, actually. Maybe we could be friends with benefits.”

I glared at him, dragging my eyes away from his infuriating penis. “We are not friends. I’d rather chop off your head than be your friend.”

He smirked. Again. He really did want to die. “How about enemies with benefits?”

I almost growled. “*Stop*.”

He shrugged. “But we *are* mates, Maya.”

I despised hearing that word coming out of his mouth. Horrible. A whole-ass nightmare. Being someone’s mate? Depending on someone? Opening up to someone—to *Colton*, who had the emotional maturity of a frog? Falling in love with *Colton*, a man who was very clearly in love with himself?

I’d rather castrate him. Before killing him, of course.

“We both know how awesome we are together,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “Why not take advantage of a good thing?”

This guy thought he was so smart. So great. Colton was so fucking full of himself that I would rather have set myself on fire than agree with him. But before I could tell my dear, infuriating mate to go jump off a cliff, the bedroom door flew open.

“Oh.” Xavier glanced at me and got this weird look on his face before arching an eyebrow. “I don’t want to know,” he said. Then he turned to Colton. “Sorry to interrupt, but I need you.”

“Well, that makes one of us,” I said haughtily, delighted to have been interrupted. “Your horrible brother is all yours.”

Colton laughed, starting to get dressed. “Aww, you’ll have to excuse Maya,” he told Xavier. “She’s just upset to see me go.”

“Yes, very upset,” I deadpanned, watching his ass as he walked around.

I crossed my arms over my bare chest, not giving a shit that I was naked and the room smelled like sex. Xavier was a big boy—he wouldn’t, *shouldn’t*, be shocked. Besides, Colton should’ve been the one who was uncomfortable right now.

Unfortunately, he was too much of an asshole to feel any type of shame.

I had to accept it—my mate was a complete and utter moron.

“Enjoying the view?” Colton asked me as he picked up his shirt. I’d possibly been staring at his abs, but I’d never admit it.

“*Get out*,” I snapped.

He smirked. “Benefits. Think about it.” He winked at me. WINKED!

Grabbing my shoe from the floor, I threw it at him as he walked out the door. It would’ve hit him right at the back of the head—I had a really good aim—but the dipshit ducked. He cheerfully followed his brother out, whistling.

“Asshole!” I growled, marching toward the door to slam it shut. But then I heard them chatting as they walked down the hall.

“Cali…” Xavier was saying. I paused by the door.

Cali. I hadn’t thought about her for a while. She could be a real pain in the ass, but the truth was, I’d actually started to like her. She was pretty inventive, scrappy, and kind of hilarious without meaning to be. And she was also one of the few people who’d reached out to me, who’d actually seemed to care about me without having an agenda.

Well, Cali was from Minnesota—the land of ‘nice’ people.

I rolled my eyes at myself for thinking about someone so positively. But then I realized that nobody had actually heard from Cali since before the council, when Lola had called her looking for Greyson. I scowled at the thought and walked back into the bedroom, quickly getting dressed. If Xavier knew something about Cali, I had to hear it too.

When I made it out into the hallway again, the brothers were gone. Hurrying down the stairs, I looked around as I got to the kitchen. Lola had a cup of coffee and a plate of muffins in front of her at the table.

“Good morning,” she said cheerfully. “Muffin? They’re blueberry! I just took them out of the—”

“I hate blueberries,” I said, cutting her off. “When’s the last time you heard from Cali?”

Lola looked alarmed. “What’s up?” she asked, sitting up. “Did something happen?”

Huffing, I turned my back on her, heading to the front porch. The Evers twins had to be outside.

“Hey, wait!” Lola called, following me. “What’s going on?”

I quickened my pace, getting to the yard. I spotted Colton and Xavier standing by Jay’s destroyed car and headed straight for them. Lola kept following me, but I ignored her. Xavier was the first to notice me. He raised both eyebrows, tapping Colton on the shoulder.

Colton smirked when he faced me. “I told you she couldn’t resist me,” he told Xavier, then he checked his watch. “It hasn’t even been five minutes!”

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up!” I hissed, grabbing him by the neck of his T-shirt to shake him. To my amazement, he *did* stop talking. A miracle.

“What’s going on?” Lola asked, coming to join us.

Frowning, Xavier looked from Lola to me. “What *is* going on? What are you two talking about?”

“I’m not in the mood for your twin bullshit,” I snapped. “I want to know what’s happening with Cali.”

“Yeah, Xavier,” Lola added, standing next to me. I didn’t work well with others, but she was asking for the same thing I was, so a little teamwork was acceptable for now.

Xavier gave me a cold stare. “That doesn’t concern you.” He glanced at Lola. “Either of you.”

“Seriously?” Lola’s voice was incredulous. “*I* brought Cali to you, and she’s my best friend—you can’t possibly mean that!”

Xavier shrugged.

“I heard you talking about Cali,” I said impatiently. “Stop fucking around.”

Xavier and Colton shared a look, but both of them stayed silent. It was infuriating. Did these men really think they could keep me out of this? There was no way I was going stay here snoozing with the Redwood pack when it looked like these two were getting ready for an adventure. Cali was worth a few scrapes and bruises, if only for her entertainment value. She’d probably be happy to see me, too—wherever she was.

For some weird reason, that last thought solidified my resolve.

“This is not a joke, boys,” I declared, stepping between Colton and Xavier. “Whatever you’re doing to find Cali, I want in.”

**Episode 458**

GABRIEL

I stepped up behind Mikah, and together we stared after the human man as he sprinted away.

“What did you say his name was?” I asked my occasionally friendly neighborhood vampire.

“Horse,” Mikah said in that dark, severe way of his. It was hilarious. Very entertaining. As entertaining as the man running across the back yard like someone had lit his ass on fire.

“Horse, huh?” I chuckled. “Well, I think your lunch just galloped away.”

Mikah’s eyes gleamed. Suddenly, he looked really dangerous.

“Don’t sweat it, buddy,” I said. “Maybe we can order a human from Seamless?”

“That son of a bitch,” Mikah grumbled, shoving me out of the way before bursting through the doorway. I crossed my arms, raising my eyebrows as I watched Mikah race after Horse. I had to admit that the stick in the mud PI was in good shape. He was tall and broad and moved pretty fast—even if he was still in need of blood.

I felt a little tingle at the back of my neck at the memory of him drinking from my wrist.

The dude had lost his mind on me, and I definitely didn’t need a repeat of that. I’d have to kill him if he tried. I didn’t actually want to kill him. Not because I liked him—of course not—but because he really was entertaining. All uptight and snooty, thinking he was better than everyone even though he was nothing but a glorified, super-sized mosquito. Though he didn’t look like a mosquito, thankfully. His nose was perfectly shaped, as were his lips. It wasn’t weird that I’d noticed, you know? His face was just… there. So I’d noticed it.

He really was a huge snooty asshole.

He probably hated this place. I looked around the room—it was a huge dump, hadn’t been cleaned in months. This Horse guy was probably into some shady business, and was most definitely a loser. Why was Mikah wasting his energy on him? Didn’t we have better shit to do? Places to be? People to murder and maim?

Oh, right. I forgot. He was *against* murder. He had a ‘conscience’. A Jiminy Cricket type in his head, probably. Only for him it was probably a talking, dancing baby leech instead of a cricket.

What kind of fucking vampire didn’t kill people?

Giving up on trying to understand the dude, I stepped outside. The back yard was nothing but weeds and rusting appliances. How boring. I hoped we could get back to civilization soon. This place sucked. There weren’t even any chickens to terrify, or a dog to make friends with. I hated cats, though they weirdly always seemed to like me. But at this point, I was so fucking bored that I would’ve been happy to hang out with a cat.

“AHHHH!” the man screamed as Mikah tackled him to the ground. Okay, *now* we were talking. I sauntered toward them across the yard, grinning as Mikah lifted Horse up by his shirt.

The dude was so dramatic.

“No, please, no!” Horse screamed, tears streaming down his face. “I wasn’t running away from you—I was just going for a jog!”

“*Stop*,” Mikah snarled. “I can always tell when you’re lying!”

Horse was panting. This was pure comedy gold. Honestly, people would probably pay to watch this shit.

“You can tell when I’m lying because you’re a…” Horse whispered the next part. “A *vampire?*”

Mikah gave a long-suffering sigh and dropped Horse to the ground. “No. It’s because every time you lie, your face goes all red and blotchy.”

Horse looked weirded out as he clambered to his feet. “What?” He glanced at me, almost like he was asking for help.

“Huh?” I looked at Horse, taking in his face. Sure enough, it was red and blotchy. “Oh, it’s true. Kudos to the private detective, I guess?”

Mikah rolled his eyes. What? I was trying to pay him a compliment.

“How do you even know this guy?” I asked the annoying vampire.

“You have to help me!” Horse told me, his eyes imploring. “He’s going to kill me!”

I frowned. “You’re really noisy, actually. I might save him the trouble and do it myself if you don’t calm the fuck down.”

Horse gasped. “You’re a vampire too?”

“What?” I hissed. “Ew, no!”

Horse looked lost. Mikah looked as sour-faced as ever, but also hungry. Horse was clearly afraid of him, and I wondered if he had a real reason for that fear. Perhaps Mr. Nice Guy PI had some skeletons in his closet?

“I’m here to collect,” Mikah told Horse gruffly.

Horse whined. “No, please! Do you have to?”

I was weirded out. “What are you?” I asked Mikah. “Private detective by day, bookie by night?”

Mikah rolled his eyes while Horse started yapping. “Mikah saved me from a demon strip club! So I…” He swallowed roughly. “I owe him now.”

“Wait, what?” I asked, pleasantly surprised. “A demon strip club? Now this is getting interesting! Tell me more.”

Horse pointed at Mikah, aghast. “I don’t have time! He’s going to kill me!”

Mikah remained sour-faced. I laughed.

“I’m pretty sure he’ll just feast on your blood for a little while and then let you go,” I told Horse. “This guy doesn’t kill humans. Do you now, ​*Mike*?”

The second I called him that, his jaw clenched. I smirked—I was having such a nice time. Horse was the exact right amount of terrified, and Mikah was his usual self-righteous grumpy self. It was so much fun to get a rise out of this guy, always had been.

“This is none of your business, Gabriel,” he snapped at me before turning to Horse. “Don’t think you can skip out on our deal, human.”

Horse gulped, his eyes going wide. “N-no, no!” he stammered. “Of course not! But how about I offer you something better?”

Mikah’s eyes narrowed. “Better? What could possibly be better?”

I had the distinct suspicion that Horse was perhaps not looking forward to being juiced like an orange.

“Let’s hear what he has to offer,” I said. For curiosity’s sake.

Sweat breaking out on his forehead, Horse wet his lips nervously. “I’ve heard that some bad shit is going down in Reno.”

Mikah’s hand twitched. “That’s a little vague, Horse. There’s bad shit happening all over.”

Mikah’s twitching hand started trembling, instead. Suddenly, his eyes were looking sunken.

“Uh, Mike?” I said awkwardly. “You don’t look too good, man. Wanna sit down?”

Both Horse and Mikah ignored me. Now Horse sounded even more desperate, and he was starting to ramble. “There’s this guy! He runs a chop shop—you know, where you take stolen cars, strip ‘em, and sell the parts?”

As Horse kept chattering, I watched Mikah with a frown. He was getting worse by the second. His eyes seemed to be struggling to focus. His voice came out scratchy as he snapped, “I know what a chop shop is. Get to the point.”

“Word is he’s using that shop as a cover,” Horse said, almost panting now.

Okay, now I was intrigued. “Cover for what?”

Horse opened his mouth to answer, but it was too late.

So fast that I barely saw the movement, Mikah jerked Horse’s head back, exposing Horse’s throat. Then the vampire reared back his head, revealing his fangs, before he bit straight into the human’s neck.

*Holy shit*!

I was stunned. And then I flinched. I’d never seen a vampire feed like that. I’d thought Horse was going to offer up a wrist, like I had. Instead, Horse was squirming and struggling like a fish caught in a net, with Mikah’s grip being the net. And then he sagged in Mikah’s hold.

I generally enjoyed violence—maybe I was born with it, like the commercial said—but this was getting a little too weird for my straightforward tastes in slaughter.

“Uh,” I said awkwardly. “Mike? Hey, man, maybe that’s enough sucking for the day?”

Mikah didn’t seem to hear a word that was coming out of my mouth. Or maybe he didn’t care.

Well, *shit*.

“Okay!” I said in a louder voice. “Party’s over, wrap it up.” I pulled at Mikah’s shoulder, saying, “You’re gonna kill him!”

But Mikah’s teeth remained clamped onto Horse’s neck. He dropped right along with Horse on the ground and continued to feed.

*Seriously.*

I could get pretty obsessed with a good burger too, but this was getting ridiculous. Besides, I was certain that this dickhead would regret it if he accidentally offed this guy. It fell on me to stop him, and I kind of hated the responsibility, but it didn’t feel like I had a choice for some reason.

Refusing to dwell on all these odd feelings, I looked around for a solution. Grabbing a rusted bicycle frame from the yard, I swung it at Mikah’s back. The crash echoed in my ears as the frame shattered.

Mikah, fucking finally, paused.

He let Horse drop from his grip like a squeezed-out tomato and turned to look at me. His eyes were angry-red, blood dripping from the edges of his mouth. In that moment, the snooty vampire was pretty terrifying, not gonna lie…

And then he growled and lunged at me.

**Episode 459**

The light disappeared, and I plunged into total darkness. I was still moving—I could feel myself falling—but the descent was slow. Achingly, astonishingly slow. Like moving through molasses. But it wasn’t molasses. It was a thick ooze of what felt like mud mixed with… I didn’t know. Snot, maybe?

Moving so slowly, I had a lot of time to think, and all I could think about was how I kept *freaking doing this.* Always leaping before I looked. Always jumping in without thinking about what the next step might be. Never bothering with little details like, I don’t know, a *plan*.

How the hell was I supposed to get Astrid and Torin out of here? How the hell was I supposed to get *myself* out of here? What if I drowned in the goo? How long could I hold my breath? How long had I held it so far?

What if I made it down, but I got trapped, too?

Greyson would love that. After all the work he’d done trying to keep me safe, he’d lose his shit if I died by drowning in snot. I was sure he wasn’t thrilled right now, up on the surface, wondering where the hell I’d disappeared to. I hoped he wouldn’t dive in after me. At least one of us needed to make it back.

But that was the wrong way to think about it. I was here for a reason. Astrid and Torin were down here, and I was going to find them. They were my friends. They’d been there for me so many times now when they didn’t need to be. I’d been a stranger, and they’d welcomed me with no question.

I was determined to rescue them.

I was still sinking downward, but my progress was too slow. I was running out of air. I moved my arms and legs in a swimming motion to speed things up. I kept going, the mud squishing into my eyes, pressing against my lips. My lungs were starting to burn, and just as I felt like I was going to have to open my mouth and suffocate in the snot-mud, I burst through the goo and tumbled down, landing hard on a pile of rocks and dirt.

I sucked in a grateful breath and promptly spat, gagging on the mud I’d somehow gotten into the back of my throat. It was disgusting. I’d never known dirt could taste rotten. The Fae world had been quite an education.

Wiping the mud from my eyes, I looked around, taking in the dark, cavern-like space I’d landed in. There was a little light, and I squinted, trying to see into the corners of the cavern, watching for movement.

“Astrid?” I called, my voice bouncing back at me. “Torin? Are you guys here? Are you okay?”

Someone coughed. Then they spluttered, like they were spitting something out.

“Astrid?” I called again. “Torin?” I stood, trying to move toward the coughing, but I had to crouch to avoid the goo. Then, once I got past the goo, there was a tunnel and I had to crawl on all fours. I kept my head down, ducking to avoid the limp ends of roots and other—unidentifiable—wiggly things that were dangling from the ceiling.

The smell was *unspeakable*—like a cooler of fish left rotting in the sun—and it was getting worse as I moved. The smell sent my stomach into revolt, and I heaved and coughed. I held my breath. I wished I could hold my nose, but I needed both hands to crawl.

The smell kept getting worse. My eyes were watering and I was starting to feel dizzy. I didn’t know how much longer I could take this. It was overpowering. My head was staring to ache.

“Astrid?” I was getting desperate now. “Torin? Where are you guys?” I stopped, heaving again. “Are you here?”

“We’re here!”

My heart leapt as I looked in the direction the sound had come from—further down the tunnel.

“I’m… coming…” I choked out, trying to keep myself from throwing up. “Hang on!”

Every part of me wanted to turn around, but I forced myself to keep going. It felt like moving through the goo again, though there was nothing in my way now but the stench. But the smell felt as physical as a wall.

“I can do this,” I said aloud. “It’s just a smell. It can’t kill you.”

It was like that old tuna sandwich Lola forgot once in the back of her car. She’d been too grossed out to clean it up, so we hadn’t been able to drive her car for a week. Then I’d wanted pizza, so I’d just cleaned it out for her. This was fine. This was nothing compared to that.

Except I was lying to myself. That putrid tuna sandwich left to bake in the Midwest heat for a week was like perfume compared to whatever this was, but just remembering it gave me the energy to keep moving.

Then I saw movement. I squinted, and—finally—I spotted Astrid. She was crowded into a corner and her face was covered in mud and goo, but she looked okay. She was waving to me with one hand, using the other hand to pinch her nose shut. Torin was beside her, also looking filthy, also pinching his nose.

“Did it heat you doo?” Torin asked. His pinched-nose voice was making him sound like a munchkin.

“What?”

“Did it heat you doo?”

I finally realized what he was saying. “Did it *eat me too*? No, I jumped in.”  
 “*Whad?*” Astrid screamed.

“Calm down,” I told her. “I came to rescue you.”

“How?” Torin asked, looking around.

“Um,” I cleared my throat. “I haven’t totally figured that part out yet. I was thinking maybe we could retrace our steps and just”—I looked back through the tunnel—“swim back out of here.”

Astrid and Torin exchanged a look, then they both shrugged.

“Okay,” Astrid said. “De sooner de bedder. The smell id terrible.”

I nodded. “Okay. Follow me.”

But as I turned around, intending to head back in the tunnel, I found a gelatinous, quaking blob of phosphorescent goo blocking the way.

“Ubbb, what’s dat?” Astrid asked.

“I have no idea,” I said, staring at the blob. “It wasn’t there a second ago.” I looked at it, waiting for it to move. It quivered, but that was it. “I guess we’ll just have to go around it.”

But as I moved forward, I realized how incredibly difficult that was going to be. The blob wasn’t huge, but the tunnel was small, and it was taking up a lot of room. There wasn’t much space between the blob and the tunnel walls. And something told me I wanted to avoid that blob as much as possible.

The smell was getting worse. My head was starting to spin, like I was going to faint. My stomach was roiling. I clenched my teeth to keep myself from dry heaving. I reached behind me for Astrid’s hand and took a slow, cautious step toward the blob. I sucked in a breath, trying to flatten myself against the tunnel wall, but for every inch we moved forward, the smell grew worse and the blob grew bigger.

The space between the blob and the tunnel wall grew narrower and narrower until—I just couldn’t help it—I brushed up against the blob.

It was cold and clammy and… jello-y. I forced myself not to look at it, not to think about it. I kept my eyes on the space ahead and just kept moving. One by one, we passed by the blob, though I was gasping for air by the time we cleared it. The tunnel got smaller and we all dropped to our knees and crawled until we reached the cavern where I’d first landed.

The smell was still terrible, making the inside of my nose burn like I’d snorted literal acid, and I peered up at the mud.

“This is it,” I said to Astrid and Torin. “This is the only way I know to get out. Is this how you guys got down here, too?”

“I think so,” Astrid said, looking around. She looked a little confused. “I’m a little disoriented, but I think this was it.”

“How many entrances could this place have?” Torin wondered.

“A question for another time,” I said, trying to only breathe through my mouth. I looked up into the mud. “Greyson! Greyson, can you hear us?”

I waited, listening hard, hoping against hope that he could hear me. If he could, maybe he could send something down to help pull us up.

But there was no response. No answering yell, and no handy rope ladder dropping down through the mud.

I was still staring upward, wondering what to try next, when Astrid screamed.

“What?” I yelped.

Astrid was staring back the way we’d come, her eyes huge. “Look!”

I followed her line of sight toward the tunnel, and I immediately spotted what was making her look so terrified.

The formerly immobile gelatinous blob was now *racing* toward us.

**Episode 460**

XAVIER

“Listen, I don’t give a shit if you come along or not, Maya,” I snapped, “as long as you understand that the only reason I’m going out there is to find Cali. This isn’t a road trip, and I’m not going to be responsible for you—or anyone else.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I think I can handle that,” she scoffed. “I don’t need a babysitter, Xavier. I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.” She gave me a tight smile. “Unlike some people I know.”

“Oh my god,” I muttered. I glanced over at Colton, who was looking closely at Maya. “You two are going to have to figure out what’s going on between you some other time, because no one’s coming with me if their personal shit is going to get in the way.” I narrowed my eyes. “We clear on that?”

Colton opened his mouth to answer when Lola strolled over.

“So, where are we going?” she asked with a smile.

We all swiveled our heads to stare at her, silently.

“*We?*” I finally asked.

She looked back at us, her jaw set. “Cali’s my best friend, Xavier. When Jay told me about the Fae thing, I was shocked, of course, but I figured if she’s with Greyson, she’s safe. But if there’s even a chance she’s in trouble, no one’s going to stop me from looking for her. Not you, not anyone.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I muttered, decidedly suppressing the idea of Greyson being Cali’s protector. “I wasn’t planning on this turning into a party.”

“What do you know about where she is?” Maya asked, turning to me.

“What do you mean?” I snapped.

“I mean,” Maya started, “she’s gone, yeah. But how do you know for *sure* that she’s in the Fae world? Have you heard from her? Has anyone been in contact with her? How do you know she didn’t just take off?”

“Hey, if you’re worried about my information, don’t feel like you have to come, Maya. You don’t.” I looked around the group. “None of you do.”

Maya made an irritated noise. “That’s not what I’m saying—”

“Because I don’t give a shit if any of you come.” I was angry now, glaring at all of them.

“We *want* to come, Xavier,” Lola said quietly. “It’s Cali.”

“Then just stay out of my way,” I snarled. Everyone nodded like they understood, but it didn’t matter if they didn’t. If anyone got in my way, they’d gain an understanding real quick. Because I’d make them very, very sorry. I was going to get Cali back, even if it killed me.

The silence that settled over the group was tense, and Lola broke it by clearing her throat. “So,” she asked, “how do we even get to the Fae world, anyway? Is there a door or something? A rabbit hole we have to fall down?”

“Yeah, do you know, or are you just going to start searching now?” Maya asked, folding her arms.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. It had been two fucking minutes and I was already sick of them. “Look, I’m not getting into explanations right now, okay? You’ll just have to trust me.”

“Fine,” Colton said, clapping his hands. “Then it’s all settled. We’re off to see the Wizard.”

My hackles went up at his sing-song tone. “You think this is a joke, Colton?”

He looked immediately abashed. “No,” he said quietly.

“Cali’s missing, man,” I said, my tone hard as flint. “There’s nothing funny about this. If you want to be a smartass, you can just stay right here.”

“And were do you think you’re going?”

I turned around. Joss was standing behind us on the gravel driveway, her arms crossed.

We all stared at her for a long, quiet moment.

“It doesn’t concern you,” I finally said, voice cold.

Her expression didn’t change, but I watched her nostrils flare in anger. “Well, you’re a member of the Redwood Pack, so yeah, it actually *does* concern me. I’m the Luna, remember?”  
 I remembered all right. I thought about Greyson… and Silas. I still didn’t know if Joss was in on it, too. “You’re not *my* Luna,” I said, turning my back on her.

“Hey, man,” Colton said quietly. “Ease up on her, okay? Joss is all right.”

“Who the hell’s side are you on?” I demanded, outraged.

Colton heaved a sigh. “She *is* technically our Luna, Xavier. Like it or not, Greyson is Alpha, and he chose Joss as Luna. And she’s proven herself.”

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “Give me a fucking break.”

“She has. You should have seen her at the council,” Colton said quickly, looking at Maya like he was searching for support. “She took on those old vultures like a boss, man.” He winked. “And I don’t mind a strong woman.”

It was Maya’s turn to roll her eyes.

“Is someone going to tell me what you all are muttering about?” Joss demanded, sounding angry.

I stared at her for a moment. I didn’t trust her—not at all—but I didn’t want any more headaches either. “Cali’s missing. I’m going to go get her and bring her back here.”

Joss narrowed her eyes. She didn’t look excited to hear any of that.

“You should be happy about the idea,” I added bitterly, “considering she’s off with Greyson. But maybe you already knew that.”  
 A shadow of pain darkened her face. Whether she’d known before now or not, this was clearly a tender subject. I could probably use that to my advantage.

After a moment, she took a deep breath, like she was gathering herself, and then she looked back up at me. “I understand Silas is back.”

Next to me, Colton stiffened.

“Do you?” I asked cautiously, wondering if she’d say more, give away more information.

Joss just nodded.

I shrugged. “Yeah, I hear the same thing.”

“Great.” Joss’s voice was flat. “Then that’s all the more reason for us to stay together. As a pack.”

I shook my head. I was losing patience, fast. Time was ticking by, and I didn’t want to waste another second chit-chatting with Joss. “Listen, I really don’t give a flying fuck about Silas. I’m going after Cali, and no one’s going to stop me—not even my half-brother’s Luna.” I gave her a cruel smile and turned to walk away.

“Stop!” Joss called after me, her voice a warning.

I spun to look at her. “Or what?”

Her jaw tightened. “Your Luna is telling you to stop.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked tauntingly. “Are you going to *challenge* me?”

She gave a single nod. “If I have to, yes.”

I rolled my eyes and looked back at Colton, who was shaking his head.

“However you feel about Greyson, I’m your Luna,” Joss reminded me. “That’s how it works. Remember?” She scanned the rest of the group. “I don’t know what the rest of you know about Silas, but he’s a serious threat.”

“So we’ve heard,” Maya said, eyeing Colton warily.

“Yeah, I’ve heard, too,” Lola said quietly.

“We’ve all heard the stories,” Joss said.

“They’re not *stories*,” I snapped, anger coursing through me. “Not to me. Silas—those stories, that bullshit—was my entire life.”

Joss looked at me, hard. “If you walk away right now, you’ll only be helping your father. Is that what you want?”

“Nice try,” I said icily. “But I’m pretty immune to manipulation. Especially when it’s so badly done. All I want is to get Cali. Nothing else matters to me.”

“If nothing else matters to you,” Joss called after me as I began to turn, “then why did you bother to call the Lupo Finale? Why did you fight to be Alpha?”

I stopped but didn’t look back at her. At the mention of the Lupo Finale, my mind flew back, scanning through my memories. Of Cali, mostly. Every memory I had was mostly Cali, since the day I’d met her. My chest felt tight, just thinking of her—the feel of her small hand in mine, the press of her lips, the warmth of her pressed close in the middle of the night…

Joss was still speaking. “Are you leaving now because you’re a sore loser? Are you so upset that you’re not the Alpha, that Greyson defeated you, that you’ll turn your back on your pack?”

I looked around. Colton was staring at me, his eyes wide. Maya and Lola had their eyes on me, too, and were clearly waiting for me to answer. I could see the questions in their eyes.

“Is that what this is all about, Xavier?” Joss continued. “You can’t be Alpha, so to hell with the pack? To hell with the rest of us? Do you not care if we’re left vulnerable to attack?” She shook her head, looking disgusted. “We have our problems, man, but I thought you were better than that. I definitely didn’t think you were so shallow. So self-centered. So—”

“*Enough!*” I boomed. My voice filled the quiet yard, echoing off the pine trees. I rounded on Joss, fury burning through me. “Enough, Joss. Fuck you. Fuck the pack. I’m going Rogue.”

**Episode 461**

MIKAH

The film over my eyes looked like red wine, or—more likely—like blood. All I could see was Gabriel, who was standing over me, holding the rusted remains of an ancient bike frame.

Without another thought I lunged at him, crashing into him, knocking him to the ground. But I lost my footing and stumbled, falling on top of him. I felt strong and powerful. It was Horse’s human blood surging through me, filling me with new life. It was clearing my mind, but slowly, and it took me a while to realize that Gabriel was hitting me, calling my name.

Gabriel.

He was a murderous mercenary. He was a *werewolf*.

I had to stop him. I *had* to. I didn’t *need* Gabriel’s blood… but I wanted it. There was always a hunger inside me, raging. Sometimes it roared, rearing its head, demanding, screaming, threatening. Sometimes it was quieter, but it was always, *always* there. It didn’t matter when I’d last fed, I always wanted *more*.

I leaned forward, reaching toward Gabriel’s neck, but Gabriel was strong. He held me back, the muscles in his forearms feeling like knotted rope under my hands. He pushed hard enough to topple me, then rolled on top of me, pinning my shoulders down. With a shout I pushed back, rolling him onto his back, and I straddled him, pinning him to the dusty ground with all my weight.

He was still shouting—my name, maybe—but the sound was distant, like a badly tuned radio. The only thing I could really hear clearly was the sound of the heart beating wildly in his chest. The only thing I could see clearly was the jugular vein bulging in his neck, keeping time with the heart’s steady beat. I licked my lips. I wanted to bite down on that vein. I wanted to feel it burst beneath my teeth.

Then something hit me in the back of the head hard enough that I saw stars. I blinked, trying to clear my sight, and in my confusion Gabriel flipped me over, getting me down on the dusty ground. He hit me hard, his fist glancing across my cheekbone.

“Get ahold of yourself, asshole!” he gasped out. There was dirt streaked across his face and his hair was wild. “Mikah! Just stop, man!”

The throbbing pain in my head cleared a bit, then a bit more. Breathing hard, I looked around wildly. “What the hell just happened?” I panted.

Gabriel looked down at me. “Are you done?” he asked, his expression anxious. He grabbed my shoulders and then slammed them back down to the ground. “Are you going to stop?”  
 I blinked and looked around. “Oh no,” I said, putting my hand over my eyes. “I lost control, didn’t I? I fucking *lost control*.”

Gabriel was still panting. He rolled off me and sat on the ground, pushing his hair—wet with sweat—out of his eyes. “You could say that, yeah.”

I pushed myself into a sitting position, though I could still feel the echoes of pain in my head. “That can be one of the dangers.”

“Dangers of what?” Gabriel asked, wiping sweat from his brow.

I glanced over. “Drinking fresh human blood straight from the tap.”

Gabriel looked at me and wiped his arm across his sweat-shiny brow. “So, are you cool now?”

I nodded, my breath still a bit shaky.

“Good. Because if you try any of that shit again,” he said, shaking his head, “I’m going to stake you right in the middle of this loser’s back yard. You got me?”

“I got you. I’m fine,” I said, annoyed, getting to my feet. I glanced over at Horse, who was lying motionless on the ground. He looked pale. “What the hell happened to him?” I rasped, though I was afraid of the answer.

“Uh,” Gabriel said, his brows furrowed, “nothing much. I think you killed him, that’s all.”

Shit. I must have gotten really carried away.

When Horse groaned and moved slightly, Gabriel and I both looked over.

“Okay,” he shrugged, “you *almost* killed him.”

“Shut up,” I snapped.

His good humor gone, Gabriel glared at me. “*Shut up?* You’re telling me to shut up? What the fuck is wrong with you?” he asked. “You talk about how I go around killing indiscriminately, and then you do that?” He jutted his chin toward Horse’s prone figure. “A little hypocritical if you ask me.”

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration and anger coursing through me. I thought I was past all this shit. I used to feel it all the time. The overwhelming hunger used to rage through me, clouding my judgment, making me a monster. Vampires were all cursed with the same thirst—the thirst for human blood.

But I’d worked so hard. For years I’d worked to control the hunger, to rein it in. It had never disappeared, but I’d thought I could control it. I’d thought…

My strength was returning. Horse’s blood was flowing through me, making me feel strong and powerful—godlike. *That* was the high of it.

I set my jaw and walked over to Horse. He flinched when he saw me standing over him, but when I held out a hand to help him up, he took it cautiously.

It was then that I saw the large-gauge puncture wounds on his neck, and the blood still oozing from them. The sight made me feel both sick and hungry. I’d definitely gotten carried away. I was going to have to be a lot more careful the next time I called in a favor from him.

With a deep sigh, I shook my head, taking in the blood and Horse’s pale, scared face.

Horse was blinking, like he was trying to wake up. He put his hand to his neck, feeling around, and when he took his hand away and saw blood on his fingers, he swayed like he was going to pass out again.

“Eat a steak,” I advised. “It’ll help.” I turned to Gabriel, a question ringing like a bell in my head. “Why’d you stop me?”

He’d followed me over to Horse, maybe to make sure I wasn’t going to finish the poor guy off.

Gabriel was still holding the bike frame. He shrugged. “You were going to kill the guy.”

I stared at him, confused. “So?”

“So what?”

“Yeah, so what?” I asked. “Since when do you care about stuff like that?”

“I don’t.” Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “But you do. I *know* you do. Figured you wouldn’t be doing that in your right mind. Besides,” he added, clearing his throat, “don’t forget, Horse was telling us some pretty interesting things about Reno before you went all fangy on his ass.”

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing my head, trying to remember what we’d been talking about.

“I want to hear what he had to say. Maybe he knows of some work we could pick up. After I hear about that shit,” Gabriel grinned, “you can finish killing him if you want.”

The grin was bullshit, and I knew it. He’d known I didn’t want to kill Horse. And he’d stopped me when I hadn’t been able to stop myself—because he’d known I would have wanted him too. That was… *interesting.* Why? Since when did mercenaries develop a conscience?

But I’d think about that later. There were other things to deal with first. I rounded on Horse, who stepped back, quaking in fear. “Finish telling us about Reno, and don’t skip the details. I’m a little cloudy on what you said before. There’s some bad stuff going on there?”

Horse swallowed, looking nervous. “Okay. But whatever I say, you didn’t hear it from me, got it?”

I rolled my eyes. “Got it. We’ve never even heard of you. Now spill it, Horse.”

“Okay,” he said, though his eyes were still darting around nervously. “You remember the chop shop I mentioned?”

I nodded. “I remember.”

“Well.” Horse lowered his voice, though we were clearly the only people around for miles. “The chop shop is run by a…” He darted his eyes around. “This is going to sound crazy, but it’s run by a goblin.”

“Damn,” Gabriel said, sounding faintly annoyed.

I looked over. “What?”

He shrugged. “Goblins are a pain in the ass.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one, they tend to explode when you attack ‘em.” He shook his head. “Very messy.”

I shot him a glare and turned back to Horse. “What’s the chop shop fronting for?”

“What do you mean?” Horse asked, his voice an octave higher than usual.

“Come on,” I said shortly. “You think a goblin is really out here trying to get car parts just so he can fix them? Spill it.”

Horse was wringing his hands, and while he still looked pale, I suspected it was more out of nerves now than his unexpected blood donation. “Well,” he said with an artificial chuckle, “I guess I can tell you. It’s actually a secret back door.”

I exchanged a look with Gabriel.

“A back door to what?” I demanded, turning back to Horse.

He swallowed nervously. “To the Fae world.”

**Episode 462**

Holy shit. The blob was *alive?*

NOPE.

I made a grab for Astrid, pulling her toward me as Torin raced toward both of us. The blob stopped just ahead of us, only a few feet away. The stench coming from it was nearly overpowering. The thing defied description, but it was unlike anything I’d ever experienced—or ever wanted to experience again.

Staring at it, I tried to find distinguishing features. It was menacing us, so did that mean it had intelligence? What was the language of the blob people? Could it understand English?

I shrugged, figuring it’d give it a try. “What do you want?” I shouted my question, just in case it was also hard of hearing. I mean, it wasn’t like it had ears.

Then, to my great astonishment—and Astrid and Torin’s, judging by their gasps—a pair of tiny, beady little eyes appeared on the blob. With the eyes as a guide, a face began to emerge. The eyes were set just above a twisted mouth. The mouth opened, revealing a set of rotting, jagged teeth.

I stared, fascinated. I’d never seen anything so disgusting.

Then it growled, a low, menacing sound that could have been a lion’s roar for all I cared. Because as it growled, it also spewed a toxic-smelling cloud at us.

My eyes immediately began to water and, when I began to back up, Astrid and Torin followed.

“What do you think it wants?” Astrid asked, grasping for my hand, her voice quivering with fear.

“I think it wants *us*,” Torin said. “You know… for lunch.”

He was probably right, but frankly, I wasn’t in the mood for this shit. I was scared, but more than that—I was mad. I’d come too far to be lunch for some stinky blob of jelly, so I scanned the cavern, looking for a way out.

And there it was. Protruding from the muddy hole I’d fallen through, a root was hanging just above us. Had Greyson sent it? Was he up there trying to get in? If I could reach it, maybe we could climb up, and get out of the range of the smelliest, grumpiest blob in the history of the world. I jumped up, trying to reach the root, but I was too short—I wasn’t even coming close. I tried again, but, when I landed again and stumbled, I dislodged a rock and the blob hissed.

My eyes shot to the blob, but it didn’t move. Maybe it was trying to decide which one of us to have for its first course. I mean, I could relate—buffets always had me wondering where to start.

“Okay,” I breathed, squinting up at the root. “Come on, Cali.” I jumped again, extending my arm as far as I could, but still, I was nowhere close. I turned to Torin. “Let me get on your shoulders, man.”

He’d been watching the blob instead of my pathetic attempts to reach the root, so he looked a little confused at my request. But, good sport that he was, he stooped down. “Okay. Climb up. I’m getting you two the hell out of here.”

I clambered up and Torin rose slowly. And unsteadily.

“Careful!” I put my hands out, trying to steady both of us, praying we wouldn’t fall over. The blob, perhaps sensing the additional movement, began to quiver in that disconcerting way it had—like a freestanding jello someone had bumped into.

“Whatever you’re doing, Cali, hurry up,” Astrid said, her voice shaking with fear. “It’s coming!”

I glanced over. She was right—the blob was starting to move toward us, slowly this time. I reached up and wrapped my hand around the cool, moist root—and then I gasped. Because the root wrapped around *me*, too. I looked up, trying to see more of the tree. Maybe this is a root from one of the talking trees? Maybe it could help us to escape? But how? How was I supposed to communicate with a root? Was that something I was supposed to just *know* how to do?

Well, I didn’t, so I decided to try just talking. I gave the root a tug. “Hello? It’s me, Cali! Um, I appreciate you just being here, but actually, I could really use some help.”

To my absolute surprise, the root responded, tightening around my wrist.

“Grab onto me,” I yelled down to Torin and Astrid. They were looking up at me, baffled, but grabbed onto my waist, holding tight. “Okay,” I yelled at the root. “Get us out of here!”

Nothing happened.

The blob growled again. I tried to close my nose as my eyes immediately began to water. Astrid screamed.

“It’s got me, Cali!” she shrieked. She was still clinging to me, but I could feel her shaking her foot, trying to free it. “It’s got my foot! It’s *absorbing* it!”

I looked down, absolutely terrified of what I would find. It was exactly as Astrid had said—her bare right foot was not being held in any way by the blob. Instead, it was just *gone*, and the blob was advancing, moving closer and closer to her left foot.

I gave the root a firm tug. “Please pull out of here now. *Please*,” I repeated, figuring a little courtesy couldn’t hurt.

And, to my surprise, the root suddenly obeyed, hoisting us up. The pull on my arm was agonizing, but I heard a little pop of suction as Astrid’s foot broke free of the blob, so I hung on.

When I glanced up, I saw the oozy mud. “Hold your breath!” I shouted, moments before we disappeared into it again. Rocks and tree roots hidden in the mud scraped against my body as we were pulled higher and higher—toward the surface and away from the blob.

My eyes were closed, my mouth was closed—if I could have, I would have closed my nose and ears, too. Just as my lungs felt as though they couldn’t take another moment without oxygen, we broke free from the mud and were launched into the air.

The three of us landed in an undignified heap next to the sinkhole, all gasping for air and spitting out slime.

“Cali!” Greyson was immediately at my side.

I looked up, wiping mud from my eyes. “Hey,” I said, smiling weakly at him. He stared down at me, brows furrowed.

“Cali, are you okay? What were you thinking just jumping in there—” He opened his mouth to say something else, but then he caught the smell of us and began to cough. “Oh my god, what the hell was down there?”

I gestured vaguely at the sinkhole. “Not a new set of dryer sheets...”

His brows drew together and he surprised me by starting to laugh. Uncontrollably.

I glared up at him, but his laughter was starting to get to me. “Do you have any idea what we just went through down there, Greyson? And how very close we came to *not* making it back up here? Oh! That reminds me.” I looked around at the trees surrounding the path. “Thank you to whichever tree helped us! We couldn’t have done it without you!”

“That was your tree friend from earlier,” Greyson said. “Convinced them to help unless they wanted an early spring trimming.”

Taking a deep breath, I struggled to my feet. Greyson reached out a hand to pull me up, his other hand covering his nose and mouth. Actually, on closer inspection, he was looking a little green. I glanced over at Astrid and Torin, who were also getting to their feet, and I kind of got why he was keeping his distance. They looked disgusting—covered in mud, slime, earth, mucus, grime, and an assortment of other unspeakable substances. And I had a feeling, even without looking down, that I looked pretty similar.

Greyson, who was still holding my hand, but looking greener than ever, looked us all over. “You need a bath. All of you.”

He wasn’t wrong, but I still glared at him. “What, you don’t want to give me a kiss right now?”

“Maybe not the best moment for one,” Greyson said, sucking in a gulp of air. “All of you seriously need to bathe. I don’t even know if you can *comprehend* how bad you smell.”

I glanced at Astrid and Torin, who were looking shaken, then at the ground. “Fine, but first we need to get away from this freaky sinkhole. I have no interest in paying another visit to Mr. Blob’s basement residence.”

Greyson looked like it was the last thing he wanted, but I’d already started walking toward him when Torin yelped like a dog who’d just had his tail stepped on.

I whipped around to see Torin stumbling backward, a terrified expression on his face.

“What?” I demanded.

He didn’t answer, just pointed to the ground at Astrid’s feet.

There, draped over her bare feet, was a mass of the blob residue. As we watched, it began to grow.

**Episode 463**

XAVIER

Joss spun around to look at me as I shoved past her. “If you go Rogue, Xavier, you won’t be protected by the Redwood Pack. You know that, right?”

“Sure do,” I snapped, not looking back. “This isn’t the first time I’ve gone off the beaten path, Joss.”

“And if Silas is really back, this seems like the wrong moment to make the move to go it alone,” she said threateningly.

I didn’t respond. I didn’t have anything to say. I was sick of talking.

Colton caught up with me as I strode down the long driveway to the road. “She’s kind of right.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” I growled.

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t go,” Colton said. “I’m just saying that it was a ballsy move. I like it.” I gave him a sideways look and he laughed. “You know me, Xavier. I love a dramatic exit.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to come with me, Colton.”

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

“What Joss said is true. If Silas is back, this is a bad time to strike out on your own. It’s always going to be better to be protected by the pack.”

Colton rolled his eyes. “Tell me something I don’t know, man. But I’m coming. You know I’m coming.”

“Colton, you really don’t—”

“I’ve made up my mind. Not that I had to. You know when push comes to shove, I’ll always chose my bro over any pack.” He shrugged. “We’ve gone Rogue before. I’m happy to do it again.”

“You sure?” I asked, peering at him.

“Sure I’m sure.” He grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. “And this way we get to sort out our daddy issues together. It’ll be more fun that way.”

I smiled. “Thanks, man,” I said, meaning it. I didn’t know what was coming, but it felt better to have Colton by my side. It always did.

We had stopped at the end of the driveway and we both looked back as Maya and Lola walked over.

“Go back,” I told them, waving them away. “If it means going Rogue, it’s too dangerous. Just go back.”

Maya rolled her eyes like this was the dumbest thing she’d ever heard, and Lola shook her head.

“I’m not going back. Not yet,” she said. “I’m not going to give up on finding Cali. She’s my best friend. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do everything I could to make sure she was safe.”

“Lola.” Jay was walking toward us from the house. “Where are you going? What’s going on?” Then he looked at me. “Is it true? Are you leaving against Joss’s orders?”

I shook my head. “Word travels fast around here.”

Colton looked back at Joss, who was standing still, watching us. “Sometimes I wonder if she’s had this place bugged.”

Jay shot us a dirty look, then looked back at Lola. “If Silas is back, you all leaving is playing right into his hands. That’s what he wants—the pack splintered, all of us more vulnerable. You’re making it easy for him.”

“This isn’t about Silas,” I ground out, glaring at Jay. “This is about Cali. Just in case your sources didn’t tell you that part.”

When Jay glanced back at me, he looked more sympathetic. “I get that, Xavier. I know you’re worried. But maybe she’s better off.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I barked.

“If Silas is around, maybe Cali’s safer in the Fae world or wherever she is. She’s somewhere where he can’t get to her. At least until we deal with your father.”

I stared at Jay, pissed. “You should have my back on this, man. What’s up with you?”

But Jay didn’t answer, and he wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“And what about Greyson? I don’t trust him with Cali,” I said, looking at him. Then I looked back at Joss. “Maybe Greyson’s fooled you, or maybe you’re in on it. Either way, the facts are the same: Greyson’s working with Silas.”

Joss stared at me, like she was waiting for the punchline. When it became clear that one wasn’t coming, she laughed, but the sound was sharp. “Are you fucking high, Xavier? Do you really think Greyson’s working with Silas?”

“Yeah,” I answered shortly.

She shook her head. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” I asked derisively. “Of course you don’t believe it. You’re his Luna. You’ve already fallen for him and all his lies.”

Joss’s jaw clenched, and she suddenly looked like she was fighting off the urge to tackle me. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and threatening. “You don’t know the first thing about Greyson.”

“And you do?” I scoffed.

She raised an eyebrow. “I’ve known him a helluva lot longer than you think, man.”

“Congrats,” I said with a cruel smile. “You’ve had sex with him a few times. Very impressive.” Her eyes began to flash with anger. “Do you really think he’s not using you?”

She didn’t answer, but I saw a flicker of doubt flash across her eyes.

“Let me help you out,” I said. “He is. He’s used and manipulated everyone he’s ever known. Me, Colton, Cali, the whole damn pack—”

“You only see what you want to see,” Joss snapped.

I shook my head. “Greyson is *exactly* who I think he is,” I said angrily. “You just don’t see it because you want to jump his bones. And, by the time you realize the truth, it’ll be too late. So you’ll just have to take my word for it, because I have to get to him before he gets to anyone else.”

Joss shook her head, clearly refusing to believe me.

“Open your eyes, Joss,” I snapped. “Greyson won you over just because he chose you as his Luna. You’re not even his fucking mate! What the hell are you even doing here?”

Joss didn’t answer for a moment. Every muscle in her body was coiled tight, and I found myself wanting her to spring; I was spoiling for a fight.

Finally, her jaw tight, she answered: “I’m here because I’m doing my fucking job.”

I laughed bitterly. “Fine, then do it. But leave me the hell out of it.”

Joss looked at me, her eyes assessing, and shook her head. “It’s a damn good thing Greyson kicked your ass, Xavier. You would have been a piss-poor Alpha.”

“What did you just say to me?” I asked, fury rising.

“You can’t handle the pressure. You couldn’t even come close. You don’t take the responsibility of the pack seriously at all. If it suits you, fine, but the second anything gets in your way, you bail.” She took a step toward me. “You can insult me all fucking day, Xavier, but I’ll never do what you’ve done. Greyson and I may not be mates, but I’ve dreamed of being a Luna my whole life and I’m not going to neglect my pack—or work against the pack’s best interest—because I’m sad about a boy.”

“I can’t handle the pressure? Well Greyson isn’t even here.” I shook my head. “I don’t have time for this bullshit. I’m out of here. Colton, you’re coming. What about you?” I looked at Jay.

Jay shook his head. “No man. It’s a bad time, bad idea.” He looked at Lola. “Let’s go.”

“I’m not going anywhere, unless it’s to find Cali,” Lola said firmly.

Jay looked back in surprise. “Lola.”

“Cali’s my best friend, Jay,” Lola said. “She’s disappeared, and I have to go look for her. I thought you’d understand.” Her expression softened as she looked at him. “Can’t you come with us?”

Jay stared at her, his eyes wide and hurt. Then, without a word, he turned and walked away, back to the house.

Lola’s gaze followed him, her eyes filling with tears.

Truth be told, I hated seeing Jay walk away, too, but he’d made his choice.

“If we’re going, let’s go,” Maya said quietly. She glanced up at the setting sun.

We turned and headed to the road. As we reached it, I turned to look back at Joss, who was still standing in the driveway, arms folded across her chest, watching us.

“When I get back,” I yelled, “you and the pack had better be gone! This is my house! I never agreed that it could become the new pack house. It doesn’t belong to the Redwoods, and I want you out of here.”

“Yeah!” Colton called in agreement. “I want my fucking bathroom back!”

Joss didn’t respond. She didn’t even acknowledge that she’d heard me. I turned back to the road.

“So,” Colton said, turning to me. “Where are we going, anyway?”

I stared out at the setting sun. “Minnesota.”

This was met with silence.

“That’s what this whole argument was about? Going to the *Midwest*?” Maya said.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Colton asked.

“No,” I said. “We’re going to go talk to Cali’s mother.”

**Episode 464**

GREYSON

I honestly didn’t know what was worse—the putrid stench coming from Cali, Astrid, and Torin, or the amorphous blob that was moving toward us.

It was clear which they thought was worse, considering all three of them were staring at the blob in frozen horror.

I couldn’t quite see what was so terrifying about it. It was small and looked relatively harmless. Though, as I watched, I couldn’t help but notice that it didn’t move past obstacles in its path—it consumed them. That was... less than ideal.

“What is it?” I asked, staring at the little blob.

“It’s a…” Cali seemed to be casting around for the right word to describe it. “It’s a *blob*. But it’s deadly, don’t touch it! It tried to eat Astrid.”

I stared at Cali. Deadly? This thing looked weird, but *deadly?* I didn’t think so. Being overly dramatic wasn’t totally out of character for her, but I still looked at Cali with concern. I hoped she hadn’t hit her head when she’d been in that sinkhole. I should’ve checked her for head injuries, but it was hard to get too close to her while she was smelling so rancid.

Picking up a rock, I lobbed it at the blob. I hit it dead center, but the blob just absorbed the rock, growing a little bigger. “Okay, that was weird.”

Cali looked over at me. “That’s not the half of it, Greyson.” Then, without another moment of hesitation, she spun on her heel and charged into the trees. She was back a moment later, holding a large, sharp branch in her hands.

I had to idea what she was up to, but I had to hand it to her—Torin and Astrid were still frozen with fear, but Cali was already coming up with a new plan. Her plans didn’t always work, but I admired her willingness to try. And, as I watched her wield her stick like a deadly weapon, I couldn’t help but smile.

She was brave. It often led to a lot of trouble, but I really admired her for being so unafraid. So selfless when it came to her friends. But it did keep me busy, keeping her out of the kind of trouble she tended to just walk right into.

Cali raised the branch above her head and brought it down with as much force as she could muster, spearing the little blob like a jello shish kabob. Then she lifted the stick over her head and stepped toward the sink hole, driving the stick into the muck. For a moment it just looked like she was planting the stick in the mud, but then, after a moment, the muddy ooze responded, sucking the stick down with the force of a vacuum—and nearly taking Cali with it.

I lunged for her, but before I could reach her, she let go of the stick and stumbled backward. With me moving forward and her moving backward, we knocked into each other and tumbled to the ground.

The sinkhole grumbled and bubbled and gave one loud, sickening, muddy burp before falling eerily silent again.

“You did it!” Astrid screamed, breaking the silence and dancing over to Cali. She pulled her up and into a hug. “You got rid of the blob! You’re my hero Cali!”

I smiled up at the girls, then, with a sinking stomach, looked down at my legs. As happy as I was that everyone was all right and—at least momentarily—out of danger, the smell wasn’t getting any better. And when Cali had fallen on me, she had gotten her gross slime all over my legs, too.

With a smile, she offered me a hand to help me stand. Figuring the damage was already done, I took it.

“You’re amazing, Cali!” Torin sang, throwing his arms around her. “That was the craziest thing I’ve ever seen. The sinkhole was the only place we could have put that thing to get rid of it. What a nightmare.”

“I know,” Cali said, still smiling. She glanced at me. “But maybe it *would* be nice to clean up.”

“Thank god,” I muttered, trying not to breathe through my nose.

“But where?” Torin asked, looking around.

I looked around, too. I didn’t see any water sparkling through the trees, and I had no desire to go back to the river. “I don’t know,” I said, scanning the trees.

“Hang on,” Cali said. “I have an idea.”

And then she headed back into the trees.

“First of all,” she said, looking around like she was giving a speech to an audience of willows, “thank you so much for helping us escape. And I’m sorry Greyson threatened to trim any of you. I don’t know how we could have done it without you.”

For a moment, there was no response. Then: “You’re welcome, but you do really stink.”

The tree’s voice was instantly recognizable. It was exactly what you’d expect a tree to sound like—old and craggy.

“So, yeah, about that,” Cali continued. “I was wondering if you had any idea where I might go to wash all this gunk off?”

“This smell is elemental and, therefore, not easy to rid oneself of.”

“But is it possible?” I asked, feeling slightly worried. My senses were always heightened, even in human form, and if Cali wasn’t able to get this smell off herself, we were going to have a big problem. The smell was killing me. It made my eyes water every time I got close to her. How the hell could I protect her if I couldn’t even tolerate standing next to her?

“It is not easy, but it is possible,” the tree said, slowly.

I was getting impatient. I got it, they were trees. They weren’t in any particular hurry. But I was going to puke if these three didn’t take a bath, and soon. “Just tell us where it is,” I snapped, and Cali shot me a reproving glare. “*Please*,” I added hastily.

“There is only one place that will cleanse this. The Absolution Geyser.”

I rolled my eyes. I couldn’t help it. Everything about the Fae world had been exactly like this.

“And let me guess,” I said shortly. “Like everything else in this fucking world, reaching this place will require a long and dangerous journey.”

“No.” The tree shook its leaves. “No, it’s just over there.” It extended a branch like it was pointing, indicating a pair of twin boulders with a slim gap between them.

I stared at them in disbelief. It was so close. Was it actually possible? Could it be that, for once, we were just going to reach a goal easily, and not encounter an army of Dark Fae on the way? Or water sprites, or trolls, or one of those blobs as the geyser’s lifeguard, or whatever else this crazy land had to offer?

“Thank you,” Cali said to the tree, bowing her head respectfully. Then she turned toward the boulders.

But after a few strides, she suddenly stopped.

“What?” I asked, my senses—all except smell—on high alert.

“Don’t you want to go ahead of me?” she asked, looking up.

“Why?”

She shrugged. “You usually do. Just to make sure it’s all safe.”

“Wouldn’t matter,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s too late. If someone’s waiting for us, they’ve already smelled us coming.”

This surprised a laugh out of her, and she looked up at me, her eyes sparkling.

I’d never thought about anyone’s laugh before, but I really liked Cali’s. It was low and musical and felt so honest—just like the rest of her.

She started forward again and we all followed behind her, moving through the opening between the two boulders. The trees were behind us now, and the land was flat, leading to a rocky plateau. There, in the center, was a pond, colored the dark blue of deep water.

Torin gave a yelp of happiness and started running toward it, with Cali and Astrid close behind, but I held back, feeling more cautious. I looked around at the flat land. Again, we were out in the open, and again, I hated it. It made me feel too exposed and vulnerable.

But then a breeze stirred and a waft of stench came up to me from where Cali had fallen on my legs, so I joined the others at the water. As I reached the edge of the pond, the ground began to rumble. Before I had a moment to wonder why, the geyser erupted. It shot twenty feet into the air and rained down a shower of hot, clean water on all of us.   
 Cali leaned her head back, letting the water run over her, moaning as she scrubbed mud off her face.

Torin and Astrid were out of their clothes already and Astrid was leaning down, scrubbing her filthy clothes against the rocks at the pond edge, using them like a washboard.

My skin prickled with awareness, and I looked at Cali as she began to undress. Her attention was on the water and on scrubbing the grime off her skin, and I watched as she peeled off her filthy clothes. The geyser water was magical, rinsing the muck away as soon as it touched her body, leaving her clean again, the small droplets of water on her skin sparkling like crystals in the sun.

My eyes traced the lines of her breasts and her back. It’d been so long… *Pull it together, Greyson*, I told myself. *Control yourself*.

I didn’t want to.

And maybe feeling the weight of my hungry stare, she turned and caught my eye.

For a moment, I wondered if she was going to glare or turn away or cover herself, but instead she just smiled—a slow, contended smile—and I took a step toward her.

But I stopped again when I heard a sound. It was distant and unidentifiable. I looked around, trying to find the source. But, just as I turned away from Cali, a huge net fell upon us.

**Episode 465**

MAYA

The lights in the plane had been turned down after we’d taken off, and nearly everyone was asleep as we flew toward Minnesota. I tried to close my eyes, but I wasn’t even in the neighborhood of tired, so I opened them again. Lola had fallen asleep the minute we’d taken off and now she shifted, resting her head against my shoulder, and snored. Loudly.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered, shoving her off.

She twitched a little in her sleep, like I’d startled her, muttered something unintelligible, then leaned against the window.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes again. If I could just fall asleep, maybe this godforsaken trip would be over faster.

But I opened them right back up when I felt something on my thigh.

It was Colton’s hand.

And it wasn’t just resting there. He was moving his thumb back and forth, stroking the upper part of my thigh through my jeans.

I turned to him, glaring, and was met with his usual shit-eating grin.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I asked, keeping my voice low and threatening.

Colton’s grin widened. “Just what we agreed to do, Maya.”

“And what was that?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Enemies with benefits. Sound familiar?”

My jaw ached from being clenched too tightly. “I never *agreed* to anything,” I ground out.

But Colton didn’t move his hand. In fact, he tightened his grip, giving my thigh a squeeze that sent shivers up my spine.

I stayed perfectly still, but there was a gleam in Colton’s eyes, like he knew exactly what I was feeling. He slid his hand down, cupped the underside of my thigh, and gave that a squeeze too.

I stifled a gasp. He was barely touching me, but it felt like he was lighting me on fire.

No. There was no way I wasgoing to let this happen again. I’d had a couple of moments of weakness, but that was *over*. Colton and I were *over*. We were never *started*.

Apparently, he didn’t think so. He leaned close. “I think we should discuss the terms of our arrangement, don’t you think, Maya?”

“What terms?” I snapped, louder than I’d intended.

He smiled a slow, sleepy smile that made my core feel like liquid heat. “You know, *negotiate*.”

“Negotiate?” I asked, feeling suddenly breathless.

“Yeah, negotiate. I offer this,” he said, squeezing my leg lightly, “you offer that. We meet somewhere in the middle.”

His voice was low and gravelly, and every word thrummed in my belly.

I took a deep breath, trying to clear my head. When I leaned close, his eyes darkened and the pupils contracted. “I don’t negotiate with dicks,” I whispered. Then I gripped his hand and pulled it off my leg. “Especially morons who think that *now* is a good time to screw.”

Colton looked surprised for just a moment. Then, recovering himself, he leaned closer. “Maya,” he said, his voice low again. “Look around. Everyone’s asleep. We’re not going to land for hours.” He shrugged casually. “Why not take advantage of the time we’re given. Join the—”

“If you say one goddamn word about joining the mile-high club, Colton, I swear I’ll castrate you right here, right now.”

He chuckled. “You seem to think about my dick a lot, huh?” Pushing up the armrest between us, he moved closer so the right side of his body was flush against the left side of mine. “Think about it, Maya. It’ll help us both.”

“How will it *help* me?” I asked, surprised into a laugh at this abrupt change of tactics.

He shrugged. “There’s a lot going on right now. Cali and Greyson, Joss, all of this shit. It’s an easy way to forget all about it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m completely unsurprised that all it would take is a boink in the bathroom to make you forget your troubles, Colton, but it’s not that easy for me. Besides,” I added, glaring at him, “you’re not really worried. You’re just horny.”

He smiled, like he’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Guilty. But I can’t help it.” He pressed closer to me. “Being this close to you *does* things to me.”

It was doing things to me, too, but I’d die before I admitted it.

I stared straight ahead, refusing to look at him. But I still heard it when he unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up.

He leaned down, his lips so close to my ear I could feel my hair move when he spoke. “Meet me in the bathroom. I dare you.”

He lingered for a moment, breathing me in, before he straightened and sauntered down the aisle, his step confident, like he had no doubt I’d be knocking on that bathroom door.

But that was Colton. He never had any doubts about anything—not when it came to himself. He was so fucking full of himself. Like I’d ever follow that conceited ass to a fucking *airplane bathroom*.

With a roll of my eyes, I settled back into my seat and closed my eyes again. But—unbidden—the feel of his hand on my thigh came back to me. I could nearly feel the heat of his palm through my jeans, the gentle pressure of his fingers. I squirmed a little, wishing I could feel it again.

“BATS!” Lola yelled.

I jumped, heart racing. “Shit,” I breathed, and put my hand over my racing heart.

She turned to me, her eyes wide, and grabbed the lapels of my jacket. “Why are there so many bats?”

“Let go of me, Lola,” I demanded, ripping her hands off of me.

“I like bats,” Lola continued. “Are you Batman?”

I groaned. “You talk in your sleep?” I asked, though it was useless. It was obvious Lola wasn’t really talking to me. Her eyes were wide and unfocused, and her expression spaced-out. “Fuck,” I said, and pushed her away, but she made another grab for me.

“Christian?” she asked, her eyes everywhere but on mine. “Is that you? Christian Bale? I’ve been waiting for you…”

“Ugh,” I groaned. I gave her another—harder—shove, and teeming with frustration, I unbuckled my seatbelt and stood before she could grab for me again.

When I looked around the dimly lit cabin, I could see that Colton had been right. Everyone *was* asleep. Huh. I looked down at Lola—she was already slumped back against her window, snoring again.

I didn’t mean to, exactly, but my gaze wandered to the back of the plane, where a little square of light illuminated the one occupied bathroom.

Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I did wonder what it might be like. The truth was, I’d never done it in a plane, and I had no idea how people even did it discreetly. But heat was pooling below my stomach at the thought. There was something reckless about having sex while flying thirty-five thousand feet above the earth.

I looked down, irritated. My hand was on my thigh and had started rubbing the same spot on my leg where Colton had touched me.

“Dammit,” I muttered, looking back at the bathroom. I bit my lip. Everyone *was* asleep.

I was moving up the aisle toward the bathroom before I’d even realized it, but when I put my hand on the door, I didn’t hesitate before I pushed it open.

Colton was looking at me as I walked in, a knowing smile on his face.

I snapped the door shut behind me and locked it. Damn was this small. When I turned back around, he was standing in front of me, his face an inch from mine.

“If you tell anyone about this,” I said in a low rasp, “I’ll kill you.”

Colton’s smile widened and he grabbed me around the waist, pulling me close, and crushed his lips against mine.

Suddenly, his hands were fucking everywhere. Beneath my shirt, down my pants.

My own fingers went to his waist, unbuckling his belt and yanking at the button on his jeans. My whole body felt consumed by fire, and I wanted him bad. *Fast*.

Colton grasped my hips and pivoted me so he could press me against the wall. I felt my head hit it and sank my teeth into his bottom lip. I tasted a whisper of blood, but he moaned with pleasure and ground his hips against mine, holding me fast. His hands dipped under my shirt and cupped both my breasts, thumbing my nipples until they were tight with want. I panted into his mouth, and I could feel his smile against my lips.

Served me right for never wearing a bra.

I grabbed his ass and pulled him tight against me, hungry for him, and when I felt his rock-hard cock against my leg, I swiveled my hips so I could rub myself against him.

“Fuck, Maya,” he whispered, breaking away from our kiss.

“That’s the idea,” I growled, and yanked his pants open.

He slammed his hips against mine, then hooked his fingers over the top of my jeans and underwear, pulling them both down with one efficient movement. He kissed me again, his tongue diving deep into me. Bending slightly, he lifted me up and spun around, perching me on the edge of the counter of the sink.

The space was so small, I was consumed with Colton and only him.

I opened my legs and grabbed his cock, giving it just a couple of hard strokes before he moaned like he was in pain and drove himself into me so hard I gasped.

Reaching up, I grasped the towel bar above me as he pumped. My heart was beating hard, and as I looked up at his face—which was gravely serious and intense with focus—I felt the waves of orgasm start to lap at my feet. They moved up quickly, overwhelmingly, consuming me until I was panting. When I started to cry out, Colton covered my mouth with his, smothering my cries of ecstasy, taming my tongue as he pulsed into me.

Shaking with the strength of my orgasm, I leaned my head back against the mirror as Colton shivered to an end. He leaned his forehead on my shoulder for a moment, breathing hard. Then, quick as a flash, he looked up, dropped a kiss on my lips, and stepped back to pull his pants up.

Slower to recover, I just stared at him.

“Enemies with benefits,” he said with a wink.

What the hell was I getting myself into?

**Episode 466**

Pushing my wet hair out of my face, I struggled against the net.

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded, though I didn’t even know who to address.

I was trapped in a net of all things, and being pulled out of the water toward the edge of the spring. Greyson was next to me, writhing in fury, trying to claw a way out. Only it wasn’t working. The only thing it was doing was pulling the net tighter, drawing our bodies closer together. Our naked bodies. Our *wet*, naked bodies.

“Oh god,” I murmured, feeling the slickness of his skin against mine. I looked up at him. His face was inches from mine, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking around frantically, trying to figure out a way to escape the net. “What’s going on?” I asked him. “Why aren’t we breaking out of here?”

“I don’t know,” he grunted, his hands starting to turn red with the effort of tugging on the ropes.

“What the hell does *that* mean?” I asked sharply. “It’s a net, Greyson. Didn’t you just lift a troll over your head, like, a day ago?”

“I know!” he said, sounding still more frustrated. “I don’t know what’s up with these ropes.” He grunted as he pulled at them. “They’re unbreakable.”

The net bounced and we lost our footing, splashing down into the water, but we were still being pulled. Still moving forward. And, at this point, the net was pulled so tightly that he and I were pressed right against each other. I couldn’t have moved away if I’d wanted to.

This close, I could feel how tense he was. Every muscle was coiled tight—wound like a spring. He looked down at me, found me looking up at him, and gave me a small, reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered. “We’ll get out of this, Cali. Together, okay?” He waited until I nodded before he looked away.

I knew he was just trying to make me feel better, but his words filled me with comfort all the same. He never doubted himself. I didn’t know how he managed it, but I leaned close, wanting to absorb some of his assurance.

Somewhere to my left, I could hear splashing, and Torin and Astrid’s voices.

“Cali? Greyson? Can you hear me?” Astrid shouted, sounding scared.

“Are you guys in a net, too, or is that just us?” Torin asked. “Because if you’re not, a little help would be nice.”

I’d opened my mouth to answer when Greyson put his hand over it. “Hang on,” he said quietly. “Let’s just keep quiet for a while.”

Finally, I felt the dry, rocky sand of the shore beneath me, and we came to a stop. The net didn’t loosen, which meant that we still couldn’t move. The only saving grace was that the journey through the spring had washed me effectively, and the horrific smell was gone.

If I ever got out of this, I’d have to remember to thank that tree again.

There were footsteps nearby and I craned my neck, trying to see where they were coming from. Then I saw them. Just over Greyson’s broad, muscled shoulder, a pair of feet came to a stop. They were facing in our direction, which meant their owner was probably watching us.

I strained, trying to see more than the bare feet and calves. “Who are you?” I called. “What do you want with us?”

There was silence for a moment, then the feet moved and a knee bent. The person was kneeling, and, as they lowered their head, I saw that it was a woman. She looked curiously at me, and I looked curiously back. Her face looked vaguely familiar, but… how in the world was that possible? It wasn’t like we could’ve had mutual friends.

I stared at her face—her eyes, her nose—there was just *something*… Looking at her gave my mind a strange, floating feeling, like déjà vu.

The woman, however, did not seem to share my confusion, and her eyes shone bright with pleasure as she looked at us. “Two birds with one stone. Fancy that.”

The woman’s accent was strong and it reminded me of an Aussie accent. It wasn’t like anything I’d heard in the Fae world so far. Granted, I’d mostly interacted with sprites, nymphs, and other magical creatures, not a lot of people.

She looked me over from head to toe, but when she shifted her eyes to Greyson’s prone body, a smile spread across her face. “Look at this,” she said to herself. “You’re a fine one, aren’t you? You’ll be a picture on the ole auction block.”

My heart stuttered to a stop. “Auction?”

The woman’s eyes flickered back to me, and the smile slid off her face. “You’ll want to keep your questions to yourself, if you know what’s good for you.”

She was probably right, but she didn’t know that I *didn’t* know what was good for me, because I asked, “But why are you doing this?”

Her smile returned, but this one was hard and shrewd. “Because you’re all valuable, aren’t you?” Her eyes flickered over me. “I’d say you’re Light Fae, and in the wrong territory. That’s what makes you valuable.”

My jaw clenched. This was the *last* thing I needed. Whoever this woman was—and whatever her plan was—I could *not* let her stop me. I was trying to remember Greyson’s advice about keeping quiet, but inside I was seething.

I glared at her, but she didn’t seem to notice. She looked back at Greyson, her brow furrowed. “Only thing is, this one’s the best of you four.” She shook her head. “Can’t say how, but his looks alone will fetch a pretty penny.” Her eyes were hungry as she took him in.

*Don’t shift.*

I looked at him, waiting to see if he’d heard me. When he looked at me, I knew he had.

*Whoever this woman is, don’t let her find out you’re a werewolf. We saw how the Light Fae reacted—we don’t want to find out what the Dark Fae will do.*

I wanted impatiently for him to respond, for him to assure me that he was going to keep himself safe.

The answer came, finally.

*I promise I won’t shift.*

I took let out a relieved breath.

*Unless the situation warrants it.*

I rolled my eyes. *Greyson!*

*Don’t worry.* His eyes smiled at me. *For now I’m happy just being close to you.*

Heat rushed to my cheeks—and a few other parts of my body—but I couldn’t turn away from him. I couldn’t step away. I couldn’t do anything except feel his skin against mine. We hadn’t even gotten this close—or naked—in the field.

Greyson’s eyes burned bright as he looked at me. My lips parted, my body aching that we were anywhere but a net—

“*Hey!*” the woman shrieked, stepping closer to us. “Whatever’s going on between you two, knock it off!”

A few feet away, I heard Astrid’s voice, though it sounded muffled. “What are you going to do to us? We haven’t done anything. We’re innocent.”

The woman laughed—a deep, throaty sound—as she looked over her shoulder in Astrid’s direction. “You’ll probably go to work in the mines, like all the others.”

*Mines?* I tried to look around to get a sense of where we were. Did she mean coal mines? Well, this woman could forget that. There was no way I was taking part in an industry that was a leading cause of climate change. Even under duress.

I wasn’t sending any messages to him, but Greyson might have guessed some of what I was thinking, because he shot me a reproaching look.

Before he could say anything, though, we were hoisted up into the air, as easily as if the net was filled with party balloons instead of human beings. The woman slung us over her broad back. She took a step forward and, for the first time, I spotted Astrid and Torin. They were in a net like ours, lying on the rocky sand. But, an instant later, and with very little effort, the woman had picked them up too and thrown them over her other shoulder. Then, jostling us, she began to walk away from the geyser.

“Who are you?” I demanded after a quiet moment.

To my surprise, she answered the question.

“I am Artemis.”

She didn’t elaborate, probably because we’d reached a wooden cart with a high seat. She laid us down gently in the large, rectangular back section—first Astrid and Torin, then Greyson and me.

“Don’t want to bruise the fruit,” she said with a chuckle, then climbed onto the wagon’s seat. She picked up the reins and, with a strange clucking-screeching sound, the cart began to move forward.

When I met Greyson’s eyes, he looked tense and angry. I looked up, trying to see Artemis, but all I could see was the sky above me.

“Where are you taking us?” I demanded.

Artemis gave her throaty chuckle again, as though I’d asked a stupid question. “Where do you think? To the Kollector, of course.”

**Episode 467**

GABRIEL

It had been hot long before we’d gotten to Reno, but when I pushed open the door of Mikah’s car outside the chop shop, it felt like opening the door of an oven.

“I guess this is it,” I said, tipping my chin up at the squat building in front of us. “Look, he’s called his chop shop ‘The Chop Shop’. Nice. Real imaginative.” I laughed, shaking my head. “Must be a real genius goblin we’re dealing with here.”

Mikah looked at the garage dubiously. “Remember, this isn’t *just* a chop shop. It’s also a nightclub.”

I thought about that for a moment. “Okay, that’s actually a pretty badass name for a nightclub.”

Mikah shook his head with a grin. “Maybe the goblin thought that the more obvious a name he gave it, the safer he’d be.”

“All right,” I said, clapping my hands. “Let’s do this.”

Mikah looked over at me, confused. “Do what?”

“Um, go in?” I said. “Meet the thing? Pretend we have a stolen car to sell him? Start fucking shit up?”

Mikah stared at me for a moment. “Wait, are you talking about *my* car? You want to sell him *my* car?”

“For fuck’s sake, why are vampires always so dense?” I asked myself. “Of course *your* car, man. It’s the only one we’ve got.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Mikah said, like I was missing something obvious. “And I’m not handing it over to a goblin so it can be chopped into a million little pieces.”

I rolled my eyes. “God, you vampires are always so materialistic.”

“Says the werewolf who kills for money,” Mikah said, giving me a level stare.

“Haven’t you heard, man? You can’t take it with you.”  
 He narrowed his eyes. “Well, as I’m not going anywhere anytime soon, that’s not really applicable in my case, Gabriel.”

I heaved a sigh and looked around. “Fine. We won’t get rid of your car. What do you propose we do, then? How are we going to get in?”

I looked around the block. It was pretty grim. Mostly industrial buildings. A welding shop down the way, next to a tinsmith. And, next to the chop shop, there was a small diner that looked like it had been there for fifty years.

“Let’s go get a bite,” I said, tipping my chin toward the diner. I saw Mikah’s eyes flick down to my exposed throat and grinned. “That’s not what I meant.”

He looked irritated. “We’ll wait until the club opens and then we’ll go in.”

“Wait?” I asked, surprised. “Why should we wait?”

Mikah sighed as he leaned back against his car. “Because, unlike you, I prefer to *not* always charge in, guns blazing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He looked at the chop shop. “We need to see if Horse’s story has any merit.”

I followed his pensive gaze to the little garage. “Fine,” I finally said. “But if I have to put away my blazing guns, can I at least get something to eat while we wait?”

Mikah leaned back, looking up at the sky, and shook his head with a groan.

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“What?” I asked around the last bite of my double bacon cheeseburger.

I’d caught him staring at me, and now Mikah shook his head.

“Where do you put it all?” he asked in disbelief, taking in my decimated burger, fries, and empty bottle of coke.

I grinned as I slurped up the last of my chocolate banana milkshake. “I’m a growing boy, boss.”

This only made him roll his eyes. He glanced out the window at the darkening street. “It’s time to go.”

I leaned forward, following his gaze out the window. “You sure?”

He nodded. “People are starting to go in. I think the Chop Shop nightclub is open for business.”

“All right,” I said, slamming down my cup. “Let’s do this.”

I dropped a couple of twenties on the table and we left the diner. We walked toward the line that was quickly forming in front of the Chop Shop.

“Don’t do anything stupid, okay?” Mikah said, turning to me.

“*Me?*” I asked incredulously.

He didn’t look happy. “I’m serious. Nothing crazy. Not like Vancouver, okay?”

“I saved your ass in Vancouver, in case you’ve forgotten.”

Mikah shook his head. “Dream on.”

The bouncer at the door eyed us as we walked toward him. “What are you two here for?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Whatcha got?”

Mikah glared. I guess he didn’t consider that *playing it cool*.

“I’m kidding,” I said, laughing. “We’re here for everything.” I winked. “If you know what I mean.”

The bouncer looked at me for a moment more, then readied the stamp in his hand. “Twenty-five bucks each and stick to the rules. No bloodsucking in common areas, no shifting, and no magic.” He stamped Mikah’s hand with a faint black star. “Violate any of the rules and you’re out on your ass, no questions asked. Got it?”

“Got it,” Mikah said, nodding. He glanced at me. “Pay the man, Gabriel.”

I started to object, but Mikah was already walking in. “Fucking bloodsuckers,” I muttered, and pulled a wad of cash out of my pocket.

Cover paid and hand stamped, I followed Mikah into the club. The lights were low, the corners lit only by a dim red glow. Music pumped through the stereo system so loud the whole building seemed to throb with the sound of it. I looked around at the crowd of people and smiled. I nudged Mikah with my shoulder. “I like this place. Gambling, drugs, sex…” I shrugged. “I could really feel at home here.”

Mikah didn’t seem happy as he looked around. “You *would* like it here. It’s got every vice in the world, all under one roof. Very convenient.”

“So, where should we start?”

Just as I asked this, a tall, slim man dressed in leather pants and a leather vest walked over.

“What’s your pleasure?” he asked, his voice throaty and suggestive.

My eyes went automatically to Mikah, who looked back, his expression slightly surprised. I quickly looked away and pointed to a closed door over Mikah’s shoulder. “What’s going on in there?”

The guy in leather shook his bald head. “That’s for special guests. Invite only.”

I shrugged, like it couldn’t matter less. “Okay, how ‘bout a beer, then?” I glanced at Mikah. “But my friend here would prefer blood. Something local, if you’ve got it.”

As the leather guy moved off to get our drinks, I motioned for Mikah to follow me closer to the door. We got there just as a well-dressed couple—dark suit, sparkling cocktail dress—reached it, led by a guy in black. From the looks of him, he was probably a concierge. Was this place fancy enough for concierge service?

All signs pointed to *yes* as he held the door open for the couple, allowing them to walk in before him.

I hesitated for just a moment, then took a step forward, slipping my foot into the doorway, keeping the door from closing. When I looked back at Mikah, his expression was apprehensive, but I just shrugged. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?”

He raised his eyebrows. “I guess.”

I kicked open the door and we slipped through. There was a flight of stairs leading up to a small hallway. In a room off the hallway, we heard voices, so we were cautious as we peered around the door into a small, dimly lit room. The well-dressed couple was standing with a rough-looking man who was wearing what looked like a bear-skin coat. He was standing in front of a large door. I squinted at the door. The room was too small to have another exit. What the hell was that door all about?

“The guy with the fur?” Mikah said quietly, nodding into the room. “He’s Fae.”

That surprised me. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“How can you tell?”

He gave me a sidelong glance. “I can smell his blood.”

My eyebrows shot up. This possibility hadn’t occurred to me. “Can you smell mine?”

“Yep,” Mikah said without hesitation.

“Well? What do I smell like?” I asked.

“Wet dog.”

“What?”

Mikah didn’t look at me. “You smell like a wet dog.”

I wondered what he’d be able to smell after I broke his nose, but before I could experiment, the guy in the room asked the couple a question, loud enough that we could hear.

“Are you two ready to see paradise?”

A thrill of fear coursed through me as I looked into the room.

“Why do I have a feeling that it isn’t paradise behind that door?” Mikah asked me, very softly.

The man in the fur took a step back and pulled open the door. It didn’t lead to another room, but revealed a mirror. Even in the dim room, the surface of the mirror shimmered. I saw the couple look at each other, then at the man, confused. The man gave them a thin smile. He stepped behind them, and, planting a hand on each of their backs, gave them a hard shove.

“Have a great trip!” he said cheerily.

An instant later, the couple had disappeared.

**Episode 468**

XAVIER

Colton drove the rental car from the airport to the hospital. I sat in the front seat, staring out the window at the Minnesota landscape whipping by, but I wasn’t really seeing anything. I was thinking back to the last time I’d been here. It had been with Cali, and it had been the first time I’d met her parents. Everything had been so different then.

I’d been nervous.

I was nervous now, but it was for different reasons. Now, I was anxious and terrified and angry.

Back then, I’d been worried that her parents wouldn’t like me.

I’d tried to hide my nerves from Cali, but I was pretty sure she’d known. It had been clear in the way she’d smiled when she’d thought I wasn’t looking. I smiled now, looking out the window, thinking about how’d I won them over by cooking for them. It was my stir fry that had done it.

I’d paid for Cali’s mom’s surgery, though they still didn’t know that. I could have told them, of course, but I hadn’t wanted to buy their approval. I’d wanted to earn it.

But this trip was different. *Everything* was different, now. I looked down as my phone buzzed in my pocket.

“Who is it?” Colton asked, breaking the silence in the car.

I looked at the screen. “Gabriel. He keeps calling.”

“What does he want?” Colton wondered.

Ignoring the call and sliding the phone back into my pocket, I shrugged. “No idea.”

“This is it,” Maya said, pointing to the large building looming ahead.

When we reached the door to Cali’s mom’s room, I paused for a moment, then took a deep breath and knocked.

The voice that answered was weak and thready. “Come in.”

I cracked the door open and peered into the darkness of the room.

“*Xavier?*”

My eyes adjusted, and I could finally see her. Cali’s mom—Orla—lying in the hospital bed, surrounded by machines that beeped and hissed softly.

She was looking at me, surprised. “What on earth are you doing here?” she asked. Then her eyes slid past me. “*Lola?* Is that you? Tom just stepped out for a work call, but he’ll be so delighted to see you. And Maya? My goodness! You came, too? How nice of you. Where’s my Cali?”

Shit. This was going to be the hard part.

I took a step into the room. “That’s why we’re here, Orla. Cali’s not with us—”

“Where is she?” Orla demanded, her pale face losing the last of its color.

“We think… *I* think she’s in the Fae world.”

Orla let out a breath, as though in sudden pain. “No,” she said weakly.

I took another step toward the bed. “I’m going to get her back. But to do that, I need your help.”

Orla was quiet, her hand on her chest. She stayed silent for so long my eyes flicked to the red button near her bed—the one that would summon a nurse or a doctor or a code team.

But, before I could make a move toward it, she looked up. “Come in,” she said, her voice hoarse.

Behind me, I heard shuffling feet, but I turned around and put up my hand. “Wait outside,” I said firmly.

“*Xavier*,” Lola said hotly.

But I wasn’t in the mood. “I need to talk to Orla alone,” I said, shutting the door in their faces.

Orla turned up a light near her bed, and I looked at her as I turned back around. I was unpleasantly surprised to see her looking so frail. She looked much sicker than I’d been expecting. Her skin was grey and sagging, her eyes bloodshot and sunken.

She waved a hand, motioning me closer. “I can barely see you over there, Xavier.”

“Of course,” I said, walking closer. “Sorry.” I pulled up a chair and sat next to the bed.

She looked me over for a moment, then peered into my eyes. “Why did she go?”

I shifted, uncomfortable. “Honestly, I was hoping you’d be able to tell me.”

She gave a long sigh, leaning back on her pillow, shaking her head. I remembered meeting her for the first time, thinking how beautiful she was, though she’d been sick then, too. Now, though, she looked about a hundred years old.

I cleared my throat. “She left without telling me why.”

“Last time I saw her, she mentioned it—going there—but I told her not to.” She closed her eyes. “Maybe she thought she could save me.”

Baffled, I stared at her. “I thought your operation would save you.”

She opened her eyes and looked at me. Studied me, like she was trying to figure something out. Finally, her eyes narrowed. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

I pretended like I didn’t know what she was talking about. “What?”

She wasn’t fooled. “You paid for the operation, didn’t you?”

Sighing, I nodded. “Yeah,” I admitted. “It was me. But I’m not here to talk about that. Though I *would* like to know why that supposedly lifesaving procedure didn’t save your life. But I’m here because I want to know if you’ll help me get Cali back.”

Orla’s mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Help you? Look at me, Xavier. How can I help anyone? I’m dying.”

My heart thumped. She was dying. It was obvious. I’d known it the moment I’d walked into the room, though I’d refused to think it. I rubbed my eyes. “I’m sorry. I wish there was something I could do.” I looked back up at her. “Though maybe there is. If Cali went to the Fae world to save you, maybe bringing her back to you willhelp.”

Orla didn’t answer. Her eyes had started to grow unfocused, and she leaned her head back against her pillows. She put a hand to her forehead, like it was hurting.

“I need a Fae item, Orla,” I said firmly, leaning forward so she couldn’t miss my words. “I need something of yours so I can bring Cali home.”

Orla looked at me, and her eyes focused again. She smiled and patted my arm. “I knew you were good for her. I knew you cared about her.”

“I do,” I said, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “But I need your help to find her.”

Orla looked at me sadly. “I don’t have what you need, Xavier. I don’t have any Fae items.”

“Nothing?”

She shook her head. “I only had one left, and I gave it to Cali.”

I was stunned. I hadn’t been expecting this. To come all this way, to see Cali’s mom, and to have nothing to show for it? I wanted to drop my head into my hands, but Orla was watching me, and I didn’t have the heart to scare her even more. I nodded, trying to look calm. “Okay. Thanks. You hang in there, okay? I’ll do my best—”

She reached out as I stood up, grasping my hand. I was shocked at how small and frail her hand felt on mine, like she had tiny, breakable bird bones.

But her eyes burned as she looked up at me. “I’m sorry I can’t help you, Xavier.”

“That’s okay, Orla. I’ll do my best—”

She squeezed my hand, all urgency now. “You *have* to find her. You have to find my Cali.”

I squeezed her hand back, carefully. “I will,” I assured her.

“Do anything to bring her back.” Her whole face was flushed as she looked up at me. “The Fae world isn’t safe.”

I stared at her for a moment, letting her words—and the fevered look in her eyes—settle in. “I will. I promise.” When she released my hand I turned away, but then I stopped at the door and turned back. “Orla, do you know anything about *due destini*?”

She peered at me through the darkness, her brow furrowed. “*Due destini*? No. I’ve never heard of it.” She tipped her head. “Is it important? Does it have something to do with Cali?”

I shook my head. “No, nothing. I just wondered,” I said. But, internally, I was reeling. This was not how I’d wanted to be walking out of this room—empty-handed, with no more answers than I’d had walking in.

But I had no time to reflect on this, as the instant I walked out of the room, I was swarmed.

“What’d she say?” Colton asked, stepping forward.

“Is she doing okay?” Lola asked.

Maya stepped up. “Does she know where Cali is?”

“Stop!” I said, putting up my hands. “Just stop. Give me a fucking second. I need to think.” But that clearly wasn’t going to happen—my phone began to buzz again. I picked it up this time, annoyed as hell. “What?” I snapped.

“Hello to you, too,” Gabriel said, sounding offended.

“What the hell do you want?” I asked. “Now’s not a great time.”

“You’re such a dick, Xavier,” Gabriel said. “You hung up on me—”

“And I’ll do it again—”

“Yeah, do it,” Gabriel taunted. “See what happens.”

I was spectacularly not in the mood for this. “Fuck off, man. I’m in the middle of something.”

“Yeah, join the club. So are we.”

“So why are you calling me?” I demanded.

Gabriel sighed, annoyed. “Because we found a way in.”

“What the hell are you talking about, man? Found a way in? Into what?”

Gabriel gave a short laugh. “You need to get your ass to Reno if you know what’s good for you, man.”

“What? Gabe, that’s the last thing I’m going to—”

He cut me off. “We found a portal to the Fae world.”

**Episode 469**

Once upon a time, I might have found the idea of being trapped against Greyson—our naked bodies pressed together—to be, you know, not the most terrible thing in the world. But thanks to Artemis, that potentially sexy captive fantasy had become a reality… in a not-so-ideal way.

Fantasy: Feeling Greyson’s hard muscles pressed against my torso, every ridge of his abs and the ropey muscles of his thighs warm and firm, a sensual rock for me to break myself against—over and over. I wouldn’t even mind the audience we had, necessarily. Maybe I’d be into the whole exhibition thing. And, hey, it would be even better if we tried being sneaky and messing around without getting caught. Of course, we’d initially try to stay focused, to avoid the distracting lust bubbling up between us, but in the end we’d give in and it would be *hot*.

Reality: The wagon we were currently trapped in the back of, the net tying our bodies together, bumped up and down with each stone and crack in the road. On my best days I didn’t have amazing coordination, but now that I was basically tied down on top of Greyson, the best I could do was to try not to flop around on top of him like a dead fish with every hitch in the wagon. The Fae world sun burned overhead, and I tried not to think about getting a sunburn on my lily-white ass. Especially a sunburn patterned by the net wrapped around me. Sweat was collecting on my skin, especially where Greyson and I were touching, and the whole thing made me cringe.

Basically, this was the most non-sexy thing I’d ever encountered. Not even Greyson’s perfect, sculpted body could save us from the awkwardness.

We hit a particularly large bump and our bodies jolted together, my thigh slipping between his, and I gripped his sold leg between my own, awkwardly trying to keep my weight balanced over his thigh and on his hip so I wouldn’t accidentally crush his junk.

He hissed anyway, proving that I hadn’t been quite successful in protecting the Evers family jewels, and I grimaced.

“Sorry,” I whispered. God, this was going to take *a lot* of liquor to forget later.

In just about any other situation, I might have been able to set the awkwardness aside and salvage what was left of our shared dignity. I mean, he’d seen me in some pretty unflattering situations, and I him. And still the chemistry between us had never been anything but explosive.

But right now, awkward and so not sexily bouncing around on top of my maybe-mate’s sweaty, naked body, all I could think about was what Artemis’s auction plans might be. Would it be a live auction? Like they’d put me up on a stage, naked and sweaty with a fishnet-patterned sunburn on my ass, and then sell me off to the highest bidder like a piece of meat?

Or would it be an eBay thing? FaeBay? How many bitcoins did a human life go for these days? Would there be multiple bidders or only one seller? Kind of like how Xavier and I had met. God, it seemed like decades ago that Lola and I had flown out to meet Colton and Xavier. And now here I was, a literal world away from any of them—my so-called mate included—trying very hard not to knee Greyson in the dick and staring down a dark, dark future.

No, I couldn’t think about that. I wasn’t going to waste mental energy worrying about that dark, empty future because it wasn’t going to happen. I wouldn’t let it. I was going to find a way out of this—for me and my friends—and I wasn’t going to spend the rest of my life working in some Fae world mine or worse.

I tried to lift my head away from Greyson’s chest to see where we were. In the angle I was currently stuck in, it was hard to see much of anything, but the trees seemed to be thinning out. Were we reaching our destination?

I glanced down at Greyson, pinned to the wagon by the net and my weight on top of him, and his eyes searched mine. I knew without him asking what he was wondering, and I shook my head. Nothing anywhere around us that might help us get the hell out of here.

The wagon began to slow, and then a voice from in front of us called, “Stop!” With only two more bumps, the wagon finally halted.

I leaned down and whispered to Greyson, “Can you see what’s going on?”

He glanced at something above my head. His position gave him the advantage of not having to spin his head all the way around to see what was going on above us. “I can see a guarded gate… It looks like we’re being brought to a compound of some kind.”

“I’ve got some goodies for the Kollector,” Artemis said from her spot up front.

My eyes widened, and I saw a similar expression etched onto Greyson’s face.

*Who or what is the Kollector?* I wondered.

I heard another voice hollering for us to go through the gate, and the wagon lurched to life again. More sweat had broken out on my skin while we entered the gate, but it was a cold sweat, born out of fear rather than the hot sun bearing down on us. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see a long, stone wall, and nearby I heard…

*Are those animals?* The sounds were strange and inhuman. I couldn’t identify any of them, but it almost sounded as if we were headed toward some kind of zoo. My heart began to race even more.

A zoo. Tall stone walls. A ‘Kollector’. Were we going to be added to some sadistic Fae’s menagerie? Or maybe that was too kind a fate for us. Maybe instead we were going to be those strange animals’ next meal. I shivered.

*Cali*. Greyson’s voice slipped into my mind. *You need to stay calm, okay? I’m not going to let anyone hurt you. As soon as an opportunity comes up, I promise you I’ll get you out of this.*

I smiled softly and nodded. It meant more than words could say that even in this shitstorm of a situation, he was still trying to comfort me, to protect me even from my own crippling fear. But deep down, where that comfort couldn’t reach, I couldn’t help but wonder if we’d ever get out of this. Not only were we trapped in these weird nets, we were now in some kind of guarded compound.

I hoped Astrid and Torin were okay. They were probably freaking out just as much as I was, and it was all my fault. They’d volunteered to help me and look where it had gotten them.

The wagon jerked to a stop and Artemis hopped off and came around to me, cutting me off before I could speak. “All your questions—and I assume you have plenty—will soon be answered.” With strength I couldn’t fathom she possessed, she hauled Greyson and me over her shoulder and threw a glance back at Torin and Astrid. “I’ll be right back.”

I wriggled in her grip. “Where are you taking us?”

“To be cleaned up,” she said simply.” I have to make sure you’re both nice and shiny before I present you.”

From behind me I heard the sound of a door opening and suddenly darkness washed over us. Shit. Was this the mine?

Then Artemis placed us on the floor and barked at a nearby servant. “Separate these two.”

No! I couldn’t lose Greyson!

*Cali*. His voice soothed through me again. *Don’t show any fear—they’ll only use it against you.*

*That’s easy for you to say*. *You’re a werewolf. You’re never afraid of anything.*

Then I was tugged out of the net and Greyson, still wrapped in its magical hold, was carried away. “Where are you taking him?” I demanded.

Artemis ignored me and walked off, and I took the opportunity to look around. I was in some kind of cell with steel bars on all sides. I rushed forward to the door of the cage, but naturally it was locked. Somewhere off in the distance, I heard muffled cries and strange animal keens echoing through the stone.

*This place is so fucking creepy!*

A few moments later, Artemis returned with Astrid and shoved her into the cage.

I hurried over to her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said quickly. “But I’m worried for Torin. I don’t know where they took him.”

Footsteps approached our cage again and Artemis appeared with a mean-looking creature that I’d never seen before. I blinked at it, once, twice, trying to figure out what it was. Its ears were pointed, its eyes were cold, and its teeth were crooked and jagged.

“It’s a goblin,” Astrid whispered.

I backed away from the door.

Artemis pointed to me and said to the goblin, “Take that one first.”

**Episode 470**

GREYSON

It took everything I had in me not to rip that bitch Artemis to shreds the second she locked Cali in that cage and dragged me away from her. The net had done a damn good job of keeping me from shifting, keeping me helplessly human, but my rage was reaching the point where I didn’t think I even needed my wolf abilities to rip this Fae woman in two.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded, echoing Cali’s cries down the hallway we’d come from. She sounded so scared, so worried and protective. Trust her to try to jump in and save the werewolf when she couldn’t even save herself. “What are you going to do with Cali?”

Artemis didn’t answer, and by this point I didn’t really expect her to. No word on where she was taking me, what her plans were for Cali. She’d mentioned something about working in mines, but if that were the case, why did we need to get cleaned up to be presented? Wouldn’t it be easier to just toss us down a mine shaft and put us to work?

As Artemis carried me farther away from Cali, I tried to reach out to her with my mind, to keep some connection burning bright between us when we’d been torn apart.

*Cali? Can you hear me? Are you alright?*

Silence answered back, and I tried even harder to link our minds, to reach through the stone and distance separating us and find her.

*Cali!*

Nothing. Either she was too far away or there was some kind of Fae magic keeping our minds separated.

Fucking perfect. I couldn’t reach her, had no way of knowing if she was all right, no way of breaking out of this goddamn net and ripping Artemis’s head off. Dammit!

I took a deep breath and tried to follow my own advice. Don’t panic. Don’t show fear. Don’t let that animal instinct to fight and claw and bite my way out of here take over. I had to be smart—both Cali and I had to be smart if we were ever going to get out of here.

I only hoped that she remembered what I’d told her. Stay calm. Don’t show fear. Don’t let them use your own emotions against you. Despite myself, I let out a snarl. “If you hurt her, I swear to god I will make you regret it.”

Artemis laughed. “Oh, I doubt I’ll regret cashing in on your playmate.”

My vision went red. The fuck was she talking about? She was cashing in on Cali? Yeah, this bitch was going to die. It wasn’t easy to kill Fae, but never let it be said that Greyson Evers didn’t know how to work hard.

Artemis must have read the homicidal intentions in my expression because she rolled her eyes. “Relax. I have no intention of harming your precious Cali, or any of you. You’re all too valuable.”

Somehow this didn’t exactly comfort me. But I stayed quiet and tried to control my resting murder face. They’d have to let their guard down eventually, wouldn’t they? And when they did, I’d be ready.

I was eventually brought to a cell with steel bars—no silver. That, at least, was a plus.

*Look at the big bad Alpha focusing on the silver lining*. I rolled my eyes at myself. Cali was obviously rubbing off on me, and not exactly the way I wanted her to.

There was another man in the corner of the cell, and he glared at me as Artemis released me from the net and pushed me into the cage in one smooth motion. “Play nice, you two,” Artemis sing-songed.

I stumbled forward for half a second before whipping around, ready to snap that Fae bitch’s neck—but half a second was too slow. I rushed toward her—and slammed into the door that she’d just swung shut. My face, hands, and chest barked in pain from the impact, and I snarled at her.

Artemis, safe on the other side of the steel bars, just smiled.

I stared at her, letting the fury etched into my expression speak for itself—and then I stopped, my brow furrowed in confusion as the weak light illuminated her features. Why did she look so familiar?

The Fae bitch looked me up and down appraisingly. “With a little spit and polish, I think you’ll be the hit of the show.”

“What show?” I snapped.

She winked and walked off.

*Typical*.

I wrapped my fingers tight around the steel bars. Could I break them if I shifted?

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” the man behind me drawled.

I spun around—and grimaced as a nauseating scent hit me. “You’re a vampire.”

He smiled and dipped his head, his voice lowering. “And you’re a werewolf.”

*Fucking great.* As if being trapped—naked—in a cage in the middle of the Dark Fae territory wasn’t bad enough, my cell mate was a fucking bloodsucker. We stared each other down, the tension in the air rising between us. In any other situation, we’d probably already be trying to kill each other.

“I’m Giorgio,” the vampire offered.

“Greyson,” I said warily, watching his face for the slightest hint that he had more in store for me than polite conversation. That was the thing about vampires. They were so goddamn polite—right up until the moment they ripped out your jugular.

“How’d a vampire end up here, in a prison in the Fae world?” I asked.

“Last thing I remember, I was at a club in Reno.” Giorgio shrugged. “I guess they drugged me, and I woke up here.”

“Too bad for you.” I couldn’t even try to sound sorry for the bastard.

“Too bad, indeed.” Giorgio’s expression became thoughtful. “I assume that our benevolent captors don’t know that you’re a werewolf.”

“Why do you say that?”

The vampire smiled again, showing off a few too many teeth. “Because if they did, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You’d be the prime attraction at the zoo.”

The zoo. Right. All those creepy, inhuman sounds we’d heard on the way in. Shit, was Cali on her way to the zoo as we spoke? Half-Fae probably didn’t come around very often. “What exactly do they do here?”

“They clean us up, make us look as amazing as they can before we’re sold off like cattle.”

“To work in the mines?” I clarified.

He shrugged. “Depends. Either the mines or for the Kollector’s personal enjoyment.”

*Personal enjoyment?* Rage poured into my bloodstream. Whatever or whoever this Kollector was, his personal enjoyment better not include Cali. I eyed the vampire across from me. Breaking out of here would be almost impossible alone, especially if I needed to conceal my abilities, but how could I trust a vampire?

Footsteps sounded on the stone floor and Artemis entered the room with Torin in tow. She shoved the Fae man into the cage with the two of us, locked the door, and called, “I’ll be back soon. Behave yourselves,” over her shoulder on the way out.

A real chatty Cathy, that one.

Torin turned his wide, frightened eyes on me the moment Artemis left us alone. “Greyson, I’m so glad you’re alright. What’s going on? She won't tell me anything.”

I eyed him with growing frustration. If he and his sidekick Astrid hadn’t fallen into that sinkhole, Cali wouldn’t have felt compelled to go after them—and they wouldn’t have gotten covered in that disgusting goo and had to bathe in the Absolution Geyser—which meant they wouldn't have been caught by Artemis.

My fingers curled into tight fists and I had to remind myself that Cali would be angry with me if I murdered her friend in a fit of fury.

Meanwhile, my silence seemed to only make Torin spiral. “I’m so worried about Astrid!” His voice had taken on a shrill quality, and tears shone in his eyes. “Where have they taken her? Have you seen Cali? What are we going to do, Greyson? I don’t want to die in the mines! I want to go home!”

“Shut up!” I growled. I only had enough emotional bandwidth to worry about Cali and *try* to keep myself under control. And some hysterical Fae man I never even wanted to join up with wailing at me to solve his problems wasn’t exactly going to help me keep my shit together.

“Don’t you care about her?” Torin pressed.

I spun away from him, my fingers wrapped in a white-knuckle grip on the steel bars, willing myself to keep it together. Because I *was* worried about Cali. And worse than that, I’d never felt so helpless to protect her—trapped here with a bloodsucker and a sniveling Fae.

Giorgio cleared his throat. “I take it you’re both together?”

“Don’t read too much into it,” I grunted.

“And this Cali and Astrid?” the vampire asked. “Are they with you as well?”

“Yes,” Torin said. “Do you know where they are?

Giorgio shook his head. “I don’t, but for their sakes, I hope that the Kollector doesn’t find either of them desirable. If he does, it’s likely you’ll never see them again.”

**Episode 471**

My eyes bugged out a little and I stumbled back until my bare spine made contact with the ice-cold steel bars of my cage. “I-I’m not going anywhere with you!” I managed, my eyes skipping from Artemis to the now-drooling goblin she’d ordered to take me out of the cage. Its teeth clacked together as it licked its lips.

*Yeah, hard pass.*

Artemis sighed, as if my reluctance was something thoroughly vexing and inconvenient. “You don’t understand. It’s not a choice.” She motioned to the goblin, who opened the cage and stepped inside.

I didn’t move, my back against the cage, considering the odds—me and Astrid, naked and unarmed, against Artemis and the goblin, who was watching me like he was eyeing a steak dinner. I had magic, though it still kind of sucked. Astrid could… use glamour magic to make the goblin look slightly less disgusting?

*Yeah, we’ll have a makeover montage and live happily ever after. Get it together, Cali.*

“Don’t even think about it,” Artemis snapped. “I’ve been very polite so far, but I *will* break both of you if I have to.”

If this was her version of polite, I didn’t think I wanted to know what straight-up rude looked like. It probably involved severed limbs. The emphasis on *break* alone made my stomach clench, and I turned to Astrid with a shaky breath. I hated to leave her here, but I didn’t know what else to do. “Will you be okay here alone?”

Astrid nodded, clearly too frightened for words.

“Don’t worry, darlings. Neither of you will be alone for long.” Artemis smirked.

That didn’t exactly comfort me. The goblin reached for me with knobby, gnarled fingers. “Don’t touch me!” I shrieked.

Artemis smiled begrudgingly. “I admire your grit.” She nodded at the goblin. “Just follow behind her.”

I turned back to Astrid. “Don’t worry. No matter what happens, I’ll get you out of here.”

The words felt like complete bullshit. I didn’t even know how I was going to save *myself*. How could I even hope to save Astrid? We were trapped, helpless, in some kind of compound in the Dark Fae territory, ready to be put to work in the mines and paraded in front of some freak called the Kollector. The odds had never been stacked so high against us. Even if we did manage to somehow escape this compound, we were still in the Dark Fae territory, surrounded by threats. Not to mention how unlikely it was that all of us—Astrid, Torin, Greyson, and myself—would make it out of this place.

I felt my heart begin to race and, even naked in the cold dungeon, I felt cold sweat slide down my back.

And then, as if Greyson himself had whispered them to me, I heard his words echoing in my memory.

*Don’t show any fear—they’ll only use it against you.*

I took a deep breath. I wasn’t alone. Greyson, wherever he was, was no doubt fighting to get us all out, and I would too. We’d fight until the end, and I wouldn’t show any fear to these bastards who had taken us. I reached for Astrid’s hand and offered her a smile. “It’s going to be okay.”

“If you’re done singing ‘Kumbaya’ over there, it’s time to go,” Artemis said dryly.

I followed behind her, forcing myself not to wince as the door to the cage slammed behind me, leaving Astrid alone. I steeled myself and dug up empowering mantras from the depths of my mind.

*No fear, Cali. Remember, you’re a badass. You’re strong and capable and this Artemis chick will never see it coming when you break out of here. You don’t give a fuck about these monsters. Girl, wash your face—*

*Oh, wait. That’s a book title.* Still, a little water and soap didn’t sound so bad right now, especially after all the panic-sweating I’d been doing.

I followed Artemis down a long hallway, the sound of the goblin’s heavy breathing haunting my steps. I hurried a little faster, not wanting any part of its congested mouth-breath to make contact with my skin. Was there such a thing as goblin flu? I did *not* want to find out.

Still, how fast *were* goblins? They had kind of stubby legs. And based on its breathing—which sounded an awful lot like my uncle with sleep apnea—it wasn’t exactly primed for a foot race. Could I outrun it?

I glanced around the narrow corridor. The walls, ceiling, and floor were stone, and there were candles mounted on the walls on either side, their light casting some seriously creepy shadows all around the space.

Honestly, this Dark Fae murder compound was trying just a little too hard for that haunted mansion vibe.

I inspected one of the candle mounts as we continued down the hallway. It looked like it weighed a fair amount. Maybe I could grab one—assuming I could wrench it off the wall—and use it to fight off Artemis and Mr. Disgusto.

Someone—or something—let out a cry from down the corridor, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose.

*Nope, nope, nope.*

*Stay strong, Cali.*

I cleared my throat, hoping to sound strong instead of very much on the verge of literally being scared shitless. “What kind of place is this?” We passed by a cell very much like my own had been, except this one had green, claw-like fingers wrapped around the bars and a set of pitiful eyes staring out at me from the darkness. “Help me,” the creature begged as we passed.

*I wish I could, but I can’t even help myself.*

“What did you do with Greyson and Torin?” I asked Artemis.

“Oh, they’re being well-cared for,” she said lightly.

“What does *that* mean? Cared for what?”

“They’re not your concern anymore.”

“That’s not for you to decide,” I snapped.

As usual, she didn’t seem the least bit fazed or intimidated by my anger. “I’d be more worried about yourself. If the Kollector isn’t impressed, your value drops. A lot. In which case, you’re less valuable to me. And you’re not gonna like what happens then.”

I gulped. *No fear, Cali! No fear.* Even my bravest internal monologue felt weak and childish compared to what I was about to face. Who was this Kollector? And what did he want from me? Half the creatures I’d met in the Fae world had wanted to kill me, some wanted to eat me… what would he want from me? What kind of value could I hope to offer?

And, even worse, what if the Kollector *did* like me?

I shuddered. There was so much I didn’t know. So much I honestly didn’t *want* to know.

We passed by another cell, this time containing a wizened old creature who rushed to the bars and hissed at us. I screamed and jumped back, only to smack into the goblin. Some of its drool made contact with my back, and as it slipped, warm and viscous down my back, I forced myself not to gag.

*Don’t vomit, don’t vomit, don’t vomit.*

We finally arrived at a closed door. Artemis spun to face the goblin. “You can go now.”

The goblin, instead of leaving, leaned even closer to me, close enough that I could smell its rotten breath and get an up-close evaluation of its jagged teeth. Definitely not a flosser. It sniffed me and licked its lips before shuffling away.

Yeah, no way I could forget that special trauma. And that was just the prologue, right? Because the true horror probably lay behind the door in front of me.

There was a burning candle anchored onto the wall next to the door. *Should I grab it and try to attack Artemis?* It was just the two of us now, one Dark Fae in her element and one naked, slobbered-on half-Fae with a very urgent fight-or-flight instinct. Could I overpower her? It seemed like an excellent time to find out.

While Artemis fiddled with a set of keys, I moved closer to the candle, slowing my reaching for it when it flickered suddenly and went out, washing us in darkness, save for the other candles flickering farther down the corridor.

I watched the smoke rise, wondering what the hell had just happened, when Artemis laughed.

“Nice try. Can’t say I blame you. I’d probably try the same thing if the situation was reversed.” She stepped closer, and in the half-darkness she suddenly seemed so much scarier. “Unfortunately for you,” Artemis continued, “it’s not.”

She pulled me closer to her and our eyes locked. As I studied her face, I had the strangest feeling. There was something about her… I could have sworn I’d seen her somewhere before.

“Trust me,” Artemis continued, “you’re going to like this.”

I shuddered.

And then she swung the door open and shoved me inside the room, which was blindingly bright. I blinked rapidly, trying to get my bearings.

“She’s all yours,” I heard Artemis say.

Another voice gleefully responded. “Oh my god, what a snack!”

**Episode 472**

“Snack?!” I backed up, my fists clenched at my sides. The room was so bright, and after the dark hallway I still couldn’t quite see properly. Still, I could throw a punch. Bite someone. Kick, at the very least.

There was no way in hell I’d be anybody’s snack. I didn’t spend the last few months joined up with a pack of werewolves and then put myself and my friends through hell to find this goddamn moon buttercup just to end up as the snack for some upscale-yet-creepy-ass Dark Fae.

As my eyes finally adjusted, I saw a man and a woman coming toward me, matching grins on their faces. They were both dressed in cream-colored uniforms, their faces made up dramatically, their hair elaborately coiffed. Both of them could easily be Instagram models, and much as I was attracted to the dominant Alpha types, I honestly couldn’t decide which one of them was more beautiful—the man or the woman.

*Okay, so they’re pretty. They got Zac Efron to play Ted Bundy because #serialkillerscanbehottoo.* Plus, Fae were empirically beautiful and lots of the ones I’d met had harbored nefarious intentions. These people’s attractiveness didn’t mean they wouldn’t murder me and bake me into an Insta-worthy Cali pie.

The thick wooden door was at my back, Artemis stood off to my left, watching me with a smirk, and the sexy duo were coming right at me. I needed an escape plan, a weapon—anything. I glanced beyond them to the other side of the room, expecting to see some kind of torture chamber, which might at least provide me with some sort of weapon.

Instead, there was a salon chair, mirrors, racks of clothes, and a vanity piled high with beauty products. If anything, it looked like one of those fancy backstage dressing rooms on TV shows.

*What the…*

“What is this place?” I asked.

The man who had called me a snack gestured behind him with a flick of his wrist. “This is where we work our magic.” Then he looked me over from head to toe. I crossed my arms over my chest, wishing for the millionth time that I wasn’t walking around buck-ass naked. But this guy wasn’t checking me out like so many other men might, if they found themselves faced with a naked woman. And he didn’t look at me like he wanted to literally eat me, like the goblin had. Instead, he seemed to be sizing me up, grading me. Finally, he turned to the woman, his eyebrows raised. “Quality clay for us to mold, for once! I was expecting worse. Much worse. Remember the ogre?”

*Wait, I’ve been downgraded from a non-consumable “snack,” to “better than an ogre”?* Heat rushed up my neck and into my cheekbones. Who did this guy think he was? Did he have any idea what I’d been through to be standing there in front of him? Seriously, what the—

*Not now, Cali!*

The man turned his back to me, still talking to his companion. “But this one. She’s got lots to work with. Good catch, Artemis.”

Artemis shrugged. “I’ll be back in an hour. Excuse me.”

“Oh, of course,” I said automatically, stepping aside to let her pass through the door. And it wasn’t until the door shut in front of me that I realized how monumentally stupid I had been.

*You just let her leave you with these people? Didn’t try to fight her? Didn’t even try to make a run for it? Dammit, Cali! Maybe try being a little less polite next time?*

Maybe it was good that Greyson wasn’t here to see this. He would *never* let me live this one down.

The man and woman hadn’t come any closer, though they still watched my every move. “What are you planning to do to me?” I asked.

“I’m Stacy.” The woman reached out and offered her hand. After a long beat I took it, and Stacy guided me over to the salon chair. She gestured to the man. “And that’s Tristan. We’re going to give you a makeover!”

*Huh.*

*Definitely did not see that one coming.*

I thought again about the Kollector, about why he might want his new captive to look pretty, and tried not to shudder. Whatever came next, I would deal with it. In the meantime, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to wash off and get some clothes—assuming the Kollector allowed it.

Yeah, I was beginning to hate this guy already.

I glanced briefly at my own admittedly haggard reflection in the mirror and grimaced. My hair was mussed and tangled, and there were smears of dirt all over me. “It’s gonna take some pretty strong glamour spells to cover this up,” I said.

“Oh, we’re not Fae,” Stacy said. “We’re humans. The Kollector doesn't like Fae to do magic on his prospects.”

Tristan leaned in, his tone conspiratorial, “Apparently he used to use glamourists on his acquisitions, but a royal was extremely disappointed when a glamour spell wore off on a troll that he paid a lot of money for. Gave the Kollector a very hard time, so he decided to try things the old-fashioned way.”

I blinked, not sure how to process Tristan’s words. Where to begin? That there were humans working for the Kollector? Or that careful, polite word—acquisitions—which was really a nice way of saying captives, slaves, people taken or bought against their will. I gulped.

*No fear, Cali. No fear.*

“So you’re… you’re human?” I stumbled. I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around it all, but this place seemed somewhat safe, and Tristan and Stacy—unlike Artemis—seemed inclined to actually answer my questions. I couldn’t let this opportunity pass me by. “What are you doing here?” I couldn’t quite believe that they could be here by choice, though they did seem pretty happy.

Stacy and Tristan exchanged a look, and then Stacy explained. “We were brought here through a portal by a Fae who owed a debt.”

My heart sank. It was nice to not feel so alone, but it was horrifying to see other humans whose lives had been stolen from them. “I don’t understand how you can be so cheerful. Aren’t you being held against your will?”

“It’s not so bad,” Tristan said, shrugging. “We have the best salon in the entire Fae world. We’re treated well.”

“Whenever anyone is brought here to be auctioned, we fix them up, help them appear their best,” Stacy said, her tone light despite the ugly nature of her job.

Okay, so maybe they weren’t quite on the same side as me then.

Both of the stylists started looking me over in earnest, touching my hair and examining my skin. It was a good thing they were both so nice and gentle—otherwise I’d probably feel like one of those prize cows before they get sent to the slaughterhouse.

My bare skin began to prickle with fear again, and I took a deep breath.

*No fear, no fear.*

“Have you two worked on a human male recently?” I asked. “His name is Greyson, and he’s um, very built. His biceps are probably as big around as my thighs and he’s got a really spectacular eight-pack. He’s totally ripped and he’s got that swimmer’s build—broad shoulders and a narrow waist. He’s like, stupid handsome. He has the dreamiest eyes I’ve ever seen, the kind you can drown in—” I stopped myself suddenly, heat rushing into my face. Now was not the time to wax poetic on exactly what a stud Greyson was.

Tristan watched me with a knowing expression. “We haven’t seen him, but he sounds hot.”

“Oh, um, he was captured with me,” I explained. “Just, uh, curious.”

Tristan’s eyes locked on the pendant around my neck. “That’s a beautiful necklace.”

My fingers wrapped tightly around it on instinct. If they tried to take it from me… I glanced around and my eyes locked on a pair of scissors lying on a vanity. But before I could grab them, Tristan turned away, still in work mode. “I’ll try to work with the pendant.”

He moved over to the rack of clothes and flipped through various dresses. “How about this one?” He held it up, but before I could weigh in, he shook his head. “Too yellow. It’d wash you out.”

I’d take anything if it meant actually wearing some clothes for a change.

While Tristan continued the search for the perfect dress, Stacy gave me a washcloth to quickly sponge off with and then began brushing out and styling my hair. This would be a really lovely day at the spa if it wasn’t also the most terrifying thing I’d ever encountered.

“Have you met the Kollector?” I asked her. “Who is he?”

“We met him once and we’ll never forget it,” Stacy said.

“The Kollector’s a Dark Fae, obviously,” Tristan answered. “Tall, thin as spaghetti, and,”—he looked around nervously, lowering his voice to a whisper—“between you and me, his breath smells like a dumpster.”

I blinked at that assessment. Good to know the Kollector had halitosis?

Stacy continued. “His eyes are as cold as ice, and when he laughs it sounds like a child is dying.”

My eyes widened. *Way to be about a thousand percent more creepy, Stace.* “I don’t want anything to do with him.”

“I get it,” she said, “but there’s not much we can do about it. That’s why we have to do our best work for Artemis—if we don’t, she’s threatened to feed us to him.”

I would hate to put these two—who were victims in their own ways—in any danger, but I wasn’t exactly looking forward to my date with the Kollector either. “What happens if he doesn’t like me? Maybe… maybe that would be a good thing?”

Tristan shook his head. “No, that would be the worst outcome. As bad as the Kollector is, the mines are much worse. No one who’s been sent there has ever come back.”

“Okay.” I swallowed nervously. “But what happens if he likes me then?”

Tristan’s face softened, like he knew his words would offer little comfort. “He’ll claim you. For his harem.”

**Episode 473**

XAVIER

I stumbled out of the portal to the Fae world, hitting my knees hard on the ground, my palms scraping on the dirt. I glanced behind me to make sure nothing and nobody had followed me through from The Chop Shop, but the portal was gone.

The mirror must have broken after I’d gotten through. *Damn*. My body was still primed to fight, to kill if necessary, but there was nothing but open air. I’d left Gabriel, Mikah, Maya, Colton, and Lola behind.

I’d made it through by the skin of my teeth. No thanks to that Dark Fae or the goblin.

But now I was alone in the Fae world, breathing heavily, my senses on edge. I was just waiting for the next threat to my life, the next unfortunate soul to be standing in the way of me finding Cali.

I waited for a moment in case the portal decided to open back up with someone chasing after me. But it didn’t. I had to leave the others behind me and press on and find Cali.

For a long string of seconds, I crouched on the ground, breathing in the rich air, watching and waiting, taking in each detail. I was in the middle of a forest clearing, in some kind of rural area. The sky above me was a deep blue, and an earthy scent carried on a light breeze, ruffling my hair as it blew past me.

The realization hit me like a sucker punch to the gut, more ruthless than any of the beings I’d fought and overcome to get here. The Fae world was fucking huge. It spanned as far as my keen eyes could see in each direction, and in the distance, I saw a mountain range rising up on the horizon.

How would I ever find Cali in such a strange, vast world? A world I knew next to nothing about. And even if by some miracle I did find her, how the hell would we get home? The portal behind me had vanished.

I’d been so foolish to think I could find her right away, that it was as simple a task as popping over, maybe following a brief trail, and then she’d be mine again. The world itself didn’t even look anything like I’d imagined. Now that I really thought about it, I’d been envisioning something like *The Wizard of Oz*—colorful roads, small fairy creatures popping out to greet me, maybe some toadstools for good measure.

But no, this could be any forest clearing anywhere in my world. And there were no munchkins coming out of the woodwork to welcome me to the Fae world. But this wasn’t my world, I reminded myself. This was a dangerous place, a place that didn’t welcome my kind. I’d need to be careful, or I’d end up with bigger problems than needing to find Cali.

I breathed deeply, searching for Cali’s scent, any scent that I might recognize. Even my good-for-nothing brother Greyson’s would do. I needed to know where to go from here, or I could spend days wandering in the wrong direction, wasting valuable time.

Nothing but forest. Shit. What the hell was I supposed to do? I needed to find someone to ask for help, but there was nobody around. And I didn’t even know *what* to ask without drawing attention to myself.

I looked behind me again. The portal was still gone. Should I mark this place, just in case? Try to find my way back to it?

I’d spent so long plotting on how I’d get to the Fae world, and what felt like forever fighting to get to the portal with Gabriel, Mikah, and the others, that I never planned beyond my arrival. Even my seemingly simple task—find Cali—was turning out to be a lot more difficult than I’d anticipated.

I felt like such an idiot. Still standing in the middle of this fucking meadow like an asshole, trying to figure out where to go in a place that I never bothered to learn anything about. All I was thinking about was Cali—I was heedless of everything else.

And it’s not like I could pop back through the portal and ask for a game plan. As far as I could tell, the portal was gone for good. I was stuck here alone, without any knowledge or anyone to help me.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

I heard a twig snap behind me and spun around to see what looked like some kind of Fae guard approaching me. “Got your papers?” The guard’s voice was a low growl.

*Papers!? What is this? Immigration?*

The Fae guard moved deceptively fast, closing the wide distance between us in only a few seconds. Beyond him, maybe several hundred feet beyond the meadow, I spotted a large stone wall with a gated entry. Maybe I wasn’t alone after all.

Though, the guard didn’t exactly look like the kind of guy you could stop and ask for directions. The guard’s hand went to the sword strapped to his waist. Two more guards approached behind him, also bearing swords, and I could make out two archers on the wall, their bows raised, arrows pointed directly at me.

*I hope those arrows aren’t silver-tipped.*

“Hey, did you hear me?” the first guard demanded. “Give me your papers!”

His buddies caught up to us, their swords drawn. What were the chances that shiny metal was steel and not silver?

*Fuck me.*

I threw my shoulders back, standing as tall as I could. “I don’t have papers. Who’s asking?”

The guards exchanged a look, clearly not used to people speaking back to them, and not inclined to make small talk. They moved toward me, and I instinctively backed away.

“If you don’t have papers, then you’re under arrest,” the first guard said.

I kept just out of their reach. Was this what had happened to Cali? Had she been arrested when she’d gotten to the Fae world? I doubted she had papers either. If she had been arrested, what had happened to her? Maybe if I played along, they’d take me to her. At the very least I could learn a bit more about this world rather than wandering through the wilderness and hoping for the best.

I glanced at the guards’ faces. Their expressions promised violence, and I grimaced. I didn’t trust Fae any more than I trusted vampires. And there was no guarantee that I could break out of whatever prison they used here. This wasn’t my world, and I wasn’t at the top of the food chain anymore.

I was glancing around, trying to determine an escape route, when one of the guards grabbed my arm and tried to pull me toward their group. I shoved him off. “Keep your distance!” I snarled.

The guard smirked. “There’s five of us and one of you, human. You think you can take us all?”

I kept moving, and they followed. I was still on a high from The Chop Shop, but there were a lot of them. “I’ll admit, the odds don’t look great.”

“So don’t bother resisting,” the guard said.

“Who do you work for?” I asked.

The guard pointed to the emblem on his shirt. “The Kollector. You’re on his property. And since you don’t have papers, you’re a trespasser.”

*No fucking kidding.* “I want to talk to your boss.”

The guards laughed and one of them smiled. “Oh, you’ll have your chance—unless you resist. We try not to damage prisoners, but accidents are known to happen.”

*Yeah, I don’t like the sound of that.* I glanced around, keeping an eye on my trio of pursuers, as well as the archers watching us from the wall. I could give in and let them take me, maybe get a chance to learn more about whatever the hell was going on here, which might help me find Cali. But surrendering would also probably mean I’d be brought somewhere with more guards—and less chances for me to escape.

No, whoever this Kollector was, I needed to meet him on my own terms. Not as a prisoner. If I had to meet him at all. Cali entered the Fae world at Haystack Rock. Did that mean she’d even come through here? Did all portals go to the same place? Or was she somewhere far away? I didn’t even know if she was anywhere nearby, if anyone around here could help me find her, or if she’d ever had to face this Kollector.

*Fuck. I don’t have time for this shit.* I just wanted to find her and get her home. Not play chicken with a bunch of Fae guards.

The guard moved into my personal space. “Which is it? Are you going to make this easy, or”—he raised his sword—“are you going to make it hard?”

*Really fucking original, dude.*

“I’m giving you a chance,” I said. “You can walk away right now and pretend this never happened.”

The guards burst into laughter. “Or what?”

I clenched my firsts. “Or I’ll kill you. All of you.” And I would. Screw keeping a low profile. Screw being careful. These pricks were standing between me and finding my mate, and that wasn’t fucking acceptable. They were lucky I hadn’t ripped them to shreds the moment I saw them.

The guards started laughing again, and my decision was made.

*At least I’ll have a little fun.*

I shifted into my wolf form, my bones cracking, my clothes tearing, and the looks on their faces were absolutely priceless. I let out a lupine snarl as their eyes widened.

*You should have walked away.*

They didn’t even have time to raise their swords before I was on them.

**Episode 474**

“His harem?!” I gasped, my eyes wide. In the mirror, I saw all the color had drained out of my face, and Stacy began dabbing on more foundation to cover my pale skin. I jerked away from her. “There is no way in hell I’m going to be part of this Kollector’s harem. That’s gross and rapey and—hell no!”

I must not have been the first captive to not be totally thrilled at the possibility of ending up as a concubine to a creepy Slenderman Dark Fae lord with bad breath, because Stacy and Tristan just exchanged a tired look.

If I weren’t about to be sold off to a literal monster, I might have felt a bit more pity for them, for the situation they were in, the deal they’d struck to create something resembling a life of happiness in their own captivity. But instead I reached for the washcloth Stacy had given me to clean up and began wiping the makeup off my face.

I didn’t want to be pretty. Not anymore. I’d rather slave away in the mines than let the Kollector touch me in *that* way.

Tristan caught my arm and gently but firmly tugged the washcloth away before I could do further damage to their work. “It’s not ideal,” he admitted,” but it’s not like you have a choice. Trust me, at least if you’re part of his harem, you get treated well—you’ll get the best clothes, the best rooms, the finest, healthiest food—anything you could desire.”

“Except *freedom*?” I growled, reaching for the washcloth again. “Except not being part of his *harem*?”

He held the washcloth out of my reach. “On the other hand, the alternative, if you end up in the mines, is misery and death. Do you really think that’s better than choosing to live?”

I didn’t know, honestly. If I was here, if I had some kind of sway with this Kollector guy, maybe I could use it to help the others? But just the thought of joining his harem… I grimaced. “What about Greyson? Will they force him to work in the mines?”

Stacy considered the question for a moment. “You said he’s really strong?”

I nodded. “Do you think they’d work him even harder than the rest?”

“It’s possible,” she said. “Unless, of course, he ends up in the zoo—which isn’t likely to happen to your friend, unless he’s some kind of unusual creature.”

“And even then, he’s gotta be super exotic to make the cut. The Kollector’s zoo already has a lot of creatures. He probably only wants something he doesn't yet have,” Tristan added.

“Oh.” I glanced down at the vanity. I didn’t want to spill the beans about Greyson being a werewolf unless I absolutely had to. “Does the zoo have… a sprite?”

He nodded. “Several, in fact.”

“What about vampires?” I asked.

“I think there’s one,” Stacy said as she reapplied my makeup.

“What about… what about werewolves?”

Tristan’s eyes widened, and Stacy grinned. “That would be awesome!” she said.

“I know for a fact that the Kollector is dying to have one,” Tristan said.

I stayed quiet while they continued my makeover. I hoped Greyson didn’t shift. If he did, considering how prized werewolves were in this world, he might never find his way out of here. They’d cage him like an animal for people to gawk at, like my grandmother did in her big war campaign. She’d, at least, been true to her word and had let Greyson and I go to find the buttercup, but I had a feeling the Kollector was a little less benevolent than my grandmother.

I should never have let him come here with me. I brought all of this on him, and now he was in even greater danger than I was. It may have been his choice to come, but I never should have let him make that choice in the first place. I should have made him stay at the Redwood pack house, stay with his pack, with his Luna, and gone off on my own.

If anything happened to Greyson, if he didn’t make it out of here… I would never forgive myself.

Stacy stepped back and spun me around to face the mirror. “What do you think?”

I looked in the mirror—and did a double take. I almost didn’t recognize myself in the face in the mirror. That was my hair color, and those were my eyes, my lips, my jaw, but it seemed like all of my features had been polished until they glowed. Until I was no longer a human woman. Until I was absolutely radiant.

“And this… this isn’t a glamour spell, is it?” I asked.

Stacy beamed at me in the mirror’s reflection. “Nope. This is all you.”

I touched my hair gently, not wanting to upset the soft curls or elaborately woven braids that half of my hair was pulled into. I watched my reflection, the gorgeous woman in the mirror, do the same. “I can’t believe it,” I said. “I wish I had someone like you back at home.”

Tristan eyed me again, this time very satisfied with what he saw. “You look amazing. You should definitely grab the Kollector’s attention.”

Just like that, the wonder and joy dried up. I looked again, examining the dramatic makeup around my eyes that made the green in my irises pop, or the bronzer and highlighter that gave my cheekbones a more defined edge. If this otherworldly beauty was what it took to get me into the harem, I wasn’t sure I wanted it.

“I’ll only tell you this once,” Stacy said, her tone only half-joking. “If you wipe it off again, I’ll have to kill you.”

I chuckled weakly as Stacy spun me away from the mirror to face Tristan. He held up a shimmering, sparkling dress with a plunging neckline and a high slit up the side. Every time the dress caught the light in the room, it sparkled and glowed.

Despite myself, I was in awe. “It looks like it’s made of lights!”

He nodded his thanks. “I learned how to capture light from studying fireflies.”

He helped me step into it, mindful of my hair and makeup, and I admired the way it sloped over my hips. “It’s so beautiful, Tristan.” I didn’t mention that I would have been happy to wear a burlap sack if only to have something covering me.

I turned to face the mirror and my eyes widened. “Wow.” There were really no other words for it. I wished, at once, that Greyson could see me like this. What would he think of a Cali forged from starlight?

I stood for a while in front of the mirror while Tristan and Stacy made a few more adjustments, and then the door swung open. The goblin guard from earlier made another appearance, much to my displeasure. He leered at me in my new dress and makeup, and it seemed like his drooling mouth was working overtime.

*Don’t vomit, no fear. Don’t vomit, no fear.* My new motto. If I ever got out of here, I was going to put that on a T-shirt and sell them to pay for all the therapy I’d need after this hellish experience.

Artemis walked in, slapping the goblin lightly on the shoulder. “If you can’t behave, I’ll feed you to the gnomes.” Her gaze landed on me and she smiled. “She looks amazing. I knew you two would be up to the task.”

Great, back to being a piece of meat on the auction block.

“Where are you taking me now?” I asked.

“It’s time for you to be presented to the Kollector.”

I cringed, though I knew it was coming. “You’re treating me like I’m some object, a piece of property to be sold.”

Artemis’s eyes widened. “Am I? I feel terrible…”

My shoulders loosened a bit, and a tiny flicker of hope kindled in my belly. Was she going to let me go?

Then she smiled and my stomach dropped. “The moment you entered the Dark Fae territory, you became a piece of property. *My* property.” She motioned to the goblin, who stepped aside. “Now follow me, human.”

I looked back at Stacy and Tristan. A thank-you was on the tip of my tongue, but I didn’t say it. After all, they were part of this too. I followed Artemis out of the room and down the passageway, the gross goblin following behind me.

I glanced around wildly as we went, hoping to see Greyson.

Up ahead, I heard the scuffle of bodies, and a group of guards came jogging past us.

“What’s happening?” Artemis demanded.

One of the guards spun around for a brief moment. “A werewolf slaughtered some guards and now he’s loose on the estate!” The guards turned back to catch up with the rest of the group.

Panic rushed through me. Oh god. My worst fears had come to pass, and now the truth was out. Greyson had shifted.

**Episode 475**

MAYA

I glanced over at Colton. He was sitting on the other side of the back seat, his eyes staring out the window as Lola drove us away from The Chop Shop, out of the Reno city limits. Colton had been sullen ever since we left Gabriel behind with Mikah and that human girl. Tamara? Taylor? Whatever her name was.

Colton didn’t want to leave his brother in the Fae world, but we hadn’t exactly had a choice in the matter—once Xavier had gone through the portal, the mirror had shattered behind him, and there was no way to follow him through. We’d barely made it out of The Chop Shop alive ourselves.

Lola tipped her head back to speak to us in the back seat. “I don’t know about this, guys. I feel bad now. Do you think we should have stayed in Reno to find another portal? And that girl was so upset about her sister...”

I shook my head, looking at Colton. “I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

“You have to admit, that was a wild fight.” Lola laughed. “Easily top five in my personal fight scene list.” It had to be a fucking short list. Lola’s eyes were almost glowing in the rearview mirror. “We probably could have forced them to find us another portal, you know? Made them an offer they couldn’t refuse? Shift and give them a scare?” She waggled her eyebrows at me.

“Keep your eyes on the road,” I snapped. I hadn’t lived through that shitshow in Reno just to die in a car accident thanks to Lola’s bloodlust. She’d been getting so wild-eyed whenever she talked about shifting. I didn’t get it. Shifting into my wolf was part of life, yeah, but it wasn’t like I actively looked forward to it. And Lola wasn’t even a full-blooded wolf. She wasn’t supposed to be hopping back and forth between her wolf and human forms like she was. It was honestly a miracle that she hadn’t permanently injured herself yet.

“We’re not going back to Reno,” Colton said, finally breaking the silence that had settled over him since we left Gabriel and Mikah behind. “We’re going back to the pack house to regroup, and then we’re going to find Big Mac and get her to help us.”

I bit back a groan. I was done chasing these Evers brothers all over the goddamn world—and even into the next. I didn’t want to be dragged into any more of their family problems. I only ever wanted to try to help Cali if I could, not go on an endless quest to help Colton find his brother. I didn’t owe them anything.

Xavier wasn’t even the Alpha, and Greyson, as far as I was concerned, wasn’t *my* Alpha. He’d bailed on his pack to go chase after Cali, and Joss had been left to pick up the pieces. If anyone in this pack had my respect and loyalty it was her—not the Evers brothers.

No, when we got back to the pack house, I’d decide what to do next, and whether or not that *next* had anything to do with Colton.

I could feel his eyes on me periodically through the long drive back, and I’d done my best to avoid them. He was probably just horny, as usual, but I wasn’t about to fuck him in the back seat under Lola’s watchful gaze.

Then we’d definitely end up dead on the side of the road.

The weight of his gaze on me finally became too much, and I looked over at him. When our eyes met, he smirked, like he knew he’d won some quiet, small battle against my will.

I looked away with a growl. I should have known he was playing games. That’s all he ever wanted to do with me—if he wasn’t trying to get in my pants. And I might have agreed to mess around with him, to enjoy our chemistry to the fullest, but that didn’t include stealing cutesy glances in the back seat. We were friends with benefits. Or more accurately, enemies with benefits. Fuck buddies with baggage?

Either way, I didn’t sign up for smirking friends with benefits. For mind games. Fuck him if he wanted to keep looking at me like that, pretending like he knew anything about me. He could look all he wanted, but I was going to ignore him for the rest of the ride.

As we passed into Oregon, I felt him tap on my leg. “Are you avoiding me?” His tone was equal parts mournful and challenging. And since I knew he didn’t have real feelings, it was all too easy to figure him out: he was bored and wanted me to keep him occupied.

I gave him my best feral smirk. “Two can play at this game.”

Then I felt his fingertips dragging up my leg, and my eyes snapped down to my thigh and then back up to his face. His smug, smirking face. *Asshole.* *He wouldn’t look so smug when I finally threw him out of the car.*

His fingers drew heavy circles on my thigh, slowly moving higher. Lust began to pool low in my belly. God, I hated how well he knew how to play my body. I hated how much I loved the idea of jumping his bones, fucking him senseless. Would I ever be able to scratch this itch he left inside me?

It didn’t help that the sex was absolutely explosive. Like in the cave. The sex was undeniably mind-blowing, even if he could be a total idiot—which only made me want to throw him out of the moving car even more. Before I met Colton I’d never known anyone I wanted to murder and fuck at the same time.

I shoved his hand off my thigh.

I never should have hooked up with him in the first place. Great sex or not, he was just a boy in a man’s body. He had absolutely no control over himself. Plus he was a fucking asshole. And I hated him.

Didn’t I?

I shook my head and stared resolutely out the window. We weren’t doing this. Not here. Not anywhere. Not ever.

I knew better than to believe that.

Colton tapped my thigh again. “What’s wrong?” he whispered.

I sighed and lowered my voice. “I don’t want Lola to know about us. It’s none of her business.”

I expected him to argue—he seemed like he lived to piss me off—but he nodded. “I can respect that… for now.”

“What are you two whispering about back there?” Lola grinned in the rearview mirror. I kind of hated how much she shipped us. She probably called us Mayton whenever we weren’t around.

“None of your business,” I snapped. “Watch the road.”

She pouted. “Fine. Keep your secrets.”

Colton settled back into his seat, that stupid smirk on his face, and yawned. “Can we stop somewhere soon? I’m getting hungry.”

“I’ll pull over at the next place,” she said, then glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “Have you thought about what you’re going to find when we get back to the house?”

“I guess it’ll be empty,” Colton said, shrugging. “Xavier made it pretty clear that Joss couldn’t use it as the pack house.”

“What about Jay?” she asked. Her pout was beginning to look real. She was worried for her mate, and probably still pissed at him. Not surprising, since Jay sided with Joss instead of Xavier. Before this, Jay and Lola had seemed like one of those fairytale couples. This was probably one of the first fights they’d ever had. “Do you think he left with Joss?”

I heard the subtext in her words. *Did he leave* me?

“You’re still upset, huh?” I asked. Probably a dumb question, but she seemed like she needed to talk about it. And I’d be her sympathetic ear all the way back home if it meant no more questions about mine and Colton’s relationship status.

Lola blinked rapidly, tears pooling in her eyes. I hoped she could still see the road. “Of course I am! Things with Jay and I were going so well…”

“I’ve never seen you argue before,” I admitted. “At least, until we decided to go find Cali.”

“I miss Jay. I… I wish I’d never left.”

Colton sat forward, his fingers wrapping around the edges of Lola’s seat. “So that’s really why you wanted to go back to the pack,” he said. “Don’t worry. Jay’s never going to leave you. He was probably just upset and needed to cool off. I’m sure everything will be back to normal in no time.”

“I hope so.” Lola sniffed.

I hoped so too, but I also knew how easily any bit of tension in a pack could lead to trouble. The Redwood pack had nothing *but* tension these days.

Colton pointed to a sign. “There’s a place up ahead.”

“I can read, thank you,” Lola snarked, then her eyes widened and she screamed and slammed on the brakes.

Colton and I both lurched into the driver and passenger seats as the car screeched to a halt, its headlights pointed at a bloodied woman standing in the middle of the road directly in front of us.

**Episode 476**

Panic flooded my veins. There was a werewolf loose in the estate, wreaking havoc and killing guards. It had to be Greyson. There was simply no other explanation. And if that were the case, then the secret was out. The Kollector and all the damned Fae in this godforsaken place knew Greyson was a werewolf, a new, coveted attraction for the Kollector’s zoo.

“Where’s the werewolf?” I called after the guards that were racing away. “Take me to him!”

Artemis pulled me away from the guards before I could demand to know anything else, so I focused all of that panic on her. “I need to see him! Take me to him now!”

She tugged me along, shaking her head. “Come now, you know it’s time for you to meet—”

“I don’t care about the fucking Kollector!” I screamed. “I’ll spit in his face, show him what I think of being trafficked by a bunch of sadistic Dark Fae!”

My fight-or-flight instincts were fully running the show now, egged on by Greyson’s shift and the thought of meeting with a powerful Dark Fae that would either sentence me to a short, painful life in the mines or a long, painful life as a member of his harem. None of this was fair. I expected Artemis to nip my little rebellion in the bud right away.

Instead, she didn’t seem even a little fazed by my anger. She certainly didn’t have a difficult time pulling me along to our destination. “Go ahead and spit on him.” She shrugged. “Might be a good idea, actually. He’ll probably pay even more for you. He likes the feisty ones. You want to know why?”

I shook my head violently. “No!” I was going to pretend I hadn’t heard that horrifying bit of information, not pick at the question like an old scab. “Please, just listen to me. I need to see Greyson. Please just let me talk to him.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Please, just this once!” I begged.

She remained as empathetic as stone.

“Can you at least tell me if he’s okay?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged again. “Right now, my biggest priority is selling you. I’ll clean up whatever this mess is afterward.”

Did this girl not have a heart?

I couldn’t stop thinking of the guards that had swarmed the hallway, the alarm that had sounded over a werewolf attack. There had to have been at least eight Fae guards running off to go handle the new threat. Had it really been Greyson? I shook my head. *Obviously.* He was the only werewolf in the entire Fae world, as far as I knew. It simply couldn’t be anyone but Greyson.

So why would he have done it? We’d known that werewolves were rare here in the Fae world, that shifting was a risk every time he did it. So why? Was he trying to rescue me?

A new wave of guilt rushed over me. If he was trying to rescue me, all he’d done was put a target on his own back. Now if he was caught, he wasn’t just facing capture and hard labor in the mines. He was probably going to be the newest member of the Kollector’s twisted zoo.

Artemis’s voice broke through my ever-more-depressing thoughts. “You know, I appreciate your loyalty to your friends, but you have to know there is nothing you can do to help them.”

*Yeah, well, you don’t know me.* If there was even the slightest chance that I could save Greyson or Torin and Astrid, I’d take it in a heartbeat.

We approached a fork in the passageways, and I slowly became aware of the buzz of a large crowd nearby. Cheers broke out, echoing through the stone passageway. What did a bunch of Dark Fae have to cheer about?

The possibilities were not comforting.

Artemis suddenly stopped and turned to me, glancing up and down as if she was appraising me one last time. “Behave yourself, human. Your friends’ lives may depend on it.”

Her smug threat had my hackles rising, and I didn’t hesitate to get right in her face. “If you hurt my friends, I’ll—”

The goblin pulled me away before I could wax poetic on all the different ways I’d hurt her. And I’d seen *Breaking Bad*; I knew some pretty fucked-up ways to hurt someone.

The goblin’s gnarled hands wrapped tight around my arms as he marched me forward past a guard and shoved me into an open arched doorway. In any other situation, I might have stopped to admire the elaborate carvings on the door, but thanks to that shithead goblin, it was all I could do to stumble forward and not faceplant into the next room—

Which turned out to not be a room at all. It was an arena. And I’d just stumbled into the middle of it, surrounded by an enormous crowd of spectators and facing a group of people and unusual creatures—a Pegasus, a troll, something that looked straight-up like a demon, and various others—all with their own guards flanking them.

I froze under so many eyes, but my goblin guard dragged me forward to join the line and took his place near me while Artemis walked over to a raised platform near the front on which sat a thin, tall, Dark Fae man with cold eyes.

The Kollector.

He was perched on a gaudy throne made of a dark carved wood bejeweled with gold and silver. By comparison, it made the Iron Throne look simple and conservative. Sitting alongside the Kollector were several other prominent-looking Fae, all of whom were drinking and chatting among themselves—until one of them pointed to me.

“Oh, that one looks simply *delicious*,” he sneered.

God, what the hell was up with these Dark Fae and their food fetishes? Suddenly everyone’s eyes were on me, including the Kollector’s. I’d thought Tristan and Stacy had been exaggerating just how creepy the Fae lord was, but staring into those dark, soulless eyes, I knew exactly what they meant. He looked like Benicio del Toro had a baby with Slenderman. Tall and terribly thin, but he carried himself with enough confidence and gravity that even the simple movement of his head as he considered me had me gulping down my fear.

*Don’t vomit, no fear.*

The Kollector raised his hands and a silence swept through the crowd. He stood, his blue cape fluttering out behind him and the sparkling highlights in his hair shimmering. Oddly, those highlights reminded me of my dress, and I wondered if Tristan had done that on purpose, dressing me to match the Kollector’s aesthetic.

He probably thought it would improve my chances of joining the harem.

Despite his unnaturally lanky build, the Kollector’s voice was deep, thunderous, and authoritative. “I welcome you all to today’s buffet.” He grinned.

I gasped. “What?” I looked around wildly. Shit, *were* they planning on eating me?

“Don’t fret,” a voice to my left whispered. “We’re not being offered up for supper.”

I spun to face a sallow-looking, dark-haired man. “I’m Giorgio.” He offered his hand, and I almost gasped at how cold his skin was. “I assume you must be Cali.”

It seemed my reputation preceded me. I didn’t imagine this could be a good thing. “How did you know my name?”

“I was imprisoned with a couple of your friends.”

My heart lurched. “Greyson? Did you see him? Is he okay?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. They took him away—and he wasn’t too happy about it.”

I sighed, my stomach twisting. I wasn’t any closer to finding Greyson, to being able to help my friends. Had he shifted when the guards had taken him away then? Maybe he thought that would be his best chance to gain the upper hand.

I looked up and down the row of prisoners offered up to the Kollector. I didn’t see any sign of Greyson, or Torin and Astrid for that matter. Where were my friends? Why weren’t they up here with me? My fingers curled into fists, and I tried to lurch back, to make a run for it, to fight my way out if necessary—only to be yanked back into position by the goblin.

“Don’t do anything rashhhhhhhh,” he hissed at me, spraying spittle across my face. I grimaced and wiped my face with my free hand. Yeah, I was definitely going to get goblin flu.

The Kollector motioned to the goblin guards. “Bring our guests closer—we’d like to inspect the day’s offerings.”

We were dragged forward and the Kollector moved toward the podium, eyeing each of us with that same appraising expression before his cold eyes settled on me. He smiled, his thin lips curving in a way that didn’t seem natural, sending chills running down my spine and reminding me of childhood monsters I’d hidden from in the dark.

The Kollector turned to Artemis and then pointed to me. “This one. I want this one.”

**Episode 477**

MAYA

*What the fucking shit?* I stared at the blood-covered woman standing in the middle of the road, mere inches from the hood of our car. The acrid scent of burned rubber was thick in the air—we almost killed this lady. If Lola had braked even a second later she would have been confetti on our windshield. Hell, Lola probably would have been killed from the impact alone.

“Jesus, ouch!” Colton rubbed his head. He’d smacked it against the side of the car when we’d been thrown forward by the sudden stop.

“What the fuck!” Lola screamed. Her hands were stilled wrapped, white knuckled, around the steering wheel, her elbows locked in place, her eyes staring straight ahead at the woman, who hadn’t moved.

I scanned the woman’s face. What the hell was going on here? Who was this Bloody Mary chick and why did she decide that playing chicken on the highway was—

I looked closer and my brain froze. I knew that face. Even with all the blood. I’d seen this woman before. But my mind refused to acknowledge what my eyes were seeing. Because, quite frankly, I was seeing the impossible.

I turned to Colton, my mouth half-open in shock. It took a couple tries for my mouth to form the right words, for my brain to move past shock and denial and into this impossible reality. “She looks like Ava, doesn’t she?” I finally managed to whisper.

His eyes went wide and he followed my gaze, his hand dropping from his face. I could tell from the shock and horror and confusion that washed over his expression that he recognized Ava too.

“That's—that’s impossible,” he murmured.

“It is,” I agreed with him readily for pretty much the first time ever.

Because it *was* impossible. Ava was dead. She’d been killed by Xavier years before in an act of bloodlust and revenge. Colton and I had both witnessed Ava’s execution. I’d *known* her. She was gone. And yet, there she stood in front of us. Covered in blood like something straight out of a nightmare. And the fact that all of us could see her, impossible or not, had my mind in a freefall.

Lola rolled down her window and snarled at the woman. “What the fuck is wrong with you? I almost ran you over! Do you have any idea how close you were to death just now?” Her voice filled the car, her screams directed at Ava. Or the specter of Ava. Whatever. “Uh, hey! Can you hear me?! What the hell happened to you? Should I call the police?”

Lola had never known Ava, so she wouldn’t recognize her. She couldn’t know that she was screaming at a dead woman.

Or a formerly dead woman. I shook my head. *What the fuck is happening here?*

Lola reached for the door to get out of the car, likely to give Ava a piece of her mind, but Colton reached over the seat and caught Lola by the shoulder. “Stay here. Do *not* go out there.”

She frowned, looking between me and Colton. “What? Why not?”

I stared ahead at Ava, who was still standing in front of our car like a ghost. This couldn’t be happening. Maybe we did crash. Maybe it had been a serious accident and I got a head injury and I was actually in the hospital in a coma right now. That made a hell of a lot more sense than the dead woman staring creepily at me from the road.

“Hey!” Lola snapped her fingers in front of my face, and I slapped them away with a growl. “What’s going on?” she demanded.

I met Colton’s eyes, both of us hesitating to put a name to what we were seeing. Would Lola even believe us?

“Fine. I’ll find out myself.” She got out of the car before Colton or I could make a move.

“Shit.” Colton reached for the handle on his door. “We have to stop her.”

Before I could reply, he shoved open the door and hopped out.

“God dammit.” I had no choice but to hurry after both of them, leaving the relative safety of the car. I rushed over to them just as Colton’s arms wrapped around Lola and he pulled her back.

“What the fuck!?” Lola gasped.

I ignored them, pushing past them both—only to find empty road ahead of us. No Ava. No blood on the pavement. Nothing. It was like she’d never been there at all.

I wordlessly turned back to Colton and Lola, who had both gone pale. Had we actually just seen a ghost? Silence set in as we stood together in front of the car, trying to make sense of what we’d just seen. And what we weren’t seeing now.

“Where did she go?” Lola asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

If that wasn’t the million-dollar question.

She looked around wildly, as if Ava’s bloodied ghost was hiding behind a tree, ready for a game of creepy-ass peek-a-boo. “I almost ran her over, and then she just stared at us. You guys saw her too, right? And then… then when I got out of the car, she suddenly disappeared?”

I realized she was recounting the events to make sure she wasn’t hallucinating, that we’d all seen and experienced the same thing. I nodded and glanced over at Colton, who looked like he’d seen a ghost.

Maybe he had. Maybe we all had.

I tried to form some kind of response, but before I could muster up anything resembling an explanation, the eerie silence was shattered by a distant howl. One I didn’t recognize.

But Colton did.

His face, if possible, went even paler. “Be quiet,” he snapped. He listened to the howl, his brow furrowing, and sniffed the air.

“We need to search the woods,” Lola suggested. “Find that woman. Did you see all the blood? She was probably hurt, or in shock. Something bad happened to her.”

*Yeah, she was killed by her mate.*

Another howl broke through the air, this one closer. Colton’s head snapped up. “Get in car. Now.” The authority in his tone made the hair rise on the back of my beck.

“But what about the woman?” Lola asked.

Colton grabbed her arm and shoved her back into the driver’s seat. I followed behind them and slid back into the car.

“Hey!” Lola protested.

“Drive,” he snapped.

He took his place in the back seat and Lola started driving, peeling away from the side of the road and speeding down the highway. We passed the exit for the rest stop we’d been planning to find a meal at, but nobody mentioned it. Colton didn’t seem to be hungry anymore.

“Guys, what just happened?” Lola demanded. “You two are doing that silent thing and exchanging glances like you know something. So talk to me. Whatever the hell that just was, it really freaked me out. You saw her, right? You both saw her? We almost hit her. I almost—” she stopped and took a breath. “Where did she go? What happened to her?”

“She must have been startled and ran off,” Colton said, his voice significantly calmer than it had been when he’d been barking at us to get in the car. “I mean, it makes sense, considering we almost hit her, right?”

I watched his face, the dread and uncertainty written across his expression. He knew something. Or suspected it, at least. And whatever it was, it was somehow worse than simply finding Ava back from the dead.

I still couldn’t wrap my mind around it. The whole thing was impossible. And now that Ava, or whoever that had been, was gone, I was starting to wonder if we’d all shared some kind of hallucination.

“Then why did you drag us out of there? She was covered in blood. What if she needed our help? We should go back there.”

“No.” His tone was flat, giving not even a single inch for argument.

“Fine. Then we’ll call the police,” Lola suggested. “Tell them to be on the lookout—”

“I said *no*,” Colton snapped. “We’re not going back there, and we’re not calling the police. You’ve clearly been in the human world too long. We don’t go to the police, Lola. *Ever*.”

She smacked her hands against the steering wheel. “I’m not stupid, Colton. Don’t you dare talk to me like that. I know you’re hiding something from me, so what is it?” She looked from him to me in the rearview mirror. “I know you’re *both* hiding something. I can see how you’re acting. First the woman disappears, and then the howls. What is going on?”

I shook my head. Colton and I must have been mistaken. We were exhausted after our long drive to Reno and the fight we’d gone through to get Xavier into the Fae world. We needed food and rest, and that was why we’d seen what we’d seen. It obviously couldn’t have been Ava. I sighed. “I know it might have been a trick of the light—there’s no way this is possible—but Colton and I thought we saw—”

I felt Colton’s words rush through my mind, cutting me off.

*Maya, I think it really could have been Ava.*

**Episode 478**

My worst nightmare came true as the crowd around me cheered. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the Kollector, as terrifying as he was. He’d just chosen me for his harem. Picked me out from a lineup like I was an object, a thing to be owned. He thought himself my master, my owner, and all of these other Fae… they celebrated it.

The Kollector never tore his eyes away from me, drinking in my fear, my desperate fury, the urge to flee thrumming under my skin. That horrifying smile tugged at his thin lips again. “She will make a fine addition to my Kollection.”

His words were a promise that ripped my world apart.

*No! This can’t be happening. I’m not going anywhere with him, not doing anything with him. I’ll die first!* I struggled against the goblin’s grip, wincing as his gnarled fingers dug into my skin so harshly they were sure to leave bruises in their wake.

I elbowed him hard in his drooling face, and he let go of me with a snarl. I stumbled away, trying desperately to ignore the wetness on my elbow from the goblin’s face, and he lunged after me, violence written on his face—only to stop suddenly and clutch his chest.

He let out a horrible croaking sound, grimaced, and dropped facedown on the ground, a spear sticking out of his back.

*Holy shit! Did someone just murder him?*

For exactly two heartbeats a stunned silence washed over the crowd, and then they began to cheer, glad to have their bloodlust sated for the moment.

I stared down at the goblin’s corpse in horror. What the everloving fuck had just happened? Sure, he’d pretty much been the nastiest creature I’d ever seen, but that didn’t mean he deserved to be murdered for doing his job.

“You must never harm the prisoners,” the Kollector reminded the group of goblin guards. His gaze shifted to me. “Especially one as delectable as this one.”

A chill shuddered down my spine. But I tried to keep my face impassive, to not show my fear. The Kollector approached me, his tall body imposing, his deep voice wrapping around me with authority. “Who are you?” he asked. “Speak.”

*Speak?* Like I was some kind of pet who spoke on command? Fuck that. I lifted my chin, trying to ignore the dead goblin at my feet and stared directly into the Kollector’s cold, dead eyes. “That’s none of your business.”

The crowd gasped and quieted, and I knew I’d just become their new source of drama. The Kollector’s lips curled up. “You’re mistaken, my dear. This is all business—my business. And now that I own you, you will answer my questions.”

Artemis joined us then, clearly sensing that I was ready to dig my feet in for the long haul. “You should cooperate,” she hissed. “You just saw what the Kollector did to one of his own guards. Do you think he won’t do the same to you?”

Well, when she put it that way… I took a deep breath. “My name is Cali.”

The Kollector nodded, satisfied with my submission, then looked from me to Artemis. “You’ve found a rival for your own beauty in this one, Artemis.”

I bristled at that, though I did my best to keep my opinions to myself. Who the hell was this guy to judge who was beautiful and who wasn’t? And why did it even matter? Artemis wasn’t part of his harem, and she wasn’t enslaved to work in the mines. As far as I could tell, she was a free agent and had a hell of a lot more power here than most of the other Fae and humans I’d met. Why did it matter what the Kollector thought of her?

If she was really smart, she’d take whatever money she could scrape together and get the hell out of here. Maybe she’d take me too—if I made it worth her while.

If Artemis was bothered by the Kollector’s assessment, she didn’t show it, and he clapped his hands, raising his voice to address the crowd. “This one,” he gestured to me, “is no longer on the market!” He turned back to us, lowering his voice. “Take her to my private chambers,” he told Artemis.

Panic rushed through me once more. His private chambers? As in… his bedroom? No, no, no, no, no! There was no way in hell I was going in there. I opened my mouth to argue, to fight, to scream, if necessary, but Artemis grabbed my arm. “Keep still and keep your mouth shut,” she snapped. “The Kollector is not a very forgiving man.”

She began to lead me back toward the corridor, and I looked back to see the Kollector’s eyes still on us. Our eyes met for a split second before he turned back to the crowd. “I understand we have a vampire here today…”

The crowd went wild as Giorgio was brought forward—and then Artemis tugged me through the doorway and back down the passageway, leaving the arena, the crowd, the Kollector, and my fellow captives behind.

“What will they do with him?” I asked. I didn’t really know Giorgio, but he seemed nice enough. He certainly didn’t seem worse than any of the Dark Fae we’d fallen victim to.

Artemis shrugged. “He’s a vampire. Who cares?”

Even after everything this Fae woman had put me through, I still couldn’t quite believe how cold she was. How could she help enslave people and not seem to care at all about the lives she was helping to ruin? “Don’t you have any compassion at all?” I asked.

“It’s doubtful that you’ll find much compassion for bloodsuckers in this world—or any other world,” Artemis said. She guided me down a corridor I’d never been to before. It seemed like we were entering a finer part of the estate—more fitting for the master’s quarters.

I shuddered, trying not to think of what awaited me in the Kollector’s private quarters.

“You’re a curious sort,” Artemis said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Here you are, about to spend your life in the Kollector’s harem, and you’re actually worried about some stranger you’ve only just met.”

I frowned. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Live my life,” she muttered, “then ask me that.”

I let her words sink in as we followed the opulent corridor to a staircase and then ascended up to a formal-looking hallway with thick tapestries on the walls, plush carpet that felt like heaven on my sore, bare feet, and warmly lit sconces that cast more than the threadbare light I’d grown accustomed to in the dungeon.

I wondered what kind of life Artemis had lived. She seemed strong, capable, smart. She didn’t even seem overtly evil—not like the rest of the Dark Fae I’d met here. I mean, she clearly wasn’t in line for a Nobel Peace Prize, but there seemed to be something more to her beneath the surface. I considered her words again. Had she had a hard life? Was that how she’d begun working for the Kollector? What kinds of things would bring someone like her to trap and enslave innocent people?

I glanced over at her. Her expression was flat, impassive. I didn’t get the impression that she’d be forthcoming if I asked her about it.

This part of the estate was so much nicer. It was decadent and inviting. Even the air was warmer here. I wondered where we were, though I knew by how nice it was that it must be near the Kollector’s rooms. There was a large oil painting of a knight slaying a ferocious-looking wolf, and anxiety rushed through me again.

Where was Greyson? Was he all right? I glanced over at Artemis. “Please, you’ve gotten everything you want. Please just tell me if Greyson’s okay.”

She patted my hand. “I understand why you’re concerned about him. He’s one of the finest specimens I’ve ever had the pleasure of laying eyes upon. But he’ll be okay, as long as he doesn’t do something foolish.” Her words seemed to be a warning to me too. *Don’t be stupid.*

“How can you be so cold?” I spat. She was calling Greyson a *specimen* now? Acting like he wasn’t even a person with feelings and life and people who loved him.

“Listen, you don’t know anything about me. So before you get all teary-eyed might I suggest you stop complaining about your big bad jailor and focus on how *you’re* going to survive.” We stopped in front of an elaborately carved door. “Welcome to your new life.”

She pushed me inside the room and I stumbled forward then turned around—just as the door slammed shut, the lock turning.

No.

I rushed forward and pounded on the door. “Artemis! Don’t leave me here! Please! Help me!” The handle wouldn’t budge; the lock was doing its job.

I heard a door creaking open somewhere behind me and spun around. I was standing in front of a gigantic four-poster bed in the center of the room. Black, gold, and silver furnishings dominated the room, just as gaudy as the throne the Kollector had sat upon.

My eyes narrowed on the bed and the door opening across from it.

The Kollector stepped in, closing the door behind him.

And then we were alone.

**Episode 479**

I took a step back without even thinking about it. It was a survival instinct. My body was trying to keep itself safe and far away from the Kollector.

He was so tall, he had to bend at the waist to fit through the doorway. And even though my muscles were tight with fear and revulsion, I found myself wondering—didn’t he live here? Why hadn’t he just ordered his lackeys to build taller door frames?

But then he drew himself up to his full and very imposing height and looked down his nose at me, and all thoughts of custom architecture left my mind.

My eyes darted around the room. Velvet couches, a sparkling chandelier, not much to protect myself with. And then the bed.

I really didn’t want to look at the bed.

So naturally, the Kollector stopped right at the foot of it so he could study me. I tried to ignore the feeling of his eyes on me, roving over the skin exposed by the dress I had loved less than an hour ago. But now, I hated it.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I ordered, as authoritatively as I could manage.

“I am only enjoying what I have paid for,” he crooned. “And I paid quite a bit for you, my beauty.”

I shivered. I wondered what a braver person would do in my situation. Maya would have told this guy off. So would Lola. They also both had the ability to shift into bear-sized wolves that could probably tear this reedy asshole to shreds. I had no such ability, only Fae powers that I couldn’t trust.

My eyes were drawn to the bed again. I took in the dark crimson sheets and silk bedspread. If I’d seen it in a hotel room, I would probably have thought it was beautiful. Decadent, even. But now it just made me want to throw up.

“I’m not going to sleep with you,” I told him, lifting my chin in defiance.

The Kollector grimaced, as if he hadn’t just bought me so I could be part of his harem.

“Must you be so crude?” he asked, his brow wrinkling in distaste.

“If anyone’s crude, it’s you,” I threw back at him. I wished for the kind of strength the werewolves in my life had. I wished I could feel strong, powerful, intimidating. But I was always the prey and never the predator.

My captor stepped slowly around the bed, as if he were choosing his path very deliberately. He must have known that my tension was mounting as he drew closer, because he drew it out as much as possible.

“How is it that someone as enchanting as you has never caught my eye before?” he asked, his voice so soft I instinctively leaned forward to listen. “You must not be from around here.”

I thought about what to say. I knew I had to be careful not to reveal anything he could use against me. But I didn’t know what to hide.

“I’m not,” I told him, deciding to keep it vague.

He took another step. I was almost within arm’s length at this point. I dug my fingernails into my palms, hoping that the pain would distract me from the scream creeping up my throat. The Kollector’s cold eyes zeroed in on the pendant hanging around my neck.

He reached for it, eyes wide, like he was mesmerized by it.

I slapped his hand away before I could consider if it was a smart thing to do.

“This belongs to me,” I told him through gritted teeth. I felt a wave of possessiveness wash over me. This was my mother’s. And even if I never found a way out of this horrible place, there was no way I was parting with the last piece of her I had left.

The Kollector just chuckled.

“And you, in turn, belong to me.” He let the corners of his mouth curl up into his horrifying smile. “So everything you once owned is now mine.”

I felt my heart drop into my stomach. Of course. In his twisted logic, if I was his, so was my pendant.

“Where did you get it?” he asked, eyes focusing on it greedily.

“It was a gift from my mother,” I answered truthfully. I wondered if that would make him more or less likely to let me keep it.

“May I?” he asked, his hand outstretched.

I gave a tiny nod. It wasn’t as though I had much of a choice. He reached out to stroke the cold metal of my family’s crest.

His eyes darted between my own and the pendant. I couldn’t tell which intrigued him more. Or which he seemed more possessive about.

“Tell me about your mother,” he breathed. It wasn’t a question. It was a command. He probably gave them thoughtlessly all the time. That was how much power he had over everyone around him. I wondered what happened to people who disobeyed him.

I knew it would be foolish to answer him truthfully. So I composed myself as much as I could.

“Not much to tell.” I shrugged. “She was a typical mom. She ran an apple farm. We had a lot of pie growing up.”

He raised a finger to silence me. For a moment, I was worried he was going to press his finger against my lips and had to force myself not to recoil from just the idea of his touch. His eyes met mine and it was clear he didn’t buy my story.

“This is the Wrenthorn family crest,” he told me. “So forgive me if I find your story wanting.”

I swallowed hard. I tried to keep our eye contact unwavering, refusing to let him feel he’d gotten the upper hand.

“So?” I asked, giving him another shrug.

“*So*,”he repeated sarcastically. “How about you stop lying and tell me the truth, girl?”

“I am telling you the truth,” I replied.

“The evidence suggests you are not,” he mused, looking at me closely. “There are no remaining descendants of the Wrenthorn family. The last of them died in childbirth.”

I remembered what Hera had told me, about my mother losing her baby. I said nothing, hoping the Kollector would do the talking for me. I wondered how much of my family’s life was public knowledge. How would my mother feel, knowing so many people knew about the child she’d lost?

The Kollector released his grip on my pendant. It tapped against my skin softly, and I found its weight more reassuring than I’d known I could.

“So the question remains,” he continued. “Where did you get this? Are you a thief? Do you know what we do with thieves around here?”

He ran a slim finger down my throat and I couldn’t help but shudder.

“I’m not a thief,” I insisted, in a voice I knew was less than convincing.

“Then how did you get this?” he asked, clearly delighting in my torment. “If Artemis had recognized the Wrenthorn crest, she would have charged me triple what I paid for you.”

“Why is that?” I asked, intrigued. Maybe that value could work in my favor.

He just chuckled again. I felt overwhelmed by the desire to punch him in his skinny throat. Of course, I’d need a step stool to do that.

“Either you are ignorant or you really aren’t from around here,” he smirked. “The Wrenthorn family goes back countless generations. They are highly respected, extremely influential Light Fae.”

He walked around me in a circle, examining me from every angle.

“If you did really get this from your mother,” he continued, “she must be a member of the Wrenthorn family. So who is she?”

I felt my palms go slick with sweat, just as my throat dried up. I had to be careful how I answered.

“It doesn’t matter,” I insisted. “You wouldn’t know her. You’re right. We’re not from around here.”

The Kollector sighed and let his hands drop to his sides as if he were suddenly quite exhausted with me.

“Let’s not play games, shall we?” he asked, his eyes flinty. “I’m growing quite bored of all this evasion.”

He leaned down so we were eye to eye, our faces only a few inches away. I tried to keep my face blank, or at least just the normal amount of scared.

“Where are you from?” he asked me, his tone much more menacing now.

“Minnesota,” I blurted out. Surely he wouldn’t want to venture into the human world in search of my mother.

“Where is that?” he asked me, puzzled.

“The human world,” I told him. “Where my father is from.”

Now the Kollector was backing away from me, aghast. I practically sighed with relief at the breathing room he was giving me.

“Are—Are you *human*?” He said it like it was a dirty word.

“I’m half-human,” I answered him cautiously. If being human disgusted him, maybe it would keep him far away from me.

The Kollector spat on the stone floor in disgust.

“Mixed blood,” he scoffed. “Even worse. If I’d known…”

He paused.

“What to do?” he mused, his hands clasping together absentmindedly.

I bit down on my lip, thinking about the goblin who’d dropped dead in front of me with the spear lodged firmly in his back. This wasn’t a man to piss off, and I had just made a bold move.

“Are you going to let me go?” I asked, hope swelling.

His laugh answered my question.

“Oh, no. No no no. I have a much better use for you.”

**Episode 480**

MAYA

*Stop pouting*, I scolded Colton through our mind link.

Moments ago, when we’d been standing in the blasting AC of the threadbare lobby of this rinky-dink roadside motel and Colton had tried to pull that ‘Just two rooms, please’ shit, I’d almost socked him. Lola looked at me, eyebrows raised, and I felt my heart leap up into my throat.

“Three, actually,” I’d insisted, proud of myself for managing not to break Colton’s jaw. I didn’t want to go public with our arrangement. And if Lola found out, it wouldn’t be long until the entire pack knew. And then everyone would have questions and want to poke at this, and I *really* didn’t want that.

So here I was, sitting in the shitty hotel room I had no intention of spending much time in, straining my ears to hear the sound of Lola’s door closing. Wondering if I should be tying myself down and keeping myself as far away from Colton as I could—for my own good.

But I needed to talk to him.

So as soon as I heard that soft click, I slipped out of my room and knocked on Colton’s door.

He opened it immediately, his shirt already off as he pulled me inside, slamming the door behind me. It was clear how he was expecting the evening to go.

“I was gonna shower.” He grinned at me, his hand still on my wrist. “Want to join me?”

I brushed past him and sat on the bed, not letting myself look at him. Because if I wasn’t careful, I’d end up in that shower without answers to my questions.

“What the hell did you mean when you said you thought that woman on the road was Ava?” I asked, my eyes trained on the spongy beige carpet. “Because we both know that’s impossible. And why didn’t you want to talk about it in front of Lola?”

Colton didn’t answer. I felt more anger boil up inside of me at his silence. How could he say something like that and not expect me to follow up?

“We both saw her body,” I reminded him, a lump forming in my throat at the memory. “She was dead. Xavier killed her.”

“I know,” he replied softly, sounding just as confused as I was.

“Then…” I tried to choose my words carefully because for once, he wasn’t being an asshole. “Can you explain it to me? Please?”

Colton sat down next to me on the bed. Both of us stared straight ahead, not looking at each other. We had an unspoken understanding that eye contact would break the spell between us. We’d fall back into our normal pattern of fighting and yelling and picking at each other. Which would turn into tearing off each other’s clothes and never finishing this conversation.

“When I first saw her,” he started, “the woman covered in blood—whoever she was—I thought maybe I was just imagining that she looked like Ava. But… you saw it too, right?”

“I mean, yeah.” I shook my head. “We both saw a woman who *looked* like Ava. It was dark, she was covered in blood. That doesn’t mean—”

“But the howl.” He cut me off. “You heard it.”

“I did,” I admitted. “But I didn’t recognize it. It didn’t sound like her.”

“No, it didn’t.” I could feel him nodding next to me. “It sounded like my dad. Like Silas.”

I felt the completely unfamiliar impulse to hold his hand. Not wanting to let myself do that, I tucked my hands under my thighs to keep them to myself. I didn’t know how Colton would react to my attempt at comfort. But it dawned on me that he might need it.

“So it’s true?” I asked, my voice hushed. “He’s back?”

“I don’t know,” Colton admitted. “I can’t be sure until someone actually sees him.”

Colton leaned against me. I swallowed, thinking about how much responsibility it would be to be his mate. His partner. His protector. Would it mean I got the same thing in return?

But none of that mattered if Silas was back. I knew how dangerous he could be. Just thinking of him being alive again made me want to run to the other side of the world.

“But, even if he is back,” I thought out loud, “what would that have to do with Ava?”

“I’m honestly not sure.” Colton chuckled darkly. “But Xavier told me that he saw Ava when we were on the way to Haystack Rock. I laughed it off because he was high off his ass when he supposedly saw her. But now…”

I’d never been one to believe in ghosts. But even I had to admit this was tough to explain. I wondered if there was a connection between Silas’s possible return and Ava being spotted in dreams and hallucinations. And maybe even on the road, covered in blood.

“I’m trying to explain it away, but…” I trailed off, wanting him to know I wished I could fix this for him.

Colton shrugged and finally turned to face me. I reluctantly looked up to return his gaze. I hated the way I felt when he looked at me. Like he knew some secret about me I didn’t know myself.

“Until we figure it out, would you mind keeping it quiet?” he asked, eyes plaintive. “I don’t want Lola to know. She’d panic, and that doesn’t help anyone. She already seems a little unhinged.”

“I mean, that’s normal,” I quipped and Colton huffed a laugh. “But of course. It can stay between us.”

I tried not to think about how that word sounded coming out of my mouth. *Us*.

“She’s been edgy lately,” Colton told me. “She keeps going on about shifting. She seems kind of…”

“Manic?” I offered, finishing his sentence without thinking.

“Yeah.”

“If *you* noticed that, it must be something,” I told him, teasing. “You’re not the most observant guy in the world.”

“I notice things,” he insisted softly, his eyes burning as they looked into mine.

I felt a nervous giggle work its way out of my mouth and looked down at the carpet. I focused on how it was slightly lighter in this room than in mine. I wondered if that meant it had been cleaned more recently, or just that fewer people had walked all over it.

“When she’s back with Jay, she’ll calm down,” I offered, wanting to keep the focus of the conversation on other people.

“I hope so,” Colton replied, sounding sincere. “I know what it’s like for mates to be apart.”

I rolled my eyes, thinking of all the girls Colton had hooked up with while we’d been ‘apart.’ It didn’t seem like it had been such a tough time for him.

“I’m going back to my room.” I pushed up off the bed, and Colton sprang up to block my path to the door.

And even though I was begging my eyes to obey me, I couldn’t help but focus on his bare chest, how it was just inches away…

“You think I’m so unaware.” He shook his head and reached out to me, brushing a stray hair out of my eyes. “But I see things. I see when your hair is out of place.”

I swallowed. His voice was getting deeper, huskier.

“And when I get close…” He took a step, closing most of the distance between us. “I can hear your heart pound.”

He leaned down so his lips brushed against my ear.

“I know that when I do this…” I tried not to shudder at the feeling of his breath tickling my neck. “Your cheeks get flushed.”

I reached up to move his hand, which had settled on my shoulder. But when our fingers touched I could practically see the sparks between us. It was impossible to deny our connection. Unable to help myself, I wound my fingers through his.

“You’re not the only one who notices things,” I told him, my voice low and quiet. “Like when I do this…”

I brought his hand to my mouth and licked the tip of his finger gently, teasingly. Enjoying the tiny inhale of surprise I knew I’d hear.

“You catch your breath,” I told him. “Or when I do this…”

I traced a finger down the coiled muscles of his back, enjoying the topography of his body.

“You tense up,” I told him.

Colton tangled his free hand in my hair and pulled me to him by the nape of my neck. I sighed against his lips as he kissed me, relaxing in his arms, delighting in being warm and pliant. His for the taking.

I would never describe myself as a submissive person, but it felt so freeing to just let go with Colton. To let him please me the way he clearly wanted to.

He dipped me low over the bed, his tongue stroking mine. Every nerve in my body felt hyper-aware of what was happening. Of his warm hand on the small of my back. Of the feel of his muscled chest pressed against mine. The give of the mattress underneath me. I could feel him pulling away so we could both undress.

But our lips refused to part. As much as we both wanted to be naked, we wanted to be touching more.

Colton was the one to finally break the kiss. I looked up at his mussed hair and swollen lips. I’d never been with a guy who was so… pretty.

“Clothes off,” he choked out in a low voice. It was barely a command. Commands didn’t sound that desperate. But I obeyed, shimmying out of my leggings and pulling my shirt over my head.

Seconds later he was on top of me, parting my thighs with his knee, and I could feel him hot and hard against my hip. His hands glided all over my body, like he couldn’t decide what part of me he wanted to feel more.

“Colton.” I looked at him, willing him to focus up.

His head snapped up to look at me, and I felt my stomach drop like I was on a roller coaster. I felt shy, not ready to be in charge.

“Ready?” he asked me, smiling. Not smirking, for once. Like he was happy to be with me.

And I was happy to be with him.

For now.

He lined himself up with my entrance, hissing when he felt how wet I was for him.

“Fuck,” he whispered as he slid inside me. “You feel so fucking…”

I waited. Was he bored? Tired of this? Wishing I was doing something differently? That I was *someone* different?

“Perfect,” he whispered into my neck.

**Episode 481**

XAVIER

After a while, I stopped running. As I slowed, I wiped the last of the guards’ blood from my face. My hands were red and sticky with it. I could taste it, salty and metallic on my tongue, and couldn’t help but think of Mikah.

This would probably make his mouth water. Not that he’d be happy about it.

He would think this was a waste of blood. And he’d also probably scold me for being an indiscriminately murderous werewolf, killing first and thinking second.

And yeah, I understood how it could *look* that way. But in my defense, I’d been attacked. I would have been more than content to just walk away. I’d tried my best to give the guards every opportunity to let me go. But they’d chosen to make things go another way.

Which meant I’d had no choice but to kill them.

I paused to listen for attackers, not wanting to be distracted by the sound of my own footfalls. I knew it wouldn’t be long before word spread that there was a werewolf around, before guards were sent out to find me. Probably more than I could handle on my own.

It stood to reason they’d find me by following the tracks I’d left as a wolf—the tracks that trailed off just behind where I stood. I decided to hurry and get as far away from those as possible. And my next step definitely needed to be finding some clothes. Because I couldn’t exactly be inconspicuous if I was naked. And I wouldn’t be able to find Cali if I didn’t blend in.

I remembered those gates I’d seen after going through the portal. The guards had said they worked for some guy named ‘The Kollector’—whoever the fuck that was. Of *course* people in the Fae world all had weird, ominous titles. But he sounded important, so I figured my best bet would be to find him and ask where Cali could have gone.

But in order to do that, I’d have to disguise myself.

I ran cautiously through the woods, carefully avoiding roots and stones in my path. But I froze when I heard voices. Two of them, close by.

I pressed myself against a tree trunk, trying to hide as much as I could. It wasn’t lost on me that I was alone and naked in what was essentially enemy territory.

“They’re ogre tracks, it’s clear as day,” a gravelly voice insisted.

“They were obviously left by a troll,” a higher, whinier voice responded. “How could you miss that? You need to get your eyes checked.”

“There’s no need to get personal,” the deeper voice argued. “They look like ogre tracks to me.”

“Well, either way, they’ve only led us so far,” the other voice replied, sounding chagrined. “And you’re right. I’m working on how critical I can get. It’s not fair to lead with judgments and I apologize.”

“Thank you,” the other voice replied. “I appreciate your honesty.”

I wondered how much more of this surprisingly healthy conversation I’d have to listen to before the guards moved on. I considered shifting. Maybe if they’d only sent two, I could take them out and keep moving.

“Hey, what’s that?” the high voice asked.

Shit.

“You there, step out from behind that tree,” the deeper voice ordered.

Reluctantly, I stepped out, hands visible at my sides. I saw my opponents. One thin and lanky and one stouter. They both had their swords raised.

They exchanged glances.

“What’s a naked human doing here?” asked the taller one, in his deep baritone.

Rolling with that, I pointed to the blood trickling out of the small wound on my thigh. I tried to put the most panicked expression possible on my face.

“Thank goodness you’re here!” I yelled, hoping I wasn’t laying it on too thick. “I was attacked! By a werewolf!”

They both leaned forward at the word ‘werewolf’.

“Where did it go?” asked the shorter one in his nasally whine.

Frantically, I pointed back over my shoulder.

“Why don’t you go?” asked the squatter one. “I’ll stay with the human. He probably escaped from the mines.”

“Meaning I would have to go get the werewolf all by myself?” the taller one asked, crossing his arms. “That sounds pretty convenient, Harold.”

Obviously, these guys had issues. And hopefully, they would be so preoccupied with their fight and their dedication to conflict resolution that they wouldn’t see me coming. I crept toward them slowly as they fought.

“There’s nothing convenient about it,” the shorter one argued. “I just think—”

I cut him off when I shoved his taller partner right into him and they both crashed to the ground. I kicked one of their swords away and grabbed the other, pointing it at them with as much authority as I could. I wasn’t really a sword guy.

They looked up at me like deer in headlights.

“Please,” the shorter one cried. “Don’t hurt us!”

“We don’t want to die!” wailed the tall one.

“I have no intention of harming either of you,” I told them firmly. “I just want clothes.” I pointed at the taller one. “You. Strip.”

“Really?” He looked up at me miserably.

“Really,” I answered. “Now, both of you—tell me who this Kollector guy is. Where does he live? How do I find him?”

“He owns the property you’re on right now,” the shorter one answered quickly while the taller guy reluctantly removed his clothing. “He runs the mines, and he lives in a huge compound over there.”

He pointed in the direction opposite to the way I’d been heading.

“It’s hard to miss,” the taller one said, handing me his clothes.

I pulled on the clothes as quickly as I could. They were a bit snugger than I’d have liked, but at least the guy was around my height so I didn’t look like a total idiot. I grabbed a coil of rope one of them had strapped to their side and bound and gagged them as quickly as I could.

“Someone else will patrol out here and find you if you don’t come back, right?” I asked, feeling a twinge of guilt about leaving them here. Cali wouldn’t have liked that, and I wanted to be the kind of person who deserved her.

The taller one nodded. I grabbed the shorter one’s coat and tucked it around him so he wasn’t completely naked.

“Good.” I nodded at them. “Uh, thanks.”

And with that, I took off toward the compound. Maybe if I made it to the Kollector, I’d learn something about Cali. I just hoped the guard’s uniform would be enough of a disguise.

Maybe I would have been better off asking the guards more questions about this Kollector guy and his operation. But who knew if I’d be able to trust what they told me? Plus, time was of the essence. I’d just have to walk in with confidence and hope no one would fuck with me.

I came upon a huge estate built out of stone. Walls and gates towered above me. I saw a large group of people streaming out of one of the gates. There must have been something going on. A meeting? A party?

I walked toward them, narrowing my gaze. I was going for a purposeful expression. As much as I wanted to question these people, I knew I couldn’t afford to. That would risk exposure. I settled for moving through them as slowly as I could, listening.

“The first round of the auction was normal,” one woman said. “But once that werewolf arrived…”

“And that fucking *stunning* Light Fae,” a man groaned. “Of course the Kollector pulled her from auction before any of us could bid on her. Her only flaw was those weird marks on her legs—hope he doesn’t mind those.”

Hearing someone describe Cali’s tiger stripes filled me with the strangest combination of hope and fury. It meant someone had seen her—but it also meant someone was talking shit about her.

Wait. She was being *auctioned off*!?

Before I knew what I was doing, I’d grabbed the guy by the front of his shirt and shoved him against the stone wall.

“This Light Fae with the stripes—the marks,” I growled. “Who was she?”

“I-I-I don’t know,” the man stuttered, the color draining from his face. “But in all honesty, it doesn’t matter. She’s part of the Kollector’s harem now. Who she was before is irrelevant.”

I felt like a bomb had just gone off in my head. There was a ringing in my ears, and my knees felt weak. Cali was in a *harem?*

I pushed past this man and ran into the compound, determined to rescue her. Cali didn’t belong to anybody—not even to me. I couldn’t let this happen.

But after only a few steps, I felt an iron grip on my shoulder. I turned to see a guard wearing the exact same uniform as me.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked.

**Episode 482**

GREYSON

The guards led me into a room. I didn’t look at it much. I was too busy fighting the urge to shift and rip them to shreds. I focused on enjoying the fantasy.

My claws ripping through their flesh. My teeth digging into them. Feeling their bones crack between my powerful jaws. Tearing them in two. Throwing the pieces at the Kollector’s feet…

And whenever I felt like I was on the verge of making that dream a reality, I repeated Giorgio’s warning to myself. If I revealed myself as a werewolf, I risked being taken to the zoo.

An actual zoo.

What the fuck kind of place was this?

The other thing Giorgio had said was even more unsettling: if the Kollector found Cali desirable, I would never see her again. It made me sick to even think about.

I knew *exactly* how desirable Cali was. With her dazzling smile, her jewel-like eyes, and the way she had of opening her arms to you. So welcoming, so inviting, so warm…

She was irresistible.

And she was alone.

I hated being away from her on a good day. But now, with all the uncertainty? The helplessness was killing me. I’d come here to protect Cali from harm in the Fae world. And all we’d managed to find was trouble around every single fucking corner. And just when it had seemed like we were about to actually do it, get the magical flower that would cure her mother and get the fuck out, we’d been taken.

I had no one I could ask to find her. I didn’t know what had happened to her. But there was one thing I did know—if the Kollector harmed her in any way, I would make him pay.

No matter the cost.

No matter how long it took.

That piece of shit wouldn’t get away with hurting her.

I was shoved into a bright room, and I blinked as my eyes adjusted. It actually looked… *nice*, in here?

There was a man in the room, and his jaw dropped when he saw me.

“Stacy! We’ve moved on from the snacks to the main course!” he called gleefully to the woman in the room.

“Please, come on in!” She smiled graciously.

“I’m Tristan and this is Stacy.” Tristan introduced himself and the woman politely, as if I hadn’t been brought here by guards. “And you must be Greyson!”

“How do you know my name?” I asked, confused.

“Cali described you to us,” Tristan answered, like it was obvious.

“Cali?” I rushed forward, looking around for her. “Where is she? What happened?”

“We did our job,” Stacy told me. “Made her as beautiful as she could possibly be, and the Kollector claimed her right away.”

“Claimed her for what?” I asked, impatient. Why were these people so goddamn polite? And why wouldn’t they give me any real answers?

“His harem, of course,” Tristan said, like I was dim. “The best ones always end up there. And thanks to us, she was one of the best.”

I swallowed, my head spinning. Harem? Did this Kollector guy already have his hands all over her? We’d *just* been together. How had this happened so fast? How could I save her?

Tristan must have noticed the stricken expression on my face, because he put a hand on my shoulder to comfort me.

“Don’t worry,” he told me. “Cali will be okay. The Kollector treats them all well. I promise. She’s safe.”

My eyes flicked over to the guard at the door. He watched me carefully, his hand on his sword. If I took him out, I could try to find my way to Cali. But if I failed, she’d be lost forever.

I was her only hope.

I had to be patient and wait for the best opportunity before I tried anything. I couldn’t fail. It wasn’t an option. Not when it came to her. Never.

*Just get me in front of this Kollector.*

I let Stacy lead me to a salon chair and she began to wash my hair. I tried to focus on the feeling of her fingers kneading my scalp. I needed to relax. My plan could take days, even weeks. As much as I wanted to find Cali *right now*, I had to be prepared to wait. And that meant not letting my heart beat out of my chest.

Tristan rolled a rack of clothing over to us. It held everything from suits to much slighter garments.

“All righty.” He gave me a tight smile, clearly trying not to piss me off any further. “Wardrobe. Luckily, you are in *phenomenal* shape. We want to use clothing that will enhance rather than hide your… assets. So…”

He held up a dark brown leather loincloth, his eyes expectantly searching my expression for a judgement.

“This could be perfect,” he said, finishing his pitch. “Assuming you agree.”

I shrugged. I couldn’t have given less of a shit what I wore when I tore the guy’s throat out. I just wanted to see him, and fast.

“Am I going to see this Kollector guy?” I asked, trying to keep the fury out of my voice.

“Of course,” Stacy said as she rinsed the shampoo out of my hair. “You’ll be presented along with the rest. Anyone who hasn’t been taken yet.”

This could be the chance I was looking for. The chance to strike. At the very least, I’d be able to see the guy’s security setup. And maybe Cali would be with him… Or was that too much to hope for?

“How will it go down?” I asked. “The presenting? Will I be alone with the Kollector? Or will there be guards there?”

“You’ll be in a big arena,” Tristan said. “Lots of spectators, and an auctioneer who runs things. Be prepared for a fair amount of spectacle.”

I felt myself deflate a bit as I went behind a curtain to change. I needed the Kollector one on one, or close to it, if I wanted to be sure I could take him out. A crowd and guards wouldn’t do.

I wanted to tear his head off. The fewer people present to stop me, the better.

After I came back out in my loincloth, Stacy dried my hair with some kind of super absorbent towel. I was surprised by how fast it worked. Not for the first time, I wished I could have been here under different circumstances. Wished I could find out how things worked here without constantly worrying about Cali…

She must have felt the same when she’d been in here. I hoped that Stacy and Tristan’s bubbly demeanors had soothed her. I hated the idea of her being scared.

“I know it’s wrong to brag…” Tristan stepped back and took me in. “But I think we did a pretty good job.”

“Well, we had a wonderful canvas.” Stacy grinned at me.

“All the better to make great art with.” Tristan elbowed her in the ribs and Stacy giggled.

I fought the urge to knock their heads together. The guard behind me, perhaps sensing my murderous intentions, cleared his throat.

“Thinking about causing trouble?” he grunted at me.

“No,” I answered smoothly.

“Good.” He took me by the arm and led me out the door. I glared at him, unable to hide my distaste for being handled.

“Bye Greyson!” Tristan shouted after me.

“Good luck!” Stacy called.

We moved through a dark passageway and, slowly but surely, I started to hear the roar of the crowd. We reached a wrought iron gate and the guard opened it for me with a creak. I blinked at the sunlight as my eyes adjusted, then stepped out onto the sand of the arena.

It was just as Tristan had described. A circular arena, stands full of eager spectators, other prisoners shuffling toward a huge podium. It felt like I was in *Gladiator*. Only, I was not entertained.

My guard shoved me forward. Apparently he didn’t care to wait while I took in my surroundings. I clenched my fists and tried to push my wolf down. I couldn’t reveal myself. I would *not* end up in a zoo because I had no self-control.

But then I smelled it.

Cali’s scent.

Floral and warm and familiar. She had been here. Instantly, I felt calmer. I wasn’t far behind her.

*I will find you,* I promised her silently. *I’m coming for you. And you will get out of the place, I swear it.*

The guard pulled me to the side, breaking my reverie. I heard some murmurs, and the crowd shifted in anticipation. It had to be showtime.

A tall, spindly man strutted out onto the podium. He was twisted and cold-looking. The kind of person who’d catch anyone’s eye.

But I only had eyes for the person behind him. Bound in chains like an animal. Eyes full of fear. Hands trembling.

It was Cali.

**Episode 483**

MAYA

I stared at my reflection in the fluorescent lighting of my hotel bathroom’s mirror. Something was different. Like when you wake up the morning after a haircut and for a split second you see your reflection and almost don’t even recognize yourself.

And then it hit me. I was actually smiling for once.

And I knew exactly why.

My night with Colton had been… actually really fun. And sexy. And *satisfying.*

I actually laughed at the realization. I laughed alone. At my own reflection. Because of a guy. Like I was in a fucking romantic comedy or something.

I’d snuck out this morning, before he’d woken up. I really hadn’t wanted Lola to barge in and find us together. I would never have lived it down. Hopefully, Colton wouldn’t be a dick about it. I was sure he’d left girls behind in worse ways. But knowing Colton, it could go either way.

When I walked out the door of my room I was happy, freshly showered, and ready to start the day. The first thing I saw was Colton, walking away from Lola’s room. The sun lit up the blond streaks in his hair that I always tried not to notice.

“Hey.” He grinned at the sight of me. “Have you seen Lola?”

It took me a second to realize that what he’d said could actually be an indicator that something was very, very wrong.

“No,” I answered, anxiety starting to prickle. “I haven’t. Is something wrong?”

“She’s not in her room,” Colton said with a shrug. “But maybe she just went for coffee?”

“And maybe she fell into a pit of poisonous snakes,” I replied. “We don’t really have the best luck, Colton.”

“Why don’t we give her a couple minutes before we start theorizing?” he offered.

“Fine.” I sighed. “But if the venom kills her while we wait, you’re telling everyone, not me.”

“Deal.” Colton rolled his eyes as he fell into step with me on the way to the car.

We found a bench to sit on, and Colton wouldn’t stop looking at me. For a second I was worried I had something on my face.

“What?” I asked, wiping at my cheeks self-consciously.

“You look good,” he told me, clearly repressing a smile. “Like, really good.”

I eyed him, confused. Was the other shoe about to drop? Was he going to say something gross about how sex with him was the best free beauty treatment this side of the Mississippi? He never said anything nice without somehow ruining it with a sarcastic or pervy comment.

“I mean it,” he said, clearly knowing me well enough to know what I was thinking. “I’m not being an asshole, I swear.”

No smirk. Maybe I could trust him on this.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, not sure how to respond to an actual sincere compliment. Those were rare for me. Was I supposed to tell him he looked good, too? I wasn’t exactly eager to watch his head inflate. He already knew he looked good. I was sure he’d already said it to himself in the mirror today. Why should he need to hear it from me?

Luckily, I was spared having to respond by Lola walking up to us, looking crazed. She’d buttoned up her shirt sloppily, and gotten her hand stuck in her tangled hair when she tried to brush through it.

“Where were you?” Colton asked, taking in her disarray.

“I went out.” Lola shrugged jerkily. “For a walk. More like a run, really.”

Colton glanced at me. I could tell he wasn’t buying it. And neither was I.

“You shouldn’t go off alone,” he told her earnestly. “It’s not safe.”

Lola scoffed and waved him off.

“There was nothing to worry about,” she assured him. “I shifted. No one’s gonna mess with the Big Bad Me.”

I thought about my talk with Colton last night—about Silas—and I felt another pang of worry.

“We don’t know this area,” I reminded Lola, maybe a little firmer than was necessary. “You shouldn’t have gone out, wolf or not.”

“Whatever.” Lola shrugged. “Who wants to drive?”

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As Colton drove us back home, we both listened to Lola regaling us from the back seat with tales of her run in the woods.

“I felt so free,” she told us breathlessly. “So alive. I almost wanted to stay a wolf forever. It’s so much better. I’m faster, more attuned to the world around me, you know? Everything is just… better. More.”

“That’s true,” I told her, stealing a look at Colton, who was looking beyond hot in his tight white T-shirt and dark jeans. “But there are advantages to being in your human form too, right?”

*I saw that look,* Colton teased me via mind link. *I have a feeling I know exactly which advantages you’re talking about. You know wolves can do that too, right?*

I rolled my eyes. There went the other shoe.

*Keep your eyes on the road, dumbass,* I threw back at him, wishing he could go an hour without making me regret trying this with him.

I closed my eyes and leaned against the cool glass of the window. I was really tired. After all, I hadn’t gotten much sleep last night, thanks to Colton.

My mind drifted back to his compliment from this morning. I knew I shouldn’t make too much of it. I wasn’t fourteen. I didn’t need to break down every word a boy said to me and glow over every shred of praise.

Who gave a shit if he thought I was pretty? My worth had nothing to do with how aesthetically pleasing a half-brained jackass found me.

But the memory still made me smile. I’d never admit it to another living soul, but it made me feel warm and maybe even a little tingly.

I drifted off to sleep and dreamed of caves and hotel rooms and all of the things you could do to pass the time in them.

Later, I woke up to the feeling of the car stopping.

“We’re back,” Colton murmured, putting a hand on my shoulder to wake me. I tried not to lean into his touch, remembering that we weren’t alone. But even just his hand felt good.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He was smiling, and I felt that fuzzy feeling I got whenever I let myself watch *10 Things I Hate About You*—a thing I only did once a year, alone on my birthday.

We got out of the car and took in the pack house. And that was when we realized something was wrong.

“What happened?” Lola asked, concerned.

Some of the windows had been smashed, and the lights weren’t even on. I strained my ears, but I couldn’t hear the usual talking inside. Which meant the pack wasn’t there—or if they were, they were being very quiet.

Something was very wrong.

Colton ran up to the porch. Lola and I followed close on his heels.

“Jay?” Colton called out into the dark house.

Impatient, Lola pushed past him and called out to her mate even louder.

But she froze when she got to the doorway. My heart dropped to my stomach when I heard her gasp.

I hurried to her side and looked over her shoulder, squinting to see in the dim light. The place had been trashed—tables turned over, couch cushions ripped apart…

“I swear to fucking god, if Joss did this…” Colton trailed off.

“I don’t think she would,” I told him. “What would be in it for her?”

“Getting back at me and my brother, for starters.” Colton shook his head. “Plus, I still don’t trust her. She’s Greyson’s pick, after all.”

“Fuck that,” Lola interrupted. “Where’s Jay? I haven’t talked to him since our fight. I need to see him.”

Frustrated and worried, Lola kicked the doorway. Hard.

“Hey.” Colton grabbed Lola by the shoulders. “You gotta calm down. And not take it out on our house.”

Lola bit her lip and nodded. I saw Colton’s expression soften.

“Why don’t you call Phil?” he asked more gently. “Get him to come over here and fix the windows. And take a look around, too. Find out if anything else needs fixing.”

“Okay.” Lola nodded and headed inside.

“We’ll find Jay,” he told her back as she walked away. “I promise. He wouldn’t go anywhere you couldn’t follow.”

Colton waited a few seconds for her to get out of earshot. Then he turned to me, not a hint of a joke in his eyes.

“We can’t stay here,” he told me, his voice serious and low.

The urgency in Colton’s voice worried me. It made me want to grab his hand and run as far away from here as we could get. But a more rational part of me didn’t want to just take his word for it.

“Why?” I asked, keeping my voice soft as well. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s true,” he told me, his brow furrowing with worry. “My father is back.”

My jaw dropped as I watched him take in the wrecked living room with sad, scared eyes.

“Silas was here,” he said. “In my house.”

**Episode 484**

JOSS

“Please remember to keep it cool, guys,” I reminded my pack.

Jay, Rishika, Mrs. Smith, Sage, Zainab, and Violet blinked back at me. All of them—except for Mrs. Smith—had the gall to give me ‘*Who? Us?’* eyes.

“I don’t want to freak out the realtor,” I continued. “We need to find a house as soon as possible. Staying with Pip and Shaggy is temporary. The sooner we stop taking advantage of their hospitality the better, okay?”

The realtor returned to her office with bottles of water for everyone and a tea for Mrs. Smith. She had her polished smile perfectly in place, ready to make the best sale she could. I took a deep breath and vowed to take advantage of her desire to close.

I looked Jillian Stone up and down. She was wearing the exact same grey wool suit and dark blue silk blouse she’d had on in her bus bench ad. Her blonde hair was hairsprayed to within an inch of its life, and she was eyeing us all hungrily. If only she knew that we were the wolves here.

“So, remind me how many bedrooms you’re looking for?” she prompted me, her tone the perfect balance between warm and professional.

“At least six,” I told her. “More if possible. And with as many separate bathrooms as possible.”

I watched surprise flicker over Jillian’s face. But after a second, her mask of friendliness and calm returned. After all, she was a pro.

“That’s a lot of bathrooms,” she said with a stale chuckle. “I’ll warn you, you’re not likely to find too many options in the area.”

“Well, there is one more thing.” I held up my hand to stop her. “We need an unimpeded view of the woods.”

My pack nodded, backing me up.

“Understood.” Jillian nodded. “That will narrow your choices down even further. And it won’t be cheap.”

“Money isn’t an issue,” I assured her indifferently.

Greyson had told me that as long as I was in charge, I had access to his bank accounts to make sure the pack got what it needed. I’d checked it this morning and there were… a lot of zeroes.

Jillian eyed me a bit suspiciously.

“Really, any price.” I gave her a big smile. “I can’t promise I won’t try to negotiate a bit. But nothing unfair.”

“All right.” Jillian smiled back even wider. “I have a few properties in mind that check all your boxes. Why don’t you ride with me so we can discuss details? Perhaps the rest of you could follow? The first place is just a short drive away.”

“Sounds great,” I told her.

The others packed up and headed to the car. I knew they’d likely all jockey for the best seats and argue over who would drive. Wolves and their egos…

I stayed in my seat, watching Jillian gather a few notes and tuck them into her leather portfolio. I took a deep breath and tried to settle my racing mind.

It felt like I’d been running ever since the council meeting. Metaphorically speaking, my lungs were burning and my legs were giving out. I needed something to go our way.

I wondered if I’d hear from Greyson any time soon.

I thought back to how he’d left. With Cali, of course. As if he hadn’t already humiliated me enough by choosing her over me. Repeatedly. Right in front of everyone.

How had he thought it would be a good idea to leave me in charge of a pack I’d just met? One that resented me at best and hated me at worst? And all without much of an explanation.

Maybe it was a test.

If so, I’d already passed it with flying colors. I’d kept us safe. I’d managed to maintain our relationship with the council even when it had looked ready to dissolve. And I’d possibly gotten most of the pack to trust me. When Greyson came back, he’d have to be proud of my work as a Luna.

And seeing as a Luna was all I’d ever be to him, given his baffling preference for that puny little Cali, I’d just have to be the best Luna anyone had ever seen. That would be my legacy.

I followed Jillian to her car and made lots of polite small talk.

“You *must* tell me where you get your hair done,” she gushed as she drove. “It’s so luminous.”

I appreciated the compliment, even if it was likely just to grease the wheels and gain our business.

“I go to a salon in Portland,” I answered. “They’re the only place I trust. I’ll send you their website.”

“What about your family?” she asked. “Have you all been living in this area long?”

“We moved here recently,” I lied, not wanting to discuss the pack. “What about you? Tell me about your history with this area.”

Lucky for me, that put Jillian into selling mode. I was regaled with details about how great the school districts were and how low the crime rates had always been. I nodded politely for the rest of the drive down the main road, and then off a winding dirt path.

Jillian started rattling off details about the property. Lots of acreage, a border on a river, the whole thing surrounded by woods…

“Very private,” she assured me. “The place was remodeled two years ago, but never finished. So you’d get to make some choices on things like fixtures and paint colors, which I think is a huge asset. Why be subject to someone else’s preferences on decor?”

I nodded. If I liked this place, I could see to it that it would look a million times better than Xavier and Colton’s house. As big as their place was, it looked like it had been decorated by two frat bros. Which, essentially, it had been.

The huge house came into view. It was painted a dark red, which made for a stunning contrast against the dense backdrop of trees. I was struck by the huge A-frame at its center, jutting into the sky. It managed to look cozy and airy all at once. Jillian knew her stuff.

“Shall we take a look?” she asked, managing not to look too smug at my pleased expression.

“Sure.” I hopped out of the car, putting on my game face. Whether I loved this place or any other place we saw today, I was eager to get all this over with. The sooner we found a place, the better. The others started piling out of their car. I heard *oohs* and *aa*h*s* and wished I could tell them to shut up. I didn’t want Jillian to hike up the price just because my pack had terrible poker faces.

“As you can see,” Jillian said, “the front yard was meticulously designed by a local landscaper. There’s actually a great little garden in the back that the owners *hated* parting with. The porch is about five years old but looks brand new. It’s very roomy and great for hosting barbecues if you’re so inclined.”

The magic word. Violet and Mrs. Smith both giggled and even Jay—who’d been sulking ever since he and Lola had parted—cracked a smile. Wolves and grilling meat outdoors: a match made in heaven.

“And the woods are so close,” Rishika commented to Sage and Zainab.

“Perfect for shifting,” Zainab agreed.

“Shifting?” Jillian asked, confused.

I threw a glare over my shoulder at my unruly pack.

“She means it’ll be a great shift from our previous living arrangement,” I explained smoothly.

“What do you think, mister?” Jillian asked Jay, playfully. It was clear she was trying to get him to loosen up a bit.

Jay just shrugged and mumbled that it was fine. He literally said “whatever,” like a sulky teen boy.

I eyed him, trying not to get too pissed. Fighting with your mate was tough. Fighting with your mate and then parting ways for an indefinite amount of time? That was even worse. I’d have to talk to him later and try to figure out a way to move forward that wouldn’t hurt the pack.

But that wasn’t a problem for now.

“Something tells me I should show *you* the kitchen right away.” Jillian grabbed Mrs. Smith by the arm and grinned at her conspiratorially.

“Please do,” Mrs. Smith answered, game as always.

I was about to follow them when my phone buzzed.

Colton was calling me.

That didn’t seem good.

“Please excuse me,” I told Jillian. “I have to take this.”

I dashed outside and answered the phone, crossing my fingers for a butt dial.

“Yeah?” I answered, pissed and worried at the same time.

“What did you do with it?” Colton asked, his voice harsh.

“Believe it or not, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I snapped. “If you’re wondering where your *dignity* went, I’d like to assure you you’ve been missing that for a while.”

“The Orb of Letifer,” he clarified, not even bothering to respond to my dig. “It’s missing.”

The what?

“I don’t know what that is,” I told him, rolling my eyes. “So unless it looks exactly like my laptop and the backpack of clothes I was able to bring over to your place after the Lupo Finale, I don’t have it.”

“Silas was here,” Colton said flatly. I felt my blood turn to ice. “And if he has it,” he continued, “we’re all fucked.”

**Episode 485**

My eyes nearly popped out of my head when I saw him. With his sandy hair, his grey eyes, and wearing barely a stitch of clothing… I would have recognized him anywhere.

“Gr—”

I started to call out to him without thinking, but I stopped myself. The weight of the chain around my neck and wrists was a reminder of where I was. Of who I belonged to now. I bit my tongue and remained silent.

Once the Kollector had realized I was half-human, he’d made me his personal assistant. He’d told me I’d arrived just in time. That the last one had just ‘given out.’ I really didn’t want to know what that meant.

And while it was a relief to no longer be in his harem, it still meant I was bound to him for all intents and purposes.

For now.

I focused on reigniting my mind link with Greyson.

*You’re safe!* I called to him silently, my heart feeling lighter at the sight of him.

*Did he hurt you?* he asked me. I could see the anger in his eyes and his clenched fists, the way the veins in his arms were popping. It was taking every ounce of his self-control not to run to me. I was proud of him.

*No,* I told him. *I’m okay, I swear.*

This didn’t seem to ease his mind much.

“Next!” the Kollector called, beckoning to the guard behind Greyson, who shoved him forward by jamming his elbow between his shoulder blades.

I winced, feeling like I was the one he’d hit. Seeing my proud Alpha treated like this hurt me more than I’d thought it could. Especially because if weren’t for me, Greyson wouldn’t be here. I was responsible for all of this. I only had myself to blame.

“Hmm.” The Kollector stroked his chin as he took Greyson in. “Doesn’t want for muscles. He’s quite tall. And attractive—for a human.”

He turned to me, smirking. Enjoying his power over me.

“Quite a specimen, don’t you think?” he asked me, showing his crooked teeth when he smiled.

I looked down at Greyson, wondering what I should say. I didn’t want to endanger him, but… what place was safest for him?

“Don’t be shy, girl,” the Kollector urged me. “I know you were captured together.”

My gaze snapped up to meet his and he must have seen the surprise on my face because he chuckled to himself. It sounded like he was gargling nails.

“How is it possible that two such *enchanting* creatures were together?” he asked, taunting me.

*Be quiet, Cali,* Greyson’s voice told me in my mind. *I mean it.*

But I had to say something.

“We were just caught at the same geyser,” I told him, keeping my expression blank. “A coincidence.”

“So you’re saying you two are strangers?” the Kollector asked, suspicious.

I nodded. I wanted to look demure, obedient. The opposite of suspicious.

“Don’t you lie to me,” the Kollector hissed. “I know you asked about him while you were being readied for auction. Who is he to you? And tell the truth.”

I swallowed hard. I met the Kollector’s cold gaze and somehow managed not to entirely shrink in on myself.

“He’s just someone who—like me—has been captured and held against his will,” I told him emphatically.

The Kollector considered my words, deciding whether to believe me. He grabbed me by the chin to examine me more thoroughly.

“Very well.” He nodded. “But if I find out otherwise, it will not be pleasant for either of you.”

I saw Greyson bristle out of the corner of my eye the second the Kollector touched me. I hoped his anger wouldn’t make him do anything rash. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“I understand,” I told the Kollector. And he let me go. I wanted to massage my jaw, which was aching from his rough grip. But I also didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d hurt me.

The Kollector addressed the crowd in a booming voice. “Shall we start the bidding?”

The crowd roared in return, some of them getting off their feet to clap and cheer. I felt my stomach turn. What kind of place was this?

The Kollector turned to the guests who were standing with him on the podium—other men in ornate robes with cold, hard, hungry stares.

“You heard them.” He smiled. “Let the auction begin.”

I shuddered at the word ‘auction’. Greyson was going to be sold. Probably to the mines. I couldn’t let this happen, but I didn’t know what power I had to stop it.

I heard the bids around me escalate, but I couldn’t bring myself to look at the people who wanted to purchase Greyson.

“One thousand!”

“Two thousand!”

“Five thousand!”

“Ten thousand!”

Greyson’s eyes didn’t leave mine until the gavel was pounded and the sale was complete. The winning bidder, an excitable elderly man in a golden robe, leapt to his feet and clapped his hands.

“Once this one’s in the mines, I’ll have a return on my investment within weeks!” he cried gleefully. My stomach turned and everything started to spin. I wondered if I might faint.

“Bring him to me!” the old man commanded. “I want to examine my purchase up close!”

I watched, horrified, as Greyson was shoved forward by the guard. He held his head high as he walked slowly toward us.

*I’m so sorry,* I told him through our mind link, fighting the tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. *I was the one who brought you here. We never should have come. This shouldn’t be happening to you, and I don’t know how to stop it. Please know that I’m so, so, so sorry and I’ll do everything I can…*

*It’s okay,* he assured me, his jaw clenched tight. *I promise we’ll both be okay.*

The man in the golden robe poked at Greyson with a crop. Like he was a horse or a slab of meat. I felt anger rise up inside me like molten lava.

“Stop it!” I shouted, my fists balled up at my sides.

The men around me fell silent, along with the entire crowd. I felt so many eyes on me, it was almost unbearable. Except for one pair.

The Kollector took his time turning around to look at me. He knew the silence would shame me more than anything he could say. And he was right.

But finally, his eyes were on mine. And it felt like I was face to face with a shark.

“Don’t you *ever*,” he said, taking a step closer to me, “raise your voice around me again.”

I glared at him, too incensed by the humiliation they’d forced Greyson to endure to be shamed. I didn’t care what happened to me.

*Cali, stay calm,* Greyson’s voice reminded me. *Please, Cali.*

I swallowed my anger, trying to trust Greyson. At this point it was the least I could do for him. Listen to him one last time.

“I’m sorry,” I said to the Kollector, shakily. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“Make it up to me by pouring me a glass of wine,” the Kollector ordered with a smile, pointing to a small bar behind me.

I could feel Greyson’s eyes on me as I turned to do as he asked. I wiped my hands on my dress, worried they’d be too slick to hold a bottle. I held my breath and hoped I could stop shaking long enough to pour. It felt like it took an eternity, but, finally, I’d done it.

I offered the Kollector the glass, trying to focus on keeping my expression blank. My posture perfect.

But he shook his head.

“Pour it into my mouth,” he crooned. As if he could make his voice more enticing, more desirable when he was the vilest person I’d ever met.

I raised the glass, my rage building the closer I got to him. Unable to handle the tension for a second longer, I dumped the contents of the glass all over his face.

I heard gasps from the crowd.

The Kollector sputtered, trying to wipe his eyes clean, and I couldn’t help but let a satisfied laugh escape my lips. Let him have a taste of the humiliation he was so happy to force on others.

But my happiness was short lived. The Kollector grabbed my chain in his bony fist and lifted it over his head. It pulled me off the floor by my throat and I gasped for air.

My legs kicked out desperately as my vision started to blur at the edges. I heard myself making awful choking sounds. I grabbed at my iron collar but couldn’t get leverage. There was no relief, no air to be found.

The world got darker and darker.

“Let her go!” I heard Greyson roar.

*Greyson*. He was here. Was this the last time we’d see each other? Was I going to die?

I looked at him, wanting him to be the last thing I saw. His face was red with fury.

And then I heard a snapping noise.

He was shifting.

**Episode 486**

GREYSON

I howled with fury as I leapt past the startled guards and onto the podium. The Kollector stumbled backward, almost tripping on the hem of his robe.

I hoped he wouldn’t break his neck trying to scramble away from me. That would be too easy for him. The way he’d tried to humiliate Cali, tried to torture her by exploiting our connection… I knew Cali couldn’t be the first girl he’d hurt like this, but maybe I could make her the last.

The Kollector released Cali’s chain and she fell to the ground with a painful-sounding thud. I hit him square in the chest and pinned him to the ground. The Kollector started screaming as I sunk my claws into him. I relished the feel of his flesh tearing. I hoped it fucking hurt.

I felt hands grabbing at me, knotting in my fur, trying to pull me off him. But I just snapped at them until they leapt back. I didn’t want anyone coming between me and my prey.

The Kollector wiggled his way out from under me and scrambled backward. His eyes were wide with terror, his mouth agape. I swelled with pride, almost able to taste his fear. But it wasn’t enough. I wanted him so hurt he was *begging* me to kill him. I wanted him to die in this place where everyone treated him like a god. I wanted him to know he was beaten. I wanted him humiliated.

But I could see there wasn’t time for that.

And there was one thing I wanted much more.

*Get on my back.* I mind linked with Cali as I chomped down on her chains, breaking them. She nodded and ran for me.

I could hear her ragged breathing as she hopped on, like I’d asked. I felt relief at her touch. She was here. We were together. Now, I could just focus on getting us out.

I bit down on the nearest guard’s arm and he dropped his sword and fell to the ground, crying out in agony. I jumped past his crumpled body and raced through the arena toward the nearest exit. It wouldn’t be easy, but I had to make it.

It was chaos all around. Half the crowd seemed to be delighting in the insanity while the other half was calling for my head. Arrows zinged past me and I felt adrenaline start to course through my veins, making me feel untouchable and numb. I focused on the feel of the sand beneath my feet. Of Cali on my back. Of the air filling my lungs.

The exit.

I had to get to the exit.

“Do not harm the werewolf, you fools!” I heard the Kollector cry from behind me. “I want him captured! I want him alive!”

I pushed myself to run faster. I dodged a few more guards, all of whom were now much more reluctant to attack me. And finally, I reached it—a narrow doorway that led to a small, dark passage.

Cali’s weight reassured me as she wrapped her arms around my neck. I had her, and they didn’t. For the moment, she was safe and mine again.

The sounds of chaos from the arena faded as I pressed forward. I still wasn’t sure where to go or where this passage would even lead to, but I knew the more distance I could put between us and the Kollector, the better.

I slowed down as I approached a fork. There were two branches I could travel down, and I had no time to assess which would be better. I made a split-second decision and veered to the left, hoping I wouldn’t regret it.

Things only got more complicated after that—the passageway almost felt like a maze. I made several more turns until I eventually slowed down. I realized I had no idea where to go, and that I had lost all sense of direction. I wasn’t even sure I’d be able to find the way back if I wanted to.

“Greyson,” Cali sighed, breaking her silence. “Let me down.”

I knelt so she could slide off. I heard her feet touch the ground and instantly missed her warmth on my back.

*Out,* my mind chanted. *I need to get her out.*

I turned to look at her and when I saw her, she took my breath away, despite everything. Despite the danger and where we were and where we’d just been, she was still the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

I had to hold her.

I had to feel her in my arms.

I shifted, happy just to look at her for a moment in my human form. I could hear voices somewhere, but I didn’t care.

We stared at each other in the stillness of the hall. The candlelight flickered across her skin and I wondered if I’d ever seen anyone so perfect. The idea that I’d almost lost her was enough to bring me to my knees, but somehow I stayed standing.

“We can’t stay here,” she told me, wringing her hands. “We have to keep going.”

“I know,” I agreed, my voice ragged. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine,” she told me, a little too quickly.

I zeroed in on the red mark around her neck from the collar. The memory of her twisting in the air as the Kollector dangled her made me hungry for blood. I wondered how he’d treated her in their short time together. I imagined the answer would make my blood boil.

“If I ever see him again—”

“He’ll keep you as a pet,” Cali cut me off, gravely serious. “Because he knows you’re a werewolf now. You know they have a zoo here?”

I did know. But there was nothing I wouldn’t risk to try and save her. Didn’t she know that?

“I don’t care,” I told her. “I told you I’d get you out, and I meant it.”

I saw tears form in Cali’s eyes. She jutted her chin out, trying hard to look tough. As if I didn’t already think she was brave.

This was the girl who charged into battle with wolves armed with a knife or a saw. This was the girl who wore her heart on her sleeve. She didn’t hide her feelings because it was convenient, or because she was scared of being vulnerable. She told people what they meant to her. She was compassionate and generous with her heart. It was hard to believe more people weren’t as hopelessly gone for her as I was.

She reached out and took me into her arms. I put my face in the crook of her neck and marveled at her smell and the softness and warmth of her skin. I would live in her arms if I could. Nowhere had ever felt half as perfect.

I pressed chaste kisses against her skin, wanting to fill her with my love. My warmth. My everything. If I had it and she wanted it, it was hers.

I knew that we should stop. That we needed to keep moving. But with no idea what direction we should head in, what was the point? Couldn’t we just stay another moment? Couldn’t I just hold her a little longer?

“Any chance you know the way out of here?” I asked her, reluctantly trying to get us back on track.

“I wish I did,” she answered, her voice muffled by my shoulder. “The Kollector’s estate is huge. Greyson—”

The voices behind us got closer. We couldn’t stay here.

“We have to go,” I told her.

I took her hand and started moving. I opened a doorway, found a staircase, and began to pull Cali up it behind me. I had no idea if we were underground or above ground—I just knew we had to run.

We arrived at another intersection. I strained to listen, hoping something would guide me in the right direction.

“There he is!” I heard someone shout. I spun around to find a small cluster of guards approaching.

I turned again to see another group coming at us from the other direction.

We were surrounded.

I would have to shift again and fight them.

But as I braced myself for the violence to come, a net fell on me.

“No!” Cali screamed, grabbing for me as I struggled underneath its weight, trapped.

But the guards already had their hands on her. She kicked and punched, fighting fiercely to get back to me, but she was too small to take them on for long.

“No!” I roared, trying and failing to lunge toward her.

Finally, Cali reached me and kissed me through the net, her lips moving desperately against mine. I could taste the tears streaming down her cheeks and cursed myself for not being more careful. For not finding the right way.

“*Greyson*,” she started, her voice completely broken with emotion.

“I know,” I said, wanting to stay brave for her. I didn’t want to be weak the last time she saw me.

“Take him to the zoo,” one of the guards grunted as Cali wailed in despair.

**Episode 487**

It took me a few moments to realize that the horrible wailing scream I heard was coming from my mouth as I watched the guards drag Greyson away. The numbing horror of it all blended together.

I clawed at the guards holding me, but their grip didn’t loosen. I struggled in their grasp all the way back to the Kollector’s bedroom, kicking and shouting myself hoarse. We’d been so close. We’d been about to get out.

And now here I was, chained to the Kollector’s wall. Locked here because he didn’t trust me as far as he could throw me. Every time I closed my eyes, I remembered dangling by the chain around my throat as he held me up, watching me twitch as I lost oxygen.

I wished for one shot, one opening to strangle him right back. I knew I’d do it in a second. That was the kind of hot, oily hate I felt toward him. It felt ugly, but I didn’t care. That was how sure I was that he deserved everything I wanted to do to him and worse.

I wondered if Greyson and Xavier felt like this whenever someone had to hold them back from doing something stupid. I’d seen the looks they got in their eyes when they fought. When they were about to fight. When they wanted to fight. Was this what it was like to have a wolf inside you? The desire to kill? The anger?

“You’re dismissed,” the Kollector told the guards after he was satisfied I couldn’t move far. The guards filed out of the room at his command, and I felt my stomach sink. I didn’t want to think about why he wanted me alone.

“We have a problem,” he told me, steepling his fingers.

I raised an eyebrow. Since when were we a *we*?

“Not only did you lie to me about this *Greyson*…” He said his name like it was a dirty word. “But it appears there are now *two* werewolves on my property.”

*Two!?* How was that possible? They were supposed to be rare in the Fae world.

“Your friend is obviously no longer a concern,” the Kollector continued, smirking. “He’s going to be my zoo’s most popular attraction.”

Any surprise I’d felt evaporated and turned to fury.

“I hope you fucking die,” I snarled. “Painfully. And soon. And I hope I’m the one to cause it.”

He ignored me. I was just furniture to him.

“This second werewolf…” he went on, clearly just thinking out loud. “Imagine how it would be to have two of them at the zoo. Perhaps if I announce a reward for its capture… I think I shall.”

If there was another werewolf here in Dark Fae territory, how had they gotten here? Did that mean there was a portal close by? A thought struck me and I swayed where I stood. Could it possibly be… no. I shook my head. It was impossible that anyone I knew had found their way here.

“But as for my other problem…” His eyes flitted toward me, and he slowly crossed the room. “What do I do about you?”

He reached for me and I felt my mouth go dry. Would he kill me? Hurt me? Something else? But as his hand moved closer and closer, I realized he was reaching past me for a brass bell on the wall, which he rang loudly. I wanted to clap my hands over my ears at the sound, but I refused to give him the satisfaction.

The Kollector kept staring at me, willing me to blink. To break. But I wouldn’t.

“Sir?” A guard opened the door, clearly summoned by the bell.

“Bring her in,” the Kollector ordered, not taking his eyes off me.

“Yes, sir.” The guard nodded and left.

I held my breath. Who was coming? And why did the Kollector look so smug?

Moments later, Artemis entered the room. I fought against my chains, fear crawling up my throat. I thrashed, unable to just stand there and wait for whatever they had planned.

“Artemis, so glad you could make it.” The Kollector gave her a broad smile. “I must say, I’m quite disappointed in this one. I’m deciding whether I should have her executed or just sent to the mines. I must admit, this is a record—I’ve never discarded one of your offerings so quickly. They usually tend to last…”

He trailed off in a way that disgusted me. His belief that people were disposable twisted my stomach. I couldn’t have picked someone worse to be at the mercy of. Artemis took me in, looking me up and down, and for a second I could have sworn I saw something like remorse or concern flash across her face. But then her face smoothed into its usual blank mask. I wanted to spit in her face for finding me. For bringing me here. For working for this piece of shit.

“The mines,” she told the Kollector, almost casually. “Execution is far too quick. Don’t you want to punish her for all the trouble she’s caused? Besides, there’s fire in this one. She might be productive.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” he mused. “Very well, take her to the mines.”

The guard unchained me from the wall, and I wondered if I could get free and wrap my chain around the Kollector’s throat. But I didn’t know if I could be fast enough.

“Good of you to bring me my first werewolf,” the Kollector continued. “Greyson turned out to be quite the bonus. Perhaps you’d be interested in catching the second one for me?”

Artemis straightened to her full height, her eyes glinting with intrigue.

“Do you have a description?” she asked him.

I felt my heart leap into my throat. I prayed for someone I didn’t know. Someone I couldn’t recognize. If another one of my friends was trapped in this world, being hunted… I didn’t know what I’d do.

The guard passed the end of my chain to Artemis. I was hers to order around for now.

“I’m told his human form is quite tall,” the Kollector said. “He has brown hair and blue eyes.”

*That could be anyone*, I reassured myself.

“And as a wolf?” Artemis asked hungrily. Like she couldn’t wait to start searching for her next prize.

“Black fur and quite large, must have Alpha blood.”

I bit down on my lip to keep from screaming. He’d just described Xavier. But how was that possible!? I was desperate to ask more questions, to figure out what the hell was going on. I couldn’t be responsible for Greyson *and* Xavier being trapped in the Fae world. Because one thing was for sure—if Xavier was here, it was because of me.

But Artemis pulled me out of the room before I could think what to ask.

“Goodbye, pet.” The Kollector waved me off. “I hope you’re less trouble to me in the mines.”

But I didn’t even look at him. My mind was reeling. If it *was* Xavier, then how had he gotten here? Did he know where I was? Had he followed my scent or something? Had he gotten in through Haystack Rock, or was there another portal?

Out in the passageway, a guard tied my hands together and guided Artemis and me to a door that led outside. I blinked at the change in light, willing my eyes to adjust faster. The guard slammed the door behind us, obviously eager to be rid of me.

Artemis looked over at me and chuckled to herself, shaking her head.

“You must have really pissed him off,” she said, admiration in her voice. “Execution or the mines. What did you do?”

But I had no interest in making small talk with her.

“I suppose you think I should thank you.” My voice was cold, flat.

“For sparing you from execution?” Artemis asked me, brows raised. “You definitely shouldn’t thank me. The mines are a *lot* worse. Trust me. If anything, you should be trying to kill me right now.”

I let out a bark of humorless laughter.

“You’re every bit as horrible as I thought,” I told her. “Actually, you’re worse. How do you live with yourself? You sell people into terrible lives and worse deaths. Doesn’t that matter to you?”

Artemis shrugged, tugging me along through the woods. “It’s not like I have much of a choice. You live with who you are. You do a job, it pays for food. You eat, you sleep, you work, you do it all over again.”

She led me into a dense thicket of trees and paused. I wondered how far away the mines were. How long it would be before I was working there.

I wondered if they’d let me change my clothes.

Were we going to meet someone? Would they take me to the mines, or would I get to enjoy Artemis’s delightful company the whole way there?

I suddenly realized that Artemis was staring at me.

“What?” I asked, confused.

A strange look passed over her face. I looked around, starting to feel like I was in trouble.

“Where are the mines?” I asked, my voice high and scared. “Aren’t you supposed to take me there? That’s what you said—”

“You’re not going to the mines.”

And then Artemis pulled the knife from her belt and raised it high.

**Episode 488**

XAVIER

I tried to remain as quiet as possible as I crept through the narrow stone passageway. I’d managed to dispose of the guard quickly—and as quietly as possible. I was cutting it way too close.

Somewhere in this giant compound, there was a harem where this Kollector asshole sent the people he deemed ‘desirable.’ I couldn’t think of a single person in the universe more desirable than Cali. And if she’d been taken there, I couldn’t let her spend even one more second in the place. Whoever this guy was, he was sick.

So far, I’d avoided crossing paths with other guards. The less attention I drew to myself, the better. Who knew when the guys I’d met in the woods—the ones I’d held at sword point and forced to strip—would be found? They’d be able to describe me, and then I’d be fucked. So I’d been trying to keep to myself.

I’d been sneaking around for a while, in the hope that I’d get a sense of my surroundings. But I’d had no such luck. The place was a maze, and after over an hour of wandering its halls, I still had no clue where the harem was kept. I’d have to take a chance and ask.

“Excuse me.” I approached one of the guards, a guy with a thick mustache and a broad chest. “I’m new here, but I’m supposed to go collect someone from the harem for the Kollector. But, if I’m being honest, I got a little turned around looking for the place…”

Mustache laughed. “Not to worry.” He clapped me on the shoulder and I made a big show of sighing with relief. “It took me three months to learn my way around. Keep going straight down that passage there. Make a left when you get to the Kollector’s bust, and then it’s the second door on your right. If you get to the arena, you’ve gone too far.”

“Thank you.” I gave him what I hoped looked like a thankful smile.

“Of course.” Mustache nodded, clearly pleased with himself. “And good luck. Wouldn’t want to keep the Kollector waiting on whoever you’re supposed to bring to him, if you know what I mean.”

He winked at me and I felt the urge to throw up. Instead, I forced a laugh—even though I wanted to rip everyone who crossed my path in half.

“I’d better hustle then,” I threw over my shoulder as I hurried off.

I followed his directions as briskly as I could, hoping that if I walked with purpose, no one would stop me. I found a huge oak door and hoped it was the one I needed. It wasn’t like I could ever be sure—the correct door wasn’t exactly going to have ‘HAREM’ carved into it.

I tried the door, but it wouldn’t budge. Locked.

I rocked back on my heels and considered my options. I could shift and rip my way through, no problem. But someone could see me, and I’d be as good as captured. That would be no help to Cali.

I closed my eyes and tried to reach out to her with my mind. If we could mind link, then maybe she could tell me where she was, or if I was close. But either the door was too thick or I still wasn’t close enough.

Still, there was one more option.

I raised my fist and knocked.

I waited with bated breath, hoping Mustache’s directions hadn’t steered me wrong. I hoped my stolen uniform would mean they’d let Cali leave with me, if she was here. I hoped a lot of things. Most of them involved seeing Cali safe and whole and clutching her tight to my chest and never letting her go again.

I was about to knock once more when I heard the sound of the lock turning and the massive door swung open.

I stared at a gorgeous older woman with dark raven hair. She blew a smoke ring as she looked me up and down.

“I’m waiting,” she told me impatiently, crossing her arms, her pipe clutched in delicate fingers.

I tried to look past her to see if I could spot Cali, but a cloud of smoke hung around her, making it hard to see behind her. I had no idea what this woman was waiting for. I still didn’t know if I was in the right place, and I couldn’t afford to look like I didn’t belong.

“I can’t read minds, so you’re going to have to talk to me,” she snapped. “Either tell me why you’re here, or we can keep staring at each other.” She tilted her head, taking me in. “Not that I mind… The view’s not bad.”

I didn’t have time for this. I pushed past her as gently as I could and looked around. The room was large, and there was a roaring fireplace against one wall. There were couches with large pillows everywhere, and rich tapestries draped over the walls. But no Cali.

“Does the Kollector have someone specific in mind?” the woman asked me. “Or does he want to be surprised?”

“I’m here for the new woman,” I told her, drawing myself up to my full height. “Cali.”

“I’m Shawn, by the way,” the woman told me sarcastically, ignoring my request. “Thanks for asking. And you must be mistaken. We don’t have anyone here by that name.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, turning around to search her face for dishonesty.

“See for yourself.” She clapped her hands together. “Ladies! Present yourselves.”

Ten women streamed through a door in the corner. Each one was stunning, but their faces were strained. All of them were dressed in beautiful gowns and made up to perfection, but it was clear that not one of them wanted to be here.

“Anyone here ever go by Cali?” Shawn asked the girls.

They all shook their heads. Most of them didn’t even look up from the floor. But I already knew that not a single one of them was Cali. All of them had clearly been here a while—long enough to be hurt by whatever the Kollector had demanded of them.

“Are there any more of you?” I asked gently, my heart breaking for the women.

They all shook their heads.

I stepped up to the closest one, a girl with curly bright-red hair and pink cheeks. She couldn’t have been much older than Violet.

“Has anyone seen anyone named Cali?” I asked gently.

“None of us have seen anyone,” the redhead answered me softly, her eyes on my chest. “We’re kept here. We only leave when we’re taken to the Kollector.”

“All right.” I nodded. “Would you mind telling me what happens when someone is picked to be part of the harem?”

The redhead’s eyes flicked up to meet mine, and I tried to soften my expression. I didn’t want to scare her. I just wanted to help Cali. Maybe there was a place where they were made up, or prepared, or even… trained. I gripped my fists tightly together, willing myself to maintain control.

“When we’re selected,” the girl practically whispered, “we are brought here. And we are taken to the Kollector whenever he asks.”

I saw the way her brows knitted together, the way her hands trembled. The hand of the girl standing next to her twitched. She clearly wanted to comfort the redhead. To hold her hand. But she was afraid of being punished for providing basic comfort to her friend.

“And that’s what happened to you?” I asked.

The redhead nodded, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip.

“To all of you?” I asked the other girls, unable to keep all the anger out of my voice, given it threatened to consume me.

Each of them murmured their assent. Some of them hugged themselves tightly. Others barely moved at all. I felt the urge to rip this Kollector guy’s spine out.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Shawn. She turned me around to face her and blinked up at me, clearly curious.

“You’re not one of the guards, are you?” she asked, her eyes wide.

I didn’t know if I could trust her, but she looked almost as upset as I was. More numbed to the horror, though. Like she’d gotten used to it over the course of her time here. She would have had to.

I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to live like this.

“I’m not,” I confirmed.

It was a risk, but it was one I had to take.

“I’m sorry,” she told me. “But there’s no Cali here. I swear it.”

“I believe you,” I replied, before backing up and moving toward the door. “Thank you.”

“What are you going to do?” Shawn asked me.

I looked at her. At the girls, all with tragic stories that had brought them to this horrible place. Each one of them had made it this far by being brave and strong. And I knew how hard it was to live through something almost unendurable.

I looked at Shawn, suddenly determined. “I’m going to help you all escape.”

**Episode 489**

XAVIER

Whispers and gasps erupted from the harem as they surrounded me.

“You want to *help* us?” a redheaded Fae asked me, her hazel eyes wide with hope.

“He can’t!” a pale white-blonde exclaimed. “We can’t do this, it’s too dangerous to—”

No-nonsense Shawn cut her off, coming to stand in front of me. “Do you have a plan, or is this is just wishful thinking? Because I don’t do well with empty promises.”

“I don’t have a plan,” I admitted to Shawn. “I’m just horrified that you’ve all been forced to be a part of the Kollector’s harem. I want to do something—anything—to help.”

The women fell quiet.

Shawn broke the tense silence a moment later, her eyes narrowed. “At least you have good intentions.”

The Fae seemed to be growing more confident as a result of my declaration, nervous energy brewing among them. Their voices became louder as they started speaking all at once.

“We should do it!”

“I can’t stay here any longer!”

“It’s now or never, isn’t it? We need to do something!”

A Fae with green hair and purple-midnight skin spoke louder than the rest. “But what happens if we do get out of here? We don’t have any…”

“Weapons,” Shawn finished her sentence. She turned to me, her full lips pursed into a thin line. “You have a willing army, but without a way to fight, things are going to turn real ugly real fast.”

I paused for a moment, processing. There was no way I was going to leave these women here, so I needed to find a solution—and fast. I’d made it to the harem easily, which meant that the guards weren’t all that bright, therefore tricking them once more wouldn’t be hard.

“We only need to worry about a few guards. It’s doable,” I said. I looked around the women. “If you can use some of your Fae magic, a spell or something to help, it would be much easier to—”

Shawn raised her hand before me. “I’m afraid that’s impossible. As long as we wear these, we can’t use our powers.” She showed me her wrist; there was a golden cuff on it. I stared at the other Fae’s wrists, and they were all wearing the same device.

“Fuck that,” I grumbled, grabbing Shawn’s hand to snap the cuff off. But no matter how much strength I applied, it wouldn’t budge. It was locked.

The Kollector had thought of everything. Apparently.

“We’ve tried everything to break the lock. Nothing works so far,” Shawn told me. Her expression was dark. I couldn’t even begin to imagine the fucked up shit she’d been through, and I didn’t want to. I never thought about the horrors my mother had been through either.

What I knew for sure was that I had to free these women. Now.

I stared at Shawn’s cuff, examining it, and a thought entered my mind.

What if I shifted? Would that help me break this thing?

“I’m a werewolf,” I told the girls. Some gasped, others looked excited. “I’m going to shift and then try to break the cuffs.”

“You think that’s going to help?” the redhead from earlier asked me. Her bronze skin had a sudden glow to it.

Shawn’s expression was skeptical. “How strong are you, wolf boy?”

The rest of the Fae continued asking me cautious questions, but we had no time for that. I took a step back. “We can only test it out and see.”

When I shifted, some of the women squealed and jumped back, and others gasped but seemed excited. All of them kept staring at me. Shawn was the only one who remained expressionless. “Calm down,” she told the girls. “If he wanted to kill us, he would’ve done it by now.”

In wolf form, I stalked toward Shawn, keeping eye contact. There was something defiant, imposing about her. The others shrank back, but she took a step forward and held up her wrist to my mouth. “Try mine first.”

Despite her fearless demeanor, I could smell the comprehension and fear rolling off her. Making sure to be as gentle as possible, I took her wrist and the cuff in my mouth. Applying the smallest amount of pressure, I bit down…

The cuff snapped.

There was a collective gasp in the room when the piece of metal clattered on the ground.

Shawn gave me a gorgeous smile, her sharp features elated. “You’re pretty useful for a man, wolf boy. What a pleasant surprise.”

I chose to take that as a compliment.

Shawn turned to the rest of the girls. “Line up and hold up your cuffs for him, everyone!” she ordered. “The wolf is here to help us.”

The girls stood perfectly still as I moved down the line, biting each cuff off. As the last one clattered to the ground, I shifted back into human form, just to ease some of their climbing nerves.

Another collective gasp took over the room.

Some of the women blushed and looked away, others grinned at me and stared unabashedly, whispering to each other and giggling.

Shawn, on the other hand, remained razor sharp. She arched an eyebrow at me. “Not that I mind the view, but you realize you’re naked, right?”

I scoffed. “That’s the least of your worries right now.”

“Yeah, but it’s pretty distracting for the girls,” Shawn said matter-of-factly. “We can’t have that if we’re going to escape.”

I rolled my eyes, looking down at myself. I remembered Cali ranting about werewolves’ casual relationship with nudity, waving her hands around all the time to declare her outrage. I felt like snorting at the memory.

“Okay, but—”

“I’ll take care of it.” Shawn interrupted me, moving her hands in a dance-line motion before glamouring me into a guard uniform.

“What the…” I checked out the suit, noticing it was golden. With gems. Not my style. At all. “This is way too flashy,” I said, frowning. “Maybe tone it down a little?”

“The guards who escort us are always dressed like that,” Shawn explained. “Just avoid showing your face.”

This would have to do, then. Nodding, I headed toward the door. “I’m gonna step out.” I looked around the women before my gaze settled on Shawn. “If it’s all clear, I’ll knock.”

The Fae watched me, nodding and mumbling their agreement. Some seemed hopeful, others anxious, and the white-blonde Fae who’d said it was too dangerous to escape looked plain terrified.

“It’s going to be okay,” I told them all.

I wasn’t going to fail them.

I wasn’t going to be a fuck up this time, and that was all there was to it.

Cautiously, I peeked out of the room. The passage was empty. I paused for a moment, listening for any footsteps. Nothing. Taking a deep breath, I turned back and knocked.

Shawn opened the door, peering at me.

I motioned for them to follow. She turned to the girls. “Quiet, now.”

One by one, the Fae followed me, Shawn first. I could feel her nerves, even though she seemed determined. I, on the other hand, felt entirely calm.

I was doing what I had to do.

“Do you know the fastest way out?” I whispered.

Shawn gestured straight ahead and we headed down the corridor. Now and then, I looked over my shoulder at the girls. The thought of Cali drilled into my head until I couldn’t take it.

“Do you have any idea where the Kollector could have put Cali?” I asked Shawn. “She was supposed to be with you.”

Shawn’s expression was dark. Troubled. “I have no idea. The Kollector always puts attractive Light Fae in the harem—nowhere else.”

I had a sudden thought that made my spine tingle. “What if she’s part human?”

Shawn’s eyes widened in alarm. I didn’t like that look. “What’s wrong?”

“The Kollector…” Shawn paused before saying, “He has a thing against humans. He despises them.”

Shit.

“What does he do with them?” I asked.

“He’s probably put her in the mines,” the green-haired Fae said quietly, looking sad and afraid.

“We’re gonna die,” the pale white-blonde Fae mumbled, sniffling. “If he catches us here, we’re gonna die!”

Shawn glared at the girl. “I don’t want to hear another word from you. We aren’t going to die.”

The blonde seemed to shrivel. The green-haired Fae wrapped an arm around her. I couldn’t let myself get distracted by all this, though—I needed to find Cali.

“If Cali’s there… How do I get to the mines?” I asked the women. “Can you show me the way?”

The Fae looked at one another. It was obvious that nobody wanted to take me there. What the fuck happened in those mines?

“Shawn?” I asked, almost pleading now.

Shawn regained her composure, flipping a lock of thick hair over her shoulder. “If you can get us out, I will take you.”

“You sure?” I asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “Anything to stick it to the Kollector.”

A sense of confidence overcame me at her declaration. She really was a badass.

“Over there,” Shawn muttered when we reached a massive wooden door embossed with snakes. “This is the way out to the gardens.”

I eyed the thick handles that decorated the door, reaching to grab them and push them open…

A loud, shrill voice echoed down the corridor, bouncing off the walls.

“Help!” the white-blonde Fae screamed. “Help, they’re trying to escape!”

**Episode 490**

I watched Artemis’s knife gleam. It looked very sharp and very scary. Also, very murder-y, as any knife would be.

*Oh no!* I thought to myself. *Why do people keep trying to kill me? I’m an innocent baby lamb lost in a sea of magical madness!*

“Why are you doing this?” I asked Artemis, trembling with fear. I then started to ramble, as one did when one was scared shitless. “What did I ever do to you?” I asked mournfully. “I was just minding my own business when you caught me and my friends, interrupting us very rudely I might add, and now—”

“Don’t make things worse,” Artemis hissed, moving toward me with that knife.

*This is it!* I thought, gasping. *She’s going to stab me to death! With her stabby knife!*

I looked around, panicked, weighing the pros and cons of screaming for help. Would any of these horrible Fae help me? Or would I just be inviting more trouble for myself? I didn’t need more people trying to kill me right now. As if she could read my thoughts, Artemis lunged at me, clamping a hand over my mouth. “Do *not* draw any attention to us,” she whispered, lifting the blade to my windpipe.

Easy for her to say! She wasn’t about to be gutted like a fish! Huffing, I started struggling to escape her vicious grip. I hadn’t gotten this far in my quest just to die from something as simple as a knife wound. How boring and normal. At this point, I had to have at least a GLORIOUS death! Nay, I *demanded* a glorious death!

Artemis seemed to have other ideas, though.

As I struggled unsuccessfully in her grip, she used the knife to cut the rope that had been binding my hands.

*Wait, WHAT?* I thought, looking between my freed wrists and Artemis. Was I dreaming? Hallucinating? Did the air here have some sort of fairy gas in it?

“Don’t scream,” Artemis almost growled. She seemed like her usual terrifying self. I was pretty offended by her comment, though—it was like, you screamed once and everybody was always all up in arms about it. Why did she keep judging my screaming? It had been very important for my survival so far in life, okay?

Since I wasn’t allowed to scream, I choked, rubbing my wrists.

“But w-what is going on*?*” I sputtered. “You just released me—what are you *doing*?”

Artemis raised an eyebrow, sheathing her knife in a holster on her thigh like Lara Croft. “Isn’t it obvious?” she said. “I’m setting you free.”

I took a step back, narrowing my eyes. “But why would you do that? You’re the one who brought me here and turned me over to the Kollector! Is this some kind of cruel trick?”

Artemis had the ovaries to roll her eyes at me. ROLL HER EYES!

The audacity was *incredible*.

“Seriously?” I said, glaring at her. “You better admit it now if you’re playing with me, because I don’t do well with cruel tricks. They’re against my moral code, not to mention my moodboard aesthetic!”

Artemis stared at me, unimpressed but also confused. “What is a moodboard?”

“It’s something magical, a secret I won’t ever tell.”

Artemis looked at me like I’d grown three heads. Supernatural creatures tended to have that reaction to me a lot. Also, non-supernatural creatures.

“There’s something seriously wrong with you, isn’t there?” Artemis asked me, tilting her head.

“Yes,” I replied honestly. “But I’m also kind of a genius in my own way.”

If anything, I’d used my ability to shock people out of many dicey situations. Could it work now?

“Right,” Artemis said dryly. “You done?”

“I don’t know. Depends on what you tell me next,” I declared. “Are we like, friends now?”

“We’re not friends,” Artemis said. “I don’t have friends.”

*Well I can see why.*

“Then why did you free me?” I asked.

“I don’t blame you for being skeptical, but I assure you that I meant what I said,” Artemis told me, her expression serious. “I’m helping you escape from the Kollector.”

I blinked in renewed shock. “But… But what about Greyson? And Torin and Astrid? Are you going to help them, too?”

Artemis looked annoyed at me, suddenly. *Ugh!*

“Don’t push your luck,” she said. “But if you want to risk your own life to help them, that’s not my concern.”

“Aren’t you risking your life to help me right now?” I demanded.

Artemis shot me a curious look. “How are you even still alive? You’re always so worried about everybody else.”

I scowled, crossing my arms. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Artemis snorted. “No. It’s actually one of the things I admire about you.”

I stared at her suspiciously once more, scoffing. “I doubt you admire anyone other than yourself.”

“No, Cali,” Artemis said. “I do admire you.”

I paused. Then I said, “So you *do* want to be my friend now?” I didn’t understand this girl whatsoever.

Artemis threw her hands up. “We’re not friends! Stop trying to be my friend!”

I huffed. “I don’t want you to be my friend, but you’re the one who freed me! Why are you helping me right now? Because don’t think saving me is going to absolve you of all the horrible things you've done. We can’t be friends!”

Artemis rubbed her temples, as if trying to control her temper. “Cali. I don’t want to be your friend.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t get you. You compliment me, *save me*, and don’t want to be my friend? I’ll have you know that I’m an amazing friend!”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Look, Cali—”

“No, *you* look!” I pointed at her. “If Greyson is hurt, I will find you and make you pay. Got it?”

Artemis looked befuddled. “I don’t want to know what that entails. And I have no idea why I’m helping you—it would be much easier if I didn’t.”

I was going to scream, I was so frustrated. “Then *why are you doing it?*”

Artemis pursed her lips. “There’s just something about you. Something that tells me I’m supposed to help you.”

I raised my eyebrows. *Really?* “Like a little voice inside your head? So what, you’ve grown a conscience?”

Artemis snorted. “Hardly. I just know that if I left you, I’d regret it—leave it at that.”

I was about to ask her more questions and demand more explanations but the severe look on her face told me to let it go.

I huffed. “Fine.”

“I still don’t want to be your friend, though,” Artemis said.

“You’ve made that abundantly clear,” I said.

Artemis rolled her eyes at me for what felt like the millionth time that day.

“I’m done talking about this nonsense. Where’s the zoo?” I asked impatiently. “I’m going to get Greyson out of here.”

“We’d better help your other companions first,” Artemis said. “Greyson won’t be harmed in the zoo, whereas I can’t say the same for…”

“Astrid and Torin,” I completed her sentence. “My *friends*.”

“There's no telling what the Kollector will do to Astrid and Torin,” Artemis said darkly. It didn’t seem like she was trying to scare me. Just… telling the truth.

My heart started pounding. I hoped I wasn’t too late. “I guess… I guess now I have to sneak into the Kollector’s compound?”

Artemis snorted, tightening her ponytail. “Good luck.” She was about to turn around when I gripped her arm.

“Wait!”

Artemis turned, eyebrows raised in menace as she looked between my face and my hand on her arm. Right. Bad hunter, not a good idea to touch her—even if she probably wanted to be my friend for whatever weird reason. I cleared my throat and let her go. “If you meant what you said, then you have to stay and help me.”

Artemis looked at me like I was nuts. “That’s not part of the deal.”

“There wasn’t even a deal,” I said, huffing. “If you don’t help me out, I’m probably gonna get caught, and your releasing me will be meaningless. It’s all VERY counterproductive.”

Artemis glowered, probably realizing that I was right. Thank god.

“If you really want to help me, then you will have to *actually* help me,” I said. “Do you understand?”

Artemis seemed shocked by this turn of events. She probably hadn’t helped anyone in a while and didn’t get how the semantics of it played out. Lucky me. She took me in, eyes narrowed, before she crossed her arms.

“Artemis, this isn’t—”

“Stop talking,” she said. “I’m thinking.”

That could turn out to be very good for me. Or very bad.

*I guess we can only wait and see*, I thought, alarmed.

Artemis looked at me up and down before scanning the surrounding area. Her expression jumped from serious to annoyed to resigned. It kind of reminded me of Greyson when he was dealing with my wild plans. In the end, she let out a long-suffering sigh. “Fine. I’ll help you. How good are you at climbing?”

**Episode 491**

GREYSON

The net had to be magical.

There was no other explanation as to why it wouldn’t fucking budge. I’d tried tearing it with my hands, biting it, punching through it, and it still looked brand new. I’d tried to shift while inside it, but nothing had worked. And if that goddamn net wasn’t enough, the guards had put me inside a massive cage and were gleefully wheeling me around like I was their newest toy, chatting enthusiastically.

I wanted to rip their throats out. Gladly.

As I was being transported from the arena and across the compound, I made sure to look around and examine every detail of the space. There had to be a weakness somewhere. An unguarded door, a shady-looking pathway, something that I could exploit later when I made my escape. Meanwhile, the guards continued to chat about me, and I imagined all the ways I could make them pay for this bullshit.

Not only for what they’d done to me, but for whatever they had done to Cali.

“Halt,” the taller of the two guards said when we arrived at a gated entrance. There was wire all around the massive building. I assumed it wouldn’t be normal wire, because magic was a serious problem in this world.

The guards talked to the gatekeeper, and we were directed to an office. The man in there had grey hair and eyes the color of moss, and was playing something that looked like solitaire. When he saw the guards, his expression remained bored.

“What is it this time?” he asked them.

“We have a delivery,” they both said proudly. They opened the cage, and together they dragged me out. The net was still wrapped tightly around me. Their hands landed on my arms and shoulders, keeping me immobile.

The grey-haired man frowned, gesturing at his game of solitaire. “You should’ve made an appointment. As you can see, I’m very busy.”

“But this is a special delivery!” one of the guards said, winking. “He’s a *werewolf*.”

“Seriously? Come in, come in,” the man said immediately.

And then they shoved me forward for the grey-haired Fae to inspect. His boredom vanished and he grinned, dropping the deck of cards on his desk. “That’s more like it!” He looked up at me with excited eyes before he started looking through what appeared to be various blueprints. “Where should I put him? I wasn’t a expecting a werewolf—I would’ve preferred a lot more time to figure out where to display him!”

The one guard shrugged. “That’s not our problem.”

“You’re the zookeeper,” said the other guard. “You’re supposed to know this stuff.”

The zookeeper opened his mouth and closed it before saying, “Okay. You have a point.”

This man didn’t seem all that great his job. Perhaps getting out of here wouldn’t be as hard as I’d anticipated. The zookeeper put on a pair of glasses then stood up and started circling me—examining me from a distance. I watched him, fury climbing. I wished I could just get my hands on all three of them and tear them apart. I needed to go find Cali, not sit here like a specimen under this creep’s microscope.

“Uh,” the zookeeper told the taller guard. “That’s it?”

“What did you expect?” the guard asked.

“Not sure,” the zookeeper said with a shrug. “Are you two sure he’s actually a werewolf?” He eyed me once more. “Because he looks… normal. Very attractive, but very normal.”

I showed him my teeth, biting thin air. He flinched.

“Oh, he’s totally a werewolf,” the taller guard said. “We saw it with our own eyes!”

“Hey, you! Werewolf!” the zookeeper said, pointing at me. This was the first time any of them had talked to me like I was a fucking person. “Do you eat raw meat?”

I smiled. “Come on over and hold out your hand so you can find out for yourself.”

The zookeeper offered a nervous laugh. “He’s a jokester, isn’t he?”

“Didn’t make any jokes with us,” the shorter guard said, huffing like he was offended that he’d been deprived of my comedic talent.

These Fae really had a fucking death wish. I’d happily grant it to them.

“So how strong is he, exactly?” the zookeeper asked the guards. As they went on a long tirade about all the things that had gone down on stage, I looked around, trying to figure out if I could jump out of their grip and through a window. I decided against it, mainly because I didn’t know if there were more guards right outside.

“Perhaps we can put him in with Nessie,” the zookeeper said. He looked thoughtful as he smiled up at me. “There’s water, trees—and it’s big enough so he won’t go stir crazy.” He looked up at me sheepishly. “No offense.”

“None taken,” I deadpanned. “It’s not like I’m plotting your murder as we speak.”

The zookeeper laughed once more, again nervously, and looked at the guards. “Hilarious! A very wry sense of humor!”

I was going to gnaw his heart out of his chest.

“You sure about putting him with Nessie, though?” the taller guard asked.

“Yes,” the zookeeper said. “The magic should be strong enough to hold ‘em both in there.”

I wanted to ask them who the fuck Nessie was, but I stopped myself. I’d had enough chit-chat with these douchebags to last me a lifetime. The zookeeper motioned toward the guards, who shoved me back into the cage. They wheeled me out of the office, following the zookeeper.

As I was moved around the compound, I realized that there were other supernatural creatures in the zoo—sirens, lizards with humanoid features, unicorns, centaurs… Shit I’d never seen before in my life. Some I could see through glass walls, others I couldn’t. But even the entities that I couldn’t see or hear, I smelled. They smelled like fury and sorrow, held in these zoo-like exhibits as if they had no minds or wills of their own.

What was this place?

No. If I let myself contemplate the horror that was going on in front of me, I wouldn’t have had a clear enough head to figure out a way to escape. I forced myself to focus on that, looking around for escape routes and feeling out the goddamn unbreakable net once more. What kind of magic was this? I’d never encountered it before. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t break free. Which was a shame, because I *really* wanted to get acquainted with the zookeeper’s guts.

He had not stopped fucking talking about how excited he was to have a werewolf in his boss’s collection.

*Collection.*

“You’re gonna pay for this, you know,” I told him in a low, menacing tone. “One way or another, every single one of you is going to pay for this. I’ll tear your fucking throats out myself.”

The only thing the zookeeper did was laugh obnoxiously.

We paused at a large, dome-like structure with a massive lock in the front. “Unlock it,” the zookeeper told the guards. He gestured at me. “Take him inside.”

Pulling me out of the cage, the guards yanked me—net and all—through the door.

“Welcome to your new home,” the zookeeper said as I looked around.

I was surprised to see that the dome structure gave way to a vast blue sky. There was a massive lake surrounded by woods.

“This is one of our most popular exhibits,” the zookeeper said. “I hope you’ll like it here.”

I wanted to laugh in his face. And he’d called *me* a fucking jokester.

“Do you like doing this job?” I asked him. “Do you like keeping sentient beings in cages for an evil maniac like the Kollector?”

The zookeeper’s cheek twitched, but he didn’t look at me or acknowledge my words in any way. “Time to release him,” he told the guards. Then he looked between the two, speaking evenly. “Use all safety protocols. No point in taking any additional risks with this one.”

The zookeeper backed up to the door, shooting me a cautious look.

This was my chance.

I would wait for this goddamn net to be removed and destroy these sons of bitches once and for all. What I hadn’t expected, though, was for the taller guard to step back and move his hands, gesturing at me as he mumbled something under his breath.

*Magic.*

Moments later, I was frozen to the spot. I couldn’t even move my tongue to tell these assholes to eat shit. The taller guard nodded when he finished casting the spell, turning to the other guard, who carefully released the net. The net was gone, but thanks to the magic, I was completely immobile.

I wouldn’t be able to escape.

Rage and panic bubbling up inside me, I let out a growl that started from my throat and spread all over my body. My first instinct was to pounce on them, tear them apart, but I couldn’t break the magic. I used all my strength, feeling the supernatural bonds giving way bit by bit.

Terrified, the guards hurried back to the door.

“Release him!” the zookeeper shouted. “NOW!”

I was no longer bound by magic. My whole body snapping into motion, I roared and lunged toward them, enraged. But before I could get close, they shut the door, locking it with a loud thud.

I was panting, shuddering, aghast.

This couldn’t be happening.

I couldn’t be locked in here…

*No.*

Growling and roaring, I pounded at the door. My ears were ringing, my heart racing as I threw myself at it. I ignored the pain of the impact, wishing for nothing but to rip those Fae to pieces. And then I heard a voice behind me.

“Save your strength. You’re stuck in here forever.”

**Episode 492**

MAYA

I started at Colton, eyebrows raised. “What the fuck are you talking about? What *orb*? Who has a fucking orb?”

“Talk soon,” Colton said, ending his phone call with Joss before he looked up at me. “The Orb of Letifer, Maya.”

“I love how you say that like I’m supposed to know what the hell it is,” I said dryly. “Are you going to explain, or should I look it up on Wikipedia?”

Colton rolled his eyes, breathing deeply as if I was the annoying one here. “The orb of Letifer is a powerful ​relic​ that can harness the energy of the dead.”

I paused, narrowing my eyes at him. “Are you pulling my leg right now?”

He shook his head, his expression grim. “My father used it to make weapons for himself, acquiring power and strength.”

“How did you and Xavier even find it?” Lola piped up. Her expression was alarmed, and I could see a slight tremor in her hands. Great. She was panicking already.

“Someone took it from Silas during his fall from power,” Colton explained. “Eventually, the orb made it to us. We were supposed to keep it safe, but now it looks like Silas has managed to find it, which means nobody’s safe.”

“Wonderful,” I grumbled, looking around at the wreckage. “What the hell is Silas going to do now if he has the orb?”

If Lola had been alarmed before, now she seemed to be fully freaking out. “Is he going to come after us? How do we know he isn't still here?”

Colton was uncharacteristically somber when he replied. “If he were, we’d probably all be dead already.”

So it looked like this had become serious business. Especially since *Colton* wasn’t joking around. “Well, we’re not dead yet,” I said. “So perhaps we should figure out what to do besides just sit around and stare into each other’s eyes.”

“No kidding,” Colton snapped at me. How was it my fault that his dad was a murder machine? *Asshole!* I resisted the urge to snap back at him considering the circumstances, saving it for later.

“Silas is gone,” Colton went on, looking between Lola and me, “which means we have a little time to figure something out.” He rubbed his forehead, letting out a huff. “I wish my stupid brother was back from the Fae world. We could use all the help we can get.”

Lola was silent, still looking panicked, but I pushed forward. “What did Joss say when you told her about the orb?” I asked Colton.

“That she’d never heard of it,” Colton said.

“So it wasn’t just me who needed to check Wikipedia,” I noted.

Colton ignored my jab. “I warned her about Silas, told her she should keep an eye out.”

I scowled. I would’ve felt safer if Joss were around. Why was I even here in the first place, really? Wouldn’t I be better off taking my chances and walking away from this house, from Colton? If Silas was seeking some kind of revenge, why should I be part of that? Why should I put myself on the line? Though, on the other hand, there was no way I wanted to face Silas alone—that would be suicide. Especially if that weird orb was what Colton said it was.

Colton’s eyes were narrowed when I faced him again. “Maya—”

He stopped speaking when a van pulled up. Phil had arrived to deal with the repairs. Colton turned to Lola, his expression serious. “Take care of him. Show him the damage and have him fix it.”

“Okay,” Lola said. Her chuckle was awkward, tense. “Better to have something to do than think about catastrophic orbs, right?”

I agreed with that. As Lola headed toward Phil, I turned to Colton. Before I could say anything, though, he got in first. “Let’s do a perimeter check.”

“Too scared to do it on your own?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He went rigid, his gaze going dark as he walked up to me. “Don’t fucking push me right now, Maya,” he said through his teeth.

I hadn’t seen Colton this angry in a while. It was jarring to witness—not because I was scared of him, of course not, but because his usual happy-go-lucky attitude was nowhere to be seen.

“Okay, sheesh,” I scoffed, shoving at his chest.

Jaw set, he started walking toward the forest.

“Wait up!” I called after him. “When the fuck did you get so touchy?”

He threw a look over his shoulder and grumbled something under his breath, so I assumed we were okay. I followed, staying one step behind him, because it was pretty obvious that Colton’s Alpha blood was having a hard time right now for whatever reason. Probably because said blood had come from Silas, and Silas hadn’t been that great a father. Or person.

“So you’re pretty pissed off,” I said, glancing at his profile. He was scowling, but still ridiculously hot. No matter his expression, the man’s face was chiseled to perfection. It was infuriating.

“Hello?” I barked. “I’m talking to you!”

He huffed. “What do you want?”

“I’m just saying that you’re mad, and it’s not even my fault this time,” I said. “Don’t you have *any* comment on that?”

Colton paused. “He was here,” he said gruffly.

He wasn’t making eye contact with me. This kind of behavior was so unlike him that it made my stomach twitch. It wasn’t Silas that freaked me out—it was Colton not being himself. He came to a halt and pointed back at the house.

“He was here,” Colton repeated, “in our place. He violated our space. *My* space.”

“I get the whole territorial thing,” I said. For once, I wasn’t mocking him—mainly because I did understand where he was coming from. “But you can’t let your anger cloud your judgement. Not right now.”

Colton crossed his arms, shaking his head. “I know. But I’ve been living as if Silas were dead for a while now. I let myself get comfortable when I should’ve been expecting him, predicting his every move.”

“You shouldn’t be blaming yourself,” I said. It sounded awkward. I wasn’t used to *not* being mean to Colton. But either way, my words were true. “This has nothing to do with you.”

“Of course it does,” Colton scoffed, coming to stand next to the house. I followed. He looked up at the broken windows, gesturing at the destruction. “He’s my father, and he came here because of Xavier and me. He’s back, and now everyone…” He looked up at me. The intensity of his gaze was a punch in the gut. “Now everyone is in danger.”

“Colton—”

He slammed his fist against the side of the house, making the wall shake.

“Hey!” I snapped. “Cut it out! You need to calm down. Phil is in there—you wanna make him think there’s an earthquake or something?”

“I don’t give a fuck at this point,” Colton said bitterly. “What the hell do you want me to do? Act like everything’s okay? Like Silas isn’t a monster out to get us all? It’s not easy to keep your cool when your father is a dangerous fucking psychopath.”

“Well, at least there’s one thing we have in common,” I said sharply.

Colton paused, staring at me. “What do you mean?”

“Your dad is a cold-blooded killer and my grandfather is a raging asshole who loves to psychologically terrorize people.”

Colton’s eyes widened. “Fuck, Maya. I didn’t know.”

Colton’s anger, his frustration, unsettled me in a way that I’d never felt before. I was used to his carefree, childish contentment, had learned to expect it, learned to live with it. Maybe I even missed it. Before I could dwell on those thoughts, I grabbed him by the T-shirt, pulling him closer.

“I know you’re scared,” I said. It was the wrong thing to tell him.

“I’m not fucking scared, I—”

I took him by the shoulders, squeezing. “It’s okay to feel things, Colton. Sometimes.”

He didn’t speak for a moment. He just stared into my eyes, taking deep breaths, his hands fisted at his sides. I could feel the tension rolling off him in waves, his shoulders taut under my grip. He looked away for a moment, like he’d been spooked, but I slid my hands up to his face, pulling him closer.

“Look at me,” I said.

When our gazes met again, he exhaled sharply. I could see that he was trying to control himself, his anger, his fear. “I’m not just worried about myself, Maya.”

It was just one sentence, but it held so many things that it made me dizzy. *I’m worried about you too*, Colton’s dark eyes said. In that moment, the urge to feel him close, to comfort him, was overpowering.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, resting my forehead against his. He glanced between my eyes and my mouth, his whole body still tight, ready to snap. “It’s okay,” I said again, and he shuddered.

Unable to help myself, I leaned closer, brushing my lips over his.

**Episode 493**

I didn’t trust Artemis, even though I was still sure that she probably desperately wanted to be my friend. Deep down somewhere anyway. Nevertheless, I had no choice but to follow her back to the compound, sneaking my way through right along with her.

I really hoped this wasn’t some sort of twisted scheme on her part.

The northern side of the compound was made of stone and was several stories tall. I didn’t like looking at it, especially after I realized what Artemis’s earlier question about climbing had been about.

“What are you thinking?” Artemis asked me.

I wanted to tell her that I had more experience falling from windows than climbing toward them. A memory flashed through my head: the time I’d fallen from the window at the barbecue. Greyson had caught me, in wolf form, and I’d been so dazed that I’d thought he was Xavier.

I vowed to kiss Greyson when I saw him again. As soon as I rescued Torin and Astrid, I was going to rescue Greyson and kiss his face all over. And perhaps do other things we hadn’t yet too, but I had no time to think about all that right now. Not with Artemis looking at me curiously.

“Why are your cheeks flushed?” she asked, eyes narrowed.

“Because I hate this!” I declared, gesturing at the stone walls. I looked up at the windows. “How high do we have to climb? Those windows look really far up.”

Artemis shrugged, probably because she’d been a spider in a past life and was familiar with climbing. “We just have to climb to the third floor,” she told me casually, and hoisted herself up.

Boiling in plain old jealousy, I watched as Artemis began her ascent. What a joke. I had to prove myself to her, because otherwise… Well, nothing would happen otherwise, but the point was that I had to prove myself—to myself most of all. I had to do this.

Determined, I pulled myself up and started climbing. The rocks of the stone wall worked like very small steps, and were pretty helpful. Okay, this wasn’t as horribly hard as I’d expected. I was still behind Artemis, but I could follow steadily without tripping and dying. So far.

“Watch out,” Artemis said as we passed the first story.

Watch out*? Who says that with a straight face?* I thought, scoffing. *Don’t you see I’m climbing here?*

I gulped, gripping the rocks even tighter. I refused to look down. The ground wasn’t that far away, but still, I didn’t need to psych myself out. “Watch out for what?”

“Arrows. If the guards see us, they won’t hesitate to shoot,” Artemis said.

Choking, I looked around. “Great. I hadn’t thought about that until now.”

Artemis snorted. Her demeanor was so calm and casual that it was rubbing off on me too. If she could do it, so could I. Yes, she was a trained Fae hunter with the name of a Greek goddess, but I was also a half-Fae, and I’d survived so far in life out of sheer stubbornness. Nobody should ever underestimate the power of my stubbornness.

I could do this.

After a few more tense minutes of climbing, Artemis stopped. “Wait,” she whispered, peering cautiously into a window. I held my breath until Artemis made an ‘all clear’ sign and scooted through the window.

I followed suit, going in head first and then moving my legs over the windowsill.

*I made it!* I exclaimed inside my head. *I’m ALIVE!*

“Did you see that?” I asked in a low voice. “I did it!”

Artemis looked at me, unimpressed. “And?”

She didn’t seem to care at all about my enthusiasm. *Rude.*

“I—”

“We don’t know if anyone’s here. Be quiet,” she hissed, looking around. I would’ve been offended if she didn’t have a point. The room was small but luxurious, with heavily embroidered furniture. It looked like a sitting room straight out of the 19th century. Artemis listened at the door, and I followed closely.

“We have to wait for the guards to complete their rounds before we can make our move,” Artemis whispered.

I nodded, breathing deeply before leaning against the wall. I had to use this opportunity to rest for a moment.

*Look at me, being practical!* I thought to myself proudly.

Artemis eyed me up and down. “How come you’re here anyway? Dark Fae territory has never been Light Fae-friendly.”

“I’m here to get a moon buttercup flower,” I said.

Artemis looked puzzled. “That’s quite the journey for just a flower that’s just a story.”

I wasn’t sure if I could trust Artemis, though she had been making some solid steps to fix that. In the end, I thought it wouldn’t hurt to tell her just a bit of the truth.

“There’s more to it than that,” I said. “I need that flower to help save my mother.”

Artemis’s expression become realizing. She snorted, shaking her head. “There you go again, risking yourself to save others. It’s a dangerous habit.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re doing the same thing with me—even if you don’t want to admit it.”

Artemis rolled her eyes.

I smirked. “You know—”

Artemis perked up, her pointed ear glued on the door as she shushed me. Three seconds later, I heard guards chatting about what they’d have for lunch as they paused outside the door. Artemis raised her knife—the same knife she’d used to free me, which still looked pretty menacing. But then the guards kept walking, their footsteps fading down the corridor. Artemis opened the door quietly, looking down the now empty hallway.

I shuddered, remembering what it had been like when I’d first been brought to the Kollector…

And now I was right back in his home.

“Hey,” Artemis said. “Are you okay?”

I examined her face. There was no way she’d brought me here to betray me—it seemed like way too much of a hassle. It would have made no sense, and Artemis was a lot of things, but dumb wasn’t one of them. Realizing that made me feel better, so I nodded.

She gestured for me to follow as she walked cautiously toward the stairwell.

This place was like freaking Hogwarts.

We began to descend the stairs, pausing at each floor, listening for trouble. It felt like we’d reached the depths of the estate when we got to the bottom, and the stairway opened up into a darkly lit passageway with stone walls.

“If Astrid hasn’t been taken to the harem yet,” Artemis whispered, “she’s probably being held in one of the cells, so be on the lookout.”

Swallowing roughly, I nodded.

We stepped through the doorway and into the holding cell area. Most of the cells were empty. The place was an odd mixture of a medieval and modern prison—shiny steel and paved floors. We started wading through the space, and my heart pounded in my ears. There was nobody here.

*Is it too late?* I thought. *Did I take too long to come save my friends?*

If it was too late for Astrid and Torin, who knew what Greyson was doing right now?

“Cali!” My name came from a few feet away, echoing against the stone walls. I recognized Astrid’s voice immediately.

*Yes!* I thought. *FINALLY!*

I raced toward the cell, and sure enough, Astrid was there. She looked like she’d been crying—her eyes were red—but otherwise she seemed okay.

“Did they hurt you?” I asked her. “Are you okay?”

Astrid sniffled, moving her arms through the bars to hold mine. “I’m okay.”

If anything had happened to Astrid while she’d been helping me with my quest, I would never have been able to forgive myself. *Thank god* we’d found her!

I turned to Artemis, my whole body vibrating with adrenaline. “How do we open this? It’s—”

I had barely finished my sentence when Artemis moved a hand and the cell lock clicked. The door swung open. Astrid rushed into my arms and I squeezed her against me, patting her shoulder. I was so relieved. “I’m so happy you’re okay,” I told her.

“I can’t believe you did this!” Astrid said, sniffling. She squeezed me back, and I could feel her shaking. She must have been so scared. “You came to find me!”

“Not that I’m not enjoying your tearful reunion,” Artemis said dryly, “but we have to get going.”

“Wait,” I said, looking around, but keeping one arm around Astrid. The rest of the holding cells were empty. A familiar sense of dread started to expand inside me once more. I faced Astrid, whose tears were now running freely. “Where’s Torin?”

She wiped her cheeks with her sleeves, swallowing thickly. “They took him…” Her voice cracked. “They took him to the mines. I was told that things are horrible there.”

*Oh my fucking god*, I thought*. Is this ever going to end?*

I turned to a stone-faced Artemis and took a deep breath. “Can you take us there?”

**Episode 494**

GREYSON

I spun around, body rigid, ready to attack after the voice pierced my ears. The last thing I needed was someone to share this prison with. I didn’t like sharing on a good day, so this would take the cake.

Every muscle in my body taut, I scanned the area with narrowed eyes, keeping my senses attuned to my surroundings. And then I saw it—a long, slender neck rising from the lake.

The creature’s face reminded me of a dinosaur, but not a T-Rex—it looked more like the type of dinosaur with big puppy eyes. The thing was fucking massive, so my first instinct was to shift. But something about its gentle expression gave me pause. It felt like a friend, not a foe. Which was fucking insane, because I hadn’t had any friends in what felt like a million years.

I stayed quiet and still, waiting for its next move.

It tilted its large head to the side, smoothly leaning closer. Its eyelashes were insanely long and thick. Cali would have said that it was ready for a mascara commercial.

“Is it true that you’re a werewolf?” The voice was deep but melodic. Sounded female.

“That’s why they put me here,” I said. “Who are you?”

“My name is Nessie,” the creature said. It actually had a Scottish accent. Something clicked inside my brain, and I realized who I was speaking to.

“They took you…”

“From Loch Ness, yes,” Nessie said. “I was captured so many years ago. I don’t even remember how long I’ve been here.”

I stood there, blinking at her rapidly. You had to be fucking kidding me. I was staring at a legend, literally. I wasn’t the type to become speechless, unless I saw Cali naked or something, but I pretty much had nothing to say.

Just that you had to be *fucking kidding me*.

“You’re, uh, pretty famous in the human world,” I said. What the hell were you supposed to say to a sea monster?

“I don’t know what you’ve heard about me, but don’t worry,” Nessie said. “Despite my size, I’m vegetarian.”

I watched, astonished by how graceful she was as she swam through the water, coming even closer to me. Her neck reminded me of a giraffe’s, whereas her skin looked like an elephant’s, with the same smoothness and silvery grey color. “Can I come closer? My eyesight isn’t what it used to be, and I’d like to see you better.”

Wondering what the fuck I was doing, I said, “Sure.”

I reasoned with myself that she wasn’t going to hurt me, so there was no reason for me to freak out. She was fine. Very polite. I was calling a sea monster polite. My asshole brothers, especially Xavier, needed to sit down and learn how to behave from her. Cali would’ve loved meeting her.

I had to get the hell out of here and find Cali.

“What you said earlier…” I cleared my throat as Nessie curiously took in every inch of me. “About me being stuck here forever. Is that true? Has no one escaped before?”

She blinked slowly before sighing, resting her head against a rock. Her skull alone was twice my size in human form. “They haven’t brought anyone here before,” Nessie said. “I just said that because I’ve tried to break the door down many times—at least in the early years. But I was at my strongest then and nothing happened.”

The fact that someone as powerful-looking as her had a hard time opening the door didn’t give me much hope.

“How do you explain that?” I asked her gruffly.

“Not only do the Dark Fae use mechanical locks, they also use their magic,” Nessie explained. “It’s an uphill battle.”

It sounded like it. But I didn’t lose any battles—*ever*.

“Figures,” I said. “But I’m not going to give up. There’s someone I need to find. We’re getting out of here.”

Nessie perked up, raising her head. I could have sworn she gave me her version of a smile. “Do you have a plan?”

“Working on it,” I said, looking around and processing. A plan would help take it off my brain that I was in a dome with the fucking Loch Ness Monster at least.

Nessie started talking again, though this time more excitedly. “I miss the outside world so much,” she said. “I miss the sound of bagpipes on the wind, the taste of haggis offered to me as a gift from the friendly farmers who lived nearby.” She made a sound that resembled a giggle. It echoed around the dome, making the forest around the lake jitter. “I also quite liked the view up their kilts, hah!”

I paused, shooting her a look. My new acquaintance was polite and all, but perhaps she’d gone a little stir crazy.

Just my luck.

“So what’s your story?” Nessie asked me excitedly, as if she hadn’t just mentioned checking out some Scottish goods. “Why are you here?”

“I was helping someone travel into Dark Fae territory when we were all captured,” I explained.

“That’s very brave for a werewolf,” Nessie said, nodding with her long neck. “This someone must be very special.”

“She’s my mate,” I said, without thinking. “Her name is Cali.” The moment the words were out of my mouth, I realized that hanging out with Nessie was already making me pretty weird too. Had I really just admitted that to a total stranger?

What the hell was wrong with me?

“That’s so romantic,” Nessie said with a dreamy sigh. At least I knew she wasn’t judging me for oversharing. “You must love her very much.”

I missed Cali so much that it had become a physical ache.

Out loud, though, I just said, “Maybe.”

“Have you told her how you feel?” Nessie asked me. Before I could decide on an answer to give her, she spoke up again. “I was in love, once.”

I felt like we were about to delve into some very interesting territory, so I didn’t interrupt her. She’d been pretty friendly so far, and I wanted to keep that going, keep her happy and appeased. I was also possibly a little intrigued by her stories.

“It was love at first sight,” Nessie said, sighing dreamily once more. “Angus was a farmer—one of the first to bring me haggis. He’d come see me several times a week. We grew very close.”

I wasn’t going to ask how a farmer fell in love with a big sea creature. People were into a whole mess of kinky, weird shit. But Nessie’s smooth, gentle voice and the longing in her tone made me remember the first time I’d met Cali. The first time we’d kissed. The first time we’d almost had sex. The way I wanted her constantly, my need for her consuming my body and soul… My frustration over being trapped in here while she was out there, imprisoned by the Kollector, grew.

I would tear him limb from limb.

“I was planning to tell Angus of my love for him when I was captured and brought here,” Nessie went on. I wondered if Angus had ever actually seen Nessie outside the water—seen her full, massive size—and realized exactly how platonic their love was. I stopped myself from asking those questions, though. Definitely none of my business.

“I was so sorry that I couldn’t tell him how I felt about him,” Nessie said, choked up. Then she turned to me. A single tear ran down her cheek. “If you do manage to get out of here, don’t make the same mistake I did. Let your Cali know the truth about your love.”

Nessie’s words were a warning. But things were way more complicated between me and Cali than they had been for Nessie and Angus’s whatever-it-was relationship. We had a big fucking problem, and that was my dear little baby brother, Xavier.

It had been a relief, not having to deal with him during this trip. But when we got out of here and returned to the human world, things would change. Theoretically, I’d have to give Cali the chance to pick between Xavier and me, and I’d have to accept the way this *due destini* thing worked. I’d have to—I *wanted* to—respect Cali’s wishes, because she was her own person.

But I couldn’t fucking *stand* the thought of Cali choosing Xavier.

I couldn’t bear the idea of anyone other than me ever touching her. The thought filled me with so much rage that my whole body vibrated with indignation, with the urge to howl, the Alpha in me furious.

I needed Cali like I needed nobody else. The notion of her rejecting me, of her not wanting me anymore… It made me sick, rocked me to the core. The thought of staying away from her, trapped in here, had my entire being shaking and seething.

“Are you okay?” Nessie asked me cautiously.

I realized that she was staring at my clenched fists, at my sharp posture. But thinking about losing Cali was counterproductive, wasn’t it?

Right now, there was only one thing that I had to do.

I turned to Nessie, my tone full of conviction. “What do you say we get you out of here?”

**Episode 495**

MAYA

I felt Colton melt into my arms. I kissed him, hugged him too, rubbing my palms up and down his back. He wrapped his arms around me and rested his chin on my shoulder, nuzzling me. It was really weird how easily this man—this obnoxious pain in my ass—could turn into a puddle. It was also shocking how well I’d been able to read Colton, how quickly I’d realized that he’d been holding back and needed this kind of… *thing*.

Tenderness?

Affection?

Other gross stuff that I didn’t like talking about?

The automatic urge to scoff and mock the feeling was strong, but I ignored it. Because, no matter my bullshit, I had to admit that holding him like this, kissing him and caressing him made every inch of me preen, acknowledging the connection. I wondered how my life might’ve turned out if I’d felt this kind of connection with someone earlier. If I’d been held like this before.

The second I stopped caressing Colton’s back, though, the spell he was under seemed to break. Clearing his throat, he let me go, awkwardly shuffling his feet as he broke the embrace. “Uh, we should finish looking around.”

I couldn’t help but smirk. Poor guy was embarrassed that he’d just shed his tough exterior and revealed a baby werewolf puppy underneath. I contemplated being a dick about it and rubbing it in his face but stopped myself, because he was kinda right. Any physical contact between us could get out of hand and pretty distracting very quickly, and I wasn’t about to fuck him in the forest with Silas roaming around. Whatever was going on between us—enemies with benefits or just enemies who randomly cuddled—it was not the time to be careless. No matter how much I secretly enjoyed being careless with him.

“Let’s start over there,” I said, gesturing deeper into the woods. Silently, we roamed the perimeter and tracked Silas’s moves—or lack thereof. When we returned to the house, I could tell that Colton was frustrated and worried.

“Do you think he’s still here?” I asked him cautiously as we took off our jackets in the hallway.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Which doesn’t make me feel any better.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So what? You would’ve preferred for him to be hanging out in here waiting for us?”

He shot me a look. “Obviously not. But this doesn’t make any sense. If he was here looking for the orb, why would he leave? Why not stay and finish his sons off?”

I paused.

“He’s going to come back, Maya,” Colton said, his jaw set. “And that’s what worries me.”

I examined his face, all that anguish, and made a move to touch his shoulder. I didn’t think about it much, just reached out to him. He turned to look at my hand as it rested on his shoulder, and gripped my wrist. For a second, I thought he was going to push me away.

Instead, he took my hand in his and led me to the living room.

The weird relief I felt was fucking ridiculous and cheesy, but I guessed I had to accept it as a new normal. Perhaps. Not entirely.

Really, I just didn’t want to let his hand go.

In the living room, Phil was hard at work repairing the patio windows.

“You guys really don’t like windows, huh?” he asked Colton with a chuckle. This poor fucker had no idea that the last time he’d fixed a window in this house could’ve been his final job—if it hadn’t been for Cali.

“Yeah, we’re…” Colton paused. “Feisty. We host a lot of game nights and they get out of hand. You know how Monopoly gets so intense, right?”

“Oh, totally. My wife flips tables when she doesn’t win. She’s a pretty sore loser.” Phil grinned fondly. “Anyway, no worries. More work for me!”

The dude was so wholesome that I gagged. We were lucky he didn’t remember anything from when we fought the Manus Cruentae. Colton shot me a look, snorting as Lola approached and pulled us to the side, away from Phil’s prying ears.

“What are we gonna do now?” she asked, looking between us.

Colton frowned. “Maybe we should consider rejoining the pack. At least until we feel it’s safe again.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” I said. “Are you going to call Joss?”

Colton nodded, picking up his phone. He moved a few feet forward down the hall, further away from Phil, to make the call. Lola faced me, her expression a mixture of anxious and frustrated. “I’m kinda freaking out, Maya. I’m worried about us, about Jay. Also Cali. Who knows what’s happening to Cali right now? What if she’s in danger?”

I glared at Lola. I didn’t need any of her rambling right now. Especially not while Colton was pacing a few feet away, muttering on the phone with Joss.

“It’s so bad, and I’ve missed Cali so much,” Lola went on. “I shouldn’t have let her go to the Fae world without me, but she didn’t even say anything before she left. She wanted to protect me, which is insane because—”

“Just stop,” I said, cutting her off. “Worrying doesn’t solve anything. The only thing you’re achieving right now is pissing me off.”

Lola gasped. She looked shocked that I’d talked to her so rudely. Did she not know who I was? Why did I have to repeatedly remind these people that I was more prone to biting than listening?

“Showing a little empathy wouldn’t kill you, Maya,” Lola growled at me, storming off.

She was wrong, actually. I could remember and count the times I’d shown someone empathy, and all of them had ended with me being irrevocably hurt. So no, empathy wasn’t my cup of tea. Besides, I had my own problems to deal with. I didn’t need to sort through Lola’s. We weren’t friends.

But maybe we shared a friend in Cali.

My stomach was busy getting twisted in knots at that thought when Colton walked over to me. His handsome face was settled in a frown, his thick brows furrowed as he stared at me. This kind of thing was so unlike his usual behavior that it felt a little jarring. I would never have admitted it out loud, but perhaps I preferred man-child Colton to this serious, stressed out version.

“Joss agrees that we should join forces,” he said. “She wants us all to meet at Shaggy and Pip’s in the morning.”

I was relieved. Joss had proved herself to be a good, smart Luna who had the pack’s best interests at heart, no matter what any asshole said.

“This is good,” I said. “Joss knows what she’s doing.”

“She does,” Colton admitted. “Though it’s not like we have a choice, anyway. Not when it comes to Silas.”

“Hey, guys,” Phil’s voice interrupted. He walked over to us, a bounce to his step. I didn’t even want to know how much fixing all this would cost the Evers brothers, but they were loaded so it didn’t really matter.

“I fixed what I could—had to put a few boards up until the rest of the glass is delivered,” Phil said. “I’ll come back to finish up in the next day or so. Sound good?”

“It’s fine,” Colton said gruffly.

Phil smiled once more. “Make sure not to hold a game night till I’m finished with your new windows!”

I scoffed at that while Colton replied. Moments later, Phil was thankfully gone, taking his wholesomeness with him. Thank *god*.

“Now what?” I asked Colton.

He remained frowny. It annoyed me, but I couldn’t say anything without sounding ridiculous.

“Let’s get some rest,” Colton said.

For a moment, I thought he meant *together.* But then he walked away, leaving me high and dry. Rolling my eyes at myself for even giving a shit, I headed upstairs to my room. I showered and settled down, fighting to relax. I did need to rest—Colton wasn’t wrong about that.

Instead of relaxing, though, I twisted and turned in bed. At first, I was thinking about Silas and the imminent danger we were in, but my mind very easily wandered back to Colton.

To the moment when he’d let his guard down.

He’d felt so good in my arms, and I knew… I knew that he’d felt the connection too.

I wasn’t about to admit to myself that I missed it, though.

There was a knock on the door, startling me out of my thoughts. Before I could respond, Colton walked in. He was wearing a pair of sweatpants, nothing more. He looked at me through his eyelashes, his voice and step heavy as he headed toward me. “Just checking on you. How are you?”

“Uh.” I chuckled awkwardly, sitting up in bed. “Since when do you ask questions like that?” I raised an eyebrow. “What’s really going on here?”

Colton swallowed thickly. I had never seen him so tense. “I can’t sleep,” he admitted. “All I can think about is Silas.”

“I get it,” I muttered, my heart starting to race as I watched him step closer.

“I need a distraction, Maya.”

Colton’s entire presence called to me, and fighting it felt futile. Without thinking, I reached toward him, taking his hand to pull him onto the bed.

**Episode 496**

XAVIER

What. The. *FUCK*.

I spun around, facing the white-blonde Fae as she screamed again. “They’re escaping! Help!”

“Shut up!” Shawn grabbed the woman, covering her mouth. The girl’s blue eyes were wide with fear. “What’s wrong with you?” Shawn hissed. “He’s trying to help us!”

What was going on with this kid? I was putting my life at risk, the entire harem’s lives at risk, just to help them escape the hell they must’ve endured, and this girl thought that backstabbing us all was the way to go?

This made no fucking sense.

Unless Stockholm syndrome was real, and we were all fucked.

Maybe I shouldn’t have ever offered to help them. If we were caught right now and all these girls were slaughtered as punishment for trying to escape, I’d never be able to forgive myself. I had enough baggage as it was—I didn’t need to multiply it by being the reason why these innocent women died.

“Guards!” the green-haired Fae whispered, tugging at my forearm. I turned in the direction she was indicating and saw a group of guards approaching. Their steps were heavy, their faces severe.

“You, over there! Halt!” their commanding officer barked at us.

I was done with this bullshit.

“Step back,” I told Shawn and the others before shifting with a roar. The whole hallway vibrated with the sound, and the guards’ fast pace became tentative as they took me in. Their fear was so potent I could smell it.

Good*.*

“Don’t waste your strength dealing with them,” Shawn told me, stepping between me and the men. “We have our powers back—we can handle the guards.”

“Actually, we’d *love* to,” the redhead of the group told me, her bronze skin suddenly glowing with power. I would rather have ripped the guards’ throats out, but the Fae were right. I had to avoid getting captured and wounded—I still had to find Cali—and the women seemed more than capable of dealing with these assholes.

With a curt nod, I stepped aside and shifted back to human. As if in sync, the Fae women turned toward the guards. Shawn waved her hands and a couple of guards fell down and found themselves unable to get back up—like turtles stuck on their backs. The rest of the Fae practiced their magic too—moments later, four guards were slammed against each other like drums, and another few seemed to be frozen in place. The last of the guards were blown back, crashing into the trees and bushes that decorated the garden structure.

I had to admit, it was amusing and impressive to watch.

“We have to keep moving,” Shawn told the girls. The guards kept struggling, either immobile or stuck. “There’ll be more guards.” She turned to the pale blonde who’d given us away earlier, shooting her a glare. “And we don’t need to be found.”

The blonde stared at the ground, silent.

For some reason, I felt sick to my stomach at the sight.

“We should cut through the zoo!” the green-haired Fae exclaimed, looking between Shawn and me. “It’s a shortcut to the mines and there’ll be more places there to hide.”

“Good idea,” Shawn agreed before turning to me.

I eyed her, a little dubious. But this wasn’t my turf. “You’re in charge,” I told her.

Shawn grinned. “Such a gentleman.”

Now that was something I’d *never* thought I’d hear.

As the girls started running, Shawn keeping a constant eye on the blonde, I followed. I hoped the green-haired Fae in the front knew where the hell she was going. But, sure enough, I saw the entrance to the zoo up ahead.

“We’ll have to climb over the wall,” Shawn told the girls, leading them away from the entrance. Several feet behind us, I could hear the guards yelling. Shawn rounded a corner, making sure the guards lost sight of us, before slipping into a row of bushes.

“Let’s try here,” Shawn said. The girls agreed. I didn’t speak, because they seemed to have their shit together and I was against unnecessary chit-chat. Unless Cali was the one providing it.

“You’re not staying behind,” the redheaded Fae told the blonde who’d betrayed us. She grabbed the girl by the hand, pulling her toward the wall. I saw a few tears escape her eyes, but I didn’t dwell on it.

I had no time to wonder about the ways being in the Kollector’s harem had broken her.

It was similar to the way I refused to think about what being with my father had done to my mother.

Shawn started to climb the wall, and the other girls followed, the blonde bringing up the rear. At least she was quiet now. I climbed over myself, landing on the other side at the same time as Shawn, who dusted herself off.

“We need to lie low,” she told the girls seriously.

I was stunned to see that this place looked like a regular old zoo. A little fancier, but still. Then I heard a high-pitched, seductive melody.

“What’s that?” I breathed, overwhelmed suddenly by the sound. “I’ve never heard anything like it…” It reminded me of everything I loved about Cali. Her laugh, her smile, her touch, her passion and loyalty and dedication, her mouth and naked body, how she felt when I kissed her, when I put my hands on her body…

I felt drunk.

I started to move toward the melody, drawn to it in a magnetic way that I couldn’t explain. Everything would be perfect, as long as I kept following that amazing voice.

“Hey!” Shawn barked, shoving me on the arm. “Cover your ears! You don’t want to listen to that!”

I brushed Shawn off. I had to move quickly, find the source of that gorgeous voice.

“Hey, lover boy!” Shawn blocked my way, snapping her fingers in my face. I flinched back. “You’re being seduced by sirens!”

I frowned. My mind felt hazy and Shawn was the only focal point. “I don’t—I’m just… trying to listen? Song reminds me of Cali.”

I moved forward once more but Shawn groaned, grabbing me by the arm with a grip that felt like a vice. Definitely some added Fae energy there. “Remember why you’re here,” she snapped. “If you want to help Cali, you have to break free from the sirens’ call!”

Growling, I pushed her off, but a second later my whole head was rattled.

Shawn had slapped me hard enough to make my ears ring.

She stared at me, impatient. “Have you snapped out of it?”

I was jarred by the sting, but I had come to my senses. The haziness was gone, and my brain was working again.

The sirens’ song had nothing to do with Cali, and I still needed to save her.

“Thanks…” I paused. “For slapping me, I guess?”

Shawn scoffed, dragging me by the arm. “Let’s get going. The others are already moving.”

As we raced through the massive compound, I couldn’t help but stare at the various exhibits, all imprisoned creatures put on display. Mountainous trolls in one exhibit, digging dwarfs in another, tiny glowing fireflies shaped like women in a massive jar, and then of course an epic aquarium.

I saw the sirens Shawn had warned me about—some had bare female bodies, others looked like mermaids, and a few others had something close to wings. A group of humanoid lizards playfully clashed against each other in another exhibit, in what I could only imagine was a makeshift dance to battle their boredom. Another exhibit held a glowing unicorn, sitting on the ground and looking into the distance, all alone.

All the captured creatures stared at us as we ran by, surprise or sorrow decorating their faces. This was a prison through and through. It was disturbing—disgusting. I was infuriated by the sight, by the Kollector’s gall, thinking that he could take living thinking things and put them in cages. This was what they would do to me too, wasn’t it?

The Kollector had wanted to put me in a cage and have his Dark Fae friends laugh at me.

“There they are!” someone shouted from behind us. The guards had caught up.

“Dammit!” Shawn hissed, and we both started running even faster. The guards kept shouting, coming toward us.

“Can’t we pause and deal with them?” I asked her.

“It’d only waste time,” she said, when the green-haired Fae blocked our path. She was panting, her hazel eyes wide as she stared up at me.

“I know what we have to do!” she said.

Before I could ask what on earth she was talking about, I was stunned to see her move her hands. Then one exhibit’s lock snapped open, allowing a huge snake with giant fangs to slither out.

Shawn gasped. “The basilisk!”

“It won’t hurt us,” the green-haired Fae reassured Shawn.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked her, shocked.

“I’m creating a distraction!” the green-haired Fae said, grinning at me. Using more of her magic to break the exhibits’ locks, she called to her friends, “Release all of them!”

**Episode 497**

MAYA

Colton wanted a distraction, and I just… wasn’t strong enough to deny him.

It would’ve been pretty moronic to deny my raw physical attraction to him at this point, so I stopped doing it. I gripped his shoulders, tracing his muscles. He kissed me deeply, groaning into my mouth when I leaned backward and pulled him with me. I opened my legs and he settled between them, brushing up against me.

He was hard already, and I was pretty much good to go too, so I made a move to flip us over, ride him, take what I needed. But he grabbed my thighs, keeping them spread and pinned.

“Let me do what I want,” he muttered gruffly, nipping at my chin before settling his forehead against mine.

His gaze was so intense that I felt lightheaded, my body scorching hot all over. I couldn’t bring myself to say anything other than, “Okay.”

He stared into my eyes. The energy that soared between us made me shiver.

“Your scent drives me nuts,” he whispered, nuzzling my cheek before brushing his lips over it. He did the same with my neck, one hand coming to caress my face, his thumb brushing over my lips. He gripped my thigh with his other hand, keeping me open under him. I moaned when he started rocking against me through his pants and the thin fabric of my underwear. The friction between us felt so divine that I whined, clawing at his back.

“You feel so good,” he said, kissing down my throat, on my chest, before pulling the strings of my nightie down. “You always feel so fucking good…” He nibbled and sucked onto my flesh, moving rhythmically against me at the same time. The pressure, the friction, the lush power of his body had me writhing under him quickly. I wanted to tell him to stop teasing like a fucking asshole, but speaking was a little hard to do when he kept mouthing at my skin and managing to drag his hard-on right where I needed it.

I shuddered, convulsing. The orgasm was sudden, deep and dull. I quivered under him, my body peaking yet somehow still greedy for more. I wanted him so much it had turned into a physical ache.

“You’d better stop messing around and fuck me now,” I demanded, panting as I dug my nails into the back of his neck. He laughed, his eyes bright and wild and gorgeous. He kissed me full on the mouth while tearing my underwear off. I pushed his sweats down, reaching between his legs to lead him in before he decided to stall again for whatever insane reason.

He groaned into my mouth the second our bodies joined. He was hot and hard inside me, throbbing. He started rocking into me deeply, slowly, looking into my eyes, his gaze depthless. The slow, purposeful roll of his hips had me whimpering, and he shushed me with kisses, caressing my cheeks as I wrapped my body around his. My second orgasm hit hard and I shook all over him, my body clamping down on his.

“Fuck,” he hissed.

I urged him on, arching upward to take more of him. He shivered, moaning. His hips stuttered, his pace quickening as he spilled inside me, shaking while I embraced him tightly. I kissed his cheek, his forehead, soothing him as he panted and trembled, as he came down from the high.

No other man had ever felt so amazing.

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Colton’s arms were wrapped around me when I woke up the next morning. My usual instinct to shove him off rose, but I pushed it down. There was something comforting about being close to him like this. Of course, I’d rather have slit his throat and then mine than admit the truth to him.

Brushing my mouth over his hand, I rested it against my chest when I felt him stir behind me.

“Are you awake?” he asked gruffly, his hard-on brushing against the small of my back.

Good morning to me.

Reaching backward to hold onto his hip, I twisted to face him. I found him smiling already. He no longer seemed riled up, grumpy, and worried like he had the night before. Sex had *definitely* helped both of us, for various reasons.

“Hi,” he said. But before I could reply, or get a proper kiss or some action from the cock rubbing up against my ass, he kissed my forehead and withdrew.

I had to smother the whine that was about to escape my throat.

“I wish we had the time for more, but we should get going.” He hopped out of bed, standing there naked for a moment after gathering his clothes. We stared at each other, awkward.

I realized that I hadn’t spoken a word so far.

“Yeah,” I finally managed.

He smiled again, because he was a fucking adorable freak of nature who I hated. But also perhaps didn’t exactly hate either.

“Okay,” he mumbled. “Uh, meet you downstairs. I’ll make coffee…? You like coffee, right?”

I felt my cheeks heat up. The feeling was weird. Was I embarrassed or just horny and annoyed that we hadn’t had sex again?

“I like coffee,” I said.

“Great,” he said, even more awkwardly but still happily, and skedaddled out of the room. I sat there on the bed, rolling my eyes at him and myself. Who’d even asked him to make coffee? I didn’t need him to take care of me in any way, shape, or form. The night before had felt a little different, though. It had been more… intimate? Still sexy and fun, but there was a connection between us that I hadn’t noticed before. Or hadn’t allowed myself to notice before.

But what the hell did that mean anyway?

That he was growing on me like some sort of hunk-shaped fungus?

Ridiculous.

Grumbling, I washed my face and brushed my teeth before getting dressed. Colton and I had showered the night before, so at least I wouldn’t have to waste time doing that. By the time I got downstairs, Colton was there…

With the coffee he’d promised me.

“Here, let me pour you some,” he said. Before I could speak, there was a cup of coffee in front of me. He stared at me expectedly. “You take it black. Right?”

“Right,” I told him, taking a sip.

He waited like a puppy expecting a treat. His behavior was *disgustingly* endearing. But I still couldn’t stop myself from saying, “It’s good.” I paused. “The coffee.”

He smirked, suddenly all cocky and self-satisfied, like his normal self. I wanted to smack him but also fuck him.

“Don’t look so proud of yourself,” I scoffed.

He winked. “You’re welcome, babe.”

He’d called me ‘babe’ time and time again before, but this time hit differently. My stomach clenched, and I felt the back of my neck heat up. I flipped him off. He laughed, and for some reason it no longer sounded annoying to me.

I had to be coming down with some sort of disease.

“Good morning,” I heard Lola say from behind me. She walked into the kitchen, pouring herself some of the coffee that Colton had made for me.

I told myself that acting territorial over coffee would be ridiculous.

“What’s our plan today?” she asked Colton, dragging me back to the present and the chaos going on in our lives.

Colton put his game face on, looking between the two of us seriously. “We hit the road. We’re meeting Joss at the Blue Blood pack’s house. Stay alert as we walk out, just in case. The house has an alarm, but the back yard is open to anyone.”

Lola and I both nodded.

A few moments later, we were in the car, with Colton driving. I was in the passenger seat, watching as the house grew small in the distance. I felt a nervous energy rolling off Colton, and he started to bounce his knee. Without thinking about it, I put a hand on his leg to stop him.

He shot me a glance. “Can’t help yourself, huh?” he murmured.

“Watch the road before we die,” I said, rolling my eyes.

He gave me a small smile, suddenly not as anxious.

I kept my hand on his thigh for some weird reason.

“Are you guys sure that Jay will be at the meeting today? With Joss?” Lola asked from the back seat, oblivious to our shenanigans.

“The entire pack will be there,” Colton reassured her. “Jay’s crazy about you, Lola, don’t worry. You guys are gonna make up in no time.”

The way he comforted her was odd. Like he gave a shit. But then again, he’d known Jay and Lola for a while. I wondered about Colton’s relationship with the Blue Blood pack and its leader, Mace. I also wondered about Joss’s relationship with them. If Joss behaved today like she had during the council meeting, we wouldn’t have to worry about anything. She could be a force to be reckoned with, and that was what I liked to see.

After a ninety-minute drive, we arrived at the Blue Blood pack house. We’d all met up here in the past too, when Xavier had been preparing to introduce Cali as his human Luna. The place looked different now, though. Worn down.

“I didn’t remember their yard being such a weed-infested nightmare,” I commented. “Also, what’s up with the rundown door?”

Colton snorted. “The Blue Blood pack has always been a little sloppy, but I like Mace.”

“It’s worse than sloppy,” I said. “It’s a wreck.”

“It’s a dump,” Lola agreed.

Colton rolled his eyes. “How about you two keep your thoughts to yourselves, huh? This isn’t *Property Brothers*.”

Before I could comment on Colton’s shocking knowledge of reality TV, he opened the driver’s door—

And a large, angry wolf slammed him into the ground.

**Episode 498**

Artemis, Astrid, and I were running away from the compound and toward the mines. I was actually keeping up with them, and I was pretty proud of myself.

When had I become such an athlete, though? Did my Fae blood have anything to do with my newfound stamina? If so, then where the hell had that darn Fae blood been when I’d stumbled my way through gym class in high school?

*Stop thinking about nonsense, Cali!* I told myself. *There are more important things happening right now! You have to save Torin from the mines, and Greyson immediately after that!*

My thoughts helped solidify my resolve. I felt so mature and collected in that moment that I wanted to give myself a pat on the back.

“The zoo,” Artemis said, gesturing forward before pausing for us to catch our breaths. The massive structure appeared straight ahead. “We’ll have to go around it, okay?”

Greyson was in there, wasn’t he?

The thought made my stomach twist. The Kollector was disgusting.

I knew we had to get to Torin first, and then I would have yet another person to help me save Greyson. We needed all the muscle we could get. Artemis, Astrid, Torin, and I would all be ready to help him. We wouldn’t stop until he was back with us. With me. That train of thought comforted me, but it still hurt to think of Greyson being locked up in there.

“Are the mines nearby?” Astrid asked Artemis.

The Fae nodded, gesturing for us to follow her. As we passed, I could hear loud sounds coming from the zoo. Was there some sort of festival going on in there? I wished I could mind link with Greyson, tell him that I hadn’t forgotten him, that I could never forget him.

*I’m coming*, *Greyson*, I thought.

Nevertheless, Greyson definitely wasn’t the type to sit tight. I could just imagine him growling at people and animals, or making snarky comments. The thought made me smile, just a little.

“What about the other werewolf?” Astrid asked Artemis in a low voice as we kept moving. “I heard that there was another one loose—should we be worried?”

I swallowed roughly, remembering how I’d wondered if the other werewolf could be Xavier. I felt both thrill and dread at that possibility, for so many reasons that I couldn’t even begin to start listing. I considered the odds—it had been difficult for me, a half-Fae, to cross into the Fae world. How could Xavier have done it? Would he have even known where to look for me?

*And didn’t he tell me we were on a break?* I wondered, bristling. *What in the Ross and Rachel hell is happening here?*

I couldn’t worry about all that right now, though. I needed to focus on saving Torin—and Greyson.

“Let’s hide here,” Artemis whispered when we finally reached a thicket of bushes. There was a high gated entrance before us. I could see a small group of prisoners, bound by rope, huddled under the menacing glare of guards near an opening in a rock face. A cloud of dust wafted from the entrance.

“What are they doing there?” I asked, peeking over the bushes. My stomach clenched at the sight of the silent prisoners. They looked so dejected and broken.

“They must be waiting for the guards to bring them down to the mines,” Artemis said.

I fought to see, craning my neck as subtly as I could. “Is Torin one of them? Or has he already been brought down?”

Astrid sniffled. “I hope not. Torin hates small, dark places.”

The two of them were such great friends. And they’d treated me like a friend too, which had brought them only trouble. The Caliana Hart Curse.

*I need to fix this*, I thought to myself, determined not to let the dark thoughts overpower me.

“Over there,” Artemis whispered, pointing to an abandoned wagon. “If we can make our way to that wagon, we’ll have a better view of the prisoners.”

“That’s a great idea,” I muttered to Artemis, frowning. “You have all these great ideas—why can’t I have such great ideas?”

“You just don’t have my experience doing shady things,” Artemis replied, smirking.

As Artemis, Astrid, and I snuck over to the wagon, I vowed to work on my shadiness levels. After settling behind the wagon, we peeked over the side to take a better look at the prisoners.

Astrid grabbed my arm so hard that I had to fight the urge to yelp.

“He’s there!” Astrid whisper-hissed, wiping her eyes. I could tell that she was trying not to scream his name. Gasping, I turned in the direction she was pointing in and saw him too. Torin was waiting near the rocky entrance. His head was bowed, and he looked so sad. The sight only made me angrier. The Kollector was a monster, through and through.

*If I ever see him again*, I thought, *the fucking BASTARD will be sorry.*

Torin was a good person—all these people were probably good people. They didn’t deserve this. The only one who deserved to be chained and degraded was the Kollector himself.

“So,” Artemis turned to me, interrupting my seething. “Have you thought of a plan?”

My jaw clenched. I hadn’t thought that far ahead, and she was supposed to be the shady person with all the great shady ideas. But then one of the guards started yelling at the prisoners.

“Take a last look at the sky, folks!” he barked, sneering. “Cause you’re going down next!”

I wanted to punch him in the goddamn face. How DARED he treat them this way?

“We should create a distraction,” Artemis said, but I shook my head.

“Didn’t you hear that son of a bitch?” I whispered, pointing at the guard.

Did he take *PLEASURE* in being their torturer?

Because I could find pleasure in smashing his ugly face in. Maybe the werewolves had been rubbing off on me.

“We don’t have the time for a distraction,” I told Artemis, breathless in my fury. I examined the insides of the wagon and my eye caught on a miner’s pickaxe. My blood boiling with rage, I grabbed it and took a sharp breath, ready to charge forward and give that asshole guard *a piece of my mind!*

“Hey!” Artemis grabbed my arm with surprising strength, jerking me back. Aghast, she asked, “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m going to rescue Torin,” I told her, panting in my fury.

Astrid sniffled while Artemis stared at me like I’d lost my shit. Which was entirely possible. “You’re going to take on all those guards with a pickaxe?” Artemis asked me, blinking in shock.

“Why not?” I snapped. “What else is there?”

Artemis paused, taking in my expression. It was undoubtedly thunderous, because I’d had enough of this barbaric nonsense. “You’re Fae, right?” Artemis asked me cautiously.

“Yeah,” I said. “Half. But what the hell can I do with that?”

Artemis grabbed my arm tighter, speaking sternly. “Watch and learn.”

I reminded myself that she did indeed have a lot of experience in this kind of tricky stuff, so that sounded like a good thing for me to do.

Artemis turned to Astrid, her tone sharp. “Can you glamour a collapse?”

Astrid wiped her eyes, nodding. She seemed determined, suddenly. “You got it.”

Right away, Astrid turned toward the prisoners and waved her hand.

Moments later, the entrance to the mine collapsed.

The guards jumped back while the prisoners screamed, terrified. Artemis leaped out from behind the wagon, brandishing a whip. For a moment, I was left there behind the wagon alone. Then I realized that my time had come.

“YOU ASSHOLE GUARD! NOW YOU’RE GONNA GET IT!” Screaming in fury, I jumped forward with my trusty pickaxe.

All the guards—not just the asshole who’d talked down to the prisoners—turned to me with wide eyes. Artemis struck one with her whip, causing him to stumble backward just as I threw my pickaxe at that douchebag and—

Missed wildly.

The pickaxe clattered unceremoniously to the ground, and I was madder at myself than ever. Before any of the guards could harm me, though, Astrid glamoured a snake out of thin air. The guards jerked back, staring at me in fear. I had to find my pickaxe and show them who was boss!

Artemis moved forward to shield me, but a guard lifted a bow and aimed at her… Which was *BEYOND FUCKING RUDE!*

I’d had enough with all their bullshit.

They thought they could put people in cages and throw them into mines? They thought they could make Astrid cry, and Torin feel like he was subhuman?

*THIS STOPS* NOW*!* I screamed inside my head.

Out of the blue, instead of panicking, I knew what to do.

It was like time slowed down.

My gaze fell to the guard who was slowly drawing back his bowstring to shoot at a frozen Artemis. Immediately, I felt a massive vibration rising from the depths of me.

It jumped forward like a wave, straight out of me, sending a booming surge of energy toward the guards.

**Episode 499**

XAVIER

Total chaos.

There was mass pandemonium as the Fae women raced through the zoo, opening cages and blasting away exhibit doors, freeing swarms of strange, dangerous, and generally pissed off creatures onto the zoo’s walkways.

I looked at the animals as they began to pass. Many of them looked familiar—or *almost* familiar. Like, they might have been familiar, if it weren’t for one or two characteristics that made them strange. Like the zebra with rainbow-colored stripes, or the giant, acid-green, two-headed snake that slithered by my feet, causing me to take a wary step back.

And I wasn’t the only one. The guards were falling back, too—when they weren’t turning tail and disappearing completely.

But it wasn’t yet time to celebrate victory: there was a newly released animal headed straight for me. It looked like a lion crossed with an ill-tempered wildebeest, and it was looking at me like I’d just insulted its mother.

I stepped aside as it charged past me, snarling.

“Keep going!” Shawn screamed as the Fae women ran through the zoo. “Keep it up! The more creatures we release, the better!”

But then she stopped, staring, as a woman began to scream. I looked over, following her gaze to the woman, who was frozen with terror in the middle of the zoo’s main square. She was standing next to a fountain, staring, horror-struck, as a huge, black dog bore down on her. The dog was snarling at her, saliva dripping from its sharply bared teeth. But, weirder still, there was a bright blue halo of flames surrounding its head.

“A kludde,” Shawn offered. I supposed she was naming the dog, though I didn’t see how that was relevant.

I didn’t wait another moment. I raced toward the woman—and the kludde—and scooped the woman into my arms as I passed. The kludde snapped at my legs, barely missing my ankles as I jumped out of its snapping reach.

The two of us—the woman and I—crashed into an empty snack stand, and the canopy and splintered boards rained down on us.

“Are you okay?” I asked the woman, who looked stunned. I hoped she hadn’t hit her head on anything as I’d pulled her away.

The woman was lying on top of me and it took her a moment to respond, as though she hadn’t heard my questions. Then she turned her huge eyes on me. “You saved me!” she shrieked, and threw her arms around my neck.

I groaned and rolled her off me. I did not have time to deal with a fan club. “You need to get out of here,” I said, getting to my feet and pulling the woman up after me. “And don’t go back to the Kollector, okay?” I waited until she nodded, then I pointed to Shawn, who was still yelling and pointing and directing the other Fae women. “She’ll help you out. Stick close, okay?”

The woman nodded and hurried away, dodging a charging pair of peacocks with feathers that flashed in neon colors.

There was a scream right over my head and I ducked as a massive black and white bird swooped low.

“That’s a thunderbird!” Shawn screamed at me, as though this might have been useful information for me.

The thunderbird apparently shot bolts of lightning, a fact I discovered because, at that moment, it shot a bolt of lightning and caused the destroyed snack stand to burst into flames.

“Shit,” I swore, stumbling back as the flames licked close to my feet. There was a growl behind me, and I turned to see a growling, hissing chupacabra—a skinny, ratty-looking, coyote-type creature. Then, with a snap of its razor-sharp teeth, it lunged at me.

“*Shit*,” I hissed, leaping away. But when I did, I crashed into something warm and solid. I looked up to see Shawn staggering back, looking surprised.

“What the hell?” I snapped, rounding on her. “Why is every creature in here attacking me? I’m trying to *help them*!”

She gave me a sideways glance. “Shit, maybe because you’re still glamoured to look like a guard? They hate guards!”

Great. As if in confirmation of this, another thunderbird swooped and I ducked, narrowly missing its long, outstretched talons.

“That’s great,” I said bitterly. “Here’s an idea: how about giving me something to wear that’s a little less hostile-looking? I’m never going to get out of here at this rate.”

Shawn waved her hand at me and, as I looked down, my guard’s uniform disappeared and I was looking down at my naked body.

“Not what I meant!” I snapped.

But Shawn just raised her eyebrows.

I looked down again and realized I was now wearing tight red pants, a red shirt, and a long, red cape. I shot a look at Shawn and was on the verge of telling her to get serious when I heard a snorting sound that made my blood run cold.

I spun around to see a massive bull glaring at me with tiny eyes that burned as bright and as red as two tiny coals. It had two small, twisted horns on its head that stopped at cruelly pointed ends. The creature seemed to be as wide as I was tall.

“That bonnacon is gunning for you, Xavier,” Shawn called, scrambling away from me.

She was right. The bull snorted, its breath steaming from its nostrils, and began to charge toward me.

I didn’t waste another moment’s thought on what to do: I took off running. The bull followed. I cast a glance over my shoulder to find the monster matching me turn for turn. Then I looked down… at the *red cape* streaming out behind me.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” I panted.

I reached up to pull it off, but I couldn’t grasp it. I supposed that was the way things were with glamoured clothes. I rounded a corner, skidding around what might have been a monkey house, though the doors were open and the place looked empty. I jumped off the path and into a patch of trees. Maybe if I just got out of its line of sight it would forget about me.

No dice.

The bull thundered to a stop in front of the monkey house and looked around. And it wasn’t like I could hide—I was wearing red from head to toe. It turned toward me, one cloven hoof toeing the ground, steam blasting from its snout.

“Shawn!” I shouted. Maybe she could create a distraction or put the thing to sleep or something.

But she didn’t even look over. She was helping two women who’d been cornered by a kangaroo with wings, and she hadn’t even heard me.

And then the bull charged.

I wasn’t sure what possessed me to do it, but I took hold of my cape and, as the bull ran toward me, I held the cape out. And the bull headed right for it. I swirled the cape away as the beast ran by.

Again, I looked around for Shawn—I could have used a little help—but now she was nowhere to be seen. Up ahead of me, the bull pulled to an ungainly stop. He was mad now, snorting and grunting, looking around for me, baffled that he’d missed me. He lumbered around and caught sight of me again and, with a furious grunt, barreled toward me.

“Dammit,” I muttered, looking around, desperate for something—*anything*—to distract the bull. I started running, desperately trying to remember the documentary Colton had made me watch about Spanish bullfighters. They’d talked about how bulls had a hard time changing direction, so the best thing to do was avoid them, so I zigged and zagged as I raced deeper into the zoo. I leaped over fences and bushes, then over a low wooden gate that enclosed a small pond. I was looking over my shoulder, tracking the bull, which meant I wasn’t watching where I was going and tripped over something wet and solid.

I scrambled to my feet, gasping, and looked down at a man who was lying on the ground, sopping wet. Well, *half* a man. He had the head and torso of a man, and the back half of a fish. A merman. No, an *adaro*. There was a sign above the pond.

“You good, dude?” I asked hurriedly.

The adaro nodded and I kept running, but the fall had cost me. The bull was catching up. My eyes were back on him—off the path again—and this time I crashed into a signpost, hitting my head. I stumbled back, black stars popping at the edges of my eyes.

This wasn’t good. I shook my head and whirled around. The bull was bearing down on me. I leaped aside at the very last moment and the bull charged—headfirst—into the signpost. The post was as thick as a tree trunk, and it split nearly in half with the force of the bull. The bull gave a massive roar of agony and stumbled, tripping, its spindly legs giving way beneath it. One of its horns was cracked and hanging limply. It bellowed and struggled to its feet, then stumbled away, confused.

I put my hand over my heart, trying to catch my breath. “What the *fuck*,” I muttered, bending over, planting my hands on my knees, waiting for my vision to clear. When my head stopped spinning, I looked up, trying to get my bearings. I had no idea where I was. I needed a map or something. The sooner I got the hell out of here, the better. I looked at the sign both the bull and I had crashed into.

*Kelpie.*

There was no Shawn around to tell me what a kelpie was, so I walked in the direction the arrow pointed. The exhibit was off the main path of the zoo, far back, but there was no wooden fence surrounding it. Instead, it had a glimmering dome barrier and, when I reached it, my jaw dropped. I stared, shocked.

And, from inside the dome, Greyson stared back at me.

**Episode 500**

I stared at the guards, who had all fallen, unconscious, at my feet. I took a step back and looked around. Every single guard was down, knocked out*. By me*. Gaping, I turned to stare at Astrid, then Artemis. “I did that?” I asked. Then, realization hit me and I was elated. “I did *this!*”

Artemis looked back at me, a little confused. She clearly didn’t get why I was so excited, but I didn’t stop to explain things. I was too busy being over the moon. I’d done it! I’d used my magic!

Astrid and Artemis, less concerned with a victory dance, hurried over to help the prisoners, who were now struggling to free themselves.

“Astrid! Oh, god, Astrid!” Torin called excitedly as she drew close. He held out his bound hands and her fumbling fingers loosened the bindings. They threw their arms around each other as the ropes fell away. They were both crying as I ran over to them.

“You’re okay?” I asked Torin, looking him over.

Torin nodded, though he still looked shaken.

He and Astrid threw their arms around me, catching me in a hug. “You’re amazing, Cali!” Astrid sang out happily. “You keep saving our lives!”

I laughed, but we all looked over when Artemis cleared her throat.

“I hate to break up the reunion, gang, but there are bound to be more guards along any moment.” She shot a glance over her shoulder. “We need to get going. Now.”

I nodded. “You’re right, let’s get going,” I said, and moved toward her, but Torin held back.

“What about the others?” he said.

“What others?” Astrid asked.

Torin looked over his shoulder to the crack in the rocks that was the mine entrance. “The other workers. We can’t just leave them down there. They’re trapped here.”

“Oh my god,” Artemis muttered, rolling her eyes. “I did *not* sign on for this nonsense.”

“He’s right,” I said firmly, glaring at Artemis. “We have to help them.”

“I thought you wanted to help your werewolf, girl,” Artemis said, sounding annoyed. “You can’t have it all.”

“Oh god,” I murmured, my heart sinking. I pinched the bridge of my nose. I felt so torn. I *needed* to get to Greyson, but I couldn’t just turn my back on the miners. God why did it have to be this way?

I looked up when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Go,” Torin said, his eyes on mine. “Go get your man, Cali. We’ll free the other miners,” he said, nodding to the other freed prisoners.

“I’ll help, too,” Astrid said, lacing her arm through Torin’s. “And then we’ll catch up with you. I promise.”

The last thing I wanted was to split up, but I didn’t see another way. Finally—reluctantly—I nodded. “Okay. But be careful. *Really* careful, okay?”

Astrid and Torin nodded, and Artemis and I turned toward the zoo.

We walked quietly for a moment, then Artemis cleared her throat.

“I wanted to thank you, Cali.”

I looked over quickly. “For what?”

She looked back at me, like she wasn’t sure if I was being serious. “Your magic saved my life back there.”

“Oh, that,” I said, feeling myself flush.

“Yeah, that.” She took a deep breath. “I have to admit, when I first met you, I didn’t know what to expect. But I’m impressed.”

Honestly, I was impressed, too. I had finally harnessed my magic, was finally able to use it when I needed it, and it felt great. I smiled, but it slid off my face when I heard a strange cry come from above me.

We looked up to see a giant, furry bird soaring above us.

“Holy shit,” I said, ducking reflexively. “What the hell is that? Is that an eagle? Why is it so furry?”

“It’s a thunderbird,” Artemis said, watching the bird’s progress warily.

“Are they dangerous?” I asked, though the knot in the pit of my stomach told me I might already know the answer.

Artemis nodded. “You could say that. They’re predators.”

I watched the bird as it soared through the sky, then my gaze floated down, watching the massive shadow the bird cast on the land below. “Then I hope to hell it’s not hungry.”

We continued on, and I kept one eye on the road ahead of us, one on the bird. As we approached the zoo, the cacophony of sounds coming from inside got louder and louder.

“What the hell is going on in there?” Artemis muttered, though it sounded like she was speaking to herself.

“Do you think it’s the thunderbird?” I asked, watching the giant bird’s progress through the air. “Maybe it’s agitating the rest of the animals.” It was sure as hell agitating me. I watched the bird soaring across the sky and wondered, suddenly, if Greyson could see it. My stomach tightened. Did he have a view of the sky where he was? Where *was* he? Who was he with? How as he being treated? Were school children being paraded through to study him?

I swallowed a bitter taste at the back of my throat. I hated that I didn’t know the answer to any of these questions. The thought of him being held captive—as an exhibit, like he was a *curiosity*—made me feel like I was going to throw up.

“*Drop!*” Artemis screamed, grabbing my arm.

I did it without question, dropping to the dusty path, and felt the air just above my head stir as the thunderbird swooped close, its crackling caw ear-shatteringly loud.

Next to me, Artemis screamed and was jerked away. The bird had grabbed hold of her and was hauling her into the sky!

I lunged as Artemis was lifted up. She was fighting the bird with all she had, but it was still holding her firmly, and, as I grabbed onto her ankle, we were both lifted into the air.

“Try to get it to let you go!” I called up to her.

“What do you *think* I’m doing?” she shot back, her voice choked with the effort of fighting. She was twisting and writhing, hitting and punching, but the bird’s claws held fast.

With the unexpected weight of both of us, the thunderbird was having trouble gaining altitude. I was being dragged unceremoniously along the ground, but I still refused to let go.

When I was little, I used to beg my dad to wrestle with me. He’d always done it, no matter how tired he’d been when he’d gotten home from work. He was always much stronger than me, of course, but I’d always been able to free myself from his grip by tickling him.

So, thinking of this, and out of complete desperation, I reached over and tickled the one spindly bird claw that was within reach.

And, to my everlasting surprise, it worked.

The bird gave a strangled sort of caw and its talons retracted, releasing Artemis. Together, we tumbled to the ground in a heap.

Still terrified, I jumped up, ready to keep fighting the bird if it swooped back down. Artemis must have been thinking along the same lines, because she was also on her feet in an instant. But the bird was already gone, flying away.

Artemis looked over at me, a wry smile on her face. “I guess I owe you again. Thanks.”

I nodded, brushing dirt off my face. The chaos of the zoo sounded even louder, and my heart was beating hard. Something was going on in there. Something was upsetting the occupants. Whatever it was, I just hoped to god Greyson was okay.

Or maybe *he* was what was upsetting them.

Was it possible he had shifted?

I thought about it for a long moment. It was possible. Greyson wasn’t one to sit around. He always took action and fought his way out.

I stood for a moment, frozen with fear and regret. I was glad that we’d been able to find Torin and free him, but maybe we should have gone straight to the zoo. Greyson needed my help. He wouldn’t have hesitated if it had been me being held in there. If something happened to him—if I was too late to rescue him—I would never forgive myself.

Giving my head a sharp shake, I took a deep breath. This was not the time to worry. Not now. This was the time for *action*. Greyson needed me.

“Let’s go,” I said, my eyes trained on the zoo.

“You’re sure?” Artemis asked cautiously.

I nodded. Whatever was going on in there, I was going in. If Greyson was inside, then there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do to get him out.

We’d just started toward the massive structure when the sound of my name brought me up short.

I turned around, my heart hammering.

There, standing the middle of the path, was a group of uniformed guards, armed to the teeth. And in the middle of the group stood the Kollector. He looked at us coolly and raised an eyebrow.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

**Episode 501**

GREYSON

Blinking, I stared at the man standing in front of me. It couldn’t be him. It *couldn’t* be. There was just no way. I was in the Fae world, in Dark Fae territory, in a fucking *zoo* of all places. The last person who could possibly be standing in front of me was Xavier Evers, my half-brother.

But there he was, clear as day. Standing in front of me, staring at me with just as much disbelief.

There was a long, long moment where neither of us said anything, just looked at each other, unblinking, each certain the other person couldn’t be real.

“He’s cute.” Nessie’s soft voice came from behind me. “Do you know him? What’s his name?”

I didn’t answer her—Nessie could make her own fucking matches—and stepped closer to the shimmering barrier that separated me from the outside world. “Nice cape,” I said, smirking, taking in Xavier’s bright red outfit and long, flowing cape.

Anger flashed across his face. Then he composed it into what I was sure he thought was a neutral expression. “What are you doing here?”

“Now *that’s* a question with an easy answer,” I said, with a smile I didn’t feel. “I’m trying to escape. But the funny thing is, I was going to ask you the very same thing: what the hell are *you* doing here?”

Xavier’s face turned stony and he took a step forward. “Where’s Cali?” he asked, not bothering to conceal the threat in his tone.

Realization dawned on me. *That* was why he was here.

I looked through the shimmering dome at my half-brother, standing strong and free in the sunlight, and bitterness settled like a heavy stone deep in the pit of my stomach. After *everything* that had happened—after the miles we’d traveled together, the ache of her on my back, after the chances I’d taken for her, after the nights I’d lain awake watching over her, after everything I had risked to help her, to keep her safe—it was going to be Xavier who saved Cali in the end. *He* was the one who was free, while I was in here—trapped. I passed a hand over my tired eyes, then down my face, scrubbing at the stubble on my jaw.

“Where is she, Greyson?” Xavier growled.

And, as much as it made me sick to think it, I had to tell him. Cali’s safety mattered and it was the only thing Xavier and I had in common.

“I have no idea where she is,” I said dully. The ache in my stomach grew painful.

Xavier took another step forward, his face livid with fury. “If you’ve done anything to her, Greyson. If you’ve hurt her in any way—”

“*Done anything to her?*” I repeated stupidly. And then fury started pulsing through me. “Do you really think I’d fucking hurt her?” I snapped.

He didn’t answer, just glared, which was answer enough for me.

“I came here to protect her, Xavier,” I snarled.

He shook his head, his eyes narrowed with suspicion. “You’ve never protected anyone but yourself.”

I crossed my arms. “Did you come all the way to the Fae world to argue and open up old wounds?”

There was a scream from behind him and he glanced over his shoulder. On the pathways behind him, Fae women ran this way and that. Creatures of every variety ran and flew and slithered along the ground. Someone had been opening up the cages and enclosures. Except, it seemed, mine.

No one was headed our way, so Xavier turned back to me, his blue eyes hard as ice. “No, I didn’t come here to argue. I came to find Cali.” He looked up, taking in the shimmering dome that held me. “How fitting.”

I tensed. “What’s fitting?”

“This. All of it.” He gestured around vaguely. “I’m not going to say I agree with all the ideas of these Dark Fae, but it does seem right that you’re in here, in a zoo, locked in a cage, like the animal you are. Finally.”

My jaw clenched. “So you still think that of me. That I’m some kind of wild animal.”

His jaw clenched in the exact same way mine did. “I know *exactly* what you are.”

My heart was starting to beat quickly. What if he refused to let me out? What the hell was I going to do? How was I going to get to Cali? I’d fucking *kill* him. “We’re brothers, Xavier—”

“You’re no brother of mine,” he shot back.

“Why?” I asked, my panic gone in an instant, replaced with a deep rage. “See too much of yourself in me?”

His jaw worked. “I see too much of Silas in you.”

“He’s your father, too,” I ground out. “We share the same blood, Xavier.”

He raised an eyebrow. The gesture was intended to be casual, though his expression was still one of deepest anger. “But I’m not the one working with him, am I? That’s you.”

“How’d you find out about him?” I asked, trying to keep my tone even, trying to hide my annoyance.

A satisfied smile turned up the corners of his mouth. “You made it easy.” He took a step back, as if to see me better, and surveyed me. “It’s funny, the more I think about it, the more alike you and Silas are. You both abandoned your pack—”

“I left to help Cali,” I said. “You’re the one who left *her*.”

His eyes narrowed. “The problem is, Greyson,” he said, lowering his voice, “you’re too certain about everything. You don’t know Cali like you think you do.”

I processed that. Then I shook my head. “You know you can’t stop her from doing what she wants once she’s decided on something. Really, you should know that better than anyone.”

Xavier said nothing for a moment. Then he nodded, resentfully. “That’s true. Once she’s decided she’s going to help someone, there’s nothing anyone can do to talk her out of it.”

We both nodded. Apparently, the only thing we could both agree on was Cali’s absolute pig-headedness.

But when Xavier looked back at me, his eyes narrowed dangerously. “But I wonder,” he said quietly, “if Cali knows what’s really going on with you, Greyson. Who you’re really working for.”

My laugh came out sounding more like a bark than anything else, but Xavier didn’t flinch. “That would suit your narrative perfectly, wouldn’t it, dear brother?” I drawled. “Painting me as the bad guy so you can play the hero and claim Cali all for yourself.”

Xavier started at that. “*Claim Cali for myself?*” He shook his head, looking furious. “You’ve always wanted what you can’t have.”

I took a step toward the edge of the dome. “What makes you think I haven’t had her yet?”

Immediately, Xavier slammed against the barrier, causing a sonic boom and a wave of ripples that shivered across the dome.

I smiled. I still knew exactly how to get to Xavier. I crossed my arms and looked him right in the eye. “When are we going to stop bullshitting and start talking about how we’re mated to the same woman?”

The impact of this statement seemed to hit Xavier like a punch. I watched as anger flashed across his face in waves. Finally, speaking as though he were gagged—barely opening his mouth—he said, “We are *not*.”

I smiled. I couldn’t help it. I just loved the way this was killing him. I took a step closer to the barrier, close enough that I could see the vein in his temple pulsing with the rapid beat of his heart. “But you hate the idea that she might be, don’t you?”

He looked like he was grinding his molars into dust, but, in a feat of restraint I might not have thought possible, he managed to control himself. “If you care about her at all,” he said, his voice thick with anger, “at *all*, tell me where she is.”

“I don’t know—”

“Fucking tell me where she is, Greyson!” Xavier screamed, losing his shit.

“I don’t know!” I yelled back. “It kills me, but I don’t fucking know! I did everything I fucking could to help her make it this far, and now I have no idea where she is, or if she’s safe! She’s trying to help her mom—”

“I know that,” Xavier cut in, shaking his head, like he was both annoyed by and proud of Cali.

“—and she’s going to need our help if she’s going to figure out to do that.”

Xavier stared at me. “What’d you say? *Our* help? She’s going to need *our* help?”

I stared back. “Regardless of how we feel about each other, we agree on her, don’t we? We agree on Cali?”

Xavier looked at me for a moment. Then, with obvious reluctance, he nodded. “Yeah. I think we do.”

I stepped forward, my eyes on his. “So what do you say? You let me out of here, and we can help her. Together.”

**Episode 502**

MAYA

I gasped as Colton was knocked to the dusty hardwood floor of the entryway. He hit the floor hard, with a loud groan, all the breath knocked out of him as the heavy wolf weighed down his chest. The moment caught me completely off-guard and I froze, unable to process this strange turn of events. We were in an ally’s home. Who was this? Who could be attacking? My mind was muddled as my eyes scanned the wolf, searching for familiarity.

And then recognition came. I knew exactly who was attacking Colton.

It was Mace. What in the world was he doing?

Lunging out of my reverie, I grabbed for Mace. My hands locked around his furry shoulders—I could feel the knotted muscles beneath my hands—and I yanked him off Colton. Behind me I heard a snarl—Lola had shifted. She must have reacted a hell of a lot faster than me.

Colton pulled himself upright and wiped the cut on his lip, which was bleeding freely. “What the fuck, Mace?” he raged, his eyes flashing with anger.

Coming from behind me, Lola lunged for Mace, but I blocked her, absorbing the impact of her momentum with my body. It hurt when she slammed into me, but it hurt a lot less than the shitstorm that would happen if she attacked and this turned into a fucking riot.

“What the hell is going on?” Joss approached and looked around at all of us, apparently baffled. She turned her attention to Mace. “You need to back the fuck off, man.”

Mace growled, the sound loud and so angry it made me flinch. He glared at Colton for a long moment, but then he shifted back. Though he kept glaring, even as a human.

“What’s your problem, man?” Colton demanded, getting to his feet.

Mace stepped forward and shoved Colton, hard. “You’re my problem, man. You and your fucking brother.”

I flashed a look at Colton, but he looked just as baffled as I felt, if angrier. I rounded on Mace. “What the hell are you talking about, Mace?” I demanded.

Mace turned his glare on me, his eyes two glowing coals of anger. “What the hell do you *think* I’m talking about, dumbass?”

“*Hey*!” Joss snapped.

“Watch how you’re talking to her, asshole,” Colton growled, stepping forward.

“I’m talking about Silas!” Mace exploded.

Everyone shut up.

“*What?*” Colton asked, his tone icy.

“Silas, Colton,” Mace said, spitting on the ground. “You and Xavier have unleashed Silas on everyone.”

“We had nothing to do with that,” Colton fired back. “Neither of us. How can you even think for a second that we would? You can’t seriously blame us for this—”

“Oh, I can’t, can I? Fucking watch me!” Mace demanded, looking crazed. He hadn’t been this way at the Lupo Finale at all.

“Mace—”

“What about the orb?” Mace shouted.

Colton got very quiet.

A bitter smile turned up the corners of Mace’s mouth. “Yeah, the orb. Remember *that*? You and Xavier never told anyone you had that.”

“That was the point,” Colton ground out. “We hid it so nobody could use it.”

“Great,” Mace said, throwing up his hands in frustration. “And how’d that work out for you? Actually, no, let *me* answer that for you: thanks to your dumbass carelessness, you’ve let a fucking psychopath get ahold of it.”

A perfect quiet followed Mace’s statement. No one seemed to know where to look. I hazarded a glance at Colton. He looked angry, but shaken and pale, like all the blood had drained from his face. His fingers flexed, like he was looking for something to grab onto, something to use to steady himself.

Mace looked around at all of us, his dark eyes angry. But, beneath the anger, I could see he was very scared. “Do any of you have any idea how much danger the Evers twins have put us in?”

His words hit Colton like a slap. The blood came back to his face as his eyes flashed with anger. His hands twitched and I put myself between him and Mace, worried that the next step would be a full-on beat down.

“Enough,” Joss said sharply, cutting the silence. “We need to sit down and talk about this. Figure out what to do.” She looked around meaningfully. “All of us.”

Pip appeared at the foot of the stairs. “What’s going on?” she asked, looking around, taking in the crowd and the angry faces.

I glanced up at her. “Your Alpha’s being a bit reckless. Can’t you rein him in a bit?” I glared at Mace. “It’d be a shame to see him lose his head.”

Lola growled threateningly.

Colton shot me a grin, but Mace glowered.

“Everyone just needs to stay calm,” Joss said, her voice firm. “Sowing seeds of division is exactly what Silas wants. If we turn on each other, then he will have already won.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Lola,” she snapped. “Shift back. *Now*.”

Lola growled again, but, after a moment, shifted back. Thank god she had those potions with her all the time.

“Come on,” Joss said, her voice brooking no argument. She led us into a large room. It was wood-paneled and looked like a den, and now it was filled with werewolves. Rishika, Zainab, Sage, and Shaggy were all there. I looked around. There were a few people I only knew by sight, but there in the back were Mrs. Smith, Violet, and Jay.

Joss stepped confidently into the room. “We’re here representing the Redwood pack. Mace, of course, is representing the Blue Blood pack.”

The room was still, all eyes on Joss. I marveled, as I had at the council meeting, at Joss’s easy command of the room. As I looked around my eyes fell upon Lola, who was near me. And, directly across from her, was Jay.

He was trying to keep his eyes on Joss, trying to look anywhere but at her, but he just couldn’t keep his eyes from straying back to Lola.

Lola was the same way.

I shook my head. Those two clearly had some issues to work out, but I figured they’d be okay, in the end. I tuned back in as Mace began to speak.

“We all know what we’re talking about here. We all know what the stakes are. The danger we’re facing is real. There isn’t a person here who doesn’t remember the terror of the Pack Wars—how wolf turned against wolf.” He shook his head, his eyes haunted at the memory. “It was the darkest time in our history. No one here can deny that. And while Silas may not have started the Pack Wars, he took full advantage of them, didn’t he?”

There was a general murmur of assent.

Mace’s voice got louder. “He took advantage of the anarchy, the chaos. He sowed division in order to gain control. In order to pit us all against each other so that in the end, no one would be strong enough to challenge him.” There were boos—not at Mace, but at the story. He swung around, his eyes on Colton, and he looked blazing mad. “And now, thanks to the recklessness of the Evers brothers, Silas has the Orb of Letifer. Again.”

The room exploded, erupting into accusations from the other werewolves and denials from the Redwoods. It was exactly the kind of chaos Mace had just been warning us against, but I supposed no one noticed the irony.

Joss started calling for quiet, but no one paid any attention. Everyone was too busy yelling and pointing, accusing or agreeing with their neighbor. Finally, Joss moved to the center of the room and slammed her fist down on an old card table, splitting it in half.

“QUIET!”

The room grew immediately still.

Joss turned to Mace. Her tone was controlled, but her face was flushed. “Placing blame isn’t going to bring the orb back—or stop Silas.”

“That’s not what I—”

“So what do you propose?” Joss asked, talking over him. “What is your solution?”

Mace narrowed his eyes. “During the Pack Wars, the Redwood and Blue Blood packs formed an alliance.” He paused.

“I am aware,” Joss said into his silence.

Mace flicked his gaze to Colton, then gave his head a sharp shake. “But given the unbridled recklessness of the Redwood pack, we can no longer trust you.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Colton demanded.

“Shut up,” Joss hissed at him over her shoulder. “Let me handle this.”

But Mace seemed prepared to answer Colton’s question. “It means that because of you and your brother, Colton, the alliance between our packs is over.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from the assembled wolves. Despite the anger, people did not seem to have been expecting this. Whispers broke out at once.

Violet stood. “So what does that mean?”

Mace’s angry eyes didn’t leave Colton as he answered. “It means that the Redwood pack must leave this place. Immediately.”

**Episode 503**

My heart pounded as I faced down the Kollector and his squad of armed guards. My eyes scanned over them, but I didn’t have to count them to know I was outnumbered. I felt dizzy, like I was about to faint, and I took a deep breath and a slow step back, wildly wondering if I could just back away slowly.

The Kollector gave me a cruel smile. “Could it possibly be that you thought you could escape? From me, little one?” He turned his terrifyingly mild gaze on Artemis. “And you, Artemis.” He made a soft clucking sound of disapproval that was as infuriating as it was horrifying. “Such a betrayal. And after all that I’ve done for you? How’s that for gratitude?”

Whatever she was truly feeling, Artemis didn’t look intimidated. Her face was placid and she shrugged, the movement eloquent with lack of concern. I wished I had that good of a poker face. If that’s what it really was. “I didn’t think too much about it, to be honest. Just seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

The Kollector’s gaze darkened. He did not look impressed by her fortitude in the face of his disapproval. “I don’t suppose I need to remind you, Artemis, that you are in debt to me. Grave debt. I thought you understood what that meant. Until that debt is paid off, you belong to me.”

I bristled. I was so sick of this toxic excuse for a man—and every man like him. “You can’t just go around *claiming* people,” I snapped, stepping in front of Artemis, like I could block her from his line of sight. “You can’t *own* a person, no matter their debt to you. That’s not how it works. It’s fucking *wrong*.”

The Kollector smiled at me, though his eyes remained cold and remote, like two holes in the universe. “It is *you* who do not seem to understand how the world works, young one.” His expression darkened to something resembling feral hunger as he looked at me. I shivered. “There are those, like you, who are born to serve, and nothing more. And there are those, like me, who are born to rule. The rulers—those like me—dictate the laws that the servants—those like you—must obey. It’s a simple arrangement, girl. So simple, in fact, that even a mind such as yours can understand it.”

Anger bloomed inside my chest, and my pulse beat in my temples.

But the Kollector wasn’t finished. He looked up with a deep breath, obviously enjoying his lecture. “It has always been this way. For centuries. Since time immemorial. But every once in a while, when some misinformed, ignorant thing like you challenges the natural order, steps must be taken.” He sighed, as though his actions gave him no pleasure, though the look on his face told me otherwise. “Those who rule must remind all who serve of their rightful place.” He barely turned his face to the right and spoke to the guard nearest him. “Give me your sword,” he commanded.

My throat had gone dry. I clenched my hands into fists, trying to stop them from shaking as the guard pulled the long, deadly sword from the scabbard at his belt and handed it to the Kollector.

I swallowed hard, blinking, though there were no tears in my eyes. Everything had gone dry. My throat, my eyes—everything was a desert now. My body was the Sahara, but I struggled to speak. “If you even *think* of hurting us—”

The Kollector began to laugh, and the surprise of the sound cut me off completely. He threw back his head, laughing hard. The hand holding the sword fell to his side, forgotten for the moment. His guards didn’t move, though. They didn’t take their eyes off me, and all but one was still armed, so I didn’t dare make a move.

The Kollector finally stopped laughing and looked at me, wiping his eyes, still giggling in a very unsettling way. “You can’t be serious. Surely you don’t think your *werewolf* is going to come to your rescue? You don’t think your dog-man is going to swoop in somehow to save you, do you? Oh, my—you do, don’t you? Oh, that is humorous. Imagine!” He looked around at his guards, who all gave him smiles. It was clear none of them thought it was funny and they only smiled because it was obviously what he expected of them.

It pleased him and he held the sword in the air, looking at it closely, inspecting the long, razor-sharp blade. He ran his thumb along the blade, and when he took his hand away, I saw the drop of blood the sword had drawn, though he’d barely touched it.

Artemis stepped out from behind me. “You’re already profiting from the war,” she said to the Kollector, her voice calm and even. “Surely you don’t need Cali for that.” She shrugged. “Just let her go. She won’t cause any problems.”

The Kollector kept looking at the blade. “I grow rich, that is true. The longer the war lasts, the more profit I see.”

A nasty taste rose in the back of my throat. This man was truly vile. “You’re making *money* from the war?”

The Kollector glanced at me and shrugged. “If I don’t, someone else will. Might as well be me.” He tossed a glance over his shoulder. “That mine you managed to avoid—thanks to your friend, here, the *traitor*—provides materials to arm the conflict.”

I looked at Artemis to see how she’d responded to the Kollector’s jibe, but she hadn’t moved. I looked back at him, meeting his eyes. “And the zoo? The harem? What about those?” I demanded.

The Kollector tipped his head back and forth, as though considering my question. “The zoo pleases people. It makes them happy, or at least contented and quiet, which is the same thing.”

“No it’s not,” I snapped. I knew it was useless, but I couldn’t stop myself from arguing with this asshole.

He raised his eyebrows. “For my purposes, it is. And, as for the harem, that’s my one weakness.”

I twisted my fingers hard. “Weakness? What do you mean, *weakness*?”

He smiled at me, his eyes hungry as he took me in. “I simply enjoy pretty things.”

I fought nausea and rage as I stared back. I refused to be the first to break eye contact, but my head was starting to pound with the effort.

“Pretty things?” I repeated. “*Pretty things?*” My voice was beginning to grow uneven, thick with anger. “Is that all you think we are? *Pretty things?*”

Before the Kollector even had a chance to consider an answer, a shadow flashed across the ground, and we all looked up.

In the air high above us, the thunderbird circled. It cried its disconcerting caw and I shivered. I looked away, back at the Kollector. I needed to focus. If I was going to make anything happen—use my power to disarm him—I was going to need to focus my energy like never before. I’d done it before, at the mines, when I’d focused and created the energy surge. Now I just had to do the same thing and direct it at the Kollector and his guards.

But it was hard to concentrate. The Kollector’s sword was gleaming in the sun, and the thunderbird was circling overhead like a malevolent vulture. There was just a lot to process.

And it wasn’t working. I bit the inside of my cheek. *Why* wasn’t it working?

The Kollector looked away from the thunderbird, apparently uninterested, and stepped toward me.

I gave Artemis a sidelong glance. “Can you use your powers here?”

But she didn’t answer. She didn’t even look at me. She was a tough read, but something told me I was on my own. Shit.

The light bounced off the steel as the Kollector raised the guard’s sword over his head.

With a gasp, I took a step back and turned my ankle on a rock. I stumbled and, unable to catch myself, fell flat on my ass, then onto my back, knocking the wind out of myself.

Directly above me now, the thunderbird opened its beak and screamed, and I felt the sound in the base of my stomach. It swooped down, its talons spread. The Kollector and his guards looked up, startled by the sound and the bird’s dive.

It opened its mouth again, but this time it made no sound. A bolt of lightning burst from its open beak. I heard screaming, and it took a moment before I realized it was coming from me. I raised a hand to protect myself, but then I felt the surge of energy and extended my palm instead. My magic blasted from me, redirecting the lightning toward the Kollector. There was an explosion like a tiny atom bomb.

And where he’d been standing, there was suddenly nothing but a swirling cloud of smoke and ash.

**Episode 504**

The swirling mass of smoke and ash that used to be the Kollector blew in my direction. Disgusted, I closed my eyes and turned away, anxious to not inhale any of him. Above me, I heard the thunderbird’s screeching call again. I felt the air stirring over my head as its great wings beat, and it dove down.

Already on the ground, I flinched and curled in on myself, bringing my knees up to my chest, trying to protect my most vulnerable parts from attack. After a moment of silence, my curiosity got the best of me. I opened my eyes in time to see the thunderbird swoop past me and reach out its talons.

In a flash it had snatched one of the guards—a full grown man—clean off his feet and lifted him into the air. The guard’s screams mingled with the screams of the bird, but both faded as the thunderbird carried him higher and higher into the sky, then farther and farther away, over the land.

I stared after him, stunned. “What just happened?” I asked, feeling dazed.

The remaining guards began to back away, all of them looking around. Their expressions were confused, like they’d just woken up from an enchanted slumber.

“What happened?”

“Where am I?”

“What happened to the Kollector?”

Artemis grabbed my shoulders and hauled me to my feet. “You did it. You really did it, Cali!” She was jumping up and down. “You used your magic! You turned that asshole into dust in the wind!”

I looked at the spot where the Kollector had been standing, then at Artemis, and all the memories of the last few moments rushed back to me. “But you didn’t.”

She stopped jumping and the happy, celebratory smile slid off her face.

“We needed them, but you chose not to use your powers, Artemis,” I said slowly, staring at her. “He could have killed me. He *would* have killed me.”

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t have let that happen.”

I looked at her, wondering if I believed her. With a sinking feeling, I realized I didn’t. “I thought we were on the same side, Artemis,” I said, my voice slightly choked.

Her jaw worked, like she was trying not to cry, but her eyes were defiant as she shook her head. “You don’t understand.”

I suddenly felt very, very tired. “What don’t I understand?”

She didn’t answer, just shook her head again.

I sighed. “Why don’t you explain it to me?”

She pressed her lips into a thin line. “When you get what you came for—when you get your moon buttercup—you’re going to go back to the other side. Back to your world, Cali. The world where you belong. You don’t have to stay here, in this world. I do. I live here. Which means that if I’d turned on the Kollector and he’d survived, I would have had to spend the rest of my days working in the mines, or trapped in his harem. I couldn’t have lived like that.” She shook her head again, her eyes distant and so, so sad. “You don’t understand.”

I didn’t answer for a moment. The fact was, she was right. I probably *didn’t* understand. I didn’t know what it took to do what she had done. To survive like she had in a world ravaged by an endless war between the Dark and the Light Fae. A war no one seemed to understand. I looked at Artemis. She had such a hard outer shell—of course she did. How could she have survived without it? She had always been on her own. She had agreed to help me, *offered*, even—and I still didn’t fully understand why—but she’d never promised to do it at the expense of her own freedom.

I bit the inside of my cheek as I thought about the life Artemis must have been forced to live. “You’re right,” I admitted. “I don’t understand. I don’t know what it would be like to live like you’ve lived, your whole life, and I don’t have any right to judge. I’m sorry, Artemis. But” —I pointed to the pile of ash that used to be the Kollector—“he’s collected his last Fae. The Kollector’s gone. Forever. So you’re free.”

Artemis looked to where I pointed, and I watched her eyes widen slightly.

“You’re free,” I said again, gently. “You’re free from whatever debt he told you that you owed him. Maybe now you can figure out what you want to do.”

“He’s really gone?” a voice asked.

“For good?” said another.

I looked up, startled. The squad of guards—minus the one who’d been carried off by the thunderbird—was looking at me curiously. They’d been so quiet while Artemis and I had been speaking that I had, for a moment, forgotten they were there.

“Yeah,” I said, watching them cautiously. “He’s gone. Really gone. But if you think you’re going to carry on his noble work, you’ve got another thing coming.” I raised my hands, ready to try to blast away the first guard who moved toward me. But then they began to drop their weapons.

One by one, they all pulled their swords from their scabbards and dropped them to the ground.

I cast a sidelong look at Artemis, who was watching them closely. “What’s happening?” I asked quietly. “What are they doing?”

She raised her eyebrows. “I think they’re… surrendering to you?”

“Um,” I said, loud enough for the guards to hear. “Anyone want to tell me what you guys are doing?”

The guard who’d handed the Kollector his sword looked at me. “The Kollector is dead. You killed him, did you not?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly, warily. “I did.”

“So the spell he used on us all is broken.”

“Spell? What spell?” I asked, dropping my hands.

“The one that forced us to follow his orders,” the guard said. “The one that compelled us to work for him.

One of the other guards threw down his sword and jumped into the air. “We’re free! We can go back to our families! Thank you, girl who shoots thunder!”

“Thank you!” the guards cried as they turned and hurried off down the road.

I watched them for a long moment, stunned. Then I turned to Artemis. “Okay, that is *not* what I expected to happen just now.”

Artemis laughed. “Yeah, same here.”

“But there’s no time to celebrate,” I said, looking around. “I have to get to the zoo. I have to get to Greyson. *Now*.”

“I’m still willing to help you,” Artemis said. Then she added, with less certainty, “If you’re still willing to let me.”

I thought about it for a moment. Truthfully, I wasn’t sure if I could trust her, but my hesitation only lasted a moment. “I want your help,” I said firmly. “Who knows what trouble lies ahead. I can use all the help I can get.”

Just then there was a shout and we looked up. Figures appeared in the road and, after a moment, they resembled themselves enough that I recognized them as Astrid and Torin, followed by a mob of dirty-faced people.

“I told you we’d catch up,” panted a smiling Astrid when they reached us.

“Who’s your crew?’ I asked, looking over her shoulder at the gathered crowd. They were all wearing clothes as dirty as their faces, but they looked happy and eyed me with lively interest.

Astrid grinned at Torin. “They’re the miners we helped set free.”

Torin turned to look at them. “Freed from the mine, to never return!”

The miners cheered in response, raising their filthy fists into the air.

I threw my arms around Astrid first, then Torin. “I’m so glad you made it,” I said, and I meant it. When we’d parted I hadn’t been sure when—or *if*—I was going to see them again, and my heart was light as I looked at them.

“Okay,” I said, snatching up a guard’s sword from the ground. I turned toward the zoo. “Now let’s go free my werewolf!”

I wondered if the miners had any idea what I was talking about, but my announcement was met with a shout of enthusiasm from the crowd, which filled me with hope. After all the ordeals I’d gone through in the Fae world, I needed this hype crew. I felt like Joan of Arc, leading my troops to victory.

But my mind was on Greyson. There’d been so many distractions on our way to the moon buttercup and on my way to save him. Did he know how much he meant to me? That I would save him too no matter what it took?

*I’m on my way Greyson.*

We hadn’t gone far when we pulled up short, stopped by a thunderous explosion loud enough to push us all back. I stumbled again, and with my hands covering my ears, couldn’t catch myself. I fell back, onto my ass.

“Where did that come from?” Torin asked Astrid.

But his question was answered almost immediately when a jet of fire and a plume of smoke shot up from the zoo.

**Episode 505**

MAYA

The room erupted again as the Redwood pack *freaked out*. Mace stood in the center of the room, his arms folded, a petulantly stubborn look on his face.

I looked around the room, taking in the furious faces of the Redwood pack and the baffled faces of the Blue Blood pack. Honestly, I didn’t see what the big deal was. I could have walked out the door right now and left both packs behind without a second thought. I sighed as the noise in the large room grew louder. Maybe I still would.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up and I looked over, finding Colton’s gaze on me. I shivered a little.

Okay, maybe walking away wouldn’t be *that* easy.

“Enough!” Joss shouted, her voice carrying over the cacophony of the room. “Everyone, quiet!” She turned to Mace. “Listen. Mace. I get where you’re coming from, and I understand that you’re angry, but you’ve come up with a really terrible solution.”

There was some mutinous grumbling from the Blue Blood pack at this, but Joss ignored them.

“You’re being motivated by anger and fear instead of logic, and I think you probably know it.”

Mace bristled and rounded on Joss, but before he could speak, Pip moved to stand beside him. She put her hand on Mace’s arm and he stilled for a moment.

Joss took a deep breath. “I thought the whole reason you called us together was so that we could fight Silas… *together*. Or at least strategize together. Come up with a plan of attack. Organize. But instead, you brought us here just so you could throw us out? Divide us? Do exactly what Silas wants?” She shook her head. “That’s absurd, Mace. That’s not what we should be doing right now, and you know it.”

The room was silent now. You could have heard a pin drop as all eyes turned to Mace, looking for his response. The energy in the room had changed. I could feel it. Joss had made good points, unwinding the anger and fear everyone was feeling, pointing out Mace’s faulty logic. People looked to him, wondering if he’d be able to explain her reasoning away.

He didn’t say anything.

Shaggy stood up. “I hate to admit it, man,” he said, looking at Mace, “but Joss has a point.” Mace glowered at him, but Shaggy just sighed and shrugged. “Well, she does,” he added, then sat back down.

Mace looked around the room at the other members of his pack. “We should discuss this as a pack,” he said sharply. He turned to Joss. “Leave us alone. We’ll decide what to do about you Redwoods and then we’ll let you know. Now get out.”

Joss rolled her eyes, but nodded. “Fine. Let’s go,” she said.

I followed her and the rest of the Redwoods out of the room and down the hall.

Joss led us outside, for which I was grateful. I wanted some fresh air after that shitshow.

We stepped out into the ruined front yard of the Blue Blood pack’s house. Joss sat down on the front steps. She didn’t let her shoulders sag or drop her head into her hands or anything. She was just sitting, her back straight, blue hair blowing in the wind, but there was something about her that looked tired. She must have been tired of fighting, and I wondered, for the zillionth time, where the hell Greyson was.

Lola was looking around, her eyes scanning the horizon beyond the yard. “Do you think he’s out there?”

“Who?” I asked when no one responded to her.

She raised her eyebrows at me. “Silas, of course.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not,” Lola protested. “He could be. He might be. Just out there somewhere, watching us…”

“Shut up, Lola,” Joss said quickly. “The last thing we need is to get ourselves worked into hysterics.”

“I know, but—”

“Silas isn’t going to take on two packs at once,” Joss said, looking up at her. “That would be too reckless. Even for Silas.”

Lola didn’t look completely satisfied with this answer, but she did stop talking. She looked down at the ground and kicked at a stone. I walked down the steps and leaned against the dusty siding of the house with a sigh. After a moment, Colton joined me, looking out in the same direction as me.

“I was worried,” he said simply.

“About what?’ I asked, looking up at him.

He shrugged. “I just thought, given the opportunity, you would have been the first one to run off.”

I looked at him, trying to read his expression. Trying to see if he was joking. But I couldn’t tell. His head was tilted back, and I couldn’t see his face.

I shrugged back at him. “I’m not going to take a chance on my own. Not right now.” I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t consider leaving in the future.”

Colton nodded. “Duly noted.”

We both looked up as Jay walked over.

“Hey,” he said.

Colton and I stared at him without responding.

Jay looked uncomfortable and shifted on his feet. “How’s Lola?”

As one, Colton and I shrugged.

“She seems a little stressed,” Jay continued doggedly. “She’s stressed, right?”

I passed a hand over my eyes. “Why don’t you ask her yourself, Jay?”

“What?” he asked, looking a little taken aback.

“If you want to talk to her, then here’s an idea—why don’t you try talking to her?”

“I don’t know. She’s—”

“If you’re wondering if she’s still upset about you siding with the pack instead of her, then yeah, she’s still upset about it,” I said, irritated.

Jay sighed. “She put me in a very difficult position. I just wish she’d try to see things from my perspective.”

I grabbed Jay by the shoulders and spun him around so he was facing the direction Lola had taken when she’d disappeared. “She’s out there. Go explain your perspective to her, man.”

Jay took a deep breath and stepped forward, out of my grasp, heading after Lola.

I turned as Colton started to laugh.

“What?” I snapped.

He shook his head. “Nothing, nothing. I just didn’t know you moonlighted as a couples therapist, that’s all.”

I punched his arm hard enough that he winced. “You say anything like that to me again and I’ll rip out your throat.”

Colton grinned.

But the grin slid off his face as the house’s front door opened and Mace and Pip stepped outside, accompanied by a few others from the Blue Blood pack.

Joss stood and turned, looking up at Mace, who stayed at the top of the porch, looking down on the rest of us. He did not look happy. His face was a strange mottled color, like he’d been very mad and very frightened in a very short period of time. He kept flexing his fingers, curling them into fists.

“Have you decided?” Joss asked.

He gave a curt nod. “Yeah. We’ve talked it over,” he said, jerking his head toward the other people assembled on the porch. “And, for the safety of all involved, the Redwood pack and the Blue Blood pack will remain allies.”

The response from the Redwood pack was mixed. Some—like Rishika—were happy, but others—like Colton—rolled their eyes.

Joss quieted everyone down with a look. “Are there any conditions?” she asked Mace.

He shook his head. “No. The Redwood pack can stay here, in this pack house.” The line of his mouth turned hard. “For now.”

“What does that mean?” Jay asked.

Lola scoffed. “And then one day you kick us out?”

Mace looked around, clearly irritated by the barrage of questions. His gaze settled on Joss and he jerked his head toward the house. “Come in and we’ll talk details.”

Joss nodded and walked up the porch steps, following him into the house.

Colton pushed off the wall as chatter broke out again. When he looked at me, a grin was fixed firmly on his face. “Well, I guess you’re stuck with me now.”

I glowered at him, which made his smile grow, but deep down, I was rather pleased. I was growing to like my ‘Colton with benefits’ situation, and I wasn’t ready to give it up. Not yet, anyway.

The door opened again and Shaggy came bounding down the steps. “Hey, Colton.”

“Hey, Shaggy,” Colton said, letting himself be pulled into a backslapping hug.

But when Shaggy turned to me, I took a step back. He had a weird vibe that I’d never liked. But Shaggy didn’t seem interested in a hug. Actually, he seemed to want to get rid of me. He looked back at Colton and tried to speak so softly, his mouth barely moved. “Can I talk to you? Alone?” he added, with a look at me.

I rolled my eyes, completely expecting Colton to nod and follow him back into the those.

But he didn’t. Colton shot a glance at Shaggy, then crossed his arms. “Just tell me.”

Shaggy eyed me warily, but apparently decided to trust me. Or ignore me. Either way, he looked at Colton and spoke in a loud whisper that carried much farther than a normal quiet voice ever would. “I think I saw your mother.”

**Episode 506**

GREYSON

Xavier looked at me, his eyes flashing with anger. “I want to make something really clear to you, Greyson,” he said, his voice as angry as I’d ever heard it. “Cali doesn’t need your help. You got that?”

I stared at him, forcing myself to stay silent even as the hundreds of times Cali *had* needed my help since we’d entered the Fae world flashed through my mind. But I needed Xavier’s help to get out of here, and I didn’t want to piss him off. Not any more than I already had, anyway. Still, I couldn’t help but shake my head. If Xavier had any idea of what Cali and I had been up against—if he knew even half of what’d we’d faced since we’d been here—he might not have been so quick to dismiss my offer of help.

But I couldn’t blame him for that. I would have done the same thing, before I’d come here. There was nothing that could have prepared me for what I’d seen since.

“Don’t let your anger get the best of you,” I warned, though I knew he wouldn’t listen. “You always do this. *Think,* Xavier. Think before you blow me off.”

But Xavier was already shaking his head, even before I’d finished speaking. “Don’t bother, Greyson. You may have figured out how to manipulate Cali into believing you, but it’s not going to work on me. I’m not likely to fall under your spell.” His eyes were ice cold. “I’ve seen too much.”

There was no mercy in Xavier’s gaze. Nothing I said was going to change his mind. I took a step back. “If that’s how you feel, then that’s how you feel,” I said.

“That’s how I feel,” he said, his tone bitterly mocking. He took a step back and looked up, taking in the dome, then his angry eyes flicked back to mine. “I came here to kill you, Greyson.”

I nodded. That didn’t surprise me.

“But I’ve changed my mind. I’m not going to kill you. I’m going to leave you here.” He nodded toward Nessie, over my shoulder. “I’m going to leave you to rot here.”

My mouth was dry as Xavier took a step back, like he was going to walk away. I opened my mouth to speak, but what the hell was I going to say? I wasn’t going to change his mind. I knew it. He knew it. We’d always been heading toward a moment like this. I was almost surprised it’d taken us this long.

“Xavier,” I started, though I knew it was useless, but something stopped me.

It was a huge explosion, loud enough we both flinched and looked around. The sound came from far away, but it rocked the ground beneath our feet.

Xavier took off running toward the source of the sound—without another word, and without looking back.

I watched him disappear around a bend in the pathway, then turned my gaze to the plume of smoke rising into the sky. In the very center of it I could see flames—bright orange and red, rising as high as the smoke. Shit. That was not good.

What the hell had just happened? I stared at the smoke, thinking hard, hoping against hope that whatever it was had nothing to do with Cali.

Fury coursed through me at the thought of her name, and I slammed my hands against the barrier. The force field shivered with the impact. “*FUCK!*” I screamed, my body knotted with rage. Why was Xavier so stubborn? How could he let his fear and insecurity stop him from helping his own brother? His own *blood*?

I looked out, down the path where he’d disappeared, feeling despondent. Maybe I should have explained everything. Gone back to the beginning, when he’d been gone and Cali had been intent on a suicide mission to save her mother. What would he have wanted me to do? Let her go alone?

I shook my head. Even if he’d let me tell him what happened, he never would have believed me. Xavier was happiest when he was thinking the worst of me.

“Wow.”

I turned around to see Nessie staring at me with her big, soulful eyes.

“What?” I snapped.

She blinked slowly. “That was *intense*.”

I grunted in agreement.   
 “Not a lot of brotherly love going on there, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say so, no,” I admitted. Then I sighed. “There never was. I guess we never really had a chance. It just wasn’t meant to be.”

Nessie nodded her huge head sympathetically. “I understand. I have a sister, you know. She and I never really got along, either. I’ve always hoped that we’d get the chance to make up.” She smiled. “Maybe someday you and your brother will have a chance, too.”

Cali flashed into my mind. I thought of her smile, the way her hand felt in mine, the way her body felt pressed against me… I shook my head. “Yeah, that’s probably not in the cards for me and Xavier.” I turned back to the barrier and scanned the whole thing, top to bottom. There *had* to be way out. “We have to figure this out, Nessie. It’s chaos out there, and neither of us is going to stand a chance at survival if we don’t get out of here.”

Beyond the barrier, I could see the creatures of the zoo running in all directions. They were flying when they could, but fighting, too.

I shook my head. “We can’t expect any of them to notice us. We’re too far off the path, and they’re all running for their own freedom. We have to figure this out for ourselves.” I looked up again, my eyes on the top of the dome. “Any ideas?”

Behind me, there was a massive splashing noise, like Nessie was emerging from the water. It sounded like she was coming toward me. But then the sound changed. It got quieter, and I heard the gentle slap of feet—regular human feet—on the ground, moving toward me. I turned around and stared, open-mouthed with shock.

There, where Nessie should have been, was a tall, lithe woman with red hair. She was stunningly beautiful, and she was walking toward me.

“Nessie?” I asked stupidly.

The woman’s sculptural face broke into a sweet smile, and she nodded. “It’s me, Greyson.”

“What… What *are* you?” I asked, not caring how rude I sounded.

“I’m a kelpie.”

I shook my head. “I have no idea what that is.”

“You should,” she said, raising a perfect eyebrow. “Because you’re one, too, in a way. We’re both shapeshifters, aren’t we?”

“Shapeshifters, huh? Well, do you have any magic?” I asked, cutting to the chase. “Specifically any magic that can get us through this barrier?”

Nessie shook her head sadly, looking around at the dome. “No. I can shift into many forms, but I can’t perform any magic. I’m sorry, Greyson.”

“Don’t apologize,” I said briskly. “I can’t either.” I gave her a small smile. “We have that in common, too.”

I moved to the door I’d entered through, but I knew it was no use. I’d already unsuccessfully tried to break through it as a wolf. I rolled my shoulders, still feeling the pain from my failed attempts.

“There has to be a way out of here,” I growled, pacing away. “There just has to be.”

I looked back out of the dome, onto the pathway just in front of us. There was a bull on the pathway, pawing at the dirt, snorting. One of its horns was broken, hanging limply down. When it looked up, I saw that its eyes were red as hellfire. The thing looked like it’d been made by the devil himself.

Then, to my surprise, Nessie raised a hand and gave it a friendly wave.

“Do you know that thing?” I asked her.

Nessie looked over at me. “He’s a bonnacon. We were brought here together.” She tipped her head and looked at the bull thoughtfully. “I wonder if he still remembers me.”

As if in answer, the bull turned to face us, its sinister eyes glancing from Nessie to me, then back to Nessie.

I knew that look, and backed the hell up.

The bull snorted and charged, smashing straight through the domed barrier.

Which immediately dissolved.

I stood, shocked, for a long moment.

The bull pulled to a stop, then looked at me, then over at Nessie. She looked surprised, but walked forward and patted him on the head.   
 “Thank you for that,” she said to the bull. “We really had no idea how to do it on our own. I can’t tell you how much you’ve helped us.”

The bull snorted again and dropped his head, almost like he was bowing to her. Then he turned away, heading back the way he’d come.

Finally coming back to my senses, I took a step forward. “I guess he did remember you. Come on, Nessie. We’ve got to go. I have to find Cali before Xavier does.”

**Episode 507**

LOLA

I’d shifted as soon as we’d left the Blue Blood pack’s house. I hadn’t waited for Joss’s okay, because I didn’t need it.

Sure, she was the Luna of the Redwood pack, but she wasn’t my mother. Standing in that meeting, listening to Mace’s doomsday prophecy about Silas, feeling Jay’s accusing gaze on me… It had all just been too much—shifting had been the only thing I could think about. Like an itch that I needed to scratch.

That was how it got for me sometimes, when everything became too much. And when we’d burst out of the house, I’d been overwhelmed by the urge to let my instincts take over. So I’d handed over the reins.

It felt amazing to just let myself run as fast as I could—leaping over fallen logs and across streams. I was racing through the trees, finally able to breathe for what felt like the first time in hours, but there was a small voice in the back of my head warning me not to go too far. Now more than ever, there were too many dangers. And as much as I wanted to get away, I knew that the pack had to stick together.

How was I supposed to do any of this without Cali here? And where was she? Was she okay? Some best friend I was. I’d done my best at The Chop Shop, but I was still here and she was… well, wherever she was.

My thoughts only made me run faster. I looped around a stand of trees and started back to the house. I didn’t really want to go back, but knew I should. I’d made it about halfway when I saw Jay, in wolf form, running toward me. Damn it.

I turned around quickly. Jay was coming fast, sprinting after me. He corralled me through a beautiful meadow before stopping in the middle of the meadow. Our eyes met each other, both of us breathing hard.

Jay was the first to shift back to human. He pushed the hair out of his eye. “Lola, we have to talk.”

I hesitated for a moment, then shifted back too. But I didn’t speak—I stared. My eyes traveled over Jay’s naked body, taking in his golden skin, his sleek muscles, his flat belly and strong shoulders… I’d mated GOOD.

He cleared his throat and I looked back up at his face, where I should have been looking the entire time.

“How are you?” he asked. “Why’d you run off like that?”

How was I? I didn’t know the answer, so I dodged the question. “What do you think about Silas? Do you think he’s back?”

Jay shrugged. It looked like Silas was the last thing on his mind, and clearly not what he’d wanted to talk about.

“What do you think we should do about it?” I asked.

Jay blew out a breath. “I’ll do whatever the pack decides.”

My whole body tensed. “Well, that tracks.”

His eyes flashed. “What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” I asked hotly. “That’s what you care about, right? The pack?”

“Lola—”

“What about *us*, Jay?” I asked, cutting him off. “What’s happening with me and you?”

Jay stared at me, his jaw working silently. The look in his eye changed over and over, like he was flashing through a thousand scenarios. We hadn’t been the same since I’d gone with the twins and Maya to find the Fae portal and Jay had stayed with the pack. We were trying to act like everything was normal, but I could just… *feel* something wedging its way between us.

Finally he said, in a quiet voice, “I don’t know. I’m not sure. What do *you* think is happening?”

“I’m not sure either,” I admitted. Then I shrugged. “This is the first time we’ve had a fight.” I looked down at the spring-green grass at my feet. “I can handle being apart from you, Jay. I did that when I was in Minnesota, but this is different. It hurts.”

I was looking down, so I saw Jay’s bare feet take a step toward me. Then I felt his hand on my face, his fingers gently stroking my cheek.

“I’m sorry, Lola,” he said softly.

I leaned into his touch. I hated to admit it, but I was hungry for it. His hands felt warm—his blood was probably still pumping hard from his run in wolf form.

“It hurts me, too,” he admitted. “It hurts like hell. Not just being away from you, though that’s bad enough. It’s more—I hate knowing you’re upset.”

I looked up, into his eye. “You chose the pack over me, Jay. I can’t forget that. I keep trying to, but I can’t. I’m your *mate*.”

Jay took that in, looking at me for a long, long time. “Lola,” he finally said. “That’s not how I see it.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean? How do you see it?”

“You left me to look for Cali. Did you ever consider how that made me feel?”  
 That stopped me. I shifted on my feet, thinking hard. Because no, I hadn’t. I hadn’t considered how that would’ve made him feel. I shook my head. “No. But you have to understand, Jay, I was worried about Cali. I still am. We’re like sisters.”

“I know,” he said gently. “I understand that, I really do. But…” He looked away, up at the sky, and when he looked at me again, there was pain in his expression. “You weren’t here back in the old days. During the Pack Wars. Or when Silas was here—when he terrorized the packs. Be thankful you weren’t—I am. But if you had been, maybe you’d understand how horrifying it was.” He shook his head, his face growing pale and tense. “It was such a dark time. I hate to think of it. I never do, if I can help it. But now…”

“Jay—”

“You have to understand, Lola, that that’s where this fear is coming from—what him being back will mean for the pack.”

“I get that,” I said, nodding. “I really do.”

A warm breeze blew through the meadow, lifting the hair from my shoulders. I crossed my arms over my chest.

Jay pressed his mouth into a thin line. “Thinking that he might be back was bad enough, but now that we *know* he’s back… Silas’s return has shaken everyone, and it’s only going to get worse. I know you’re close to Cali, and I care about her too, I really do. But I stayed behind because I wanted to protect you.”

I stared at him. “Protect me?” I asked incredulously. “Protect me by leaving me? How the hell does that work?”

His expression had an edge of irritation. “Protect you by making the pack strong.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay.”

“We need to stick together. We need all of our combined strength if we even want a chance to defeat Silas.”

I took a deep breath. “He’s really that bad?”

Jay nodded slowly. “Worse. That’s why I wanted you to stay with me—so I could protect you, keep you safe. But I couldn’t stop you from going after Cali. I wouldn’t have stopped you even if I could have.” He gave me a small smile that made my heart beat fast. “But I’m glad you’re back now.”

He leaned forward, slipping his arms around my waist. His body was warm as he pressed himself against me. He pressed his lips to mine quickly, then pulled back.   
 “I missed you so much,” he whispered against my lips.

I hadn’t known it before he’d said it, but this was all I needed to hear. I pressed myself against him and crushed his lips with mine, tangling my tongue with his.

Warm from the run and burning for each other, we melded together.

There was a part of me that was angry, and I could still feel it when I kissed him, my teeth biting a little harder than was strictly necessary. But mostly I was hungry, and my hands couldn’t move across his skin fast enough.

He seemed to feel the same way and his hands moved down, molding themselves around the curve of my ass. “Lola,” he whispered, moving his mouth down, trailing kisses down my neck to my collar bone. “I’ve missed you so much.”

I gasped and dropped my head back as he kissed the notch at the base of my throat. It was a sensitive spot, and he loved to spend time there.

While my attention was caught, he moved his hands from my ass and slipped one arm around my shoulders, one around the back of my knees. Then he swept me into his arms. He kissed me for a moment longer, then laid me down carefully in the soft, green grass of the meadow.

It tickled my back and the underside of my knees, but it was soft and sunbaked and I reached up for Jay, pulling him down on top of me. I loved the feel of him over me and he hovered for only a moment, his kisses soft and sweet, before he slipped himself into my core. My Jay. My mate. My one. I moaned and wrapped my legs around his back, drawing him in deeper.

Jay laced his fingers through mine as he finished, his whole body tight and solid until his release, which turned him boneless. He relaxed on top of me, panting, smiling, and kissing me.

“Lola,” he kept whispering, over and over. “Lola. Lola…”

“I’ve missed you, too,” I panted. The heat from my core was spreading outward, consuming me. My eyes squeezed shut as the ecstasy overtook me.

**Episode 508**

The flames in the sky made me squint, then shield my eyes against their brightness. “What the *hell* is that?” I demanded, looking around.

Astrid and Torin were looking up, shocked.

Artemis shook her head. “No idea. I’ve never seen anything like that,” she added, her tone low and awestruck.

My stomach clenched with fear. I only had one thought. “Greyson. We have to get to Greyson!”

“Cali! Wait!”

But I didn’t. I was already running toward the zoo, my heart racing. As I drew closer, I saw something running toward me.

My hands were sweating—everything was sweating—but I tightened my grip on the sword. Why couldn’t I have found a *lighter* weapon?

The thing moving toward me came close enough that I was able to make it out, but I blinked, unsure even as it drew closer. It looked like a deer, but it had wings like a bird. It was looking around in every direction, its large eyes terrified as it ran on small, cloven feet.

“What the hell is that?” I asked, slowing slightly and lowering the sword.

“It’s a peryton,” Astrid said, panting, drawing level with me.

“It is dangerous?’ I asked warily. It didn’t look dangerous, but I’d learned to be cautious of everything in the Fae world.

Astrid shook her head, still breathing hard. “It wouldn’t hurt a fly, Cali.”

“It’s so beautiful,” I said, my heart rate starting to slow slightly, now that I knew that the peryton wasn’t going to gouge my eyes out. “I feel so bad for it. Is it escaping?”

Astrid nodded. “Probably. And it was probably scared by the explosion. They’re very skittish. Scare easily.”

The peryton was a soft gray, and I reached out to stroke its neck. It shied away, but relaxed as my fingers made contact.

“Oh!” I said, surprised. The Peryton wasn’t covered with fur, as I’d thought, but with tiny feathers, soft and silky. As I stroked her, I could see that they were iridescent in the sunlight. The animal seemed to relax under my hand and looked up at me, her eyes wide and trusting. I smiled at her and leaned closer. “You haven’t seen a werewolf, have you?”

By this time Torin and Artemis had caught up, and Artemis snorted with laughter. “It’s a peryton, Cali. It doesn’t talk.”

I looked down at the peryton. I should have known, of course, but there was so much intelligence in her eyes. Even if she didn’t speak, I had a feeling she could understand me. But I looked up when Torin called out.

“Watch out!”

He was pointing at a two-headed dog the size of a small pony that was galloping toward us. One head was barking loudly and the other was running with its mouth open, its tongue bouncing with every step.

“OH MY GOD!” Torin shrieked. He’d definitely picked that up from me. “We have to get out of here! They’re deadly! They’re vicious!”

The dog was already on top of us. I jumped out the way, pulling the peryton after me, but Torin stayed still, frozen with fear. The dog bowled him over and stood over him, both heads looking down. For a moment, no one moved, then both heads began to lick him. They yipped happily, licking Torin like an ice cream cone.

Torin—after a shocked moment—began to giggle. “It likes me!” He looked around at us, making sure we were seeing what he was seeing. “The orthus likes me. Astrid! It *likes* me!”

“I can see that, Torin,” Astrid said, laughing shakily.

Torin, still laughing, reached up to pet the orthus.

Artemis looked up, away from Torin—and the friendly orthus that was slobbering all over Torin—and toward the zoo. “This place is huge.” She glanced over at me. “If we want to make any progress in here, we’re going to have to split up.”

My instinct was to tell her no, but then I thought about it for a moment. With the Kollector dead, the danger was gone too. There were no more guards, no more threat. I shrugged. “I guess that’s fine. We’ll be able to cover more ground that way.” I nodded, convinced, and looked around at the group. “Okay, but if anyone finds Greyson, let him know I’m here. Tell him I’m looking for him and that I’m coming for him.”

They all agreed and, when we reached the entrance, we went in different directions. I raced into the heart of the zoo, my eyes peeled for Greyson but also keeping a wary eye on the creatures racing around the paths. The flames were still spiking into the sky, and I looked up to them occasionally as well. There was a lot to take in, and I had to keep reminding myself to breathe.

Then the wind changed, and even breathing got harder. The smoke plume shifted, blowing right at me, enveloping me, obscuring my vision. I coughed, my eyes watering, but I plunged on, into the smoke. I had to keep going. I *had* to find Greyson.

My throat was dry and my lungs burned like fire, but I kept walking, blinking hard, trying to keep my vision clear. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the smoke cleared, whipped away by a sharp breeze.

And I froze.

Standing in front of me, perfectly still in the chaos of the fleeing creatures, was Xavier.

Even from a distance, his blue eyes pierced through me and the sunlight glanced off the sharp planes of his face. His broad, muscled shoulders caught the sunlight, his tan skin glowing. He was naked—wait *what*?

I blinked. Then I blinked again. This was a dream. It *had* to be. I wanted to see him, so I was just imagining him standing there, ten feet in front of me.

But… what about that talk of another werewolf? Brown hair, they’d said. Blue eyes. Black fur.

Oh my god.

“Cali.”

His deep, resonant voice was like a physical touch, and my whole body responded, every nerve ending lighting on fire. How long had it been since I’d heard his voice? Since I’d heard my name on his tongue? It felt like years.

For all the riotous thoughts that were going on within me, I couldn’t move toward him. Not a muscle. Not a little finger. Xavier’s face was like stone as he strode toward me, but his eyes burned like fire. He crossed the distance between us, ignoring the madness as animals ran and flew in every direction, and stepped up to me, sweeping me into his arms. The wind was completely knocked from me. I was breathless, holding him.

It was the sweetest, most desperate agony, and I was abruptly certain that I was going to shatter into a million pieces. Then he pressed his lips to mine and the sharp, hungry pressure made my whole body feel liquid. My sword clattered to the ground as I clutched him, digging my fingers into his shoulders, feeling the familiar knotting of his muscles beneath my hands. His tongue pressed through my lips, and out of habit I opened to him willingly. I wanted him to take everything I had. I wanted to give it. The feel of his arms around me made me feel electrified, like I’d touched a livewire, and I wanted more and more and more…

But it was more than that. I could feel tears streaming down my face. I felt safe in his arms. I’d been scared ever since we’d come to the Kollector, but being held by Xavier felt like it always had, from the very first moment I’d met him.

His kisses softened and he pulled back slightly, gently biting my bottom lip, then kissing me one last time. When he pulled back to look at me his eyes ranged across my face, drinking me in.

I looked back, still staring at him in disbelief. I felt drunk. “What are you doing here?”

He gave his head a little shake, like this wasn’t a very bright question. “I came for you.”

It sounded like a simple answer, but I knew better. It had been hard as hell to get into the Fae world, and harder still once I’d gotten inside. And he’d come after me. He’d risked his life to come here, just to find me, and I could feel tears welling in my eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were Fae?” he asked, his voice soft and his lips close.

“I—” I stopped. I didn’t have an answer. He kissed me again. His hands moved across my back, holding me close, like he was never going to let go. This time it was me who pulled back. “Thank you,” I murmured.

“Cali.” He said my name against my lips. “I will always come for you.”

This jogged my mind from the complete haze it was in and I stepped back, my breath hitching with fear. “*Greyson*.”

“What?” Xavier asked.

“Greyson!” I repeated, panic shooting through me. “Where’s Greyson? Have you seen him?”

**Episode 509**

XAVIER

I froze as Cali watched me expectantly, her question hanging in the air above us, ready to come crashing down on me at any second.

*Where’s Greyson? Have you seen him?*

Of course I’d seen him—and I’d never wanted to rip his throat out more. He was lucky that the barrier had stopped me from finishing him off when I’d found him. He was tough, but I’d had more than enough fury pumping through me to overpower him. I still couldn’t believe he’d acted like the good guy in this situation, like *I* was the threat. He’d told me he’d come here to help Cali, that he’d never been a threat to her. More lies.

He’d never denied working with Silas, which was maybe the only truth he’d conveyed during our little chat. I almost wished he’d tried to lie, even though I would have been hard-pressed to believe a single word that came out of his mouth. Because if he’d been working with Silas all along, it would have cast the past few months into a new light, filled my mind with a whole new set of questions, and all kinds of new implications.

Greyson was a liar, a traitor. That much hadn’t changed, even when he’d become Alpha, even when he’d ditched his pack to follow Cali into the Fae world.

And apparently she’d believed those lies, because now she was staring at me with unabashed hope and worry, waiting for me to answer her question. How could she possibly believe Greyson had helped her, that he was capable of doing anything for anyone but himself?

I knew firsthand what Silas was capable of, just like I knew Greyson was cut from the same cloth. He was more than capable of the exact same horrors. I had to protect Cali from that—*from him*—even if she ended up hating me for it. She’d learn the truth sooner or later, and then she’d understand.

I took a deep breath and then shook my head, frowning just a little to show my ‘disappointment.’ “I haven’t seen him, Cali. I’m sorry.”

The hope in her eyes flickered, and she looked past me, toward the still-smoking zoo. She took a step in that direction. “We have to look for him.”

I caught her arm before she could breeze past me. “Why? I just told you, I didn’t see him in here.”

“Because he’s been imprisoned in the zoo!” She turned the full force of her glare on me, and it was a testament to how much I’d missed her that it filled me with fondness rather than frustration. “We can’t just leave him here, Xavier.”

I didn’t let her go. “Cali, I just came from the zoo. I didn’t see him.”

“But he has to be—”

“I doubt it,” I said, cutting her off. “You’ve seen all the animals escaping—the place is complete chaos right now. He probably escaped. Besides, he’s a werewolf. Wherever he is, he can look after himself. We should move on.”

Her eyes narrowed and she tried to tug me along with her. I refused to budge. “Why are you in such a hurry to dismiss him?” she asked. “I know you two haven’t always gotten along, but that doesn’t mean he deserves to be abandoned.”

She was right; he didn’t deserve to be abandoned. He deserved a hell of a lot worse. He’d gotten off lucky when I’d left him in that zoo. But she didn’t need to know that. I shook my head. “I’m not dismissing anyone. I’m just stating a fact—Greyson is very well-equipped to take care of himself. Wherever he is, I’m sure he’s just fine. He doesn’t need us to come to his rescue, and it’s not like we know where he is anyway. Hell, maybe he’s on his way back to the human world as we speak.”

She scanned my face, and I kept my expression as placating as possible. This scrutiny didn’t gel with the Cali I remembered. The Cali who’d trusted me implicitly. What had Greyson been telling her, to make her look at me like that? She sighed, her expression softening. “I know how you feel about your brother, but it would mean a lot to me if we could look for him. Please.”

Well, shit. What was I supposed to say to that? I recognized the expression on her face—it was one I’d seen a lot of since I’d met her: pure determination. When she was wearing that expression, there was no stopping her. That was the one thing Greyson and I had agreed on: a determined Cali was a force of nature, and you didn’t get in her way.

After a beat, I nodded. “Okay. If you really want to look for him, come on.”

We started toward the zoo, and I immediately began brainstorming ways to keep Cali away from the kelpie exhibit. Apparently I’d gone about this whole thing the wrong way; I’d assumed Cali would be more willing to ditch Greyson after I lied about not seeing him. I’d assumed that, even if she did learn the truth, it’d be long after today, after time and circumstances changed her perspective. Hell, I’d hoped she’d be so happy to see me, she’d forget about Greyson altogether.

Apparently, I’d been wrong on all counts.

“I know you’re not his biggest fan,” Cali said, her voice soft as we made our way back to the zoo, “but Greyson has risked a lot to help me. He left the pack to come here with me and keep me safe, and he’s protected me the whole time.” She told me all about their adventures in the Fae world, about meeting her grandmother and being taken captive, about Greyson being beaten and imprisoned, about the dangers they’d faced crossing into Dark Fae territory, facing down threats and being taken captive by a monster that lived in a well, being sold off to the Kollector and trying to fight their way out before running into me. “He’s even protected my friends, Astrid and Torin,” she finished. “I couldn’t have done this without him.”

I grunted in response, my head spinning. It was worse than I’d thought—Greyson had completely manipulated Cali, brainwashed her into believing he was capable of helping her, that he was looking out for her best interests. I was disgusted. If only she knew the truth about my maniacal half-brother, she wouldn’t have hesitated to leave him behind.

Just like I had.

I shoved down the guilt I felt for lying to her. I’d done it to protect her, and I’d do it again in a heartbeat.

As we neared the zoo, we passed more and more freed creatures running around. I tensed, recalling my run-ins with the bonnacon and the chupacabra. “Be careful,” I told Cali. “These are not gentle animals.”

We cautiously moved forward, freezing in place as a huge, snow-white bird flew overhead. I was extremely aware that I wasn’t at the top of the food chain anymore. As we got closer to the kelpie exhibit, the knot in my gut tightened. If we found Greyson still trapped in that exhibit, there was no way Cali would leave without helping him escape. And he’d probably waste no time tattling about our little meeting earlier.

I’d just gotten Cali back, and I was already lying to her.

Maybe I needed to tell her the truth. We’d had trust issues in the past, and if she found out I’d lied to her again…

The thought made me feel sick.

Up ahead, a harried-looking man was zigzagging along the path. His face was blotchy, tears streaming down his face. “My babies! All my babies have escaped!” he cried frantically. “Someone help me!”

He ran up to us, waving his hands in the air. “Have you seen my jackalope?”

Cali shook her head. “I haven’t, but do you know where the werewolf exhibit is?”

“That exhibit was never completed.” The zookeeper pouted. “We put the werewolf in with the kelpie.” He pointed toward the exhibit and I grimaced. Fucking perfect.

Cali frowned. “You never should have captured any of these creatures! It’s not right to keep them caged up! Shame on you!”

Despite the complete and utter failure of my plan, I smiled to myself. Cali was always on the side of right.

But did that mean that I was in the wrong here? I was lying to her, trying to keep her away from Greyson…

Before I could ponder more, Cali took off toward the kelpie exhibit, and I had no choice but to follow.

My heart raced as we approached the exhibit—and Greyson. What was I going to say? How was I going to explain this?

When we reached the exhibit, the shimmering barrier was gone, the sign was broken, and the exhibit was empty.

Greyson was gone. Not dead. Not trapped. He was out there in the Fae world somewhere, probably pissed off and looking for Cali.

*Well, shit.*

**Episode 510**

The exhibit looked like it had been completely ransacked. “What happened here?” I looked around, as if Greyson might pop up from behind the torn-up shrubbery, sporting a new loincloth or maybe just a strategically placed leaf—

*Not now, Cali! What’s wrong with you?*

One of these days I’d have to do a deep-dive examination of the broken parts of my psyche that made me react like this to stressful situations. But that would have to wait. I kneeled down next to the broken sign and flipped it over. This *was* the kelpie exhibit, wasn’t it? Or had we simply come the wrong way?

The sign, which had been split almost completely down the middle, read KELPIE. We were in the right place, so where had Greyson gone? Was he okay? I couldn’t decide whether it was good or bad that there didn’t seem to be any signs of injury to any inhabitants of the exhibit. I mean, obviously it was good to not have found chewed up bits of Greyson—or any other creature—littering the place. But that still didn’t answer my question.

“Where’s Greyson?” I asked.

I stood, ready to turn around, find that zookeeper, and ask him for help finding the werewolf he’d put on display. It only seemed fair, seeing as he’d kept all these creatures captive for so long. It seemed fitting that he be responsible for ensuring their safety now that they were free. But as soon as I stood upright, Xavier lunged and knocked me back down to the ground.

His arms were tight around me, and he twisted our bodies so that he took the brunt of our combined weight as we hit the ground. I gasped. “What the—”

A massive bull came charging past, and I felt air whoosh past me. Those sharp horns had only missed me by a few inches. The bull continued on, thankfully. I’d pretty much met my danger quota for the rest of my life.

I climbed to my feet and glanced around, my focus still on one thing and one thing alone. “Where’s Greyson? Do you think that bull got him?”

Xavier stood as well, shrugging. “We don’t even know if that zookeeper was telling the truth. Maybe Greyson was never here at all.”

My heart sank. No, that was impossible. I knew he’d been taken to the zoo. The Kollector had been ecstatic to add a werewolf to his collection. It made sense for Greyson to have ended up here. And I had to find him. Had to make sure he was okay. After everything he’d done for me—everything he’d given up to help me—I owed him that much, at least.

Xavier shifted uncomfortably. “Cali, we can’t stay here forever.”

What was his deal? Did Xavier truly hate his brother so much that he couldn’t be bothered to expend a single ounce of energy looking for him? Even after everything I’d told him about Greyson helping me?

It was like he wasn’t even listening to me. Every time I said *Greyson*, his eyes just glazed over in fury. He didn’t care about his brother, and he definitely didn’t care about the fact that *I* cared about his brother. It was just like old times. Xavier knew best, and there was no changing his mind once he’d decided something.

Well, tough shit, because I wasn’t changing my mind either.

“No!” I snapped. “I’m not leaving until we find him. I’m the reason he got captured in the first place. I’m the reason he’s been in danger ever since we set foot in the Fae world, and I’m not leaving him!”

Xavier’s eyes flashed, and for a second he looked like he was going to rage at me, or maybe just storm off—he’d always been so good at both of those things, whenever we’d fought. But then he paused for a beat, his eyes searching mine in a way I’d never seen before. And then he took a breath and spoke again, his voice gentler this time. “I understand that you think you owe Greyson, but don’t forget why you came here in the first place.”

I frowned. “How do you know why I came? I never told you.”

“I went to see your mother,” he confessed.

My eyes widened. “What!? When?”

“When I found out you went to the Fae world. I was worried about you, and I was looking for answers, so I visited your mom, hoping she could clear some things up for me.”

I blinked, slowly processing this. It was a lot to unpack. Him worrying, him going out of his way to visit my mom even though he’d never seemed to care about spending time with her before. The unspoken accusation in his voice, and all the questions implicit in that accusation. In that moment, I could see the distance between us, a gap that had cracked open back when Xavier first left. Widened by all the things I hadn’t told him, all the things he’d kept from me, and all the times we’d pushed each other away.

How was it that this man was my soulmate—my *first* soulmate—and yet he felt so much like a stranger?

I sighed. “You left me, Xavier. You told me you wanted a break.”

“I know,” he said quickly. “I know. But that doesn’t mean I stopped worrying about you.”

My heart softened a bit. Even through this long journey with Greyson, there had always been a side of my heart that had never stopped caring for Xavier. It was a huge relief to hear that he felt the same way. “I know our history is complicated, and things weren’t great when I left on this trip. I… I’m honestly surprised you came here.”

He hesitated. “Are you upset that I did?”

I smiled softly, thinking of how I’d felt when I’d seen him coming. How I’d swooned over him. The pure thrill and relief that had rushed through me. Not to mention our kiss… I blushed and turned away. “I’m glad you’re here,” I mumbled.

He gently grasped my shoulders and turned me to face him. “Your mom was in the hospital,” he said.

I guessed our heart-to-heart wasn’t over just yet. “I know. She’s… declining.”

“It looked worse than that, Cali. She was in bad shape.” He paused and then added, “I don’t want to scare you, but I don’t know how much time she has left.”

My jaw dropped, and my heart plummeted down to somewhere near my toes. I’d known my mom was dying, but I’d thought she’d have more time than that. Like it was similar to cancer, or something, and I’d have a few months before she was truly in danger. But not yet. Not now.

Was I already too late?

“What is it that you think you’re going to get here in the Fae world?” Xavier’s voice was so soft, it made me want to cry. “Did you come here because you’re Fae?”

My mouth went dry. I didn’t want to get into my heritage, all the things I had or hadn’t known when I’d come here. I swallowed. “I came here to see if I could find something to save my mom. I knew she was dying, and it turned out there’s only one way to save her. I have to find a flower. A moon—”

“Cali!”

I stopped, twisting in the direction of Torin’s voice. When I saw both of my friends unharmed, my face split into a smile. “Torin! Astrid! Have you seen any sign of Greyson?”

They approached us, giving Xavier a few questioning looks. “We’re still looking,” Astrid answered, then glanced at Xavier. “Who’s this?”

My brain froze. *Think, Cali! This shouldn’t be that hard!*

Except, what was I supposed to call Xavier? My mate? My ex-boyfriend? I didn’t know where we were anymore, relationship-wise. He’d broken things off with me. He’d *left* me. There wasn’t a word to describe all the things that he was and wasn’t to me.

“Um, this is Xavier. I know him. Don’t worry.” I could feel Xavier’s eyes boring into me. I had a funny feeling he wasn’t entirely satisfied with my answer.

Well, he’d just have to deal with it. “So, Greyson?” I pressed. “No sign of him? No leads? Nothing?”

Torin shook his head. “We’re not sure. It’s kind of hard to find a trail with all the creatures running around.”

I gritted my teeth. What was I supposed to do? Find Greyson, or rush off to get the moon buttercup for my mom, who was literally dying while I stood around deliberating?

*I wish there were two of me! A Cali to find Greyson, and a Cali to run off with Xavier to get the moon buttercup.*

“Cali, just go ahead,” Astrid said softly. “When we find Greyson, we’ll catch up. Okay?”

Relief flooded through me. “Thank you. Just follow the path; you’ll find us.” I turned to Xavier. “Come on. We need to hurry and get the moon buttercup to save my mom—before it’s too late.”

**Episode 511**

GREYSON

I stood at the edge of the smoldering remains of the zoo’s marketplace. What a huge fucking disaster. A few escaped creatures were still running around, looking for safety amid the destruction of their cages.

I needed to get out of here. To find Cali. I needed to know she was okay, even if that meant coming face to face with my asshat of a brother again. What were the odds that after all this time—after everything Cali and I had been through to get to Dark Fae territory and find the moon buttercup—that Xavier fucking Evers would swoop in and get to her at the eleventh hour?

I growled at the thought.

“Aw, man!” a former guard whined as he approached the ruined marketplace. “I can’t believe this whole place was wiped out. Must have been some bad magic going around.” He sighed and patted his belly like a hungry cartoon character. “Now where am I going to get lunch?”

And that was the thing about the Fae world. Half of its residents had an uncanny sort of Disney vibe going on, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t straight-up slit your throat given half a chance—for no other reason than because they felt like it.

Fucking Fae.

I looked around the market helplessly. God, I hoped Cali hadn’t been involved in all this. The whole area had been practically leveled by the explosion. She could have been seriously injured. I shook my head. No, Cali was smart. And she was lucky. There was no sign of her here, so I had to assume that she was okay—but where was she now?

“I admire your dedication to your human,” Nessie said, standing beside me and looking out at the remains of the market. Her voice took on a dreamy quality. “It reminds me of Angus.”

I nodded absently, still looking around as if Cali was going to pop up any second. There was no sign of Cali, but I did pause and then step back as a unicorn trotted by.

*Wow. Cali would lose her shit if she could see this.*

Nessie nodded at the unicorn. “Harold.”

Harold the unicorn whinnied as he passed us and disappeared out of sight.

Nessie hummed. “Such polite creatures.”

I tucked that little detail away for later but didn’t respond. My eyes skimmed over the exhibits. Where could Cali have gone? Had she been captured again? Or had she left to go find the moon buttercup? But it that were the case, wouldn’t she have brought me with her?

My stomach lurched at the thought. She hadn’t just ditched me, had she?

I tried to assure myself that Cali *wouldn’t* have ditched me. That she was incapable of leaving me behind. It would certainly have been a strange turn of events, considering how many times she’d lectured me about not leaving anyone behind.

The zookeeper staggered by, his face pale and his eyes bloodshot and swollen. He stopped short when he saw me and dropped to his knees. “It wasn’t my fault! I was only doing what the Kollector wanted! Don’t hurt me, please!”

I rolled my eyes. I couldn’t have cared less about him, even to avenge the shitty way I’d been treated. All I cared about was finding Cali. I sighed. This was a waste of time. Cali clearly wasn’t here. I needed to move on and look elsewhere.

Shooting the zookeeper a disdainful glare, I spun around to head toward the exit, and then I caught the eye of a beautiful Fae woman who was passing by.

She looked me up and down, looking startled to see me.

I ignored her surprise. “Have you seen a girl named Cali?”

She blinked, recognition flashing across her features. “Everyone is talking about that girl!”

“Have you seen her?” I pressed.

She shook her head. “I haven’t, but I wish I had. I truly don’t understand why anyone would hide from two magnificent creatures such as yourselves!”

*Two creatures? What the—*

Realization hit me. “You’ve spoken to my brother, haven’t you?”

The woman’s eyes lit up. “Brothers? Xavier is your brother?”

I huffed out a breath. I didn’t have time for this bullshit. “I need to find Cali. Can you help me or not?”

The woman scanned me. “I’ll tell you what I told your brother: search the mines. That’s where most people who are unlucky enough to be caught by the Kollector end up.”

*Shit.* “Where are the mines?”

She smiled. “I’d be very happy to help any brother of Xavier’s.” Before I could ask what she meant by that, she noticed Nessie behind me. “Are you coming too?”

Nessie shook her head and looked at me. “I’m sorry, Greyson. I’d like to help you, but I want to get back to my loch. Angus might still be waiting for me.”

I nodded. “Good luck, Nessie.”

She held out her arms for a hug, and I embraced her. I wasn’t exactly the hugging type, but it if weren’t for Nessie, I’d probably still have been stuck in a cage.

The Fae woman watched us embrace with a sympathetic gaze. “Shall we?”

I said goodbye to Nessie, and the Fae woman walked with me out of the charred remains of the zoo.

I glanced at the woman, who was looking around our surroundings with a strange expression on her face. “What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t,” she answered. “But it’s Shawn.”

“Greyson,” I supplied.

We walked toward the exit, stopping to wait for a flock of flamingos to pass by, then stepped out onto the road. “So you’re a werewolf too?” she asked.

I grunted an affirmative.

“And are all werewolves as thoughtful as your brother?” She eyed me curiously. “Came as a surprise to me.”

I rolled my eyes and didn’t respond to that one.

Following my cue, Shawn fell silent, which was fine by me. I wasn’t here to make nice with a Fae woman; I was here to find Cali. Preferably before Xavier did. Or maybe I’d find Xavier first, kick his teeth in, and *then* find Cali.

I wasn’t picky.

I didn’t know whether to hope we’d find her in the mine or not. Much as I needed to see her, to know she was safe, the idea of her working in the mine with so many other human slaves made me sick to my stomach.

We put the zoo behind us and headed for the mine. Shawn didn’t try to talk to me about Xavier or anything else during the journey—from the way that she was staring at everything around us, it looked like she had plenty going on in her own head. I breathed a sigh of relief when we saw the first sign for the mines. I didn’t know how much longer I’d be able to put up with the increasingly perilous scenarios I’d envisioned for Cali in my mind.

That relief evaporated as we got closer to the mines. It looked just as bad as the zoo—if not worse. “Shit. It looks like a battle took place here. What happened?”

Shawn shook her head. “I don’t know, but the guards are all gone. Maybe the prisoners rioted?”

“And you’re sure this is where Cali would be?” I asked.

She blew out a breath and nodded. “Yes, but there’s only one way to find out for sure.” She gestured to the entrance. “Unfortunately this is where I go. I need to get back to my girls. If you see him, thank Xavier again for me.”

*Yeah, I’ll give him a real special ‘thank you.’*

“Good luck,” Shawn said with a wave.

“You too,” I said.

Now we were back to a party of four.

We walked into the opening to the mine. Darkness wrapped around us, but my eyes were able to adjust. We moved quickly but carefully, descending into the main tunnel and coming to a fork. We didn’t pass anyone on the way, and the complete silence in the mine set my nerves on edge.

How far down did this mine go? What kinds of materials did it even have? And where the hell were all the people?

As we continued deeper, the air cooled and became stagnant.

“—*son*…”

I stopped and listened. Had I just heard something?

“*Greyson*…”

Someone was calling my name!

“Greyson!” the far-off voice called out.

I turned around. Was it Cali? Xavier? The voice was too distorted by the echoey tunnels to know for sure.

I raised my voice. “Cali? Cali, I’m over here!”

Torin, Astrid, and Artemis appeared at the fork. Torin grinned. “We found you!”

I looked for Cali behind them, and my stomach sank when I realized she wasn’t with them. Then realization hit me, and I turned to Artemis, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Don’t worry,” Astrid spoke up before I had a chance to say or do anything. “She’s on our side now.”

“Where’s Cali?” I demanded.

“She went to get the moon buttercup with Xavier. I told her we’d find you and catch up,” Astrid said.

Rage shot through me. “*What?*”

She left. With Xavier. I had to find her, to help her find the flower and to talk to her before Xavier could try to turn her against me. I pushed past the group and was heading toward the entrance when a rumble shook the mine, and rocks began crumbling from the ceiling.

The passageway was collapsing.

**Episode 512**

MAYA

I’d never seen Colton look so confused, which was definitely saying something because he wasn’t exactly the smartest guy in the room. “What do you mean you saw my mother?” he asked Shaggy. “She’s dead.”

The older werewolf nodded. “I know. That’s why I’m telling you. Something super fucked up is going on.”

I glanced at Colton, my heart sinking. This wasn’t the first time we’d heard of someone coming back from the dead. “Remember what we saw in the car…” I murmured.

Shaggy turned to me, his eyebrows raised. “Oh, did you see his mom too?”

I paused, not sure how much to reveal. It was now open knowledge that people were popping up who were thought to have been dead for a very long time, but that didn’t mean Colton would want me blabbing about Ava. We weren’t even sure what we’d seen, to be honest, and even though I had certainly seen and heard Ava myself, I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around it.

Colton’s voice was quiet. “No, we didn’t. We thought we saw Ava.”

I noticed the careful phrasing in his words—like he was trying to hedge the implications of Ava coming back from the dead, and if it turned out to not be true he could simply recall that he’d ‘thought’ he’d seen her. Or maybe he too was still struggling to make sense of it. Maybe he still didn’t quite believe he’d seen Ava with his own two eyes.

If that was the case, I couldn’t say I blamed him.

Shaggy frowned. “Wait, Xavier’s mate? But she’s dead too, right? Didn’t Xavier kill her himself because *she* killed your mom?”

Colton nodded.

“What the hell is going on?” Shaggy demanded.

“I don’t know,” Colton admitted. “But this can’t be good news.”

“Why don’t you tell him what happened at the weed farm?” I suggested. “What Xavier thought he saw?”

Shaggy’s eyes lit up. “Weed farm?”

I rolled my eyes. Classic Shaggy. Focusing on how to get high instead of all the very important pressing issues affecting our world. The whole thing was kind of bullshit, actually. Shaggy had a reputation for clashing with authority, but I was pretty sure it was only because he didn’t like anyone calling him on his tendency to be a total fucking stoner.

“That’s not the point,” I began, but Colton put a warm hand on my shoulder, effectively cutting me off. I resisted the urge to bite him.

“My brother thought he saw Ava, too,” Colton told Shaggy.

“Wow.” He blew out a breath. “There must be some weird ghost vibe shit going on. I don’t like it. Maybe I should tell Mace.”

I frowned. Since when did he care about keeping his Alpha in the loop? “Why? It doesn’t concern him.”

“But what if this has something to do with Silas, or the orb?” Shaggy asked.

I considered this for a moment. Maybe all that pot hadn’t completely baked his brain after all. Could there be a connection here between Silas’s return, the missing orb, and the ghostly appearances? When I really thought about it, it definitely seemed pretty freaky, especially when you considered the way that both of the ‘dead’ women had been tied to Silas and his family. One of them had been his mate, the other the mate of his son.

But how could they all be connected? I shook my head, trying to make sense of it all. “I mean, it *could* just be a coincidence, right?”

Joss, with her uncanny knack for knowing just when to walk in to other people’s conversations, chose that moment to come out of the house. She looked from Colton’s face to Shaggy’s, and then her eyes settled on me. “What coincidence?” she asked. She probably figured she’d stand the best chance at getting answers if she asked me.

She probably wasn’t wrong. Shaggy wasn’t part of her pack, so he had no reason to listen to her beyond the basic respect that was typically due to Lunas—which wasn’t much. Colton had enough baggage with Joss to sink a ship. And so that usually left me.

*Maya, the eternal peacekeeper.*

But this time was different, because it wasn’t my story to tell. Shaggy was the one who’d seen Xavier and Colton’s mother. Colton and I had seen Ava, but that had been after Xavier had confided in Colton about having seen her at the weed farm. I wouldn’t be the first to tell this story to Joss. It was up to Colton.

Silence set in, and Joss sighed. “*What* coincidence? Tell me. Now.”

I winced inwardly. She was using her no-nonsense Luna voice, which was probably Colton’s least favorite sound in the world.

I expected him to dig his heels in for the long haul. He had no trouble disrespecting her, telling her how little he valued her contribution to and authority in the Redwood pack, even though she was the only one stepping up amid all the fuckery that the Evers boys had been getting into.

So I wasn’t surprised by Colton’s answer. “We were just talking about Silas’s return. What’s the verdict with Mace?”

Joss sighed. “He agreed that we need to stay together, but he clearly doesn't want us in the house.” She met Colton’s eyes and kept eye contact, staring at him coolly as she added, “And I don’t like staying where I’m not wanted.”

Yikes. Seeing as how Xavier himself had told her that he didn’t want the Redwood pack staying at the Evers house, it looked like the list of places Joss wasn’t wanted had just added a new location. Now what was she going to do? And how was Colton going to respond to Joss pushing him? They’d maintained an uneasy truce so far, but I worried about what might happen if either of them started putting pressure on it.

“Our house has been trashed,” Colton said, “so that’s not really an option—even if I liked you.”

Joss smirked. Her eyes were ice-cold. “I have a place lined up for us. I just have to confirm with the realtor.”

“Oh?” Colton’s voice sounded lighter. Pleasantly surprised. “That’s good to hear. Hopefully Silas won’t know to look there. Where is it?”

“I’ll let you know,” she said smoothly. “For now, sit tight and try not to piss Mace off any more than necessary.”

I watched her go, reluctantly impressed, as usual, by her conduct. She’d been essentially left with a pack that neither liked nor cared about her, and she’d gone out of her way to prove herself to them, to care for them even if they hated her. Even now, she was finding a new home for her pack while navigating all the different Alpha egos. Not an easy task.

If I were ever to become a Luna, I hoped I would be like Joss.

Shaggy waited until she was out of earshot before turning back to us. “So what do we do about… you know… Ava and your mom?” he asked.

Colton shrugged. “I’ll think about it.” He reached for my hand and pulled me toward him as we walked back inside.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

He didn’t answer, and I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. If he thought he was going to get laid right now in the Blue Blood pack house, then he had another thing coming. He pulled me into a side room and pulled out his phone. I saw him pull up Gabriel’s name on the display.

“What do you want him for?” I asked. I was still sore from the last time we’d come face to face with Gabriel. God, I hoped we weren’t about to be pulled into another crazy mission.

He ignored me again, and Gabriel picked up the phone. “Hey, dude. What’s up?”

“I’ve got a question for you,” Colton said. “You said that when you found Big Mac, she was hiding in a mirror?”

“Yeah, it was trippy as fuck. Mikah spotted her. I guess vampires can be useful sometimes.” I heard the snicker in his voice, but didn’t really see what was so funny.

“How do I find her?” Colton asked.

I gasped. “What?” He was trying to find a witch? What could he possibly be thinking? Since when was it a good idea to go hunting for witches who aggressively did not want to be found?

“She was hiding in her house,” Gabriel said. “Why did you—”

“Thanks, man.” Colton ended the call.

“So are you gonna tell me what that was all about, or are you going to keep yanking me around and ignoring me?” I snapped. Just because we were enemies with benefits, that didn’t give him the right to treat me like I didn’t exist, like I didn’t even matter enough to talk to.

Colton turned to face me. “We need to find Big Mac. And once we do, we’re going to make her lead us to the orb.”

**Episode 513**

Greyson’s absence felt like a phantom limb. Aching and impossible to forget. With every step Xavier and I took, I considered turning around and heading back, making sure Greyson was truly okay, that I hadn’t just abandoned him after all he’d done for me.

But then I thought about what Xavier had told me, how my mother’s decline was happening so much faster than I’d thought. If she was truly doing so poorly, then I had to move forward. Xavier wouldn’t lie about that, I knew it. No matter how messy things had been between us lately, if he said my mom didn’t have much time left, then that was the truth. And if—after everything I’d been through in the Fae world to find a cure for my mom, everything I’d put Greyson and Astrid and Torin through—she died because I took too long to find the cure, then I’d never forgive myself.

I might worry about Greyson every freaking step of the way, but I wasn’t going to stop. I wasn’t going to turn around.

Besides, Astrid and Torin would come through. They’d find Greyson, and then we’d all find each other. But for now, I had to focus on saving my mom.

“Do you know where exactly this moon buttercup is?” Xavier asked. We’d been speed-walking in relative silence, and the zoo was long out of sight. It was strange, being here in the Fae world with him, especially with all the ugliness and uncertainty that still hung between us.

I stopped and pointed at the mountain looming ahead of us. “A nymph told me it’s up there.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And you trust this nymph?”

I felt the urge to get defensive, to remind him that I was the one who’d spent days—*weeks* —here in the Fae world, and that I’d done the best I could.

Instead, I took a deep breath and shrugged. “I don’t really have another option, but yes, I do trust her. I believe it’s up there.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said quietly.

I bit my lip. I’d forgotten how quick he was to dismiss any conclusion he hadn’t come to all on his own—especially when I was involved. Xavier always believed he knew what was best for me, even when the mere fact that I’d gone to the Fae world without him proved that belief wrong.

*What an ass.*

He’d been in the Fae world for what, an hour? And already he was acting like I was some kind of naïve idiot for having come all this way. I wasn’t stupid. I knew what I was doing, and I knew that it was the right thing to do.

And if Xavier couldn’t be bothered to see that, then that was his problem.

*Wow, Cali. Way to rage at the guy who travelled to the Fae world just to save you.*

Confusion and regret and annoyance rushed through me. I hadn’t *asked* him to save me.

*But you still needed it!*

I hated it when Brain Cali was right. I glanced over at Xavier, who’d gone silent again, stoically watching the road as we ascended the foothills of the mountain. He was my mate, and he’d come all this way because he’d been worried about me. And now he was sticking around to help me, even though was grumbling about it.

It was a net positive, right? I couldn’t be mad at him for leaving me *and* for showing up to help.

Change of topic. No Greyson, no Fae heritage, no dying moms, or trusting nymphs…

So basically, no talking about any part of my journey or any of the things I was actually worried about. Great plan.

I eyed Xavier again, my gaze catching on the ridiculous red cape. “So, cape, huh?”

He huffed a laugh. “It’s a long story, and I don’t really feel like telling it.”

Silence slipped between us again. Our footsteps practically echoed down the path without our conversation to cover them. When had it become so hard to talk to him? I *needed* to talk to him. To say *something*. He’d come all this way for me.

We stopped at a fork in the road, and Xavier glanced at me. “Which way?”

I pointed to the right. “We have to pass through the Absolution Geyser.”

“Sounds… exciting. What’s that?”

I opened my mouth to tell him about it, but then I remembered the last time I’d been there—with Greyson. Heat rushed into my cheeks. “It’s just a geyser. You’ll see.”

We continued down the right path, the silence getting heavier and more awkward with each step.

Xavier was finally the one to break it. “So when were you planning to tell me you’re Fae?”

I stumbled a little bit at the question, but quickly caught my balance. “Um… I never actually had the chance to tell you.”

He scoffed, and something like hurt crossed his face. “But you’ve known this whole time, and you never bothered to tell me?”

I stopped. “First of all, I only just found out. And right after I learned that life-changing, world-shattering truth, you took off and left me. Besides, I’m not supposed to tell anyone. My mother made me promise, and apparently there’s this thing about Fae promises…” I trailed off.

“And what about Greyson?” he growled.

“What about him?” I asked. I had a feeling I knew where Xavier was going with this, but I wanted to put it off as long as possible. Xavier wasn’t going to like what I told him about my time with Greyson. The truth would hurt him. Might even hurt all three of us. I didn’t want to do that to him.

“Does he know?”

I bit my lip, then nodded. “He knows.” I didn’t elaborate. Didn’t tell him how Greyson had found out the truth, because how was I supposed to tell him that? *Oh, yeah, so remember that fight with the Manus Cruentae? Greyson got stabbed in the hand with a silver knife by Adra, and after he killed her I was convinced he was going to die—so I kissed him.*

That would *not* go over well. Especially because it only skimmed the surface of the truth. It didn’t cover how desperate I’d been to save him. How the thought of losing him drove me to the edge of madness. And then I’d healed him. And kissed him. And that was how Greyson knew. Not that I planned to tell Xavier any of that.

“How?” Xavier asked. “How did Greyson find out?”

*Come on, universe! Throw a girl some slack, will you?*

I shrugged. “He just figured it out, I guess. I didn’t tell him, if that’s what you’re wondering.” I pointed ahead. “The geyser should be just over there.”

I led him to the geyser, hoping to hell there weren’t any more poachers like Artemis lurking around to trap us. If I lost any more time finding the moon buttercup, I would absolutely lose my fucking shit.

*Although if we* do *get attacked by a poacher, at least Xavier will stop grilling me for half a second.*

Guilt washed over me as soon as I thought it. I shoved it down and put on a bright smile, waving a hand at the water. The sun was setting behind the geyser, and even I had to admit: for a Fae world landmark, this one was majestic as fuck. “I give you the Absolution Geyser. Ta-da!”

Xavier glanced over the scene and then looked back at me. “Beautiful.”

I didn’t know if he was talking about me or the geyser, and I ducked my head, blushing. “Beautiful, indeed.”

When I was brave enough to look up at him again, he was still watching me, still staring at me with heat in his eyes. He really was beautiful, and he looked like some kind of dark prince—what with the sun setting behind him, and the geyser blasting up into the darkening sky. Even his red cape didn’t look quite so stupid anymore.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

It was then that I realized I’d been gaping at him. “Um… n-nothing. I just have some water in my eye.”

And then his red cape flickered and dissolved into thin air, leaving him naked in front of me.

I gasped and covered my eyes with one hand, putting the other hand on his chest. “Um, you’re naked?”

I peeked at his face from between my fingers. As per usual, he didn’t seem half as embarrassed by his nudity as I was. He glanced down. “Sorry. I guess the glamour wore off.”

He didn’t pull away. He stayed there, warm and real and so very naked—right in front of me. I felt his heart beating beneath the hand I’d braced on his chest and I swallowed, my hand dropping away from my eyes so I could see him clearly.

My beautiful mate.

My eyes dropped to his lips, and suddenly all I could think about was kissing him.

**Episode 514**

GREYSON

Torin’s scream echoed around us but was quickly drowned out by the clouds of dust descending on us—followed by a blast of tumbling rocks. I didn’t even have time to brace myself before Astrid, Artemis, Torin, and I were all knocked backward by the force.

I hit the ground with a wheeze, the air knocked out of my lungs. Dirt and dust filled the air, continuing to rain down on us even after the rumbling had stopped and the ceiling had finished caving in.

I coughed, spat dirt out of my mouth, and sat up. Blinking rapidly, I wiped the dirt from my eyes and surveyed the damage. My stomach lurched. The entire passageway was blocked by rocks of every size—from huge boulders to tiny pebbles. I spared a glance at the others. Torin was helping up a coughing Astrid. Artemis was already on her feet, covered in dirt and backing away from the blocked entrance.

All things considered, we were lucky that we hadn’t been crushed by the cave-in. But I didn’t feel lucky. I scrambled to my feet and dust burst off me in a cloud. If Cali were here, she’d probably have said I looked like Pig-Pen from the Peanuts comic strips.

But Cali wasn’t here, and the only exit I knew out of this damned mine had just caved in. There wasn’t an ounce of gratitude in my body. I snarled at the boulders blocking the entrance. This couldn’t be happening. I couldn’t really be trapped here in a mine with a bunch of Fae while Cali was with Xavier, on her way to the moon buttercup.

I had to get to her, to talk to her, to help her complete her task and undo the damage Xavier was no doubt causing this very fucking second.

I would fucking kill him.

My fingers curled into tight fists, and I spun around to face the group. “Does anyone know another exit?” I snapped.

“Can’t we dig our way out?” Torin asked. Astrid was still coughing, and he thumped her hard on the back.

I glanced back at the blocked tunnel. I doubted even my strength could dig us out, and I didn’t want to risk another cave-in—one that would likely prove much more fatal. I shook my head. “We need to find another exit.”

Artemis whimpered, backing away from the blocked tunnel even more. She seemed… afraid.

I blinked. What the hell was going on with her?

“I can’t stay here,” she stammered. Even in the dimly lit mine, I could see her trembling from head to toe. She made a choking noise. “I c-can’t breathe.”

Well, shit. Just what we needed. She was fucking claustrophobic. I rushed over to her, catching her hands when she skittered back. “Hey. You’re okay. Just breathe. Take slow, deep breaths.”

She shook her head. “I can’t,” she wheezed. Tears tracked down her dirt-smudged cheeks, and my heart flip-flopped. I’d never cared about anyone before—except Cali—but Artemis was triggering all sorts of protectiveness in me. I didn’t know why. Probably this whole being trapped shit. But I couldn’t just let her lose her cool. We needed everyone’s focus now more than ever.

I gently grasped her shoulders. What would Cali have done in this situation? Obviously, she’d have wanted to help Artemis. God, I was not cut out for this. I took a deep breath, then coughed a bit. There was still a ton of dust in the air. “Artemis,” I said firmly, my voice as low and gentle as I could make it. “Look at me.”

Her wide, frightened eyes flicked up to mine, and for a moment I was thrown out of the present, back to the last time I’d stared into eyes just like hers.

*I’ve seen those eyes before… But…*

I shook myself. Now wasn’t the time. “Listen, I’m going to get you out of here, okay? We’re all getting out of here. We’re going to see the sun again. Breathe the fresh air. I promise. But in the meantime, you *can* breathe. You’re safe.”

The terror in Artemis’s eyes receded just a bit, enough that her lungs unclenched and she let out the breath she’d been holding. “Okay. I’m… I’m fine now.”

I nodded and stepped back. She was back to the Artemis who’d captured us and sold us to the Kollector—putting on a tough face. But that was fine. I could work with that.

Being soft and sensitive? Not so much.

I looked around and pointed down the tunnel we were trapped in. “Where does this lead?”

“It’ll take us to different levels in the mine,” Torin said.

I nodded. “And are there any more entrances or exits?”

He considered this, his brow furrowing. “I think there’s one at the southern end. But the only access would be through level three.”

Artemis swallowed. “Level three?” Her voice broke.

Fucking great. I was stuck in a mine, and the only way I could get out and get to Cali was to go even deeper. With Torin, a practically asthmatic Astrid, and Artemis, who looked like she was one second away from completely losing her fucking shit.

I sighed and turned back to Artemis. “You have two choices here. You can stay here, closer to the surface, and hope that someone eventually finds you, or you can come with us to escape through the exit Torin mentioned. It’s your call.”

The rest of the group turned to her, waiting for her response.

She took a deep breath, then coughed a little and squared her shoulders. “There is no fucking way I’m staying here.”

I nodded and turned to Torin. “You know the way?”

“It’s easy,” he said. “Kind of. We just go down.”

I pointed down the tunnel and stepped aside. “Then lead the way.”

Torin took the lead with Astrid right behind him, and we started down the tunnel. Another rumble shook the mine, and Artemis squeaked and jumped, latching onto me like a Fae barnacle.

We all froze until the rumbling stopped.

Yeah, we needed to get the fuck out of this mine. I gently unlatched Artemis’s hand from my bicep. “It’s all right,” I told her.

She jerked her hand back. “Sorry.” She ducked her head and quickly followed Astrid and Torin.

I brought up the rear of our sad little party. “Hey,” I said softly to Artemis. “It’s okay to be scared. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.” She slowed her steps a bit so there was some distance between us and the others. She liked her privacy. I could relate to that.

Artemis sighed. “I can’t help it. I’m claustrophobic.”

*Oh I know*, I thought. I was slightly impressed that at least she’d confirmed it. It was bad enough being stuck in a mine that kept threatening to collapse on top of us—I couldn’t imagine what she was going through, having to face one of her biggest fears.

“You’re doing great,” I told her. At this point I was just recycling things I’d either heard Cali say or thought she would.

She shrugged. “I’ve dealt with worse.”

I chuckled. “I believe it. After spending time in the Fae world, my world seems like a fucking theme park.”

Up ahead, Torin stood at the edge of a huge, dark hole in the ground. He looked back at us, worry etched into his face. “The ladder’s broken.”

I approached the edge of the hole while Artemis froze and stayed back a few feet.

Astrid peeked over the edge. “It’s so dark. I can’t see anything.”

Torin pointed to a wooden ladder, poking over the edge. “It’s shattered going down.”

Sure enough, the ladder ended abruptly about six feet down. “It was probably damaged by a falling rock,” I said.

Everyone looked at me uneasily.

“What do we do?” Astrid asked.

They were all looking to me for answers. Shit. It looked like I was going to have to take control if we ever wanted to get out of this shithole. I looked around, taking advantage of my superior werewolf vision.

I caught sight of a coiled rope on the ground nearby and scooped it up. “We’ll use this.” I quickly tied one end of the rope to the mounted bracket that held the top of the ladder and threw the other end into the hole. It fell so far, I couldn’t even see where it ended. Definitely not unnerving.

“I’ll go first,” I offered, looking at each of them. The sooner I got us moving, the sooner we could catch up to Cali and Xavier who I’m sure was hustling her along. “The rest of you can follow.”

I paused, my eyes locked on Artemis’s pale face. “You can do this.”

She nodded nervously, and I grabbed the rope and began to climb down. Slowly but surely, we descended into the hole, and I felt the rope pull as each of them followed me down. I glanced down into the pit, searching for something for us to land on. None of us were small, me least of all, and I was worried the rope wouldn’t support our combined weight for long. We needed to find a place to climb off and continue—

The rope went taut as iron in my hand.

*What the—*

There was a snapping noise, and we all began to fall.

**Episode 515**

There was a little voice in my head telling me to kiss Xavier.

I knew I shouldn’t have even been thinking it, but I couldn’t help it. He was so close, so warm. It’d been such a long time since we’d seen each other, and even though things were a complete fucking mess, a part of me still wanted him. It always would somehow. I placed another hand on his warm, bare chest, trying to ground myself and just plain looking for an excuse to touch him.

The kiss near the zoo had been spontaneous and completely unexpected—existing outside of reality and all of our baggage. It had been shock and love and relief and giddiness and hope and longing, all wrapped up into one moment, one kiss that had turned my world upside down.

This was different. We’d literally just been arguing about all our baggage, and its presence still hung in the air around us. It didn’t change the way I was drawn to him. Here. Now. Standing alone together on the road to the moon buttercup, his naked body pressed against me…

But Greyson… I felt things intensely for him too. How was it possible to feel this way about two people?

Against my better judgment, I looked into Xavier’s eyes. Heat coiled in my stomach at what I found there. His pupils were dilated, heat and want and love radiating from them. And suddenly, our baggage didn’t seem so heavy. Suddenly, none of the things we’d been arguing about—the broken trust, the mutual feelings of abandonment—none of it mattered anymore.

It was just me and Xavier. Two mates. Together after being apart for a long time.

Xavier leaned in, and I met him in the middle. His lips gently brushed over mine, a tentative kiss, more a question than a statement. Then I wrapped my arms around him, hugging him tighter, and with a hungry groan he pulled me close.

It was hard to resist the kiss. That little voice didn’t want to. My body didn’t want to. But my head kept screaming at me.

Xavier deepened the kiss, and I tasted him—my mate—for the first time in weeks. For the first time since he’d left me, and I’d left the human world altogether. I pressed myself against him with a moan, and everything else evaporated. All the distance I’d felt between us began to narrow; all my questions about the status of our fucked-up relationship disappeared.

I kissed him back with an intensity that surprised me, my lips moving against his, my fingers sliding through his hair, grasping those dark strands and tugging him exactly where I wanted him. It was a kiss that edged on violence, bruising in its strength, tongues sliding, teeth gnashing, my body aching and rolling against his.

But his arms were strong around me, keeping me grounded while his muscular body pressed against mine, and I gave in to the hunger, savoring every moment of him pressed against me, savoring *him*. The scent of his skin, the taste of him in my mouth, the sensation of his callused fingers dragging over my skin beneath my shirt…

“Cali.” He murmured my name like his favorite prayer, and I dragged my lips across his stubbled jaw, trailing down his neck.

His strong hands glided up my back and then tugged at my shirt, pulling upward, and I felt cool air wash over my midsection.

It was like a glass of water being thrown over me, and I came crashing back to reality. What was I doing? *What the fuck was I doing?*

I pulled back and gently grabbed his wrists, tugging his hands out from underneath my shirt. “I can’t,” I said softly.

A crease appeared between his eyebrows, and I could see the longing, the lust bubbling inside of him, clear as day. “What’s wrong?”

*What’s wrong? Try everything, Xavier!* My whole world was a jumbled mess. “It’s just… This doesn’t feel right,” I admitted.

He shook his head, like this response was unacceptable to him. “But I’ve come for you, Cali. I came all the way here. I fought so hard… I’ve chosen you.”

I grimaced a little at that, and he zeroed in on the expression, his nostrils flaring. “You left me,” I reminded him. “How can you say that you’re choosing me when you’re the one who left?”

His expression darkened. “Is this because of Greyson?”

Of course he was asking *that* question. The question I not only didn’t want to answer, but also the one I didn’t have a true, complete answer for. “He plays into this, but not the way you think.”

Xavier shook his head again, a jerky motion that set my nerves on edge. I could see his anger boiling, could see him fighting to control it even as his voice rose right along with it. “Have you slept with him?”

I scoffed. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“*Answer me.*”

Seriously?

Things had been broken between me and Xavier for a long while now, and I’d tried like hell to fix them. To make up for my mistakes, to forgive his flaws and try to move forward with my mate. But then he’d up and left me, and now that I’d taken that space he’d given me and used it to go on this crazy journey to save my mom, he was acting like I should have been waiting for him all along.

Like, even here in the Fae world—at the foot of a goddamn mountain that I’d only reached because *Greyson* had dropped everything to help me—Xavier expected me to stop what I was doing and go back to being his doting mate. He was acting like if I did anything less than that, I’d be betraying him. Was he *serious*?

We weren’t even together! Not really. Not in any way that counted. And the last time I’d checked, he didn’t know squat about anything that I’d been through in the past few weeks while he’d been out dicking around with Gabriel. He didn’t own me. I didn’t belong to him. And I sure as hell didn’t live to please him. And the fact that he seemed to think otherwise was just…

*Argh!*

“I shouldn’t have to answer you,” I snapped. “But if that’s what you need to know—no. I haven’t slept with Greyson.”

He didn’t respond, but he didn’t turn away. I couldn’t read his expression, but I had a feeling he wasn’t exactly satisfied with my response.

“Do you not believe me?” I asked.

“Honestly? I don’t know what to believe.”

Where was this antagonism coming from? I’d tried to be honest with him, but it was just blowing up in my face.

*Maybe I* should *have slept with Greyson. With how upset Xavier’s getting, I might as well have fully enjoyed myself.*

“Then that’s your problem.” I stepped back and glanced around. I didn’t have time for his possessive Alpha bullshit. My mom’s life was on the line, and that was what I needed to focus on. “We’ve still got some daylight. Let’s keep going.”

I moved ahead without waiting for him to follow, anger fueling every step.

It wasn’t like I’d actually done anything wrong, either. I didn’t have anything to feel guilty about. I hadn’t slept with Greyson; I hadn’t run off to find myself like Xavier had, and I hadn’t ask to be part of a *due destini*!

Xavier caught up to me in just a few strides. Damn him. “You can’t avoid this forever.”

I shook my head. “Right now, all I care about is saving my mom. You should know that, and you should know that nothing is going to stop me.”

“Fine. But you can’t avoid this forever.”

I picked up my pace, as if I could distance myself from him and put an end to all the uncertainty he’d dug up. But of course I couldn’t outrun him—he was too fast, too strong. So we walked in angry silence, side by side, Xavier just inches away.

Once I had to squint to see the road in front of us, I finally came to a stop. “It’s getting dark. I won’t be able to keep walking for much longer.” I glanced around and noticed a clearing off to the side of the road. The ground looked pretty even. I pointed to the clearing. “Why don’t we stop there tonight?”

Xavier shrugged. “Whatever.”

*Ugh,* I thought. *Why did he even come if he’s just going to be a pouty bitch the whole time?*

What right did he have to be upset, anyway? He didn’t. It wasn’t like I’d asked him to drop everything and come here. In fact, if I’d known he was going to act like this, I would have flat out told him *not* to come.

I settled onto the ground and curled up on my side. A chill ran down my spine. The ground was cooler than I’d expected, and it was only going to get worse as the night progressed. I scooted over to make room for Xavier, hoping he’d help keep me warm through the night like Greyson always did.

And then he stepped past me and curled up in a spot several feet away.

*Message received, Xavier*.

Chilly or not, tonight, I was on my own.

**Episode 516**

MAYA

Colton wanted to find Big Mac.

God, was he really this much of an idiot?

I didn’t know where to start with his latest brilliant idea. Which part was worse? Going on a wild goose chase for a witch who had a knack for hiding, or maybe his plan to convince said witch not to hex us on the spot if we did actually find her? And then assuming steps one and two went off without a hitch—which seemed like a million-to-one chance—there was another huge hurdle to get past.

“Let’s say we do find Big Mac, and she doesn’t just explode us on the spot with some kind of crazy magic bomb,” I said, sarcasm dripping from every word. “Why would she agree to help us find the orb? She’s in hiding, right? Why risk being found by whoever it is she’s running from?”

Colton’s eyes narrowed at my tone, but he didn’t take the bait. Maybe he wasn’t such an idiot after all. “I’m hoping Mrs. Smith will help me persuade Big Mac. After all, Silas poses a huge threat to Mrs. Smith, and if their friendship or special relationship or whatever they’ve got going on means anything to her, Big Mac will want to help.”

I considered this. It still sounded like a pretty terrible plan. “And do you think Mrs. Smith is going to be on board with helping you to force her friend out of hiding?”

Colton shrugged. “Guess there’s only one way to find out. Let’s go talk to her and find out.”

He turned to head to the door, and I caught his arm. “Wait. Maybe you should talk to Joss first?”

He scoffed. “Fuck her. I don’t need her permission.”

God. These Evers men and their egos. It was amazing they could walk through doors with the gigantic heads they all had. “Colton, you can’t just ignore Joss and pretend she doesn’t exist. She’s not going anywhere, no matter how much you might wish otherwise. And you shouldn’t push away people who can help you.”

For a long second, he looked like he was digging his feet in for an argument. I knew how much he disliked Joss, how he didn’t respect or recognize her authority in the pack and even saw her as an extension of Greyson, despite the fact that it had been weeks since we’d even heard from the Alpha.

And, during that time, Joss had picked up Greyson’s slack with grace. She really was a great Luna, and it was shitty of Colton to ignore that because of his personal feelings about Greyson. Finally, he sighed. “Okay. But I’m going to *tell* Joss. I not going to ask her for permission. She’s not my Luna.”

*Yeah, and your Luna of choice is off gallivanting around the Fae world for god only knows why. Definitely picked the winning horse there, Colton.*

He tried to leave, but I held on tight again, holding him in place.

“What is it?” he snapped.

“Do you remember when Joss wanted everyone to go back to the house? Mrs. Smith went with her. If we can get Joss on our side, maybe *try* to play nice for a minute or two, then Mrs. Smith won’t argue with her Luna.”

He frowned. “Fine. Let’s go talk to Joss.” He shrugged off my hand and headed down the stairs.

Alone in the side room, I smiled to myself. I’d won that round, small victory though it was. And as a bonus, Colton had actually included me every step of the way—even if I hadn’t recognized it at the time, mainly because he had about as much finesse as a Mack truck. It still felt like progress, like he was making space for me in his life.

And that had to count for something, right?

I followed him down the stairs and we looked through the house for Joss. I was heading to the foyer when the front door swung open and Lola and Jay came inside. They were both totally naked, and looked a little… messy.

Lola’s eyes widened when she saw me. “We shifted, took a little run,” she blurted out.

“Okay.” I smiled, trying to hold back a laugh. They looked absolutely ridiculous, and there was no hiding exactly what they’d been up to. If only I’d had a camera.

Jay and Lola had been on the outs since Jay’s decision to stay with the pack and Lola’s decision to defy Joss and go with Xavier, Colton, and me to find Cali. But considering the fact that they’d run in buck-ass naked with leaves in their very mussed and tousled hair, dirt on their skin, and that *I just got laid* energy… Well, it didn’t take a genius to see that they’d made up. It also didn’t help that Jay’s eyepatch was askew.

Colton stopped beside me and smirked. “Looks like someone’s been boning.”

Jay blushed, but Lola just shrugged and tugged her mate up the stairs.

I smacked Colton’s chest. “You’re so immature.”

“What? I was just telling the truth. They’ve clearly been—”

I shushed him. Jay and Lola’s footsteps echoed on the landing above us, and I smiled again. It looked like Lola had taken my advice. Maybe a little far, but her love life wasn’t my concern.

We ended up finding Joss on the front porch swing.

“Hey.” She regarded us warily. “What’s up?”

I looked at Colton and raised my eyebrows, urging him to have an honest to god conversation with his Luna. He took a breath and then turned to Joss to explain his plan. He quickly told her about Shaggy having seen Colton’s mom, and Xavier’s encounter with Ava back at the weed farm, and then what the three of us had seen when we’d been driving home from Reno.

“We have reason to believe that Big Mac can help us find the orb my father stole, and that the orb may be connected to these separate instances of seeing these people who are supposed to be dead,” Colton said. “And in order to find Big Mac, we’re hoping to enlist Mrs. Smith’s help. With Silas out there, Mrs. Smith is vulnerable and we’re thinking that Big Mac might be willing to come out of hiding to help her friend. So that’s what we’re going to do. We’ll talk to Mrs. Smith first, but since she’s part of your pack I thought you’d want to know.”

I rolled my eyes. What a very Colton-like sign off, making it clear he wasn’t asking permission for anything.

To Joss’s credit, she took the whole *we see dead people* thing in stride. She considered his plan and finally nodded. “I know you’re going to do what you think is best regardless of what I think, and that you’re not asking for my permission, but if this is something that’s going to save the pack, then I’m all for it.”

“First, you have to ask Mrs. Smith,” I reminded them. “We can’t force her to this.”

Colton shrugged. “Yes, we can.”

Joss and I both ignored him and we wandered the house in search of Mrs. Smith. Unsurprisingly, we found her in the kitchen.

At my suggestion, Colton was gracious enough to let Joss make the request. Colton might not have wanted to admit it, but Mrs. Smith respected her Luna, and a request like this had a much better chance of succeeding if it came from Joss.

Mrs. Smith listened quietly as Joss explained Colton’s plan—he only chimed in four times to clarify or add to Joss’s spiel—and then she stared off into the distance for a while before shaking her head. “I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

My eyes widened, and I glanced at Colton. He looked just as surprised as I was. Was Mrs. Smith really turning down an opportunity to help save her pack, to protect herself from further harm from Silas? I’d thought she’d be over the moon with this plan.

“Is it that you can’t, or that you won’t?” I asked.

“I won’t betray MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said simply. “She has her reasons for hiding, and I’m not going to ask her to risk herself.”

I blinked. She was choosing a witch over her own pack? How could she do that?

“The fate of the Redwood pack is at stake,” Joss reminded her. “Probably all the packs.”

Mrs. Smith nodded. “I understand, but MacKenzie isn’t a werewolf, and she went into hiding on purpose. It’s not fair—”

Colton cut her off with a growl. “She went into hiding to avoid my father. Only she didn't do a very good job. Trust me—if Gabriel can find her, Silas can too.”

Mrs. Smith just shook her head. “You don’t understand—”

Colton slammed his fist down on the counter, and my eyes widened.

“Hey!” I snapped at him. “Don’t treat her like that.”

He ignored me, his eyes locked onto Mrs. Smith. “Then *make* me understand. What’s the story with you, Big Mac, and my father?”

**Episode 517**

GREYSON

Shit, shit, shit.

I mumbled every curse word I knew as Astrid, Torin, Artemis, and I tumbled down the mine shaft. I had to think quick, or we’d turn into a nice werewolf-slash-Fae flavored stain on the bottom of the mine.

The collective screams of the group filled my ears. Torin’s was unsurprisingly high, but Artemis was the one who screamed like a banshee. I reached my hands out, looking for anything to grasp onto.

“Hold on!” I yelled. I shifted one of my hands and tried to dig my claws in for purchase on the rocky wall. Sparks flew, illuminating our freefall in terrifying small flashes as my claws scraped down the wall.

“Come on!” I screamed at myself, at the rocky wall, at the entire fucking universe that just couldn’t seem to miss a single opportunity to shit on me.

Finally, my claws hooked on to a crevice and my body jerked to a halt. My shoulder screamed from the sudden lurch—supporting my entire body weight. I clutched tight to the rope in my other hand and braced myself for it to catch the weight of the three Fae.

This was going to suck.

Their combined weight pulled the rope taut and fire burned up my other arm, across my back, and into the shoulder and arm that were keeping all of us from a very gruesome death. I bit out a cry, my voice echoing off the cavernous mine shaft.

*Fuck! That hurts!* My breaths came in tight hisses through my teeth. I could do this. I’d been through a hell of a lot worse than this. This didn’t hurt that badly—

“Oh my god, you saved us!” Torin cried.

“Shut the fuck up!” I snarled.

Okay, maybe the pain was actually just as horrifying as I’d originally thought.

Below me I felt the trio grasping tighter to the rope, wiggling around on the literal lifeline I’d given them.

“My hands are slipping!” Astrid cried.

Their movement wasn’t helping anything, and I came dangerously close to losing my grip on the rope. I gasped and grunted. “Don’t move. Do not. Fucking. Move. Just… hold on.”

There was a beat of silence.

And then, naturally, they all started losing their shit.

“DO NOT drop me!” Artemis screeched. I’d never heard her sound like that before, though some part of me was relieved I could hear her at all. I’d half-expected her to pass out from fear the moment we’d started climbing down the side of the mine shaft.

“Argh, I’m slipping! I’m slipping!” Astrid cried, and the rope in my grip jerked around so hard I almost lost my hold on the wall.

Torin was also freaking out, but his hysteria took a slightly different approach. “Do you have us, Greyson? You can do this, buddy! I believe in you!”

I wasn’t sure why, but this somehow seemed worse than Astrid’s incessant tugging on the rope. She yanked hard again, and a line of fire raced down my back. Fuck. If by some miracle we survived this, I was going to murder them all.

I glanced around. I wouldn’t be able to hold them for long, especially since it seemed like Astrid was trying to do a goddamn dance routine down there. Was there any ground below? Anything to soften our fall?

“You’re doing great!” Torin cried, ever the cheerleader. “Just—”

The rock I’d been hooked on broke free from the wall, and we tumbled further down the shaft and into the deep darkness.

Our screams echoed through the cavern once more, and we hit the ground. Well, *they* hit the ground and then provided me with a bony, Fae-shaped pillow to land on. I groaned. I was pretty sure that someone’s elbow had just bruised my kidney.

The Fae were all groaning on the ground, but judging by how much they were all bitching about their fall, nobody seemed seriously injured. Once this was over, if I never saw another Fae—Cali excluded, of course—it would be too soon.

And then it hit me: we weren’t dead. We should have been dead. We should all have been smashed to blood and bits, but the ground was surprisingly soft? What the hell kind of mine had a soft bottom? What did they mine in here anyway? Marshmallows?

At this point, I wouldn’t have put it past the Fae world to actually have a marshmallow mine. Except the marshmallows would obviously be poisonous and curse your entire family, because fuck everything about this freaky death trap of a world. Because this place fucking sucked.

There was a breathy groan beneath me, and my eyes shot open. I couldn’t move my limbs—I must have gotten tangled in the rope—and I was lying face to face with… Cali?

“Get… off… me,” Artemis groaned.

My head shot up. Had I hit it on the way down? Artemis was absolutely not Cali.

I tried to unravel myself but just slumped back down on her. “Sorry. I think I’m all tied up.”

She winced and nodded. “Okay. I’ll help you.”

Together, we carefully unraveled the rope around me, our hands occasionally brushing while I tried not to crush her under my weight. But I still couldn’t quite get free enough to climb off her. She offered me a pained, awkward smile, and I tried not to lose my temper over something as silly as a rope coiled around me. If she could be a good sport about almost having been crushed by a werewolf raining down from the sky, I could stand to be a bit more gracious about it taking half a fucking century to untangle a rope.

And yet, I was furious. Not with Artemis, necessarily, just this entire shitshow of a situation.

I’d never asked for this. All I wanted was to get the hell out of here and get to Cali. All I’d ever wanted from the moment we’d gone through the portal was to help Cali find a cure for her mother, and to bring her home. I’d never wanted to pick up every stray Fae we came across, or liberate an entire compound of slaves and creatures. And yet I’d been saddled with protecting and leading this misfit group of Fae that Cali had gathered up—and then apparently ditched to go run off with Xavier.

My teeth ground together. This was one of the reasons why I didn’t want to be an Alpha. I didn't want to be responsible for a pack—didn’t want to have to take care of a bunch of other people—and yet here I was, responsible not for a pack of werewolves, but a group of Fae. They might as well have been a pack, with the way they looked to me to lead them, to protect them.

There was a not-so-small part of me that wished I’d just ditched them earlier. Then I wouldn’t be here, trapped at the bottom of this dumbass mine.

But this was what Cali would have wanted me to do. And I knew for certain that she’d never forgive me if I left them here to fend for themselves.

“Excuse me,” Artemis snapped. “Can you please hurry it up a little? Maybe try helping out a bit more? You’re really heavy.”

I glared at her but did as she asked. I wouldn’t have enjoyed having a big, heavy body trapped on top of mine either, and I didn’t know what it was about Artemis, but I was struggling to stay mad at her. Even after everything she’d done to me and Cali.

She tugged on the rope and tried to shimmy out from underneath me, but it only pulled me closer.

She groaned. “I don’t think it’s working.”

“Oh really?” I deadpanned. “You don’t think?”

She glared at me. “Ass.”

I smirked. “Yeah, probably.”

I didn’t mind her anger. Better she be pissed off at me than losing her mind to her claustrophobia. I could see the shadow of that fear on her face, and I knew it wouldn’t take much for it to consume her. It was better to keep her distracted.

Finally, I untangled myself and started to roll off Artemis.

Torin let out an earsplitting shriek. “It’s moving!”

Everyone scrambled to untangle themselves and find their feet. I glanced over at Torin in the darkness. What the hell was he talking about?

“*What’s* moving?” Artemis asked.

“The ground!” Astrid cried.

“What the hell?” I finally found my feet and helped pull the others off each other. Then the ground beneath me shifted and I stumbled, almost falling right on my ass.

“The floor’s moving,” Artemis gasped out. “Greyson, why is the floor moving?”

“No fucking clue, Artemis,” I said, my voice raising.

Then I saw it—the coiled, slithering body of a snake. The most gigantic snake I’d ever seen. The Fae all scrambled up against the wall behind me, and I backed up cautiously. The snake rose, its yellow, slit-pupiled eyes almost glowing in the darkness.

Its long slithering tongue darted in and out, scenting us as it opened its large jaws and revealed huge, glistening fangs.

I was so done with this place.

**Episode 518**

I shivered as I settled down on the soft grass in the clearing, curling up on my side and wrapping my arms tight around my chest for warmth. It was freezing out, especially here in the mountains. From my spot on the ground, I could just make out Xavier’s form several feet away. He was also lying on the ground, his back to me. It was going to be a cold night—in more ways than one.

I couldn’t believe the way he’d spoken to me earlier. After everything!

Maybe it had been presumptuous of me to assume that even though we were fighting, Xavier would still have lain down next to me and helped me stay warm all night with that magical werewolf body heat of his. Except…

*Greyson always kept me warm. Even when we weren’t on the best of terms.*

I still remembered our first night in the Fae world. I’d fallen asleep with my teeth chattering and had woken up to the soft warmth of Greyson’s wolf form pressed against me. Even then, when I’d barely trusted him, he’d still supported me however he could.

I rolled over, trying to find some semblance of comfort on the cold ground.

I shouldn’t compare them. *Couldn’t* compare them. Xavier and Greyson were half-brothers, were both werewolves with Alpha tendencies, but they were different people with different histories—especially where I was concerned.

Greyson and I hadn’t had the tidiest history before we’d teamed up in the Fae world, but we’d never had the baggage and complications that Xavier and I were facing. So maybe it wasn’t fair to expect Xavier to do everything that Greyson had done for me.

And Xavier was here. He’d come to save me, to help me, to… *choose me*, if I could believe that. And that wasn’t worth nothing. So maybe I shouldn’t have been quite so hard on Xavier, but nothing about our relationship had ever been easy. And him just showing up out of the blue and acting like he deserved some kind of medal for it… I blew out a breath.

*Cool it, Cali. You’re trying to be nice, to give him the benefit of the doubt, remember?*

I didn’t know what to do. I was freezing my ass off on the hard ground, my mind spinning, and if I wasn’t seething at Xavier or worrying about Greyson or panicking about my mom, I was thinking about the kiss Xavier and I had shared. It had felt like a missing piece. It had set my world on fire. It had been completely and totally perfect—and yet so wrong.

*Ugh*. I *really* needed to get my shit together.

I shivered again, trying to resist the urge to scoot closer to Xavier and explain… What, exactly? How could I explain something I didn’t fully understand?

Xavier was my mate. That was a certainty. But it didn’t mean we actually had a good relationship, or that it had *ever* been truly good. And then there was Greyson… There was just something about him, about our connection, that I couldn’t let go of. That I didn’t *want* to let go of.

We were mates too… Maybe? How was I supposed to know 100 percent?

*UGH*.

*Oh boy, Cali. You’ve gone and found yourself yet* another *complicated relationship.*

I couldn’t help thinking of the first time I’d heard the term *due destini*, of how troubling it had been to hear an account of someone torn between two mates—but how it had also felt *right*. How it had helped explain the pull I felt between these two powerful werewolves. I’d hoped *due destini* was just a myth, like Lola had said, but now I knew the truth—and I’d known it all along, if I was being honest with myself.

There was truth to the myth.

But now wasn’t the time to worry about that. I had to get the moon buttercup and bring it home before my mom ran out of time. That *had* to be my first priority. After I’d found the flower, after I’d brought it home and saved Mom, *then* I could try to sort out everything with Xavier and Greyson.

And, in the meantime, I really needed to sleep. Because considering the way things were going with Xavier, it didn’t look like he’d be letting me ride on his back if I got tired.

Despite the cold, once I finally worked through some sort of plan, I drifted off to sleep, a soft, soothing voice echoing through my mind. It was my mom’s voice, singing a lullaby. We were in my bedroom in Minnesota, and I was resting against my mom’s warm body, held in her arms.

I was a baby. I was happy and taken care of and cherished. And I was loved—so very much.

A thunderclap broke through the peace of the moment and I jolted in fear, but my mother’s voice remained calm. “Don’t worry, my darling. The storm will pass.”

Was that why I’d never been afraid of lightning?

My dad came in, a goofy grin on his face. “I’m beginning to get jealous. Am I ever going to have a chance to hold my beautiful daughter?”

My mom laughed. “Only after I get my fill.”

My dad groaned, gave my mom an affectionate kiss on the side of her head, and left the room. I reached for him as he walked out. I wanted all of us to be together, to be one complete, happy family.

But my dad was already gone.

My mom put me down in my crib. “I have to go, Cali,” she said.

The thunder exploded again, louder this time. It shook the whole house and sounded like it was right outside my window.

*No!* I reached for my mom. I didn’t want her to leave me alone, especially not during such a scary storm. But my mom was already stepping back, her voice turning raspy.

“Get the flowers, Cali. Before it’s too late—” My mom stiffened, letting out a strangled wheeze. “Cali…” she groaned.

And then she crumpled to the ground.

*Mom, no!* I screamed for her, but no sound came out. My voice was gone. I crawled toward her, but no matter how fast I moved, I couldn’t reach her.

*Mom, I’m coming! I’m going to save you! Don’t give up! Just hold on!*

I couldn’t lose her, not like this. Not now, when I was so close, when I’d come so far! I kept crawling forward, kept reaching for her, but something grabbed my legs and pulled me back, away from my mother.

*No!* I couldn’t let her die. I had to save her! I couldn’t lose her! I kicked and fought and let out one voiceless scream after another. *Mommy, no!*

“Cali.”

The voice calling my name wasn’t my mother’s. It was deep and urgent, though somehow gentle at the same time. It simultaneously soothed me and set my nerves on edge, and I fought harder against the grip on my legs, desperate to reach my mother’s limp form.

*I have to save—*

“Cali.”

There it was again. That voice, deep as the thunder outside my window. I knew that voice…

Xavier. He was calling for me. What was he doing here? Was he here to help?

“*Cali*.”

I bolted upright, my heart racing. I blinked the sleep out of my wide eyes, searching for the threat my mind told me was nearby. What had happened? Where was I? Where was my mom?

My teeth began to chatter, but I wasn’t cold. Pure terror coursed through my veins, and when Xavier reached out to touch my face, I skittered backward like a frightened animal.

“Cali…” he said again. His voice was soft as ever, but I’d never seen the look on his face before. He looked confused, and even a little afraid—but not like I was. He slowly approached me, his hands up, and in those brief seconds before he reached me again, understanding set in.

I was in the Fae world, in the foothills of a mountain in Dark Fae territory, with Xavier, who was furious with me, while my mom was dying, maybe even taking her last breaths, back in the human world.

And then I lost it.

By the time Xavier touched me again, his arms wrapping tight around me, I was sobbing inconsolably. He smoothed my hair and rubbed my back, making soothing noises while I clung to him like he was my lifeline.

“It’s all right, Cali,” he said. “You were having a nightmare.”

It had been so real. So terrifying. But at least I wasn’t alone, now. Xavier was here. He’d come for me, and he’d *stayed*. He hadn’t left me.

Warmth began to wash over me, the heat of his body sinking into my own, and some of the fear receded. Finally able to think, I looked into his eyes and saw nothing but love shining back at me.

*I’ll never leave you again.*

I’d heard his voice inside my head.

**Episode 519**

GREYSON

I eyed the snake and held my ground as I looked up into its green eyes. I’d known people growing up who’d been terrified of snakes, and had even met this girl at a bar once who told me she cuddled up next to a boa constrictor every night. But honestly, I’d never really had any real opinion on the creatures.

But this one, I decidedly did not like.

Probably because this particular snake was fucking huge and looked like it wanted to swallow us whole. I braced myself, preparing to shift. But then Artemis started speaking in a low quiet voice.

“Everyone stop moving,” she ordered, her voice tense but soft. “Jormungands are attracted to movement.”

“But we can’t just stay here, right?” Astrid asked, wrapping her arms around herself, probably to keep from shaking.

I turned to Artemis, watching for her answer. But all she did was slowly raise her hands. Her face was tense with concentration and I wished I knew what the hell she was planning. But I was just going to have to trust her.

The snake turned its gaze on her, almost lazily. It reared its head back, and I was sure it was going to strike. I found myself wondering if its bite was poisonous—or if just being caught between its powerful jaws would be enough to kill a person.

But then a surge of energy hit the snake, causing it to vibrate. Almost like it had been electrocuted. I felt my jaw drop as I took in the sight of the dancing snake.

“Listen carefully,” Artemis hissed at us, her teeth clenched with the effort of whatever she was doing to the snake. “You all need to move *slowly* toward the tunnel while I hold this thing at bay.”

Torin, Astrid, and Shawn nodded, and shakily started shuffling away. But I hesitated. I wanted to get to Cali as soon as possible, but it didn’t seem right to leave Artemis alone with this massive, deadly creature.

“Go,” Artemis insisted, like she could read my mind. “I’ll be okay.”

I nodded and took my first step. I tried to ignore Artemis’s straining face as I made my way to the tunnel. But it was no use. I could hear Cali in my head telling me to stay put. Then, out of nowhere, the snake’s tail came hurtling toward me like a battering ram.

I fell to the ground, the wind knocked out of me. I heard the *thwack* of the snake’s tail hitting Artemis. I craned my neck, just in time to see her being slammed into the wall by the force of the hit.

Angry and aching, I sprang to my feet. I could feel the fight rising in me. We’d tried this her way, but now it was time for mine. I heard my bones pop and crack as I shifted.

I threw back my head and howled as loudly as I could to draw the snake’s attention. I stalked toward it, howling again when it didn’t look my way.

*Look at me*, I willed it as I snarled. The snake finally fixed its beady eyes on me and hissed. I braced myself for a fight, but was shocked when the snake dropped to the ground and slithered away.

I looked at Artemis who just looked back at me, her eyebrows raised as she caught her breath.

“Wow,” she finally managed. “I’ve never actually seen a werewolf shift before.”

I shifted back to human, stretching as I adjusted to my human form, forgetting that she might not have been prepared for my nudity.

Sure enough, her eyes flicked up and down as she took me in. I wondered if I was imagining it, or if I was really seeing a bit of color blooming in her cheeks. After a moment of stunned silence, she cleared her throat loudly and shook her head.

“Sorry.” She rolled her eyes at me, like she hadn’t just been checking me out. “I can’t do glamours, so you’re stuck like that.”

“I’m used to it,” I replied flatly. “Let’s get going.”

I could feel her gaze on me as I started off toward the tunnel. To be fair, maybe nudity was less common in the Fae world. But still.

“What?” I snapped, tiring of this world and its customs. “Do you have a problem?”

“You’re naked,” Artemis stated, and my teeth clenched at the obvious statement.

“Yeah, that tends to happen after I shift,” I said, exasperated and annoyed. “Again, do you have a problem? Because I’d like to get going. But if you wanted to throw a net around me first…”

I trailed off and turned back to look at her. She just raised her eyebrows again and followed me.

“We can go,” she offered, composing herself and walking past me coolly.

I sighed. I was less than thrilled to be partnering up with my recent captor, but it would have to do for now.

We found Astrid, Torin, and Shawn at another opening in the ground. They were hunched together and still looked pretty shaken. I wished Cali were here to ease their minds, because I didn’t have the slightest idea what to say.

“What happened?” Torin asked, eyes wide.

“We scared it off,” Artemis answered.

“How much further to the exit?” I asked him, trying not to sound too gruff but knowing we needed to stay on task. Torin wasn’t always the best at that.

“Should just be two more levels,” he answered. “And this ladder miraculously isn’t broken.”

“I’ll go first,” I offered, anxious to make up for lost time.

The thought of Xavier having more time alone with Cali made me see red. How long would he wait before he made a move? Not long, I was certain.

How could he possibly think he was good enough for Cali? All he did was hurt her. Misunderstand her. Break her heart.

I started down the ladder, moving as quickly as I could, the rage fueling me to go even faster. A voice in my head that sounded a lot like Cali’s reminded me to go slower, so the others could keep up. But I didn’t really care. They weren’t my concern.

I tried to stretch my senses so I could be aware of what was moving around below me. I really didn’t want another giant snake-sized surprise leaping out at me.

We passed the next level without incident. My companions surprised me by actually keeping up as I hurried through the cramped tunnels.

I looked back to check their progress and locked eyes with Artemis almost immediately.

“Is it just me, or are you in a hurry to leave me here?” she asked, her voice cold.

“Why would I want to do that?” I threw back at her. “I’m trying to get out of *here*.”

I didn’t have time for a petty fight. I wanted to get out of here and go to Cali. I couldn’t have cared less about some Fae I didn’t even know.

“Since we met, it seems like that’s all you’ve wanted to do,” she answered, jogging to catch up with me. “Can’t say I completely blame you. I’ve done some pretty shitty things to you—but don’t take it personally. I was just doing a job.”

Something in her voice sounded resigned, like she was used to be hated—even if it wasn’t what she wanted.

I knew what that was like.

“We probably have more in common than you think,” I offered, for reasons I couldn’t have explained.

Artemis paused, and I could practically see her gears turning.

“What have you done, wolf?” she asked, eyes alight with curiosity.

God. What to tell her? She’d probably have been interested in the number of people I’d killed, or the lies I’d told. The times I hadn’t protected Cali half as well as I should have… The fact that I’d kissed her even when her heart had belonged to my brother.

The brother I hated.

“It doesn’t matter,” I told her gruffly, hoping she’d let it go.

“You don’t want to play the ‘Who’s Done It Worse’ game with me,” she warned, playfully. “I win every time. I guarantee this won’t be any different.”

In spite of myself, I snorted.

“It wouldn’t even be a competition,” I retorted. “I’ve done things that would make you—hell, even the Kollector—blush, okay? I’m not exactly the kind of guy you bring home to your mother.”

Artemis deflated, and for a second I wondered if I’d offended her.

“My mother died in childbirth,” Artemis admitted.

She gave me a weak smile—the apologetic kind people gave when they were talking about someone who’d died. Like they’re sorry to bring you into their pain. I was surprised to see that kind of vulnerability from her.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I didn’t realize. I shouldn’t have…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Artemis said, brushing it off.

We walked in silence for another moment, but I still felt wrong. Like there was something unsaid that I needed to get off my chest.

“I didn’t have a mom when I was a kid, either,” I told her, unable to keep quiet. “I get it. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

Artemis nodded, her features relaxing as we both slowed to a stop. I looked down at her and felt… warmth. Warmth, and a connection I hadn’t expected.

**Episode 520**

MAYA

I let my eyes dart over to check on Colton. I’d gotten the passenger seat. Not because I’d called it or asked for it, but mostly to keep Colton and Mrs. Smith as far away from each other as possible. Given how hostile their last conversation had been, it had just seemed like the right move.

At least now we were on the way to Big Mac’s. Mrs. Smith had agreed to that much, at least. But she was still refusing to tell us what was going on between her, Big Mac, and Silas. And Colton had asked. Repeatedly. And not always nicely.

I knew I wasn’t exactly an expert on tact. But I definitely would have handled things a bit more delicately if I’d been in his shoes. It was obvious that Mrs. Smith was keeping a secret, but yelling and pouting and huffing wasn’t going to get it out of her.

I found myself wishing I knew how to get her to talk. And not just for me—I was still deciding whether or not to bolt—but for Colton. For *his* piece of mind.

Holy fuck, I was getting mushy.

I felt the wave of nausea that generally accompanied the realization that I actually gave a shit about somebody. Almost like he could read it on me, Colton glanced my way.

*You okay?* he asked through the mind link.

*Carsick,* I lied, giving him a tight smile.

*We’ll be there soon,* he promised, making my chest go tight with guilt. He was comforting me, and I wanted to run away.

I took a deep breath and sighed, resolving to think about anything but me and Colton. We had bigger things to focus on right now.

*It’s good Mrs. Smith decided to come,* I offered silently, hoping it might remind Colton to be less of a dick to her, considering he wanted her help.

*Yeah,* he answered, snorting out loud. *It didn’t hurt that Joss basically told her she had to. But yeah. It’s something, I guess.*

So much for getting him to stop being an asshole.

“So, Mrs. Smith.” Colton stared at her in the rearview mirror. “Seen any ghosts lately?”

*What the fuck are you doing?* I threw at him through our mind link in a last-ditch effort to get him to shut the hell up. But it didn’t matter. This was Colton. He was going to do what he was going to do.

“Ghosts?” Mrs. Smith asked, giving an awkward laugh. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Shaggy thought he saw my mom,” Colton said. “And Xavier thought he saw Ava. Honestly, so did Maya and I, when we were out with Lola. I’m just wondering if it’s going around.”

I looked back to see Mrs. Smith’s reaction. Her face was frozen in a polite smile. Like she couldn’t tell if Colton was for real or not. *Or* like she knew something and was working very hard to pretend she didn’t.

Suddenly, my interest was as piqued as Colton’s. Was Mrs. Smith hiding something?

“Are you going to answer?” Colton pressed. “Or is this another one of your fucking mysteries?”

I sighed. Just when I’d thought we were on the same page… Did Colton really have to antagonize everyone all the time? Would he ever realize that wasn’t the way to get what he wanted? Would he ever stop acting like a fucking teenager?

“You’re the one who had the orb,” Mrs. Smith reminded him evenly. “Not me. Why don’t you enlighten us as to how you lost it?”

I pursed my lips together, watching Colton’s expression get increasingly gobsmacked. That was the thing about leaping without looking. Sometimes you fell into a vat of boiling water and got burned. Or something. I wasn’t really a metaphor girl.

“We told you,” Colton replied through clenched teeth as he white-knuckled the steering wheel. “Silas took it.”

“But how did you obtain it?” Mrs. Smith pushed, picking up steam. “Did you even have any *idea* what you were dealing with?”

“Why do you think we hid it?” Colton demanded, completely losing his cool along with any credibility he’d possessed at the start of this conversation.

“You should have brought the orb to the council,” she told him, an edge to her voice. Her subtext was clear: *You only have yourself to blame.*

I’d never heard her that angry before. And apparently neither had Colton, because he actually looked a bit chagrined when he replied.

“Well, we didn’t,” he mumbled.

“Take the next left,” Mrs. Smith snapped, apparently uninterested in hearing anything else from him.

Mrs. Smith directed Colton to where Big Mac’s house was supposed to have been. The area started to look familiar, and I realized the hot springs weren’t far away. The ones where we’d played truth or dare.

I felt my cheeks heat up a bit at the thought of my kiss with Colton, back at the springs. And before I knew it, I was the only one left in the car and Colton was poking his head through the window.

“You coming?” he asked, his expression equal parts annoyed and affectionate. Something about it startled me, and I let out a nervous giggle.

“Uh, yeah,” I murmured, scrambling to join him outside the car.

Colton grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me close. For a second my heart leapt up into my throat. Was he going to kiss me? Here? In front of Mrs. Smith? And more importantly, did I care?

“Be careful, okay?” Colton half-asked, half-told me.

I blinked at him, confused. Was Colton… looking out for me?

“Big Mac’s a witch,” he continued, not registering the daze I was in. “And we all know how much we can trust a witch.”

I nodded, getting with the program. This whole Silas thing wasn’t anything to fuck around with. But even though I had every right to be nervous as hell, it actually felt nice to have Colton beside me for something like this. Not that I’d ever have admitted that to his stupidly handsome face.

“MACKENZIE!” Mrs. Smith hollered, through cupped hands. “COME OUT!”

Colton and I exchanged bewildered looks. Well, that was one way of handling it.

“Or we’ll blow your house in!” Colton threw in.

I swatted at him without thinking.

“Don’t be an asshole,” I chided, but Colton just grinned at me. God, he was fucking infuriating.

We stared at the space where Big Mac’s House should have been. Nothing moved. Nothing even made a sound.

“MacKenzie.” Mrs. Smith lowered her voice a bit, showing her nerves for the first time. “We just want to talk. It’s urgent. We can’t leave until we get an answer.”

Still nothing.

“Fuck this,” Colton grunted, turning on his heel and heading back to the car. Before I could ask him what he thought he was doing, he leaned on the horn. Its loud, shrieking bleat filled the woods.

“What the fuck?” I yelled at him at the exact time Mrs. Smith called out, “Stop that right now, Colton!”

But he didn’t listen. He just kept his hand on the horn and turned his face up to the sky to shout.

“Silas!” he yelled. “Silas, she’s right here! Come and get her!”

I looked at Mrs. Smith, feeling the odd desire to apologize to her for Colton’s behavior. But why should I? He wasn’t my responsibility.

Mrs. Smith stormed over to him, her face going red. She stopped a foot away and fixed him with a piercing stare.

“If you don’t stop antagonizing her right now,” she growled, “you’ll have more than Silas to worry about.”

Colton lifted his hand off the horn.

“Fine.” He smirked at her and I clenched my fists—why was I getting the sneaking suspicion that he wasn’t done?

Maybe because as soon as Mrs. Smith turned around to continue entreating Big Mac to come out, Colton cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled at the top of his voice.

“We know you’re there! You can’t hide forever in that mirror!”

My jaw dropped when Big Mac appeared out of nowhere, floating in the middle of the woods. Her hair was wild and she looked like she hadn’t had company in quite a while, but it was unmistakably her.

She glared at Colton. I was shocked she hadn’t already managed to reduce him to a smoldering pile of wolf remnants with the power of her gaze.

“You are this close to being turned into a crustacean,” she hissed at him.

“If you think I’m scared of you—” Colton was cut off when Big Mac slashed the air with her hand.

Colton stopped mid-sentence. I watched him try to speak, but all he could do was emit a small wheezing sound.

I raised an eyebrow. A silent Colton? How rare was that?

I turned around to Big Mac, who was grimacing. A combination of relief and anger was playing out on her face. And in that moment, I knew we were lucky that this was all she’d done.

“Can you teach me how to do that?” I asked, grinning in spite of myself. “It might come in handy sometime.”

I saw Colton moping at me out of the corner of my eye, but I ignored it. Instead, I watched Big Mac look at Mrs. Smith like I hadn’t said a thing.

“What’s this all about, Sabine?” she asked.

Like always, I bristled at the use of Mrs. Smith’s first name. It was always weird to hear. Like seeing a teacher at the grocery store. It was strange to think of Mrs. Smith having a life outside of being the reluctant matriarch of the Redwood pack, because that’s absolutely what she was at this point.

“Silas has the Orb of Letifer,” Mrs. Smith answered gravely.

Big Mac’s brow wrinkled. Her eyes darted around the forest, probably scanning for attackers. When she was satisfied we were alone, she fixed her gaze on the three of us.

“Come in,” she ordered. “Now.”

**Episode 521**

His words rang in my ears.

*I’ll never leave you again.*

But more shocking than the words themselves was the way Xavier had said them. He’d opened a mind link between us. I’d primarily only ever experienced that with Greyson. But if Xavier and I could communicate like this too… What did that mean?

“Did you do that on purpose?” I asked, cautious. I didn’t want to let on how earth-shattering this was. How much it could mean to me.

Whether it had been intentional or not, I’d let Xavier in so many times before only to get hurt. And while my heart was overwhelmed with emotion, my body was guided by muscle memory. And everything inside it was screaming at me to be very careful.

“It wasn’t by accident,” he answered, looking as serious as I’d ever seen him.

“But why now?” I asked, careful not to let my voice break. “We’ve never… We haven’t been able to do it before. Not really. What changed?”

Xavier hesitated for a second. I could tell he wasn’t afraid. He was actually thinking, trying to answer my question as best he could. He was trying to search himself and be honest.

“Everything,” he told me.

It was like a dam burst inside him. He clutched at my waist, and his eyes filled with emotion. For once, he didn’t seem distant. Instead, it was the opposite—he seemed desperate to be close to me.

“Ever since I left you to go with Gabriel,” he started, his words coming out in a rush, like if he stopped now he might never be able to start again, “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. And honestly, I don’t want to. Cali…”

I could see it all in his eyes. So much longing and pain and fear. He was still holding it all in, like a kid who refused to let go of their favorite pet even though it was trying to wriggle free. Like if he let it go *this time*,it might never come back.

“It’s okay,” I told him, placing my hand over his heart. “Keep going.”

He took a deep, shuddering breath that made me want to hold him in my arms as tightly as I could. I found myself wishing I could carry the weight on his shoulders for him. Just for a minute. Just to give him a break from all his worries.

“Being with Gabriel, it brought back all these memories.” He swallowed hard. “Memories of my past. My relationship with my dad. What it felt like to lose my mom. And… Ava.”

I saw the way his expression almost crumpled on that last word. He never talked about Ava. Even mentioning her name seemed to hurt him.

“You’ve never really talked about her much.” I didn’t want to scare him, but I wanted him to know it was okay to talk about this if he wanted to. “You’ve never really explained how you felt about her. What came to mind when you thought about her again?”

“Everything,” he answered, huffing out a helpless laugh. “If I let myself, I can remember it all. Her laugh. Her smell. How close we got, even though there was so much animosity between our packs.”

I couldn’t help but stroke his cheek. I wanted him to know that he was safe with me. That he could talk about this with me. That it was okay to feel this way. That I wanted to be there for him. I knew I had to just listen right now.

“I’d never felt that way before…” He got a faraway look in his eye. “I trusted her. We were going to spend the rest of our lives together…”

And then his expression darkened, like his memories had shifted. I ignored the pang in my chest.

“Until my father incited a war between her pack and ours.” He shook his head bitterly. “And she sided with them over me.”

He blinked hard and for a second, I wondered if he was about to cry.

“You know the rest,” he finished gruffly.

He must have reached his limit, or at least needed a break on the caring and sharing, because he took a step back and turned around. He craned his neck to look at the night sky.

I tried to give him a moment while I processed what he’d just told me. Ava was the one person he’d chosen to let into his life before me. The one person he’d chosen. And she’d betrayed him. Of course being with me was hard for him. It wasn’t an excuse, but it was an explanation. One I deserved. And one he finally understood he needed to give me.

“Did you love her?” I asked. I could hear in my voice how scared I was to push my luck by asking another question. But it felt wrong not to take advantage of his rare openness. This could be my only chance to get answers—and no matter who I ended up choosing, I’d always care about Xavier.

He was my first love.

“Yes.” Xavier nodded, but he didn’t turn around. “Very much.”

I took a deep breath, knowing that the next question—the one I really wanted to ask—was going to be a lot harder.

“Do you love me as much?” I asked, hating how small I sounded. How desperate. How vulnerable.

I hated that I felt competitive with a ghost—that I always had, for as long as I’d been with Xavier. Ava had always haunted our relationship, and I didn’t even know if that was something she would have wanted to do.

Xavier turned to face me. His gaze made me hold my breath as I waited for his reply. I had no doubt in my mind that he was about to be very honest.

“Even more. *Cali.*”God, I’d forgotten what my name sounded like in his mouth… “Cali, I love you so much. More than I ever thought possible.”

I wanted to gasp for air, but it felt like I’d forgotten how to breathe. Like his words had knocked the air out of the atmosphere.

“Since I last saw you, I’ve learned what’s important to me.” He reached out and took my chin in his hand, cradling it. “And I know now, more than ever… It’s *you*, Cali.”

I swallowed before sucking in a huge, shaky breath. I was afraid to speak in case I burst into tears. This was all just too much.

“Why?” I croaked. “Why now?”

Xavier’s expression darkened, and I felt his exterior harden a bit. I reached out to him uselessly, a plea for him to stay open dying on my lips.

“My father’s back,” he admitted.

I blinked back at him, thrown.

“How is that possible?” I asked. “How can you be sure? Have you seen him? Talked to him?”

“I haven’t,” he told me. “But… he’s made his presence known. It’s him, for sure.”

I nodded, fear flooding my system.

“Does the pack know?” I asked, worried for everyone. “Does Greyson?”

Xavier recoiled at the sound of his brother’s name, like I’d slapped him. I instantly wished I could take it back, but it was too late. The distance between us grew as Xavier put another brick in the wall he kept between himself and everyone else.

“Colton knows,” he told me, trying to shake off the mention of his half-brother. “He’ll deal with things while I’m gone.”

“Are the others okay?” I asked, regret washing over me like a wave. “Lola and Maya and Mrs. Smith?”

“I assume so,” he answered.

I took that in as a long pause stretched out between us. I found myself missing how open Xavier had been, just a few seconds ago. Even if it had been painful for him, it had been such a relief to know what he was really thinking. I wished there was a way for him to be less opaque, in general.

“What happens when you get back?” I asked the question we were both thinking.

“I don’t know.” He sighed. “Why don’t we get some sleep?”

When I closed my eyes, visions of a girl I couldn’t quite make out danced in my mind. She was laughing.

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I woke up in his arms the next morning, like we had hundreds of times. I lifted my head from his chest and saw him smiling back at me. He looked so gentle, like he’d been at the beginning.

“Morning,” he murmured. “Do you know how much farther it is to the moon buttercup? Maybe I can save us some time by shifting.”

“It would make your lack of clothing easier to deal with,” I quipped, fighting off a smile. “Not that I completely mind, but… Well, you’re a little distracting.”

Xavier chuckled. “Message received,” he joked, rolling over and shifting in one fluid movement.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of his wolf. Sure, he was a lethal creature with teeth sharper than most knives. But he also had Xavier’s eyes.

I climbed up onto his back, anxious for us to get where we were going. Xavier took off in the right direction, and I reminded myself that this was the day. Today, we were going to get the flower that would save my mom. After this we’d turn back and head home. No more pit stops.

We came to a stop at the top of a ridge and I gasped.

In front of us was a vast field of flowers.

I slid off Xavier’s back immediately.

“WE MADE IT!” I cried, looking over at Xavier, who was shifting back into his human form. “I MADE IT!”

“You did.” He grinned at me. “So which one is it?”

I froze, looking out at the vast array of flowers.

Shit.

How was I supposed to know that? There were so many white flowers in front of me, all in different shapes and sizes. They couldn’t all be moon buttercups. What if I picked the wrong one? My mom could still die, even after everything we’d been through…

But just as the panic started to set in, I heard a voice.

“I can help you.”

**Episode 522**

GREYSON

The fresh air felt good in my lungs. We were finally out of the mines. We were all smeared with soot and dirt and our clothes were torn—well, those of us who were *wearing* clothes. I looked at my makeshift crew: battered, worn, but intact.

Maybe I was always meant to lead some kind of pack or another. I wondered if that thought would make Cali happy.

*Cali*.

“How long until we reach the moon buttercups?” I asked Artemis as we hiked.

“We’re going to have to backtrack a bit,” she admitted with a grimace, like she knew it would piss me off. “Could be half a day or so extra.”

I groaned. How much of this fucking trip was going to prove to be wasted time? Every minute counted at this point. Not only for Cali’s mother, but for Cali. Every second we spent here felt more dangerous than the last. I knew Xavier well enough to know he’d do everything he could to protect her, but that wasn’t good enough for me.

It should’ve been me with her.

I wouldn’t relax until I saw her. And even then…

I thought about shifting. That would certainly speed things up. But speed wasn’t useful when you had no fucking clue where you were going. I couldn’t afford to get lost—or worse, get captured again. I couldn’t afford a detour.

I glanced over at Artemis, my only hope at actually finding Cali. I wished I could say that looking at her gave me comfort, but it didn’t. There was something about her I couldn’t put my finger on… It was like I could see there was a missing piece in my understanding of her, but I couldn’t make it materialize. What was she hiding?

“Interested in borrowing my clothes?” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Because I don’t think we’re the same size.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Seriously,” she continued, with a sly grin. “Do you just walk around like that all the time? I guess it isn’t a terrible look.”

She made a big show of giving me a slow once-over and I gritted my teeth, annoyed. Probably sensing my anger, Torin nudged Astrid in the ribs.

“Why don’t you give him something to wear?” Torin suggested, and for possibly the first time since I’d met him, I found myself grateful that he’d opened his mouth.

I was so used to Astrid and her magic that I didn’t even stop walking, I just let the tingle of the materializing clothing flow over me. I looked down only to find myself back in the billowy white shirt and tight leather pants she’d put me in before. This fucking outfit. It sucked, but I found it tough to complain at this point.

Artemis chuckled at the sight of me, and I found myself wishing she wasn’t here.

“Should I call you Captain?” she asked. “Is your ship waiting in a cove somewhere? Because I could use the buried treasure…”

“Let’s just go,” I grumbled.

“You’re no fun,” Artemis teased. “But at least we don’t have to see your naked body anymore.”

Torin sighed. “It’s a shame.”

Well, there went my short-lived appreciation for Torin.

I just kept walking, wondering why Fae were so fucking annoying. Was this where Cali got her motor-mouth? Was it genetic? If so, how did she manage to make it such an adorable trait?

Artemis caught up to me and I tensed, preparing for more teasing and banter. More stuff I wasn’t in the mood for.

“You know, you’re much more approachable when you’re dressed,” she quipped.

“Thanks,” I responded dryly.

“Actually…” She took a breath. “I wanted to thank *you.* For keeping me from panicking in the mine. That was… good of you.”

I glanced over at her, waiting for the other shoe to drop and the punchline to hit. But it didn’t come. Artemis seemed sincere.

What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

“We needed you,” I answered, brushing her off. “Having you freaked out wouldn’t have been helpful to anyone. Don’t worry about it.”

Artemis snorted. “I guess gratitude doesn’t sit well with werewolves.” She grinned at me, clearly enjoying watching me squirm.

And there went the other shoe. Not wanting to give her the satisfaction of knowing she’d gotten to me, I just shrugged.

“So what’s the deal with all of you popping up here now?” she asked, eyeing me suspiciously. “Werewolves have been super rare around here for as long as anybody can remember. I’d never seen one in my life and then today, out of nowhere, two. It can’t be a coincidence.”

“Must be your lucky day,” I threw back at her.

I didn’t know this woman and I didn’t want to get into this with her. I didn’t owe her an explanation or pointless chit-chat. As far as I was concerned, *she* owed *me* for handing us over to a slave-brokering maniac.

“You kinda look like the guy Cali was with,” Torin piped up from behind us. “Xavier.”

Torin must not have seen the way my shoulders tensed when he said my brother’s name, because his questions didn’t stop there.

“Are you guys related?” he asked, picking up gleeful steam. “Is he a werewolf too?”

“We are, and he is,” I answered flatly. “Technically, he’s my half-brother.”

But my menacing tone did nothing to dampen Torin’s natural desire to stick his nose where it didn’t belong. When I turned around to glare at him, he was clapping his hands and grinning like a schoolkid.

“Wow!” he cried, practically beaming. “I’ve met *two* werewolves! Two of ‘em! I can’t believe it!”

I sighed.

Two of us. Both here. Both trying to be there for Cali.

And right now, I was the one farthest from her. Which made my blood boil if I let myself concentrate on it too much. The less I thought about Xavier, the better.

“Greyson, I know you hate questions, but I have to ask,” Torin rambled. “Are all werewolves as attractive as you and your half-brother? Physically? Or is it just something that runs in your family?”

“Torin,” Astrid interrupted chidingly. “Don’t be like that. It’s rude. How would you feel if he asked you a question like that?”

“Really flattered,” Torin answered, like it was obvious.

“And this is why I’m your only friend,” Astrid shot back.

Torin grumbled in reply and I sped up, happy to take advantage of their squabble and put some distance between myself and their incessant questions.

Especially because I was getting angrier by the second. I could feel the rage coursing through my body, making my skin hot. I wanted to shift so badly. To shift and run as hard as I could, until I felt like myself again.

But I couldn’t.

We were half a day away from Cali and Xavier, and all of Torin’s questions had only made me more aware of everything that could happen between now and then. I found myself wondering if they’d already kissed. Surely Cali wouldn’t be interested. Or maybe she was so shaken, she would’ve been drawn to someone familiar…

I couldn’t think about it any further. Cali and Xavier had what they’d had, but I was it for her.

Either way, I’d bet everything in my bank account that Xavier hadn’t told Cali he’d left me for dead in that fucking zoo. Because she’d hate that. She’d maybe even hate him for doing it. Cali wasn’t someone who turned to hate easily, and Xavier knew that. So he’d pretend to be a perfect little prince.

Because that *was* the narrative he preferred, wasn’t it? The one where I was a monster and he’d never done anything wrong in his life. Last time I checked, *I’d* never killed mymate. I’d never ditched Cali for a job worth a few thousand bucks, leaving her scared and lonely.

What a bastard.

Didn’t Xavier know she was bound to find out eventually? Would Cali ever forgive him for abandoning me? Abandoning his brother? His *Alpha?*

I remembered the look on Xavier’s face as he’d stared me down through the dome barrier. Right before he’d turned his back on me and walked away without lifting a finger to help. His eyes had burned with anger… but that hadn’t been the only thing. There had been a spark of something else.

*Pleasure*.

The anger, I understood. In his eyes, I’d taken everything from him—his pack, his mate. After all that, he’d have been foolish to trust me. But that he’d been *happy* to leave me there… That was what I couldn’t let go. That sick fuck had actually *liked* seeing me imprisoned. Degraded. Hopeless.

He’d been perfectly happy to throw me in jail and lock away the key, even though he didn’t even *understand* the things that had made him so angry with me. Xavier thought he knew what was going on, but he had no idea. And maybe he never would.

Artemis sidled up to me and I braced myself for more inane questions. More jibes. More bullshit.

“Maybe it’s not so bad that I don’t have any siblings.” She gave me a sad smile. “I always dreamed about what it would be like to have someone. A brother, maybe. But looking at you right now, I’m not so sure.”

“Why?” I asked, grinding salt into my wound like the masochist I was. “What changed your mind?”

“You did,” she answered. “You hate your brother, don’t you?”

**Episode 523**

MAYA

I looked at Big Mac, confused.

“Not that we don’t appreciate you agreeing to hear us out, but…” I trailed off, feeling stupid saying this out loud. “How do we come in? Like… *where?* All I can see is you beckoning us into the woods. Your house is gone.”

Colton sighed and took my hand, walking straight toward Big Mac, who stepped back and disappeared entirely. *What the hell?*

But before I could ask what the fuck was going on, Colton tugged on my arm and suddenly I was stumbling across a threshold. I was *inside* Big Mac’s house. Holy shit, Colton was right—witches were not to be underestimated. Big Mac had made her house invisible and untouchable if you didn’t know exactly where to look and when to enter.

And if she could do this, then what other weird shit could she do? Judging by the little bottles and vials of multicolored liquid and dusty old tomes surrounding us, lots of stuff I didn’t want to find out about.

I felt something brush against my ankle and nearly leapt straight up in the air. I looked down and was shocked to find that it was actually an adorable kitten.

“Do you think she decided a black cat would be too on the nose?” I joked, nudging Colton in the ribs.

Colton just glared at me, pointing at his mouth. Right. He couldn’t talk. I could get used to that.

“You know, strong silent type suits you,” I teased, unable to resist. “Maybe you should take a vow of silence.”

Colton shook his head at me, brows furrowing. He looked like a kid trying and failing to play the quiet game.

“Sorry, I didn’t get that?” I cupped my hand around my ear, feigning confusion.

“You can break the spell, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith reminded Big Mac pointedly. “I believe the boy has learned his lesson.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes and waved her hands.

“Nice of you to clean the place up for us,” Colton sniped, his voice restored.

I smacked him in the arm.

“This is why you can’t have nice things, idiot,” I snapped at him.

“Oh yeah,” Colton threw back at me. “*I’m* the immature one. Not you for making fun of me when I didn’t have a voice.”

“It’s not my fault I’m funnier than you,” I threw back, grinning at him. It was so much fun to get him riled up, I couldn’t help it. Colton didn’t have many buttons to push so when one came up, it was kind of irresistible.

“Enough.” Big Mac cut us off, unamused. “Or I will shut you up. Only this time it’ll be permanent. I could use a wolf tongue for my collection.”

That shut us both up.

Satisfied by our silence, Big Mac turned back to Mrs. Smith.

“I only let you all in to talk to Sabine,” she tossed off at me and Colton, her eyes locking on Mrs. Smith. “How did Silas get the orb?”

Mrs. Smith’s expression got cloudy, and I saw Big Mac’s hand twitch. Did she want to reach out to her? Comfort her?

“Apparently,” Mrs. Smith said, throwing a sour look Colton’s way, “the Evers brothers took it upon themselves to hide it. In their house. Which allowed Silas to find it when it was left unguarded.”

Big Mac rounded on Colton, her eyes fiery.

“Idiot!” she cried, pointing a finger at him. “How could you be so stupid? So *reckless!*”

Colton stared at her. For once, he seemed shocked into silence.

Big Mac was afraid, and Colton didn’t seem to know what to do about that. For a second, he looked like a scared little kid. I felt a pang of protectiveness before fear for my own well-being started to set in.

Big Mac started to run around, grabbing books and vials and tossing them into a worn-out carpetbag. As I watched her, I felt goosebumps spreading across my skin. Just Silas’s *name* seemed to scare the shit out of everyone. Something very, very bad was on the verge of happening.

“MacKenzie.” Mrs. Smith took a breath and sighed, like she was trying very hard not to lose her head as well. “You need to calm down. Even with the orb, Silas can’t see you through your spell. You’re safe.”

“No, he looked for it here first. I didn’t redecorate like this on purpose,” Big Mac murmured, gesturing to her torn up house as she scooped up her kitten. “Lion, we’re going.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Mrs. Smith told her, planting her hands on her hips. “No one knows what Silas will be capable of now that he has the orb. Running away might not be the right option for you.”

“Can one of you fill me in?” I snapped impatiently. “Because you’re being cryptic as fuck, and the rest of us would like to know what’s at stake here.”

Mrs. Smith looked at me appraisingly. I wondered if I’d just managed to gain a bit of her respect. I wished that thought didn’t fill me with a small amount of pride.

“What’s the big deal about this orb?” I continued, sensing I had permission to ask. “We can’t help if we don’t know what we’re up against.”

Big Mac looked at Mrs. Smith, almost like she was silently asking if I was worth confiding in. Mrs. Smith nodded, and I felt myself leaning forward with anticipation.

“The Orb of Letifer draws power from the realm of the dead,” Big Mac said solemnly. “Anyone who has it can use the power of the people they have killed.”

“That’s why we think Silas went on a killing spree during the pack wars,” Mrs. Smith added. “To increase his power. And that’s also why he took MacKenzie’s mother—to use her witch magic.”

“So Silas had the orb, back then.” I connected the dots out loud, finally starting to understand why everyone was losing their shit.

“He did,” Big Mac confirmed. “Until my mother stole it from him. And he murdered her.”

The air seemed to flee the room. I saw the pain in Big Mac’s eyes as she admitted to the loss of her mother.

“I’m sorry,” I heard from behind me, and turned around to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating.

But I wasn’t. Colton, in a rare move, actually looked *contrite*. I felt like the world had turned upside down.

“I didn’t know that asshole had killed a witch.” He shook his head bitterly. “But I’m not surprised.”

“But if Big Mac didn’t have the orb, then why is Silas still after her?” I asked the room, trying to make sense of all this. “You had nothing to do with this, right?”

Mrs. Smith and Big Mac exchanged a long look, loaded with emotions I knew I’d never totally understand. They shared something private. Something intimate.

“MacKenzie saved me from Silas,” Mrs. Smith admitted, her voice soft.

I looked to Mrs. Smith, shocked. Her shoulders were hunched, and her eyes were damp. Talking about this wasn’t easy for her. Whatever threats Silas had made—whatever had almost happened to her—were clearly hard for her to think about.

I felt a deep well of sympathy open up inside me for Mrs. Smith. She had the kind of maturity and composure that made you assume nothing bad had ever happened to her. Like she was untouchable.

But she wasn’t.

She just made it all look easy.

Apparently, I’d never really understood that that was an option.

I felt myself wishing I could hug her or Colton or… someone. I wanted to hold and to be held. I wanted to feel safe. It was a strange feeling, but even just the illusion of safety would do. Because things were starting to get really fucking scary around here.

But there was nowhere safe to turn to. I’d have to settle for getting angry instead of getting scared. It was the only thing I could think of to keep myself from shattering.

“What did you do to piss him off?” I asked around the lump forming in my throat.

“I didn’t do anything.” Mrs. Smith actually smiled, like she couldn’t help but be struck by the irony even now. “You don’t have to do anything to bring on Silas’s wrath. You just have to be in the wrong place at the right time.”

I looked to Colton, who seemed to harden at that. He must have known exactly what that was like. My anger intensified at the thought of a young Colton dealing with his father’s abuse. No wonder he was less than perfect now.

“So,” he said, his fists clenching. “How do we get the orb back? Can’t you just do some magic or something?”

Something about the brusque way he was talking made me recognize something—Colton and I had more in common that I was willing to admit. We both preferred to feel angry rather than scared. Maybe that was why it was so hard for us to make things work for real. Maybe that was why we never would.

“It’s not that easy,” Big Mac answered. “But even if it were… I don’t want any part of this. If your father ever finds me, he’ll kill me.”

“Why?” Colton and I both asked.

“Because I didn’t just save Sabine,” she answered. “I *took* Sabine from him.”

**Episode 524**

XAVIER

I shoved Cali behind me, gripping her wrist tightly as I turned toward the voice, prepared to shift and lunge at whatever had just spoken to us. I was done with the Fae world and all of its surprises.

But instead of a huge beast or a bounty hunter or a guard determined to capture and kill us, I was surprised to see… nothing at eye level.

I looked down and saw a short white man with large, watery eyes. I took in his pointy ears and long white beard. He looked like he’d wandered off some old lady’s lawn.

“What the hell?” I blurted out.

Cali seemed to take this much more in stride than I could, because she peeked out from behind me, smiling radiantly like this was the most normal thing in the world.

“Thank you so much for offering to help.” She waved at him enthusiastically. “We’d really appreciate it.”

But the small man just waggled his finger at her like she was a naughty child. His smug expression made me think that maybe we weren’t in for the help Cali had expected.

“You don’t listen too well, do you?” the man sneered. “I said—and I quote—I *can* help you. Meaning I’m fully *capable* of helping you. *Will* I help you? Well, I didn’t promise that, did I?”

Oh great, a tiny creature obsessed with flowers and semantics. Just what I’d hoped for. I was glad we’d at least reached the moon buttercup, because I didn’t think I could stand the Fae world and all its quirky interruptions much longer.

“Forget this asshole.” I cut him off, my patience gone. “We don’t need his help.”

“Xavier.” Cali’s voice was solemn. “We do need his help. Look at all these flowers. I can’t afford to mess this up. My mother’s life depends on it.”

I looked out at the vast sea of white flowers. As much as I wanted to believe that we could find the right one together, I knew it was unlikely.

I looked back at Cali and nodded. She was right. This little guy might have been a dick, but we weren’t in a position to turn down help. Not when we had such a time limit. I reached for Cali’s hand behind me and squeezed it tightly. I wanted her to know that I had her back. That I was listening.

“Okay,” I said, addressing the creature. “Which one of these is a moon buttercup?”

He stepped up to me, looking me up and down, appraising me. His expression soured, like he didn’t like what he saw.

“You do know it’s customary to wear clothes around here, right?” he droned, resentment oozing out of every word.

“Got any I could borrow?” I fired back before I could think better of it.

The little creature just sighed.

“The moon buttercup…” He looked behind me at the vast array of flowers. “It’s easy to find, if you know what to look for.”

Cali pushed past me, her cheeks glowing red with frustration. I suppressed a small smile. That was Cali for you.

“He told you we’re looking for a moon buttercup,” she told him, exasperated. “Do you know which one it is or not? I’ve been after this thing for a while and I’m not really in the mood to have my time wasted.”

Ignoring her, the creature reached out to me, revealing long spindly fingers. He poked me in the thigh and brought the finger back to his lips. He licked it and closed his eyes, like he was concentrating on the taste of me.

After a beat of very uncomfortable silence, the creature’s eyes snapped open and he looked up at Cali.

“I suppose you could guess,” he told her. “If you like.”

“You haven’t answered my question,” Cali reminded him. “How can I be sure you even know what you’re talking about?”

I’d had enough of this. What was the point of all this back and forth with this jerk? I pushed past the creature, pulling Cali along by the wrist.

“Come on.” I spoke just to her. “We’ll find one. It can’t be that hard.”

“I warn you,” the creature croaked. “If you choose incorrectly, you do not get a second chance.”

“You’re full of shit,” I spat, spinning around to face him.

“Such vulgar language.” The creature grimaced. “There’s no need to be crude.”

“Just answer my question, please,” Cali pleaded. I wondered if I’d ever heard her sound so annoyed.

The creature sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “*Of course* I knowwhich one is the moon buttercup,” he told her. “I grow them.”

“Then show me,” Cali pleaded. “Please.”

The creature held out a hand and pointed.

“There.”

It was impossible to tell what flower he was pointing at, they were all growing so close together. This guy was just messing with us. And every second I let him continue to breathe, he was hurting Cali.

“Fuck this.” I pulled Cali to me. “Let’s go.”

But she pulled back and stood her ground. She set her jaw and her eyes burned with anger as she looked at me.

“No,” she told me firmly. “What if he can help us?”

“And what if he’s just being a pain in the ass?” I retorted as gently as I could manage—which wasn’t very gently. “We’re wasting time.”

“I know that better than anyone,” she snapped at me. “It’s *my* mother who’s dying. Trust me, Xavier, I know the stakes.”

I sighed, wishing I could find the flower. Wishing I could fix this whole thing and take her home and save us all. I hated arguing with her here, especially now.

“I know.” I nodded. “But there has to be a better way than this.”

“I wish there were,” Cali admitted, her eyes sparkling with tears. “I didn’t know there were going to be so many flowers. I should have asked for a picture or something. I just… If he can help, we have to work with him.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Cali stormed over to me and held me by the chin. For a moment, I thought she might try to silence me with a kiss and even closed my eyes. But instead, she opened our mind link.

*Xavier*, her voice breathed in my mind. *I was told I’d have to ask nicely to get the flower. So shut up, okay?*

*Ask nicely?* I couldn’t believe this shit.

*Yeah, I know,* she replied. *So just trust me and let me handle this. Please.*

Trust. Not the easiest state for me to access, for sure. But didn’t I owe Cali my trust? If I wanted her back, she was going to have to trust that I wouldn’t fuck all of this up again. And trust was earned. If I wanted her back, I had to trust her.

*Okay,* I told her silently. *I’ll trust you, Cali.*

Cali dropped my chin and turned back to the creature. She straightened to her full height and took a deep, calming breath.

“Okay.” She kept her voice even as she addressed the annoying little guy. “You said you can help. And I really need this flower. So help me, please.”

The creature shook his head, seeming to delight in turning her down. I balled up my hands into fists, wanting to punch him into next week. But I’d promised Cali I would trust her. I stayed where I stood, mouth shut.

“Not so fast,” the creature warned. “We have to make a deal.”

*What kind of deal?* I wondered, suspicion crawling up my spine. I wouldn’t trust this guy to do shit. There was a difference between letting Cali try things her way and letting her agree to sell her soul to this little lawn gnome.

“I want that necklace.” He pointed at a gold pendant around Cali’s neck. I hadn’t noticed it until now. It looked unfamiliar. New.

Cali’s hand wrapped around it, and she held it tightly to her chest. She shook her head, adamant. “No. Absolutely not.”

The creature mumbled to himself, like he was thinking through his next move. All of a sudden, he broke into a smile that I really didn’t like the look of.

“Very well.” He paused, letting anticipation build. “Give me you. I want you.”

“What?” Cali cried.

Unable to just stand there for another second, I stepped up to the creature. I looked down at it through narrowed eyes.

“That’s not going to happen,” I told him through clenched teeth. “Ever.”

The creature groaned, like *we* were the unreasonable ones.

“Must you be so difficult?” he asked, frowning. “I enjoy a good haggle more than most. But this is taking it entirely too far.”

“Please.” Cali scrambled to smooth things over. “There must be a more reasonable option. I just want a flower.”

But the creature’s eyes narrowed as he looked up at her angrily.

“Not just any flower,” he corrected. “A moon buttercup is much more than just a flower. It’s—”

But then his eyes lit up and he snapped his fingers, a grin breaking out on his face like he’d just gotten a great idea.

“Give me a human.” He pointed at me. “Like him.”

**Episode 525**

I opened my mouth to object, indignant. Did this guy honestly think that if I wasn’t willing to give *myself* up, asking me to give him Xavier was a valid alternative? After all I’d been through, of course this final step wasn’t going to be easy. Of course it wasn’t as simple as ‘asking nicely’. Nothing in this world was ever anything but complicated.

“This is my final offer,” the creature pressed, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “Give me your human or I will never help you.”

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, trying to suppress my rising anger and keep an angry retort from escaping my lips. This was my last obstacle to get the flower for my mouther. I’d been through the ringer for this plant. But right when I thought I might be forced to give up and just take one of every flower in this entire field back to my grandmother, I got an idea.

*I need you to trust me,* I told Xavier, opening our mind link. It was scary how easy it was now. *You remember you said you’d trust me, right?*

*I trust you,* Xavier replied. And I could hear in his voice it wasn’t easy for him.

I looked the creature square in the eye and crossed my arms.

“You want my human?” I asked him.

“Are you dense?” the creature asked, furrowing his brow. “You do understand me, right? Yes, I want your human. That is precisely what I *said.*”

“I just want to make sure we understand each other,” I told him, wanting to make sure every word of our agreement was clear.

“Cali, what are you doing?” Xavier murmured, forsaking our mind link and speaking out loud.

But I ignored him and extended my hand to the creature to shake, careful to keep my expression a mask of confidence and self-possession. Not typically my two most natural emotions, but I knew I had to try.

“It’s a deal,” I affirmed as he stared at my hand.

“What the hell?” Xavier asked.

But I kept my eyes on the creature.

“You can have my human if I can have one of your moon buttercups,” I told him. “Sound good?”

The creature’s eyes lit up and he actually hopped in joy. He grabbed my hand greedily, eager to seal the deal.

“Deal!” he cried.

The second he let my hand go, he placed both of his over his belly and chortled.

“The last customer I had only had to give up a shoe.” He threw his head back and laughed some more, delighted. “What a haggler he was!”

But I waggled a finger at him, impatient.

“No time for talking,” I reminded him. “Show me the flower. Now.”

He hung his head a bit, clearly disappointed that he wouldn’t get to gloat for much longer. It seemed like he didn’t get much company outside of denying people flowers. I couldn’t find it in myself to have much sympathy for him.

“Very well,” he replied sourly. “Follow me.”

And with that, he ducked his head and lead us into the field. I followed after him, even though I could feel Xavier’s eyes boring a hole in my head.

I looked at the various flowers as we walked past them, trying to note the differences. So many were white with blue centers. If only my grandmother had given me a photograph or a drawing!

“Cali, what the fuck?” Xavier whispered tersely. “You sold me?”

I ignored him, focused on the flowers as I wondered how exactly the moon buttercup would help my mother. What about its magic would do it? What exactly was broken inside of her that a flower could fix? I had to be wary and make sure I got what I’d come here for.

I’d never received any instructions on what to do with the buttercup once I’d acquired it. And I doubted I could google it. Was I supposed to make it into a tea? Was she supposed to eat it whole? Or would she need to keep it around her? Would it create some kind of… Fae world oxygen that my mother needed to stay healthy?

Whatever I had to do, all I knew now was that I needed the flower. I could focus on the rest later. After all, maybe my mother would know what to do.

As we walked, the creature started pointing out the various flowers.

“That’s an anemone.” He pointed at a gorgeous white flower with a dark center. “The trick with those is to keep the soil moist. But never, ever soggy. They drown easy. And those are columbines.” He waved at a group of white-petaled flowers that looked practically indistinguishable to me. “They love the sun but hate the heat. This is the perfect climate for them. Any hotter and they’ll wilt. People think this is so simple. Well, they wouldn’t last a day in my shoes. They’d wind up with a barren field of seeds and sprouts, nothing more.”

“Are you gonna fill me in on your plan here?” Xavier whispered urgently as we fell into step together.

“I made a deal to get the flower,” I replied. “It’s pretty straightforward.”

“With this… goblin creature?” Xavier pressed me. “I could have just ripped him to shreds. There’s no *need* for this.”

“And what would that have gotten us?” I fired back, trying not to get too annoyed by his lack of faith. “We’d still be stuck here trying to guess which one was right. And I cannot afford to be wrong. My mother’s *life* is on the line.”

The creature came to a stop, and I nearly tripped over him.

“Here we are,” he crowed, pointing downward.

I started down at it. A small white flower, growing out of a cluster of rocks. It had delicate white petals that came together in a small blue center.

Xavier and I exchanged skeptical looks. I didn’t need a mind link to know what he was thinking: *Yeah, looks like a flower. But how can we be sure it’s the* right *flower?*

“Are you sure?” I asked the creature, looking down at the tiny bloom.

Maybe it was just because I’d had to go through hell to get here, but I’d been expecting something a bit more… momentous than just a normal flower. I’d thought it might sparkle or something, at least.

“We made a deal.” The creature looked up at me, aghast. “Don’t insult me. I would never be so dishonest.”

I bent down to inspect the flower more closely. I was surprised at how frail it looked. Its petals were paper thin, almost translucent. I’d also thought it would be bigger. I was reaching out to touch it when the creature batted my hand away.

“What about our deal?” he reminded me. “Give me your human.”

Xavier looked at me, tense.

“What will you do with a human?” I asked suspiciously.

The creature smiled at me and clapped his hands in excitement.

“Oh, so very much,” he told me eagerly. “I have so many chores! And your human is so strong!”

“Except he’s not my human,” I told him with a small shrug.

The creature paused, his face falling. “*What*?”

“He’s not only not my human,” I continued. “He’s actually not a human at all. He’s a werewolf.”

The creature’s face crumpled into an expression of pure fury.

“But we had a deal!” he wailed, throwing his hands up in the air.

I looked back at Xavier, who was smirking at me. I could tell he was impressed. Maybe I’d learned a thing or two in the Fae world.

“The deal was a flower in exchange for my human,” I reminded him. “But Xavier here isn’t a human. And I don’t have any humans. I don’t own people.”

The creature was red in the face with frustration. And I swelled with pride for getting one over on him. Had he really thought I’d give him a person? A living being? What the hell kind of place was this, where people were exchangeable?

“You tricked me!” he yelled, enraged.

I just grinned.

“Yes.” I nodded. “I guess I did. What are you going to do about it?”

The creature growled in frustration and stomped its feet angrily.

I heard a whooshing sound and looked around. Had my victory really been that short-lived? Was something else going to leap out and kill us right when I’d gotten what I wanted?

But to my surprise, I saw a big soup ladle flying over to us. The creature jogged to meet it and leapt onto it, flying off into the distance.

Xavier turned to me, looking dumbstruck.

“Did that really just happen?” he asked me.

I shrugged. “Honestly, at this point, that wasn’t even in my top three,” I told him. “The Fae world is weird.”

I knelt down and reached for the flower. Finally, the thing I’d come for was in my grasp. And then I heard a tiny voice, clear as a bell.

“Hello! I’ve been expecting you, Calliope!”

**Episode 526**

GREYSON

I looked back at Artemis, struck by her question.

*You hate your brother, don’t you?*

A lot of people assumed that I did hate Xavier. It was a question I’d struggled with for a long time. It was a question that had only been made more complicated by Cali and my feelings for her.

But even though I’d thought about it a lot, the answer still felt more complicated than a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. Because the real answer involved a very long story that was very hard to tell, because it was full of secrets I’d never told another person in my entire life.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” Artemis assured me, her tone regretful. “If you’d rather not talk about him at all, we could—”

“Why do you think I hate my brother?” I asked her. I felt seized by the desire to know what this woman saw in me. Why she was so certain of this, without even having known me a day.

“I could read it on your face when you spoke about him,” she answered, not meeting my eyes. “You looked angry…”

I nodded. I wondered if that was what everyone saw when they looked at me. Anger and hate and darkness. It seemed like that was what Cali had seen when she’d first met me—not to mention all that Xavier and Colton could see, even though they were my brothers.

“I don’t hate my brother,” I said, feeling like it was important she knew for some reason. “He hates me.”

Artemis took that in, nodding. I wondered if that would be the end of it. If her curiosity about me was satisfied.

“I imagine that’s really hard,” she said thoughtfully. “Can I ask… Why does he hate you?”

She seemed willing to look me in the eye now, so I turned to look at her dead on. I felt compelled to tell her the truth. And like she might see it in my eyes anyway, even if I tried to keep it a secret.

“He thinks I betrayed him,” I explained gruffly. “Why don’t we leave it at that?”

“Of course.” Artemis looked down at her feet again, backing off. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Thank you for sharing.”

I didn’t want her to feel bad for having asked. It was actually kind of nice to talk about it with someone who only knew *me*, for once. Someone biased to be on my side. Someone I’d met first.

What would it have been like if I’d met Cali first?

“So.” I tried to change the subject. “You’re an only child?”

“What?” Artemis asked, confused by my admittedly abrupt pivot.

“You told me you dreamed about having a sibling, so I assumed…” I trailed off, feeling stupid for having said anything at all.

“Right.” She nodded. “I’m an orphan, actually.”

She gave me a pained grimace and turned her eyes front again as we walked together in silence. I cursed myself for having brought up a painful topic.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured to her. “Must have been hard.”

“It was,” Artemis said. “When I was younger, I used to imagine what it would be like to have a family. But I’ve come to terms with it since then. Growing up the way I did made me the person I am today.”

I thought about my father. Would it have been better to have grown up alone? Would loneliness have been preferable to the constant fear I’d felt as a kid whenever he’d been near? It was impossible to know.

“Having family isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be, I guess,” I offered, wanting to say something helpful.

“I’d kind of like to figure that out for myself,” Artemis said with a bittersweet smile. “Maybe someday I will.”

I nodded, wondering if this was the first time I’d ever wished good things on someone who’d kidnapped me. I hoped it was the last.

We kept walking side by side without talking. I was grateful for the silence. My mind needed time to unspool. Whatever hardship Artemis had faced growing up, I doubted it held a candle to the demons I’d faced.

“Can I ask you something?” Torin asked, appearing at my shoulder.

I sighed. Was I allowed to say no? Cali wasn’t here. Maybe I could.

“If Xavier is your brother,” Torin started, without my permission. “Did you grow up together? How long has Cali known him? They seemed close. Do you all hang out—the three of you? Are you guys in the same pack? You do have a *pack*, right?”

“We do.” I cut him off. “I’m the Alpha.”

Torin’s eyes went wide. “I knew it!” he exclaimed. “Of course you’re the Alpha! You’re so… so…”

“Dominant?” Artemis offered dryly.

I eyed her. Was she kidding?

“I dated a really dominant guy once,” Torin babbled excitedly. “He was so bossy. So was my last girlfriend, actually. Maybe I have a type.”

Torin giggled, and I wondered how bad it would be if I just shifted and ran off. It wasn’t like any of them would be able to catch me. Maybe I could scent Cali and follow the trail? It would be worth it to escape any further details about Torin’s love life.

Artemis caught my eye and burst out laughing at my struck expression.

“Did I say something funny?” Torin asked eagerly. “I can never tell when I’m being funny. I used to think about being a jester, you know. Career change.”

“You’re not that funny,” Astrid quipped. “Why don’t you call it quits for now?”

He pouted. “But I have so many more questions.”

I was sure he did. There were a lot of reasons I’d gone Rogue, but annoying questions had definitely been in the top five. People prying, feeling entitled to your life story just because they were in your general vicinity.

I took a deep breath and pictured that huge snake from the mines swallowing Torin down in one gulp. I smiled, picturing the Torin-shaped bulge in the snake’s throat wriggling as he was slowly digested.

“I should have left you all in the mine when I had the chance,” I muttered.

“Even me?” Artemis asked, eyebrows raised. “I thought we were making progress.”

I gave her a pointed look. “Yes, even you.”

But Artemis just smiled, like I’d complimented her.

“I have a question for you,” Astrid piped up. “It’s about mates.”

Jesus, what now? Why the hell had I been put in charge of a fucking slumber party? I was just supposed to get a flower and leave. How had this all gotten so complicated?

“Yeah?” I sighed, waiting for her to continue.

“So werewolves have mates, right?” she asked.

“They do,” I answered, wary. “They *can*.”

“Is Cali your mate?” she asked carefully.

I paused, watching her teeth sink into her bottom lip.

“Why are you asking me that?”

“Because I’m curious,” she replied. “Being mated to someone must be amazing. It’s just so romantic. I wanted to know what it was like to have a bond with your one perfect person.”

“Some people have two,” I grumbled offhandedly.

“WHAT?” all three of my traveling companions cried.

Why had I opened my mouth? Why had I let them ask these stupid questions? I didn’t want to owe them anything—not information, not explanations, not my protection. I had a pack at home. There were already enough people on my conscience. More than enough, actually.

This was overkill.

“There’s a story among werewolves,” I explained grudgingly. “When you have more than one mate, it’s called *due destini*.”

I explained how in the story, Cassandra had been mated to two wolves. How they’d both loved her fully and completely, blah, blah. And how they’d tried to force her to choose between them, because they hadn’t been able to stand sharing her. And how, depending on the version you heard, they’d all died in horrible and violent permutations and combinations. The fucking end.

“Super cheery bedtime story for you werewolf kids, huh?” Artemis joked, and in other circumstances, I imagined I might have laughed.

“Wait, hang on,” Torin interjected. “I’m not sure I’m understanding how that works.”

“Me either,” Astrid added. “Isn’t your mate like… *the One*? How can you have more than one One, you know?”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Torin agreed. “Like, suppose it was you, Xavier, and Cali…”

I looked up at the sky and wondered why in the hell this was happening to me. Sure, I’d done bad things, but was this really what I deserved?

“Say you were both mated to her, and she was mated to both of you,” Torin laid out, completely unaware of the irony. “She’d be… torn between both of you, right? Unable to choose.”

“In the *story*,” I said, trying to steer us back to the right path, “Cassandra has two mates. She could have chosen between them, but she decides to do something else instead. Throws herself in the middle of their fight, jumps off a cliff, drinks poison. She avoids the choice when she could have just ended everything. But she chooses not to.”

Astrid looked at me. “So in our scenario, what would happen if Cali didn’t choose you?”

**Episode 527**

COLTON

“What the *fuck*?” I asked, confused. “Big Mac, what do you mean you *took* her from my dad? No offense, Mrs. Smith, but why would my father want you?”

Maya smacked me hard on the arm and glared at me like I’d just said something completely out of line. But in my mind, this was a valid question.

Well. Maybe in retrospect, it hadn’t come out in the politest way possible.

“I mean,” I said, trying to explain, “you’re just another werewolf. You’re not a witch, so it’s not like he needed something from you, right?”

Mrs. Smith sighed.

“Colton, you know your father wasn’t true to his mate,” she reminded me, her voice sad.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Maya asked, her cheeks flushing with anger.

“It means he took what he wanted,” Mrs. Smith answered, her gaze dropping. “Including women.”

It was true. I knew my father’s history. I wasn’t a fool.

I thought about my mother. She’d been just one in the long string of women my father had brought home. He’d always treated her like she was worthless and in need of punishment for some crime none of us had seen her commit. Just like he’d treated me and Xavier.

I knew how powerful he was. How hard he was to deny.

“Fucking asshole,” Maya hissed.

I looked up at Maya; her jaw had tightened and her fists had clenched. I could see how angry this had made her. And of course it had. Whether she admitted it or not, Maya had a thing about abuses of power. They didn’t just hurt her—they made her righteously angry.

When I looked at her, I saw my own childhood anger reflected back at me. The skin crawling fury my father brought out in me. The way I hadn’t been able to do a goddamn thing about it. The way I’d just had to stand there and take the way he’d treated us. I could see the pain behind Maya’s fury. The kid who just wanted to be protected.

I found myself thinking of everyone who’d ever hurt Maya. Anyone who’d talked to her for more than a few minutes could tell that Maya hadn’t grown up easy, even though she didn’t open up much about that kind of thing. And I felt a flare of hatred burning inside my stomach at the thought of anyone who’d ever mistreated her.

*None of the people who hurt us are here,* Maya told me, through the mind link. *It’s just us. So don’t take that shit out on people who are in just as much pain as you are.*

I nodded.

A lot of the time, Maya’s ‘don’t be an asshole’ advice pissed me off. She was always taking things too literally. She was one of the angriest people I’d ever met—how was I meant to trust her social graces to get me through anything? But this time, I thought she was right.

“Mrs. Smith.” I took a deep breath, hoping this came out right and I wasn’t about put my foot in it, like always. “I know I’m not responsible for my father’s behavior. But I just want to say, I’m so sorry for what he did. I’m sorry for how he hurt you, and I wish I could have done something to stop it.”

“Thank you.” Mrs. Smith smiled kindly at me. “I was just a teenager when he took me from my old pack and forced me to join the Redwoods. Your father wasn’t an easy person to stand up to, and I certainly wasn’t ready to be the first to do it.”

My hands clenched at my sides as I remembered the fear Silas was able to instill in me with just a look. Just the mention of his name. I felt sick with fury at the thought of all the misery he’d caused.

She’d been a *teenager*. He made me fucking sick.

Maya must have seen how pissed I was, because she took my hand and squeezed it tightly. I took a deep breath and tried to focus on her touch. I felt calmer. It was crazy, how she could do that.

“If you have more questions,” Mrs. Smith said, “I can make some white chocolate mochas and we can talk.”

I nodded, and Big Mac led us into her bright little kitchen. We sat down at a circular table and Maya kept my hand in hers. I knew if I tugged it away she’d let me go, but I didn’t want to stop feeling her.

I thought about opening the mind link and telling her something. That she looked beautiful today. That I appreciated her keeping me in check. That she could always talk to me if she wanted to tell me how she’d grown up. That I wouldn’t let Silas touch her. But I didn’t know how to say any of that. Didn’t know if it would come across as stupid or needy or suffocating.

I’d only barely gotten her to agree to the whole ‘mates with benefits’ thing. And half the time, it still seemed like she hated the sight of me.

But she was still holding my hand.

Mrs. Smith busied herself with the kettle. She opened and closed cabinets, making little noises of frustration when she checked the wrong one, and affirmation when she found what she was looking for.

“Could we start at the beginning?” I asked, eager to think about anything but Maya. “How did you two meet? It’s not every day that a werewolf and a witch become BFFs.”

“Well,” Big Mac started, “when my mother was forced to join the pack, I had no one. Until Sabine arrived.”

Big Mac smiled at Mrs. Smith, and for a second I could see what she must have looked like when she was young.

“We became instant friends,” Mrs. Smith confirmed, a smile spreading across her face.

“Probably because we were both living in fear,” Big Mac added. “Maybe we could both sense the other person needed help.”

Mrs. Smith, probably noticing the hitch in Big Mac’s voice, came over and put a hand on her shoulder. Steadying her.

“And then we became more than friends,” Mrs. Smith continued.

“It’s complicated,” Big Mac said quickly.

“So… You two?” I looked between Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, realization dawning on me. I wiggled my eyebrows.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Yes.”

“We dated,” Mrs. Smith said.

I looked at Maya. Had she known this? She looked unfazed. Before I could think, I was opening my mouth. Maya braced herself.

“That’s hot,” I told Big Mac and Mrs. Smith.

Maya dropped my hand and hit the back of my head, making me cry out in pain.

“Ow, what the hell?”

“You’re a pig,” Maya hissed at me, crossing her arms.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize it was awful to appreciate the love and beauty of two older women,” I snapped at her.

Maya rolled her eyes.

I looked at Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, trying to hide the fact that I was a little in awe of them. Outside of wolf mates, I’d never really seen two adults able to just… be together. Able to share a history—a hard one—and still want to be around each other more than not.

“*Anyway.*” Mrs. Smith pulled us back on track. “When Silas was through with me, I was terrified. I didn’t know what to do or where to go…”

She trailed off, clearly lost in a painful memory.

“Weren’t you making mocha?” Big Mac prompted. But something about the strain in her voice made me wonder—was there still something between them?

“Is there something you’re not telling us?” I pushed. “Because I really need to know what the fuck is going on. Whatever it is, I can take it.”

“I thought Silas was going to kill me,” Mrs. Smith admitted gravely. “We tried to escape, and he caught us. Big Mac helped me get out, and I never came back. He would have killed me the second he saw me.”

“I got out with my mother soon after,” Big Mac explained. “She and I went into hiding.”

“You hid your entire house?” I asked. “Like you are now?”

Big Mac nodded. “We did.”

“And then Lola?” I asked. “How did you come to watch over her?”

“Someone had to protect her from Silas,” Mrs. Smith told me. “Her parents reached out to me when she was being adopted. They asked me to watch over her, and I couldn’t say no. I couldn’t let another young girl fall prey to a vicious animal like Silas. I couldn’t stop him, but I could try to save her. So I did.”

“I understand,” I told her with a nod, hoping my sincerity was clear. Hoping it was obvious that I thought she was brave.

Mrs. Smith set down a mug of mocha in front of me and I took it, eager to get on her good side. I brought the steaming cup to my lips and took a sip. It was hot and sweet and rich, just like always.

“Damn.” I smiled at her. “I forgot how good this is.”

But before Mrs. Smith could respond to my compliment, an ear-shattering, shrieking noise filled the room. The cup shattered in my hand and before I could think about it, I was in midair, diving across the table to cover Maya’s body with mine.

**Episode 528**

I looked up at Xavier, confused. Could I have imagined that voice? Had my extended visit to the Fae world made me go crazy? Was I delirious at the prospect of having finally found the moon buttercup?

“Who said that?” I asked Xavier.

But he just shook his head, clearly as confused as I was.

I heard the tiny voice make a frustrated little huffing sound. In different circumstances, I probably would have found the sound adorable. But right now, I was just tense, waiting for the other shoe to drop and chaos to reign.

“I did,” the voice announced.

And that was when I realized the voice could only be coming from one place.

The moon buttercup.

“Am I hallucinating?” I asked out loud. “Did that goblin trick me? Or is the flower actually talking?”

I leaned in as close as I could to the flower, and was surprised to see a tiny creature in its petals. It looked like it was part-teddy bear, part-mouse. A mouse-bear.

“What took you so long?” the mouse-bear asked impatiently. “We’ve been expecting you for some time.”

Then its eyes landed on Xavier, and a wicked smile spread across its face.

“Oh.” It gave me a big wink. “Now I understand. He’s cute.”

Xavier snorted, and I hoped he’d be mindful enough to watch where he stepped. I didn’t want him squishing the mouse-bear.

I wondered why the mouse-bear had called me ‘Calliope’. That was the same name the wisps had called me when they’d warned me to leave the Fae world. Maybe it was a Fae dialect thing? Like how Thomas was Tomás in Spanish?

But whatever the reason, I didn’t have time for questions about names. Maybe my mother could explain it when I got back. When I saved her. Which I was so, so, *so* close to doing.

“How did you know I was coming here?” I asked the mouse-bear.

“Friends!” the mouse-bear told me coyly. “I have friends. And friends talk. In fact, sometimes they talk so much it drives them up the mountains and makes you wish they’d shut up.”

“Can you tell me who those friends are?” I asked, trying not to show how impatient I was growing.

“The trees, of course!” the mouse-bear answered, rolling its eyes. “They’re such gossips.”

“Trees?” Xavier asked, confused.

“Yeah, the trees talk,” I told him before turning back around to address the mouse-bear. “So you know why I’m here?”

The mouse-bear nodded. “I do.”

“Then you know I need your flower.” I bit my lip, bracing myself for another hurdle.

“You can have it,” the mouse-bear told me. “But first…”

Xavier groaned. If he thought he was tired of everything in the Fae world coming at some sort of ridiculous price, he probably couldn’t even have *imagined* how over it I was.

“*But first,*”the mouse-bear repeated, clearly annoyed, “you have to tell me something true about you. Something from your heart.”

“Great, more bullshit,” Xavier grumbled. “Just take it, Cali.”

But I remembered my warning—I needed to ask nicely. Taking the moon buttercup without permission didn’t sound so nice to me. Plus, how hard could this be?

I thought on it. What was true about me?

“Okay, the truth is…” I searched for the right words. “I need to save my mom. It’s the thing I care about most in the world right now. And that’s the truth.”

“*No-ooo*,” the little mouse-bear sing-songed. “I want to hear something true that you haven’t even admitted to yourself yet!”

I gritted my teeth, really starting to lose my patience with this adorable little annoyance.

“How am I supposed to tell you something I don’t even know?” I asked, tears starting to prickle at the corners of my eyes.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. Xavier put his hand on my back and I leaned into his touch. Thank god I had someone here for moral support.

“How do I do that?” I repeated to the mouse-bear, more calmly than I had before.

The mouse-bear just looked up at me sweetly, its eyes wide, its hands clasped together.

“I need what’s in your heart of hearts, Calliope,” the mouse-bear explained. “If you’re honest, the flower will last eternally after you pick it. But if you’re not honest, it will die once it’s picked. And if it dies, so will your mother. I know you don’t want that.”

I nodded, struggling to wrap my head around this. What didn’t I know?

“Only when you’re honest with yourself,” the mouse-bear continued, “will you be able to save your mother with this flower.”

I wracked my brain. What could I say? I was just a girl from Minnesota. How many secrets could I possibly have locked up inside me? What kind of profound truth could I tell that would keep a magic flower alive?

I felt Xavier kneel down next to me. I looked at him, appreciating the company. I smiled at him, and he returned it. His smile still made me melt just a little. It wasn’t like it used to be at first, when I’d barely been able to look at him without losing my entire mind. This was different, but still warm.

And that was when the answer came to me.

I took a deep, shaky breath. I had to say it, even though Xavier was here. Because this was about saving my mother. And there was nothing I wouldn’t do to keep her alive.

I had to be honest. For once. When it mattered the most.

“I’m in love with two men,” I told the mouse-bear, my voice a tear-soaked whisper.

The mouse-bear closed its eyes and held up its hands. Gorgeous, crystalline wings sprouted from its back and it zipped up and out of the flower, wings fluttering.

It flew up to my face, toward the tear that was running down my cheek. The creature took its tiny hand and gathered up the tear into its arms, cradling it like a baby.

“You should leave now, for your mother,” the mouse-bear told me gently. “Take the flower and go to her. It’s not too late.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, my body going limp with relief.

I reached down to pick the tiny flower. My hand shook as I reached for the stem and plucked it. I heard a snap and looked down to see that my necklace had popped open to reveal a little space to keep the flower safe.

I had it.

I FINALLY HAD IT.

Everything up to this point had been worth it. All the hard nights, the strange creature encounters, the detours that wanted to make me scream… I would do it all again in a heartbeat. And I could go home and take it to my mother. I shut the flower inside my locket.

There was just one thing I had to do first.

Xavier was still kneeling next to me, frozen. He hadn’t moved since my admission.

I didn’t know what I’d expected. I’d known this would hurt him, and I’d said it anyway. I had to.

What was I supposed to say to him now? I didn’t want to have this conversation. I wanted to get to my mother, give her the flower, save her life… And maybe *then* I could deal with my love life.

But I could feel the hurt radiating off him in waves. I couldn’t un-ring this bell.

But maybe I could multitask.

I pushed myself up to my feet and started walking back the way I’d come. Maybe if I stayed silent, Xavier and I could both have some time to think about what had just happened. And maybe after we’d processed it, we could have a mature discussion.

But then I felt Xavier touch my arm as he fell into step with me.

“Cali, we have to talk about what you just told that little bear… mouse… thing.” His voice was gruff. I could tell he was trying to remain calm. But I knew what it looked like when Xavier was repressing his emotions. And I also knew that those emotions rarely stayed repressed for long.

“Not now, Xavier,” I told him, pushing forward. My mother couldn’t afford for me to stop right now. He had to understand that.

“Yes, now,” he insisted, his hand closing around my wrist as he slowed to a stop.

Pissed off, I wrenched my arm out of his grasp and kept walking.

I heard Xavier’s footsteps behind me as he caught up. I could feel his anger, and I wished I could be alone. That I could avoid this. I wasn’t ready to have this talk. He wouldn’t like the outcome if we had it now, and neither would I. This wasn’t the time.

“Cali, this isn’t a joke.” Desperation leaked into his voice. “We have to talk about what you just said about Greyson.”

And just as he said that, I walked around a huge stack of boulders and came face to face with Torin, Astrid, Artemis… and *Greyson*.

My heart skipped in my chest. A part of me was giddy to see him, like I always was. He was in the pirate outfit Astrid had made him, so he must have shifted and lost his clothes again since I’d last seen him. I wanted to laugh or maybe cry. He hated that thing so much.

But another part of me was filled with dread at the sight of him. It was going to be much, much harder to avoid this conversation now that they were both here.

Greyson didn’t even look at his brother. He just stared at me, so intensely I felt my cheeks heat up.

“What about me?” he asked.

**Episode 529**

GREYSON

Xavier, my dear brother, was standing real fucking close to my mate. I was pretty fucking pissed off right now. It hadn’t been what I expected when we came up the mountain. I’d gotten the group to speed up, to stop asking me about mates.

And this was what I got? Seeing them together?

“What did you say about me?” I asked Cali, as gently as possible. It was a matter of strategy. At this point, I was pretty sure that every little thing mattered when it came to Cali choosing between the two of us—between me, the obviously superior choice, and Xavier, an annoying whiny runt who Cali wouldn’t get rid of because of some absurd *due destini* bullshit.

I could see the conflict on her beautiful face, plain as day. It hurt, but I had to accept it. I had no other choice. When she ran up to me, I couldn’t stop myself from exhaling in relief. She wrapped her arms around me, holding tight, and I kissed the top of her head, hugging her close.

“You’re here,” she murmured, exhaling sharply.

Her embrace was so comforting that it came pretty close to pleasure. Scenting her hair, I looked at Xavier, arching an eyebrow. He looked like he wanted to kill me, which was fair enough. I was feeling the same way about him.

“Look!” Cali said, opening up her pendant. Looking precious and breathtaking, she showed me a small flower inside. “It’s the moon buttercup, we found it!”

The moon buttercup.

*The* moon buttercup.

Cali had finally found it… With fucking *Xavier*.

“Great, that’s great,” I said, forcing a smile while growling on the inside.

Was I glad that she’d gotten the damn flower? Of course. But did it *have* to have been with Xavier? After all the shit I’d been through, why the hell did *he* have to be the one who’d helped her find the flower? No fucking way.

Little brother had always had it so easy, and I was just about sick of it. He didn’t deserve Cali. Especially not after he’d walked away from me, his own flesh and blood, back at the zoo.

I should tell Cali about that.

I should let her see who the real Xavier was.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Cali asked me excitedly. She was so cute it was unfair. “We can save my mom now!”

“I’m really glad you found it,” I told her softly. I meant it. She looked up at me with sparkling eyes, and I felt better.

In that moment, I felt wanted.

But then Xavier had to walk up to us and sling an arm across Cali’s shoulders. With a smug smile, he said, “*We* found it. Cali and me. *Together*.”

The urge to tear Xavier’s arm and head off had never been stronger.

“Is this like that story?” Torin asked, trotting up to us. His gazed bounced between all three of us, beyond excited. “The double destiny thing? How fascinating!”

I was going to murder Torin one of these days. I had no idea how he’d survived being around me so far. Oh, right. Cali wanted me to be nice to him. This thing—Cali preventing me from attacking or threatening people—was turning into a disturbing pattern, and I wasn’t sure if I was fully comfortable with it. Who was I if I didn’t—at least occasionally—use violence and threats to get what I wanted? Was I becoming a… *better person?*

I shuddered at the thought.

At least Torin’s comments were making Cali look as awkward as I felt. Served her right for not letting me deal with that annoying Fae sooner.

Good god, I cared about her so much.

“Torin, *no*,” Astrid hissed, nudging him.

Torin pouted. “But it’s so interesting how—”

“*Anyway*,” Astrid said, shoving her friend in the stomach this time to cut him off. She shot me an apologetic look—which I appreciated because I wasn’t primitive, like fucking Xavier—before turning to Cali. “What happened with the flower?”

Cali perked up. She looked so cute I wanted to eat her and send everybody else home. She stared at Astrid and started to ramble. “There was a little mouse-bear in the flower! It was so adorable, and I remembered what the trees had said about being nice, so…”

Cali kept going as I locked eyes with Xavier. We both loomed over Cali, me holding her hand, Xavier with his arm still draped over her shoulders. Neither of us were going to back down. If there was one thing we shared, it was stubbornness.

DNA didn’t spare anyone.

We both begrudgingly let Cali go when she moved away from us, closer to Astrid as she kept talking about the flower bear.

“I’ve heard about flower bears,” Artemis piped up, her voice breaking through my thoughts. It was melodic, light but piercing. Hard to miss. “I’d never been able to capture one, but it would’ve brought a pretty penny. The Kollector always wanted one.”

“He did?” Cali gaped before scoffing. “Why am I not surprised? That man was a monster. And incapable of asking nicely I’m sure.”

Xavier’s voice came out sharp. “And what does that make *her*, for bringing supernatural creatures to him?” He stared at Artemis, his eyes narrowing. “Who are you?”

I kept my mouth shut while Cali spoke up. Because I knew what was good for me.

“Artemis is a bounty hunter,” Cali said evenly, tugging on Xavier’s arm to make him face her. “She’s the one who captured us—”

“*What?*” Xavier growled, like the hothead he was. I rolled my eyes.

“But she also helped us escape, Xavier!” Cali continued, nodding seriously.

Xavier glared at Artemis, snarling. “You’re the one responsible for all this?” He walked up to her. Artemis didn’t even flinch, watching him with mild interest and raised eyebrows.

She really was a badass.

“Cali?” Artemis deadpanned. “How about you get your friend in check before we have a problem here? I think you’ve seen what I can do with a whip.”

“You think I’m scared of you?” Xavier barked, coming to stand in front of Artemis.

“It doesn’t matter now, Xavier!” Cali exclaimed, grabbing him by the arm to pull him back. “I have the flower!”

“Listen to her, new guy,” Artemis told Xavier, resting her hands on her hips. “You don’t want to mess with a bounty hunter.” Her whole demeanor was just as threatening as his. It was pretty funny to watch. All I needed was popcorn.

“You’re no match for a werewolf, Fae. Bounty hunters are just opportunistic, cowardly parasites,” Xavier snapped.

This was ridiculous. Who the fuck was he to teach ethics to anyone?

“Seriously?” I scoffed, staring at Xavier. “Artemis isn’t all that different from you and your friends, Xavier. You’re a mercenary, she’s a bounty hunter—both pretty ruthless and opportunistic occupations.”

“Okay, let’s calm down,” Cali said, while Astrid and Torin looked at each other nervously.

Artemis raised an eyebrow at Xavier, ignoring Cali’s warning. “You’re a mercenary? And you think *I’m* the problem here?”

“It’s not the same,” Xavier declared.

“Xavier, stop,” Cali said patiently, looking between him and Artemis. “Don’t push this.”

“Are we splitting hairs here, brother?” I asked.

“She could have had Cali killed!” Xavier told me, pointing at Artemis, who rolled her eyes.

“Xavier, no!” Cali tugged at his arm. “Artemis helped me. You don’t get to be the only one with a redemption arc—let her have hers.”

As Cali spoke, I moved between Xavier and Artemis. In theory, I could have just let Xavier attack her. But Cali wouldn’t have liked that, and also, for some reason… I felt protective of Artemis. It was weird, and I wasn’t sure why, but it was definitely happening. Probably because she’d helped Cali.

Either way, I wasn’t letting Xavier touch her. And right now, I’d have loved any excuse to pounce on my brother.

“Step the fuck away, Greyson,” Xavier told me sharply.

“You first,” I said.

“I don’t really need anyone’s protection, but thanks,” Artemis said casually, from behind me.

“Oh my god, all of you!” Cali huffed. “Stop acting like children!”

“Who, me?” Artemis asked, annoyed.

“Not you—you’re doing great, sweetie,” Cali told Artemis, before glaring at both me and Xavier. “This isn’t a playground, you two! I have the flower, and I need to get back to my mom. *Now*!”

“Go ahead,” Artemis told Cali. “I’ll deal with this guy.” She reached for her whip. I was sure that Xavier wouldn’t enjoy getting acquainted with it.

“Can’t we all just get along?” Torin yelped, wincing when he saw Artemis’s hand on her whip.

“No!” Xavier growled, glaring at me. “Greyson thinks he can—”

“This is so typical of you, Xavier,” I said. “You always let your jealousy and insecurity get the best of you.”

“What did you just say to me?” Xavier spat, planting himself in front of me.

Sensing that a clash was inevitable, I turned to a scowling Cali. “Go. You don’t have to stay for his bullshit, it’s—”

“She could’ve killed Cali,” Xavier hissed, pointing at Artemis, “and you’re defending her!” Before either of us could speak, he shoved me to get at Artemis. I shoved him back, maybe a little harder than necessary.

I was fucking done playing nice.

The force of my push had Xavier stumbling backward, falling to the ground.

His humiliation was so strong that I could almost taste it.

Before I could smirk, though, or turn to see Cali’s expression, Xavier shifted.

A second later, his wolf lunged at me with a roar.

**Episode 530**

I stood there, gaping like a stunned fish as a shifted Xavier leaped at Greyson, who jumped back and then turned into a wolf too. They couldn’t have planned this better if they’d tried. It was EXACTLY WHAT I HAD WANTED TO AVOID.

*Why are boys… BOYS?* I screamed inside my head, and it was definitely the question of the century. At this point, I was a great thinker for the ages, exploring the mysteries of disgustingly hot, testosterone-fueled men going at each other over my vagina, which—last I checked—wasn’t even magical! Or was it? Perhaps it felt like magic to them? Was it a Fae thing? Did it sparkle?

But Greyson hadn’t even been introduced to my Nether Region Lady Sparkle yet, so he kind of had a reason to be frustrated. Unlike Xavier, who’d been getting all up in this around the clock before he’d left me, BY HIS OWN CHOICE!

You’d have thought that Xavier might have at least acknowledged that his absence was one of the reasons why Greyson and I had become a thing. But *no!*

Honestly, what had Xavier expected? That he’d leave me with *Greyson* of all people—the most seductive man I’d ever met, who was naked like half the time when he talked to me—and everything would be FINE when he returned? That would have been like leaving a toddler with five pints of ice cream and then getting mad when the kid ate it all and got a stomach ache. It would have been like putting a puppy on your brand new rug and then yelling at it for pooping!

*The puppy’s gonna poop on that carpet, Xavier!* I screamed inside my head. *THAT’S WHAT PUPPIES DO!*

This whole thing was madness.

“Can you two just *not?*” I yelled at the two wolves, who promptly ignored me and kept rolling on the ground, snarling.

“Oh, no!” Astrid said mournfully, turning to me with horrified eyes. “They’re fighting!”

“It happens more often than you’d think,” I snapped, before turning to scream at them again. “I SAID STOP IT!”

“This is amazing!” Torin shouted, hiding behind Astrid. “But also terrifying—shit, someone’s going to get hurt!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure they stay back,” Artemis declared, cracking a whip she took off her belt. Both snarling wolves yelped at the impact and sound. They continued to fight a few feet away, biting and scratching at each other with what looked like an endless pit of rage.

For a moment, I wanted to convince myself that this couldn’t just be about me. That was way too self-centered. The two brothers had tons of baggage hanging between them, so me being the only reason for their constant attempts at trying to tear each other’s throats out was ridiculous.

The thought didn’t comfort me, though. Because whatever was going on between the two of them didn’t matter right then. If one of them got hurt, it would be my fault. It would be my responsibility, and I didn’t want that. I had enough bullshit to deal with without adding that to my plate. I hated the thought of them putting this weight on my shoulders—and yet, I had to admit that I’d brought this on myself, to a certain extent. I had chosen to be with both of them, after all.

*Screw this* due destini *bullshit!* I thought bitterly, panting as I took in the scene before me. Two brothers, fighting because of me, trying to kill each other. It made me sick to my stomach for so many reasons, but mostly because I couldn’t afford to deal with this right now.

These men who supposedly cared about me couldn’t stay in check long enough to remember that my mother was going to die if I didn’t get her that flower.

And if anything happened to my mother…

I would never be able to forgive them for it.

Or *myself*.

When I shouted this time, my voice broke, carrying so much emotion that my whole body started shaking. “STOP FIGHTING! WE’RE WASTING TIME! I WILL FUCKING LEAVE BOTH OF YOU HERE!”

But they kept fighting, Greyson preparing to slice through Xavier’s throat before Xavier bit at his shoulder, growls and snarls and teeth and blood everywhere, a frenzied battle of beasts that just wouldn’t end.

I had to stop it.

I felt confused, frustrated, but above all, *furious*. I was hurting. They might’ve been irresponsible, insensitive jerks, but stopping them had become my responsibility, and for that I resented them both.

Actually, I was furious at them.

*I have to stop it.*

My body was shaking, my voice was shaking, and every inch of me was starting to vibrate with a feeling that I’d become very familiar with recently. A feeling that terrified me, but not as much as the idea of them killing each other. I moved closer to them.

“Cali, no! Stay away from the werewolves!” Artemis screamed.

“Cali, listen to her! They’re out of control!” Astrid agreed, whimpering.

“I don’t want anyone to die!” Torin piped up, real fucking helpfully.

I ignored them all. I knew what I was doing. I’d dealt with them before, and I wasn’t afraid then, or now.

Stalking toward the fighting wolves, I harvested the feeling inside me as much as I could. Though it wasn’t just a feeling, really. It was energy, a sensation that felt alive on its own, fighting to jump out of me.

“I said…” I stared at the werewolves fighting to kill each other. My voice was a hiss before it turned into a roar. “*STOP!*”

The vibration surged right out of me, bursting and blowing Xavier and Greyson apart. It knocked Torin, Astrid, and Artemis back, and I felt horrible about that, but finally…

Everything seemed to stop as the energy dissipated.

It worked!

*That’s right,* I thought, panting and shaking. *You’ll listen now.*

A huge part of me couldn’t believe I’d just harnessed my Fae energy to do this.

*Am I a badass?* I wondered internally. *Is that a thing I can be now?*

“Shift *back*,” I snapped, looking between the two werewolf jerks who dared to snarl at each other again. “Shift the fuck back, right *now*.”

Greyson—who had like, five percent more empathy and social awareness imbedded into his brain—shifted back first. He looked at me like he expected me to give him a fucking cookie for doing the bare minimum, but I ignored him and turned to Xavier.

“Xavier,” I said, trembling with fury. “Don’t make me say it again, I swear to fucking *GOD*.”

Letting out what sounded suspiciously like a whimper, Xavier shifted back too, looking up at me with wide eyes. Both men were covered in scrapes and bruises and blood, but they seemed fine, the monsters.

They were fine, and I was relieved.

But also fucking *enraged*.

“Cali,” said Greyson, a.k.a. Mr. ‘Look I Have Like Five Brain Cells and One of Them is Really Good at Seducing Cali’. But I’d had enough.

“Do *not,*” I snapped, glaring between him and Xavier, fighting to control my anger. “While you two are trying to tear each other apart, my mom is *dying*. Right now, I need you both to try and have this thing called empathy and stop thinking with your dicks, because nothing else matters.” I looked between them again, taking in their silent, stunned expression. “You two don’t matter right now.”

In the background, Torin gasped.

“I didn’t ask either of you to come along,” I continued. I was on a roll, and they’d finally shut the fuck up. I pointed at my pendant. “I’d always planned to come on my own. This was my journey, and… This is what I came for, and I’m going back home to save the one person who’s most important to me at the moment.”

I made a move to turn my back on them, but Xavier spoke up.

“I’m coming with you,” he said gruffly, clambering to his feet.

I paused, glaring between them once more. Greyson straightened up too, shooting a fiery look at Xavier as he approached me. “What do you want right now, Cali? Do you want Xavier to go with you?”

Greyson’s sour gaze made me feel sick to my stomach. How the hell was I supposed to answer that? Could I get both of them to promise that they wouldn’t be at each other’s throats for the rest of the way back? Because based on what I’d seen so far, I doubted it. And getting back had to be my priority.

Whatever fate *due destini* had in store for me, I would have to deal with it later.

“I don’t want you to come with me,” I told Xavier.

His eyes widened with hurt.

Greyson’s mouth twitched into a slight smile that vanished when I spoke again.

“You want me to choose between you, but I can’t do that right now. I choose my mother.” I looked between their stunned faces, and added, “I’m going back without either of you.”

**Episode 531**

COLTON

My ears were ringing as the piercing screeching continued, like a banshee having multiple orgasms. Yes, I knew what that sounded like—I’d been around the block a couple of times before Maya had made a semi-monogamous man out of me.

Crouching on the floor, I caged my mate to protect her from whatever the fuck was about to attack us this time. Our bodies were pressed together and she clung to me, her eyes scrunched shut. It looked like she wasn’t about to shove me away anytime soon, which was an awesome change.

In fact, it looked like she liked this feeling, me surrounding her like she was small and vulnerable instead of the deadly badass she truly was. This wasn’t about her not being able to take care of herself, though—this was about me not giving a shit about getting hurt if it meant her being safe.

“It’s okay,” I muttered in her ear, wrapping my arms tight around her. There was a chance that she couldn’t hear me over the screeching, especially considering she’d covered her ears. But she was still hiding her face in my neck, because… I was the man. Literally, I was *her* man. Her mate.

A sudden surge of pride erupted inside me. I felt like one of those sparkly-assed peacock spider motherfuckers that did a flashy mating dance every time they wanted to fuck, which… Well, hard same. In a way.

Trying really hard not to focus too much on Maya’s body pressed against mine, I stifled a groan when she shifted right against my hips. It was insane how quickly she could affect me, but I didn’t think sporting a stiffy in a potentially dangerous situation was the best idea. Even if feeling Maya’s thighs wrapped around me sounded like the *best* idea right now. And her round ass was right within the perfect squeezing distance…

Fuuuck me.

Shaking my mind out of the gutter, I looked around while the screeching continued. Big Mac seemed horrified, and seeing her like that spooked me as well. I thought she was supposed to know pretty much everything?

“What the hell is that?!” I shouted at her, but she either didn’t hear me or straight up ignored me.

Rushing out of the kitchen, she gestured at Mrs. Smith to follow her. Mrs. Smith turned to us, yelling, “Wait!”

“What the hell is happening?” I demanded again, this time talking to myself. I kept looking around to make sure we weren’t being attacked by commandos breaking through the windows or something.

“If this is your fault somehow, I’m gonna kill you, Colton! I’d better not fucking die today!” Maya growled at my chest, still squeezing herself against me like a koala. I felt like laughing. She really was a piece of work. I loved it.

A moment later, when I was pretty sure nobody had broken into the house, I got to my feet. I helped Maya straighten up before we both hurried to see what the fuck Bic Mac was doing. We saw her peering out of her front door, looking wide-eyed and anxious. All of us, apart from Big Mac, were covering our ears to fight the noise.

“Will *SOMEONE* tell me what the fuck is going on?” I barked.

Maya slapped me on the chest. “Don’t you see they’re trying to figure it out? Stop being a dick!” she yelled at me, her voice rising over the screeching.

Her words hurt a little. I wasn’t a dick. Was I? Okay, maybe I was, but she didn’t have to call me out on it—*that* was the dick move. I was just trying to help! Meanwhile, Mrs. Smith glared at me. It was shocking, because she usually was pretty nice.

“Someone, or something, tripped Big Mac’s alarm!” Mrs. Smith said.

Maya gasped. “Silas?”

I faced Maya. The worry on her face was as jarring as that fucking sound. “Turn that shit off before we all go mad!” I snapped at Big Mac, snarling.

Annoyed, the witch finally waved her hands and the sound stopped.

My ears were still throbbing, but at least it was quiet now.

“Why the fuck didn’t you do that sooner?” I demanded.

Maya grabbed me by the arm. “Colton!” she hissed. “Whatever’s out there would have been just as put-off by the sound as we were. *Get it?*”

I paused. Oh*. Oh*. Okay, that was smart.

Peering into the yard, Mrs. Smith whispered to Big Mac. “Do you see anything?”

Big Mac shook her head.

“Let me go out there and look around,” I said impatiently.

Maya narrowed her eyes at me. “You don’t have to prove yourself, Colton. We all know you’re strong.”

I smirked. “All I just heard is that you think I’m strong. And that you care about me.”

Maya crossed her arms over her chest, rolling her eyes hard. I felt like grabbing her and kissing the sneer off her gorgeous face.

“Colton.” Big Mac spoke up. “Do you know if anyone else was coming here? Were you guys followed?”

There was a hint of panic in Big Mac’s voice, which was new. Kind of amusing, too, because Big Mac was usually composed and deadly. Though I shouldn’t really have been amused at that moment, because this shit could take a turn really fast. If the alarm had anything to do with Silas, I’d soon be the one in trouble, struggling with my fears.

The thought made a somber, heavy feeling settle on my shoulders.

“Joss knows where we are, but I’m pretty sure we weren't followed,” I said.

“Colton and I would’ve sniffed out any trackers,” Maya added. I instantly felt better at her acknowledgement of my skills.

“Joss, huh?” Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “She’s the new Luna… Can she be trusted?”

I shrugged. “Eh. Probably? She’s smart. Seems cool. Blue hair and whatever.”

Maya glared at me. God forbid I badmouthed her girl crush! I didn’t know what kind of weird attachment Maya had to Joss, and Joss was really hot, but I wasn’t into threesomes. Well… No, that had been different when I hadn’t had a mate, but Maya was mine alone now. My mate. My girl.

End of fucking story.

“We don’t have to worry about Joss,” Maya told Big Mac. “She’s literally stuck her neck out for the pack.”

I frowned. “Yeah. Whatever.”

“You speak as if no one’s ever been two-faced, Maya,” Mrs. Smith said, in that level-headed way of hers that didn’t match Maya’s aesthetic at all.

“I think all of the Redwood pack had better start trusting Joss,” Maya said sharply. “Otherwise it’s gonna be your funeral.”

Before Mrs. Smith could respond, I huffed. “Okay everyone, stop getting your panties in a bundle. There’s literally no reason to talk about any of this shit—we need to see if there’s anyone out there. I’m going to check.”

Maya peered at me like she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to choke me out or fuck me. Maybe she’d do both at the same time. Not gonna lie, I loved that idea.

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith nodded their agreement, and I was heading for the door when Maya grabbed my arm.

“You really need to stop worrying about me,” I scoffed. “I’m a big boy, it’s—”

“I’m not *worried* about you,” she scoffed, cutting me off. “I just figure two werewolves checking out the perimeter are better than one.”

I rolled my eyes, dropping the subject because arguing with Maya wouldn’t do me any good. She was way too stubborn for me to sway or manipulate, and that was one of the things I liked about her.

“Both of you, be careful!” Mrs. Smith called. She really was sweet. I winked at her before heading out, but Maya ignored her, like she was allergic to motherly figures.

For a moment, I wondered what Maya’s mom was like.

The night was quiet when we stepped outside. Eerily quiet, in fact—as if something had scared all the animals. I gestured for Maya to stay silent as we moved, and she nodded in agreement. I felt her stiffen a moment later, the energy between us vibrating as she pointed to her left. She mind linked with me. *Something moved over there, behind the trees,* she said.

I scanned the forest before taking a few cautious steps toward the place she’d gestured at. Maya was holding onto my arm tightly. I loved her hands on me, and I’d have bet that she did too—even if she’d never admit that out loud.

*Can you smell if Silas is here?* Maya asked me through the mind link.

*Yes*, I replied. *It’s a scent I’ll never forget.*

As hard as I tried to keep the memory away, it would always haunt me.

I stopped walking and sniffed the air, recognizing my father’s scent. Cold sweat ran down my spine. But I had to be rational. The scent could have been a remnant from before, when we’d found Big Mac hiding in the mirror—

A few branches cracked.

“Colton?” Maya hissed.

Before I could shield her, a wolf burst through the trees and charged toward us.

**Episode 532**

“Cali, wait!” Xavier called after me, but Greyson blocked his way.

“She just said she doesn’t want you to go with her,” he said through gritted teeth. “Aren’t you fucking listening?”

“You don’t tell me what to do, you fucking maniac!” Xavier spat, getting in Greyson’s space.

“Seems to me that you’re not hearing what she told you, asshole,” Greyson shoved Xavier in the chest, and my heart dropped.

My heart dropped, because Greyson… Greyson, the Alpha, the equalizer, should’ve known better. And Xavier should have too at this point.

My rage was made of hurt and dejection.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked Greyson, my voice shaking as I marched toward the pair of them. There was a look on his face that I couldn’t place as he looked at Xavier. “You’ve been on this journey with me—you’ve seen me almost die like a million fucking times in the past few days, just so I could get this flower! You *know* what’s at stake!”

He stared at me, wide-eyed and guilty. “Cali—”

“Don’t you fucking *CALI* me!” I pointed at Xavier, who stood there, panting. “Your brother’s still on catch-up mode; he has no idea what we’ve been through! I don’t blame him for trying to fight Artemis, because one, he’s a fucking hothead, and two, because what she did *does* sound horrendous if you don’t know the context and what she did afterward to redeem herself!”

“Yeah,” Xavier barked, suddenly all puffed up like he thought I was taking his side. “I don’t know what’s up, asshole.”

“No, you stop! You’re not excluded from this, Xavier. You’d better get with the program! This can’t keep happening!” I yelled at him, watching him flinch back at the sound of my voice and the furious expression on my face.

*YEAH, BUDDY!* I thought, bristling. *I’M NOT KIDDING HERE!*

“Besides!” I snapped, turning to Greyson, who also flinched. “Artemis could have held her own against Xavier and pretty much anyone, so you didn’t need to get in the middle!”

“I definitely could have,” Artemis piped up from somewhere behind me.

“Right?” I told Artemis. “You’re an ex-bounty hunter who behaved like an immoral dick half the time and almost blew my whole operation apart, but you’re still kind of a badass.”

Artemis looked torn between insulted and flattered.

“Bottom line, Artemis doesn’t need anyone to save her,” I went on, turning to Greyson.

Greyson’s silver eyes narrowed. Had I just wounded his ego? What could he possibly do to me now?

*NOTHING.*

Both he and Xavier would never do anything to hurt me, at least not on purpose. They both wanted me and kept trying to kill each other over me, which I now realized meant one thing: *I* was the one with the power here.

My magical vagina was all the sparkle-rage, so I didn’t understand why the FUCK they were refusing do what would make me happy right now.

“Cali,” Greyson said gruffly. “You don’t need to—”

“Oh, but I do!” I snapped. “I’ve had enough of you guys fighting! I think I’ve made it pretty clear where my priorities lie, but if it’s still not obvious…” I looked between them, glaring daggers. “I will stop talking to you two altogether if you start fighting again.”

Greyson snorted and Xavier rolled his eyes.

“If that’s how you both want to act, fine.” I turned on my heel and started marching away from everyone down the mountain. I had to make my way back to the human world. They could follow if they felt like growing up.

*That’s right!* I thought to myself. *I’M THE ALPHA NOW!*

So I was possibly still a little high from using my Fae magic.

Vaguely delirious but definitely furious, I continued to march away from everyone. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Artemis, Torin, and Astrid sheepishly following me. I hoped I was going in the right direction. The last thing I needed right then was to get lost, not when I had the moon buttercup. At least I didn’t have to worry about the Kollector anymore. Because I’d defeated him.

*Me*.

I’d done that.

Honestly, when the hell had I become a badass without a spatula or a chainsaw? What kind of glow-up was this? Was I ready for it? Magic was something else entirely.

*Am I having an identity crisis?* I thought, slightly panicked. I didn’t turn around to see if Greyson and Xavier were following, because I was just that fed up. They wanted to keep being petty, so I could return the favor.

Astrid and Torin caught up to me a moment later.

“So, um,” Torin started.

“We’re not talking about what just happened, Torin,” I declared.

He pouted. Astrid, who was the more socially savvy of the pair, changed the subject. “Okay, but are you planning on going all the way back to Light Fae territory?”

“I am,” I said, taking a deep breath. “It’s the only place I know where there’s a portal back to my world.”

Artemis showed up on my other side, eyeing me with interest. Meanwhile, Greyson and Xavier were also following us, but a few feet behind me now that they’d learned their place. I felt the sudden urge to tell them not to bother following, but the truth was I wouldn’t have made it this far without their help, and there was a chance I’d need it again.

So perhaps they weren’t *entirely* useless and I’d exaggerated a bit…

*Uh yeah, big time, Cali,* I told myself, sighing. Both Xavier and Greyson were amazing, and strong, and wonderful, and I had no idea how I felt about choosing one of them. I needed time, but I doubted they were going to let me have that. I’d need to keep fighting for my space, like I had earlier.

*It’s sad, but true,* I thought to myself, scowling*. And also fucking* infuriating *that I need to demand their respect. Shouldn’t they be able to recognize that I’m in a tough spot on their own? Why do I need to do so much work? UGH!*

“So that was pretty cool,” Artemis mumbled from my side, the moment Astrid and Torin started chattering about Torin writing a book about his adventures in Dark Fae territory. The two of them sure knew how to entertain themselves.

“What?” I asked Artemis.

“You used your Fae powers back there to separate the brothers.”

I nodded. “I haven’t mastered my magic yet, but I’m beginning to get some sense of how to use it.”

“But how—”

“Look, Artemis,” I interrupted. “You’re cool and all, but you’re also a pain in my ass. You’re one of the main reasons why I almost failed to get the flower. You get that, right?”

Artemis nodded curtly.

“I get why you were hesitant to help me when the Kollector threatened me,” I continued. “We all have to survive, after all. But I don’t have to like it. This is my mom’s life we’re talking about.”

“I understand,” Artemis said in a low voice. She sounded vulnerable when she asked, “Would apologizing to you make things better? Because I am sorry, Cali.”

I didn’t speak. Her attempt at being remorseful was nice, but I was just overwhelmed. Part of me wished that all three of them—Artemis, Greyson, and Xavier—would just disappear.

“Hey!” Torin called, returning to our conversation. “Do you guys think we’ll have trouble with Nybor on the way back? She was pretty mad, earlier.”

I glared at the forest ahead of us, clutching my pendant. “Screw her. No one’s going to stop me now.”

“We should definitely steer clear of the town where they almost burned Torin and me,” Astrid said sheepishly.

“True,” I agreed. I hoped that wouldn’t add too much time to our journey back. I remembered the ondines, too—how Greyson had been so drawn toward their song, how he and I had kissed in the river…

Would Xavier be drawn to the song of the ondines as well?

What the hell was I gonna do with two kiss-hungry werewolves?

The thought was startling, and a little dizzying, but I shoved it down. I couldn’t lose my cool now. Either way, it didn’t matter. This time, I knew the dangers ahead and I’d be ready. Or at least readier. I had to be, because my mother depended on it.

We all walked through the forest silently for a while; Torin and Astrid on my right, Artemis on my left, and both my mates bringing up the rear. I could feel their eyes on me, burning and expectant. It would’ve been hot if it weren’t so dangerous and exhausting, not to mention *fucked up.*

They were brothers.

Brothers, and I was in the middle.

*Jesus Christ. What was I doing?*

“*Hey*,” Artemis hissed, stopping.

I peered at her, annoyed. “What?”

Artemis pointed up ahead. “Do you hear that?”

There was a weird grumbling noise that was getting closer. My eyes widened when a mob of angry miners started coming toward us, shovels and pickaxes in hand.

They were blocking our way.

**Episode 533**

MAYA

I didn’t hesitate to shift mid-lunge and crash into the dark brown wolf. It was pretty big and muscular, like an experiment gone wrong. It couldn’t have been a werewolf, though—something felt *off* about it, about the way it tumbled with me on the ground, about the way it carried itself.

It was strong, but I managed to gain the upper hand quickly, slamming it back onto the ground before choking it with my paw, growling. I heard Colton’s roar a second later. He’d shifted too and was now hovering over the wolf, snapping at the animal with his teeth.

The wolf’s brown eyes widened in a way that seemed more human than beast, and then I heard a weird little voice in my head.

*Please don’t, I’m a werewolf too! I’m hurt!*

I stopped growling and looked around. What the fuck? That wasn’t Colton’s voice. I stared at the wolf and it whined now, turning its head to the side to show me its neck. An obvious sign of submission between wolves, but also werewolves. I’d sensed that there was something wrong with this wolf, but could that mean it was a werewolf?

And if it was, then why didn’t he shift back?

The wolf under me whined some more, looking more like a dog now. I saw blood on his leg, and that, along with his submissiveness, gave me pause. Colton, of course, considered the whining a sign of weakness and roared again.

The annoying asshole was really gonna rip this animal’s throat out, just for fun. Then again, I couldn’t say I’d never acted like that myself before, so I tried not to judge him. Too much.

Quickly, I mind linked with Colton before he could attack.

*Hold off!*

Colton heard me. Making a noise of confusion, he stared at me.

*Back off*, *Colton*, I told him through the mind link. *I’ve got this.*

Colton’s wolf huffed, because he was a dickhead who didn’t know what was good for him. Growling, I kicked him. He fell down like a sack of potatoes. The asshole really needed to start listening to me in places other than the bedroom. We’d have a problem if he didn’t—or rather, *he* would have a problem, because there was no way I’d let him do whatever the fuck he wanted when I was around.

Colton shot me a betrayed look, making actual wolf-puppy eyes at me while I turned away, huffing. I stared at the wolf lying under me, making sounds of distress. For a moment, I wondered if I’d imagined the voice I’d heard earlier, and if this was really just a massive normal wolf that had lost its pack. It wouldn’t have been unheard of for a normal wolf to seek out werewolves.

But then the wolf mind linked with me again.

*Thank you for stopping him! I think he was about to eat me. Is he always so scary? Not that you’re not scary—you’re super scary too! Just, more prone to listening, and that’s great!*

I blinked, staring down at the rambling creature. It was talking inside my head. How was that possible? How could I hear this random wolf? Or, obviously, werewolf?

*Can you please let me go now?* The wolf continued to mind link with me. *I only came here to get the witch’s help!*

*Help with what?* I asked through the mind link, still keeping the wolf on the ground.

The brown wolf made a whiny, yippy sound. *I’m trapped in this wolf… I can’t shift back!*

“What the hell is going on here?” Colton snapped from behind me. He’d shifted back to human, fully naked and furious now. Colton and I didn’t have a good history when it came to communication—I said black, he said pink just to piss me off. I would’ve explained to him that this wolf was one of us, but I didn’t see that going over smoothly. Questions would arise. Colton would want to know how and why I was able to mind link with the strange werewolf, and I wasn’t ready to talk about any of that with him yet.

*You’d better behave while I sort this out*, I told the strange wolf.

He blinked up at me, nodding. At least there was one person around here who listened. Shifting back, I released the wolf, who whimpered but got to his feet.

“Maya, what the fuck are you doing?” Colton’s voice came out incredulous. “It tried to attack us!”

I shrugged. “He was just frightened,” I said, gesturing at the wolf. He now tilted his head to the side, looking more like a dog than a wolf—much less a werewolf.

“How the hell do you even know that?” Colton asked me, obviously weirded out.

“I’ve studied wolf behavior in the wild,” I lied, shrugging.

Colton narrowed his eyes at me before snorting. “We’re both wolves.” He turned to the wolf, who sat down beside me. The beast lowered his head in my presence, lightly wagging his tail.

“Great,” Colton scoffed. “He likes you. How about we get a collar and leash?”

I sighed. “You mean for you? Great idea. Go see if Big Mac has one.”

Colton rolled his eyes. “Hilarious, Maya. Truly.”

“Thanks,” I deadpanned. “I’ve wanted to tie you up somewhere and leave you for dead for a while now.”

He smirked. “I think you just mean tie me up and fuck me into the—”

“Shut up, Colton!”

Meanwhile, the wolf was glancing between us with alert, clever eyes. He seemed a little amused too, but didn’t mind link with me again. I was glad to see that his self-preservation instincts were sharp, because I would probably have bitten his head off if he’d commented on my vibe with Colton.

“I can try to communicate with the wolf,” Colton said skeptically. “Xavier’s done it—we’re twins with Alpha blood, so I should be able to do it too.”

“Go for it,” I told Colton.

The wolf shifted his gaze from me to Colton and cocked his head like he was listening to something. He definitely looked more like a dog now. Colton stared at the wolf for a beat too long, then he turned to me.

“He said he’s from the Arrowood pack and has been trapped in this wolf form,” Colton said. “He wants to ask Big Mac for help.”

I felt like scoffing in his face and saying that I already knew all that, but I stopped myself. I could be less obnoxious when the situation required it. And right now, less obnoxiousness was needed to keep this situation balanced, and my relationship with Colton… Whatever it was.

Like he knew what I was thinking, the wolf winked at me, obviously ready to keep my secret. I arched an eyebrow, hoping to communicate that I would hurt him very badly if he didn’t keep said secret.

“I’m not sure if Big Mac will help, though,” I said, for both Colton and the wolf’s benefit. “She’s not exactly werewolf-friendly right now.” I stared at the wolf. “You came at a bad time.”

The wolf whined, mink linking with me again. He was definitely abusing this outlet now that he’d found it. *No, please! Can’t you explain to Big Mac what’s going on? I’m bleeding! I’m stuck in my wolf! What if I die or something? This isn’t normal!*

I laughed, because this wolf was most certainly a drama queen. What was it with men?

Colton stared at me, eyebrows scrunched up in confusion. “Why are you laughing?”

I cleared my throat. “Nothing. Just thinking of Big Mac’s face when we tell her we want her to help a stuck werewolf. What do you think we should do?”

Colton shrugged. “I’m not exactly friends with Big Mac. She’s a witch, so…” He turned to the wolf. “Sorry, bud, but this isn’t exactly our problem, is it? You’re stuck, but we’re pretty busy with a crazed murderer, so I don’t think we can waste any more time trying to help you.”

The wolf yelped in protest, whining at Colton.

I rolled my eyes, sighing. “Of course you’d take the easy way out, Colton.”

Colton gasped, clearly offended because he was also a fucking drama queen. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Before I could reply to my annoying mate and get this fight started, the door slammed open and Mrs. Smith and Big Mac stepped out.

“What’s going on?” Mrs. Smith asked cautiously.

“This wolf wants Big Mac’s help,” Colton said, gesturing at the werewolf.

“He’s injured,” I added.

“And Maya seems pretty invested in his well-being, for whatever weird fucking reason,” Colton snarked.

I flipped him off while Big Mac glared at the werewolf.

“You came at a bad time,” she told him.

The wolf whined some more, raising a paw at her. He really did look like a dog, the fucker. I bet he knew that too, and used it frequently to his advantage.

“We should at least clean his wound,” Mrs. Smith told Big Mac, who let out a long-suffering sigh.

Reluctantly, she motioned for all of us to go inside. As we walked into the house, Colton kept shooting glaring hot looks at me, like he was annoyed that I’d spent more than three seconds paying attention to someone else other than him.

“So how did you know where to find me?” Big Mac asked the wolf, about to close the door. We all stared at the wolf, who turned to Colton. My mate’s annoyed expression turned into one of pure fear in a second flat.

He growled, putting himself between the defensive wolf and the rest of us.

“What the hell is wrong this time?” Big Mac exclaimed before Colton could shift.

Colton pointed at the wolf. “Silas sent him.”

**Episode 534**

The miners were rushing toward us, and I had just about had it.

*Now what?* I thought, equal parts pissed off and scared. Couldn’t I get a fucking break, just once? I felt like kneeling on the ground and shaking my fist at the sky, yelling, *‘*Why God, *why?*’

No, I wasn’t being overdramatic.

“She’s the one!” One of the miners pointed at Artemis, enraged. All their tools were raised threateningly. And also rudely. Rudeness seemed to be the norm around these parts.

“Yes, that’s her!” another miner shouted, pointing at Artemis again. Seriously, this looked really, *really* bad. For one, there were like three million miners and six of us.

I huffed, turning to Artemis. “What did you do this time?”

Artemis offered me the most innocent look known to man. “Who, me?” she asked.

I was not convinced in the slightest. I wanted to say, ‘You’d better start talking, asshole’, but I stopped myself because I didn’t feel we were in a place where I could call her an asshole and get away with it. I also had other things to deal with right now. I turned to the miners, who’d stopped a few feet away from us, and took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“Hey, everyone!” I said, as friendly as I could. “Excuse me, but, uh, what’s this all about?”

The miner in the front, a pale redhead with freckles, pointed at Artemis. “She took us!”

Another miner, a massive guy who was, weirdly enough, wearing a muddy purple scarf, yelled, “I was in a club near Reno eating the most delicious food and the next thing I know, I’m kidnapped and forced to work in a mine. I’m a dentist, not a miner!” He raised his now-rough palms to show me. “I didn’t have the hands for this!”

Oh my god, that sounded… horrific. As horrific as the man’s random purple scarf. Where did he get that? And if all that wasn’t enough, the rest of the miners started piling on too.

“I got tricked into going to the club by a duplicitous Fae!”

“A guy told me there were free clams in there and I can’t resist free seafood!”

“I found my wife cheating on me and I wanted to find someone to hook up with and get back at her!”

They kept rambling, telling me their worries and stories. They started in various ways, but they all had the same ending.

“She captured us!” the redheaded miner said, hissing as he pointed at Artemis.

Purple Scarf pointed his pickaxe at her. “She has to pay for what she did!”

I turned to Artemis, who was looking alarmed. Finally. “Oops?” she said sheepishly.

*Oh my fucking GOD!* I thought, groaning silently before stepping between Artemis and the miners. She’d saved my life, she’d helped me—I couldn’t just leave her to them.

*But maybe she deserves…*

I stopped myself from finishing that thought. I couldn’t let them hurt her. Not after she’d been instrumental in saving me and my friends. She’d been through her own hell with the Kollector… Didn’t everyone deserve a second chance?

“I get that what she did was horrible…” I shot a glare at Artemis, who was smart enough to cower in shame and take a few steps back. “But I won’t let you guys hurt her.”

Purple Scarf stepped forward, scoffing at me. “Yeah? And who are you?”

I lifted my chin in defiance, but I couldn’t ignore the way my heart was pounding in my chest. These people had very sharp metal things… Then again, I had Fae magic. How come Greyson or Xavier hadn’t stepped up to talk to the miners on my behalf, though? That would probably have given me enough pissed off energy to blow everyone away again.

“I’m Cali,” I told the miners, clearing my throat. “Just Cali.”

“Are you Fae?” called someone from the back.

The redheaded miner gestured at Torin and Astrid, glaring. “Are *they* Fae?”

“I don’t, uhh, speak hooman*?*” a very anxious-looking Torin told the redheaded miner. Red—I’d call the redheaded miner Red from now on—seemed confused.

“I agree with what he said,” Astrid added, pointing at Torin before they both promptly moved behind Xavier and Greyson. Smart of them.

Meanwhile, Artemis was watching the madness with the air of a mildly interested cat.

“What about you?” Red glared at me, repeating the question. “Are you Fae?”

“Well, uh,” I said. “Technically, yes.”

“So you’re just as bad as the rest of them!” Red yelled, snarling as the miners began to step forward, charging at me this time.

“I’M FROM MINNESOTA!” I screamed. It was a war cry of self-identification and also a way to get out of this. I wasn’t even lying—I *was* from Minnesota, dammit! I didn’t even go here!

My declaration thankfully stopped everyone in their tracks.

Purple Scarf gasped. “Really? My ex-boyfriend is from Minnesota! We totally stayed friends.”

“We make lots of people’s boyfriends and girlfriends and partners in Minnesota.” I nodded seriously. “I didn’t know I was Fae—”

All the miners gasped at the same time.

“*PART FAE*,” I clarified, my voice getting higher, “until recently. My mom is dying and I came here to save her.” I glared at the crowd. “I’ve been through a whole lot of shit on this quest, so I swear to god if *any* of you kill me with a damn pickaxe before I can save her, I WILL come back and haunt you!”

The miners laughed nervously.

“I’m not fucking joking, fellas!” I barked.

“Ghosts aren’t real,” Red said, like a goddamn smartass.

“Did any of you think that *fairies* were real?” I demanded, daring them all to go against me.

They fell silent, watching me in horror.

*Get ‘em, love.* I heard Greyson’s voice in my mind through the link, spreading through me like warmth. I took a steadying breath as Xavier moved forward.

“If any of you take one step closer,” he growled in that eloquent way of his, “I’ll rip you all to pieces.”

Rubbing my temples and sighing, I glared up at Xavier. “That’s not helping, Xavier.”

Xavier flinched like a wounded puppy at my harsh words. *Just kill me now.*

Meanwhile, that sneaky monster Greyson chuckled from behind me.

“Who are you?” Purple Scarf asked Xavier. Even though he was human, he was three inches taller than Xavier and fifty pounds heavier.

“If you don’t back the fuck off, you’re going to find out exactly who I am,” Xavier snapped, coming to stand at my right side. “And it won’t be pretty.”

“My brother is a little rough around the edges,” Greyson said smoothly, appearing at my left, “and he can be wrong about so many things. But when it comes to this, he’s actually correct. If you guys don’t drop your weapons and your threats, there will be blood—and every drop will be yours.”

Xavier glared at Greyson. “I don’t need your fucking help, Greyson.”

I was not enjoying the way things seemed to be escalating between these two dickheads. Again. But I also wasn’t surprised.

“Everyone, please calm down,” I told the miners. “We come in peace.” I turned to Greyson and Xavier, who were glaring at each other like children fighting over the same fucking toy.

I was nobody’s toy.

“Both of you, you need to bring it down, because this isn’t helping,” I told them. “I will not hesitate to implement my earlier threat.”

“Which threat in particular?” Greyson asked.

Ignoring his infuriating, smug face, I turned to the miners. “What is it that you all really want?”

“To make all Fae pay for what they did!” someone from the back yelled, and everyone agreed.

*Lord give me the strength to deal with all these idiotic men*, I thought, breathing deeply.

“That is technically impossible,” I said to the miners. “Fae have magical powers, and there aren’t enough of you, and you don’t have guns or bombs or any of the other stuff that usually helps humans destroy things. So you’re gonna lose and die and probably won’t come back as ghosts,” I finished pragmatically.

The miners did not enjoy pragmatism, and started yelling in protest.

“Wouldn’t you rather go home?” I asked loudly.

They paused.

Purple Scarf stared at me, wide-eyed. “What are you talking about? We’re trapped in the Fae world.”

“There’s no way to go back,” Red said, huffing.

“Step back, Cali,” Xavier said gruffly, moving between me and the miners. “It’s time to take action.”

“No,” I snapped, dragging him back by the forearm. “It’s time for you to shut up and do what you’re told. The miners are going to drop their weapons anyway.”

Purple Scarf scoffed. “Why would we do that?”

“Is she insane?” Red sneered at me while the rest of the miners started laughing.

“Uh, actually,” Artemis piped up, poking my shoulder. *Now* she’d decided to talk? “I was wondering the same thing. Why would the miners back off?”

I turned to the miners, determined. “Because if you kill me, you’ll be killing your only shot at getting back to the human world. Is that something you want to risk?”

**Episode 535**

LOLA

“Look at this light! Perfection!” the realtor rambled as he showcased the house to us.

“Yes, it’s—”

The realtor cut Joss off. “And the ceiling! Gives the phrase ‘the sky’s the limit’ a whole new meaning!” she said passionately, her eyes moving from Joss to Rishika to Violet and then back to Joss, who at least looked interested.

“This is exactly what you’re looking for!” she told Joss. “And at a reasonable price! I almost died from excitement when I found it for you!”

“Someone’s in love with their job,” Jay muttered in my ear, nodding toward the almost orgasmic realtor. My cheeks heated up at his proximity.

I couldn’t stop thinking about our hook-up in the woods. The looks we’d received when we’d returned, all the snickering and raised eyebrows, had been worth it. We tried to convince the pack that we’d just been running, but I wasn’t all that good at lying, and Jay was so wholesome it hurt, so he was just plain bad at it. Together, we’d been practically defenseless against Colton’s snarky sexual remarks, but I just didn’t care. Colton and Maya had told me that I should try and work things out with Jay, anyway. I’d just been following their advice, and um, having some fun at the same time.

Jay and I hadn’t exactly figured anything out yet, but at least we’d had fun. And we hadn’t fought.

I hated fighting with him. He was everything I’d ever wanted in a mate, a man, and a friend too. Kind, caring, generous, sweet. I guessed that was why I’d been shocked when he’d stayed back with the pack instead of choosing me. I’d always felt so safe with Jay, always thought he’d have my back. The idea of that being untrue made me feel wrong. Restless in my own skin. Something I rarely felt.

I was fucking awesome.

“What do you think of the house?” Jay asked me, leaning closer again. He moved his arm over my shoulder, caging me close. The flush of my cheeks rapidly spread all over my body, followed by a sudden urge to shift. The feeling was sharp, a punch in the gut.

I wasn’t sure why this kept happening to me, but I chose not to dwell on it. It was like an itch that I knew I shouldn’t scratch. We had much more serious things to worry about.

“House is fine,” I mumbled. “I can’t stop thinking about Cali, though. We haven’t heard anything from Xavier. Is there cell reception where they are?”

Jay shook his head. “If he’s in Fae land, definitely not.”

I frowned. “I just feel like I haven’t been a good enough friend to Cali… She didn’t even feel comfortable enough with me to ask me to go on a quest with her.”

Jay shook his head, squeezing my shoulder. “She just wanted to protect you, Lola. You know Cali.”

A faint smile decorated my lips. “She thinks she’s invincible and everybody else needs her protection.”

“Exactly.” Jay nodded. “She’s like the Pomeranian that bites the thief’s jugular—all cute and fluffy, so you’ll never see her deadly attack coming.”

“She’d be so offended if you compared her to a Pomeranian to her face,” I said. “She wouldn’t accept anything less than a Border Collie.”

Jay smirked. He was so beautiful, it made my heart race. “Cali the Collie, out to protect us all.”

I snorted. It was dorky stuff like that that made it really hard for me to stay mad at Jay.

“Okay, gather round, everyone!” Joss cut in, ready to speak to the pack. The realtor lady stood by her tall, lithe form, clearly giddy with excitement. “Unless anyone has some serious objections,” Joss said, “I’m probably going to buy this house.”

Jay raised his hand to speak. He was so respectful, always. That was very much a turn on for me. “I think that Lola and I should check out the bedrooms first, just to make sure the layout is practical.”

Joss raised an eyebrow. “The bedrooms? I thought you guys already checked out the forest earlier. Wasn’t that enough?”

Her insinuation hung heavy in the air, and the rest of the pack started snickering. Even sweet Violet.

“Really, Jay?” I whispered, embarrassed. “The bedrooms?”

Jay shook his head at them and me, looking like a very hot, disappointed teacher. “You guys need to get your minds out of the gutter,” he said. “This is an investment—we need to look at the bedrooms before committing.”

“Your man is so practical,” Joss told me, smirking. Her fangirl, the realtor, asked her if she’d just missed some sort of inside joke as I followed a silent Jay upstairs. He seemed withdrawn, suddenly, like something wasn’t sitting right with him.

“You okay?” I asked. “Something wrong with the house?”

He paused by the upstairs hall, turning to face me. “Just…” He ran his hands through his brown hair.

“Come on, spit it out,” I said nervously.

“Are you back for good?” he asked me, his green eyes searching.

So we were going to talk about this, after all. “I’m here now, aren’t I?”

Jay pinched the bridge of his nose, tense. “Does that mean that you’re staying with the pack?” He gestured at the bedrooms. “Because I definitely want to share one of those rooms with you.”

I squeezed his shoulder. “I’m *here*, Jay.”

He stared at me, pressing his lips together. “I hope you don’t regret it, though.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’ve been acting… different,” he said, his voice cracking.

“Of course I’m acting differently. I’m worried. Cali is off in the Fae world, Silas is running around, and our fight the other day…” I looked up at him, sighing. “We *never* fight, Jay. So this is pretty upsetting to me.”

Jay squeezed both my shoulders. His hands felt large and steady on me. They made me feel better. He always did. But then he kept talking. “I’ve noticed that you’ve been pretty antsy lately, even before all that. Like, why did you shift back at the house?”

I took a step back, withdrawing from his touch. “What’s wrong with shifting?”

“You’re a hybrid, Lola,” he told me carefully. “It isn’t always safe. You could hurt yourself. You *know* that.”

“Now you sound like Cali.” I arched an eyebrow. “Maybe *you’re* the overprotective Pomeranian here.”

He was anything but a Pomeranian. Jay towered over me and was like my personal huggable bear with abs. He ignored my tone and glanced downstairs. The others were still there, the very human realtor tittering enthusiastically.

“We’re not gonna talk about this out here,” he said, pulling me into one of the bedrooms. “Remember when you got stuck while shifting?” he said, the second the door closed. “That happened *twice*. And both times you needed a witch to fix you.” His eyes were pleading, soft and gentle in a way that was hard to resist. “I don’t want to see you in that much pain ever again.”

I knew where he was coming from, but Jay couldn’t understand how I felt. I was trapped in my own self sometimes, torn between human and werewolf. Shifting was the only way to escape the frustration, the bubbling energy that vibrated within me.

“I’ve heard all this before, Jay.” I hated to get sharp with him, but right now it felt inevitable. “Besides, look at me—I’m fine. Can’t we just drop it?”

“Lola…” He reached out to hold my hand. A current ran through me, sending tingles down my spine. “Please, don’t ignore—”

“I’m back and we’re together,” I said, both for him and for me. I needed this kind of anchor right now. I needed his closeness, his warmth. “Isn’t that all that matters?”

Jay’s hand brushed my cheek as I spoke, and the warmth kept spreading and spreading, building up to the urge to shift. The sensation was so sudden and sharp it felt like a shove, my insides aching with something that felt like a call.

My wolf was locked inside, and she wasn’t happy.

*Shift… Shift now! If you can…*

It almost felt like she was taunting me.

“Hey, are you okay?” Jay asked, looking at me worriedly.

“Yeah, uh—” I cleared my throat. “What do you think of this bedroom?” I licked my lips. Jay looked alarmed, but all I could think about was the taste of *his* lips. The thought struck me out of the blue, but I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “Maybe we *should* test it out, huh? Get freaky.”

Jay gaped at me in shock before I grabbed him by his nape, dragging him into a hungry kiss. He gasped, wrapping his arms around me. My whole body throbbed, eager for more kisses, more closeness, more of this amazing feeling, but then…

Jay pulled back.

“*Wait*. We shouldn’t,” he said, like the good boy he was. “Everyone’s downstairs—they know we’re here.”

“And you already implied we were doing this, so might as well.”

“Lola—”

I shut him up with another kiss. I didn’t care about anyone else—I just wanted him. I pushed him down onto the model house’s bed and straddled him, kissing him again, devouring him.

“You’re gonna kill me,” he choked out, all his tentativeness gone. I moved my hands from his chest to his belt buckle, rubbing him over his jeans just to feel him shudder. He was hard already, and I loved that. I loved how much he wanted me, how he could forget all his reservations because of me. It was so sexy, so…

*Hot.*

I suddenly felt hot, but not in a good way. Not anymore.

“Why’s it so hot in here?” I breathed, fanning myself as I moved away from Jay.

He looked at me, wide eyed and panting. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t—”

I was burning up, my skin on fire like I was being stabbed by a million scorching needles. My insides vibrated with that same energy from earlier, the need to shift becoming uncontrollable while my wolf mocked me. Challenged me…

*Do it! Shift!*

“I need to shift,” I told Jay, trembling. “I need to shift, *now*! Get me out of here!”

**Episode 536**

COLTON

“That wolf was sent here by Silas!” I growled. Maya, Mrs. Smith, and Big Mac gasped, staring at the wolf in fear as I made my claws extend. Yes, I was about to go Wolverine all up in this shit, and I had no fucking regrets.

“Get it out! OUT!” Big Mac screamed as if the injured wolf were a spider, looking around to find a mirror to hide in.

*That’s not what I said!* the wolf told me through our mind link, taking a defensive posture as I dragged it toward the door to throw it outside. *Please, don’t kick me out!*

“Colton, are you sure about this?” Maya asked me cautiously as Big Mac hid under the table. Apparently, the mirror was gone? Mrs. Smith tried to calm her down while I snarled at the wolf.

“You said that you came from Silas,” I spat, pulling the wolf outside via headlock. Moving the beast was actually pretty easy. I didn’t even have to shift. If this wolf was an assassin, he was doing a crappy job.

*No, wait!* the wolf whined—both through mind link and out loud, like a dog’s whimper.

“Silas is bad news around here, so you’re gone!” I declared. The wolf clawed at the ground, howling like the stubborn dog he was.

*THAT’S NOT WHAT I SAID!* he screamed inside my head. *I said that I was TRAPPED in this form by some guy named Silas!*

I stopped, keeping the wolf in a headlock. I glared down at him. “Come again?”

“What the hell is going on, Colton?” Maya asked, irritated.

“Hang on a minute!” I said, turning to the wolf.

*I swear I’m not gonna hurt anyone! I’m the one who’s hurt!* the wolf whimpered.

Big Mac hissed at me. “Colton, what—”

“I’m not Google translate,” I told the women, loosening my grip on the wolf. “Can’t you do some witch stuff and help this guy switch back to human?”

Big Mac scoffed, still hiding under the table. Her cat, Lion, was casually lounging on her lap now. How normal. “I’m not helping anyone associated with Silas!”

“Maybe we should give him a chance?” Maya asked, shocking everyone.

“How come you don’t want him dead?” I asked her, eyes narrowed. The wolf yelped. “No offense,” I told him, “she’s just pro violence in general.”

The wolf lowered his ears, watching Maya with fear as she just… rolled her eyes.

“MacKenzie, we should try to help him,” Mrs. Smith told Big Mac, who stayed under the table. Big Mac protested while her cat purred on her lap, entirely oblivious.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, getting real fucking tired of this shit. I wasn’t a patient man on a good day, but much less while I was under stress. And this was stressful having three people telling me to do different shit. Holding the wolf by the neck at arm’s length, I turned to Big Mac. “You gotta make up your mind. If you want to know what’s going on here, you need to do something witchy and get this over with or it’s wolf for dinner.”

“Fuck off, I’m *done*,” the tiny, ferocious witch declared. “Get that wolf out of here and shut the door behind you!”

“I want to trust you,” Maya hissed at the wolf. “But if you’re lying, I’m going to tear you to pieces.”

*I’m telling the truth, tell her! Please help me!* the wolf whined, both through mind link and out loud. Annoying little fucker…

“He says it’s the truth.” I paused, glancing at him. He looked more like a massive German Shepherd than a wolf. “Don’t we need more allies right now?” I said.

Maya arched an eyebrow, resting her hands on her hips before turning to Big Mac. “You should help him. If he turns out to be lying, we’ll protect you. It’s three against one.”

“I would never let anyone harm you, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith added, reaching to hold Big Mac’s hand. They looked at each other like they were the stars in some sort of *Notebook*-style movie. It was sweet. And hot. They were MILF levels of hot, and I wasn’t totally minding being stuck with a bunch of hot women.

But this fucking wolf on the other hand…

Pressing her lips together, Big Mac said, “Fine.”

Holding Mrs. Smith’s hand, she came out from under the table gingerly. Lion bounced off her lap and trotted away, uninterested in the unfolding drama. What an asshole.

“I’m with you,” Mrs. Smith told Big Mac, holding her hand as they both moved toward the wolf. Big Mac shot Mrs. Smith a grateful look before turning to the wolf. I let him go and he lowered his head in submission, then Big Mac raised her hands.

She said some spell-type thing that I didn’t understood and the wolf writhed on the ground, starting the shift back to human.

“Wow,” I said, wincing. “That looks pretty painful.” I turned to Big Mac. “Don’t *ever* do that to me.”

Maya squeezed my shoulder. “Oh my god, stop talking!”

She didn’t tell me, ‘Shut up, asshole!’, and as far as I was concerned, that meant we were making great progress. I grinned before wincing again at the sound of the wolf howling in pain. This was really bad.

Thankfully, a moment later, the shifting was complete, and we were all left staring at a naked dude with a gash on his leg. He had to be around our age, but he was still pretty tall. He was all gangly arms, brown skin, and dark brown, wavy hair. I shot Maya a look, just to make sure she wasn’t looking at him with any more interest than necessary. Lucky for him, she was just scowling, so the guy would live to see another day.

“Okay,” I said, poking his side with the tip of my shoe. “Your spell is broken, now start talking.”

Mrs. Smith moved past me, kneeling down next to the guy, who was still panting in pain. “We need to check this out first,” she said, gesturing to his wound. “MacKenzie, could you get some bandages?”

Frowning, Big Mac shockingly did what she was told without being annoying.

“Thank you,” the man rasped, staring at Mrs. Smith.

“What’s your name, kid?” Mrs. Smith asked him gently.

“Teddy,” he said, still trying to catch his breath. “Teddy Tahir.”

“Like a teddy bear?” I asked, not bothering to hide my snort.

Maya shook her head at me. “Stop being a tool, Colton, this isn’t funny!”

“It’s kinda funny,” I insisted. “Your parents should’ve known you’d get called that, right?”

“Ignore him,” Maya told the kid, moving closer to him. He looked up at her like she was some sort of goddess, which was pretty fucking annoying. “What pack do you belong to again?” she asked the kid.

“I used to be part of Arrowood, but I went Rogue,” Teddy—what a name—said. At least he seemed to be in less pain, now.

“Why did you leave?” Mrs. Smith asked.

“It was the best thing for everyone,” he said, shrugging. Big Mac walked back into the room.

She tossed the bandages to Mrs. Smith. “What about Silas?” she asked the kid.

Teddy swallowed roughly. Fear seemed to be lingering around him. I didn’t blame him.

“I ran into a witch,” he said. “Apparently, I was trespassing on this Silas guy’s territory, and…” He paused, glancing between all four of us. “Well, we got into an argument.”

“Bad move,” I told him straight up. Getting into a fight with Silas over territory? I was shocked this kid was even alive.

“Yep,” Teddy grumbled, sighing. “I said some shit, Silas and the witch said some shit, there was a scuffle, and the next thing I knew, the witch put this fucking curse on me. Forced me to stay in my wolf form.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m pretty surprised Silas didn’t just slit your throat.”

Teddy scowled. “I’m not that easy to kill, you know.”

Somehow, I doubted that. “He probably thought you were too insignificant to deal with.”

Teddy glared at me, offended. “*Hey!*”

“The witch who cursed you,” Big Mac said, pushing through. “What was her name?”

“No idea,” Teddy said.

“What did she look like, then?” Big Mac pressed, impatient now.

Teddy frowned, looking like he was trying to remember. He squinted at Big Mac, looking at her up and down. “Like your average witch? Coachella meets hot evil?”

“Seriously?” Big Mac glared at him, scoffing. Then she turned to Mrs. Smith. “I’m going to put the curse back on him.”

“MacKenzie, no!” Mrs. Smith said.

The kid gasped. “Please don’t!” he moaned. “I almost *died* earlier!”

“You’re literally fine, it’s just a little gash,” Maya told him dryly. She seemed unimpressed by his dramatics, which pleased me no end.

“No, you don’t understand!” Teddy exclaimed. “Being stuck as a wolf without being able to shift back felt like a cage—like I was in a small space and couldn’t breathe. I’m claustrophobic, I can’t deal with it!”

“Maybe we should stick him in an elevator and call it a day,” Maya told Big Mac, who snorted.

“No, please!” Teddy exclaimed. “I can take you all to Silas!”

Everyone fell silent. I grabbed him by the arm, my chest suddenly aching. “What the fuck did you just say?”

“I can take you to Silas,” Teddy said. “I know where he is.”

**Episode 537**

The miners looked at each other, unsure. Probably wondering if I was insane.

*How rude!* I thought, bristling. *Here I am, offering them a way out and they just stand there and doubt me? The nerve!*

Okay, so maybe I was jumping off the deep end here, offering to help them. But what was the alternative? Letting Greyson and Xavier kill them just because they were too dumb to realize the danger they were in?

“This is your choice,” I told the miners impatiently. “You can try to attack me and die—or even worse, get stuck in the Fae world. *Or*, you can put down your weapons and follow me to the human world.”

“What kind of powers do you have, exactly?” Purple Scarf asked me.

“Yeah,” Red added. “Who the hell died and made you the boss?”

“The Kollector,” I deadpanned. “I got rid of the Kollector, so technically, you could say that means I’m in charge.”

The miners fell silent, all at once.

*Why are you even bothering with these people?* Greyson asked me through our mind link. *You need to think of yourself, love. If you don’t,* I *will.*

Even though Greyson’s voice in my head made me feel all tingly, I didn’t have time for this bullshit. I swatted my hand in his direction, like he was an irritating fly, and stared at the miners. I wouldn’t let anyone harm them—especially not my two infuriating mates.

“So? What’s it gonna be?” I asked the miners.

“If you’re lying,” Purple Scarf said, “you’re gonna be sorry.”

The lack of gratitude really pissed me the fuck off.

*I’m the only thing standing between you and death at the hands of two very murderous werewolves, dipshit!* I wanted to scream at him. But I stopped myself. Instead I said, “I swear, I’m telling the truth.”

I could actually *feel* the disapproval rolling off both Greyson and Xavier. They’d probably been looking forward to getting out of here ASAP, not having considered what it would mean for me to leave these men behind. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I left them to their deaths. They were kind of asshole-ish, but they had been through a lot of shit, and if my mom knew what’d happened to them… She would never forgive me if I didn’t help them.

“Do we have a deal?” I asked the miners.

Purple Scarf stared at me, his expression severe. “You’re being serious about this. You actually want to help.”

I nodded. The miners looked at one another. And then Purple Scarf lowered his weapon. Red did the same, and one by one, the rest of them followed.

“Uh,” Purple Scarf said, clearing his throat. “Thank you for offering to help us.”

The rest of the miners offered a mild round of applause. I felt myself smiling—things were looking up. “You’re welcome,” I said. “We should all be okay.”

“What about her, though?” Purple Scarf asked, his eyes narrowed as he stared at Artemis.

I faced her, eyebrows arched. “Artemis?”

I could tell she wanted to pull a ‘Who? Me?’ routine again. But at the last minute, her expression changed. She turned to the miners. “I apologize for capturing you. It was a job. Not an ethical job, but it put food on the table in the time of the Kollector.”

“Not good enough,” Red said, glowering.

“Okay, let’s not push this, huh?” I told him.

“You guys shouldn’t leave your weapons here,” Artemis piped up, staring between Purple Scarf and Red. “There could be trouble along the way.”

Purple Scarf, despite his massive physique and earlier threats, squeaked. “What kind of trouble?”

“I don’t know.” Artemis shrugged. “A troll, some goblins—who knows?”

“No one said anything about trolls!” one of the miners in the back bellowed, and they all started talking among themselves about how much they did NOT want to deal with any trolls.

“Thanks, Artemis,” I told her with a tight smile. “Really helping with team morale here.”

“I think we should just get rid of them,” Xavier piped up helpfully.

Greyson scoffed. “We’re not getting rid of them, Xavier. Do you even know Cali?”

Xavier growled, calling Greyson either a piece of shit or a manipulative piece of shit—I wasn’t sure, because the miners were getting louder. I wanted to smack them all over the head.

“Can we come out now?” Torin asked me, peeking from behind his BFF Greyson. “Or do they still want to kill us?”

“All of you, STOP TALKING!” I said loudly, waving my hands around. The miners settled down enough for me to be heard. “Whatever danger lies ahead, we will all deal with it together. It’s better to stick with a group, don’t you think?”

The miners paused.

Then they agreed with me, Purple Scarf leading the way because he was actually pretty cool now. After I explained to the miners that we had to get moving right away, we all started hiking back toward Light Fae territory.

I was in the front, with Torin and Astrid rambling to each other at my left, and Artemis hanging around somewhere to my right. The miners were at the back, following, while Xavier and Greyson were walking between them and me. I resolutely didn’t turn around to face the two brothers.

Of course, I could still feel them watching me move, like two guard dogs ready to attack anyone who got too close to me. It was infuriating, but also jarringly… *intimate*. Knowing with absolute certainty that they’d rather die than let anything happen to me made it hard to stay mad at them.

Even when they absolutely deserved it.

“So, that was impressive,” Artemis said, walking up to my side. “Stupid maybe, but still pretty impressive.”

I shrugged. “I’ve had to face things far more dangerous than a bunch of scared miners.”

“I’ll bet,” Artemis said. “The Kollector, for one.”

I snorted.

“You could’ve just left them here, though,” Artemis added. “Or at least let Greyson and Xavier scare them away.”

I shot her a sideways glance. “They needed help, Artemis. You got them in this position in the first place, so you could, in theory, feel a little gratitude over the fact that I am basically fixing your mess.”

Artemis blinked. “You have a point. But that still doesn’t change the fact that you wanted to help them, even though they threatened you. Just like you want to help me, despite who I am. Why… Why are you like this? That’s what I don’t get.”

I stared at her, pretty irritated. The memory of Artemis being ready to let the Kollector kill me seared through my brain. “Well,” I scoffed, “some of us have a conscience! It’s this tiny little voice in your head that just won’t shut the fuck up when you do something wrong. Ever heard of that?”

Artemis frowned. For a moment, she didn’t seem cocky or murderous. She just looked frustrated. “I used to have a conscience,” she mumbled. “Turned out to be too much trouble.”

I scowled. “I don’t believe that.”

Artemis shrugged. “If you lived here long enough, you’d probably end up understanding me more. When you have only yourself to count on, nothing else matters.”

“You’ve been…” I paused. “You’ve been alone, all this time?”

Artemis looked at the ground. “Let’s just say you have a group of friends that I’ve never had.”

“Have you ever even *tried* to be friends with anyone, though?” I asked, raising my eyebrows. “Because I remember you distinctly and repeatedly telling me that we could never be friends, just a few hours ago.”

“I gave up trying to make friends a long time ago,” she said. “Friendship requires trust. And trust was a rare commodity under the Kollector.”

I stared at her profile. She looked sad. Younger, suddenly. Could she ever trust *me*? How were you supposed to gain someone else’s trust? How did trust work in general? I trusted myself, but what about anyone else?

What about Xavier and Greyson?

I glanced behind me, catching Xavier’s eye. He stared at me, full as ever of smoldering hot tension. He looked incredible in the knight’s outfit that Astrid had glamoured for him. Maybe I *could* trust him—he’d come for me, helped me find the moon buttercup, after all. I turned to Greyson, whose glamoured outfit made him look like a street fighter. He was wearing that gorgeous, enigmatic smile of his, and I remembered how I’d been warned repeatedly not to trust him.

*And yet, for some reason, I trust both Xavier and Greyson*, I thought to myself, my heart pounding. I hoped my gut feeling wasn’t the wrong one to have right now. Not when I needed to get back to the human world and save my mother.

I clutched at the pendant around my neck, swallowing thickly.

*It’s gonna be okay, Cali*, I told myself, trying to keep my shit together.

We moved toward a thicker part of a forest, and I was lost in my thoughts when a high-pitched voice came out of nowhere and startled me.

“Stop! You don’t want to go this way!”

**Episode 538**

LOLA

It felt like my brain was pounding inside my head, boiling as my temperature rose. This was wrong—something was really, deeply wrong right now. The feeling was like a fever I couldn’t escape, one that was escalating with every second.

“I can’t,” I told Jay, panting, “I need to shift!”

Jay’s eyes widened. His deep voice sounded scratchy when he spoke. “Lola, the realtor is downstairs. If you shift—”

“I don’t know what’s gonna happen,” I said, gasping as I jumped away from the bed. “But I can’t stop it!”

“Lola, *please* calm down,” Jay told me in a serious tone, walking toward me slowly. “You don’t have to shift.” He moved closer, keeping his composure. “I’m here to help you, okay? I’m here for you. I love you, I’d do anything for you. You don’t need to do this.”

My temperature kept rising and rising and rising, turning into an inferno in my blood. “I can’t, I can’t control it, Jay!”

My wolf called to me, clawing at my insides, trying to get out. I was shaking and shivering, my knees weak as the mantra *shift shift shift shift* vibrated within me.

“Lola, let’s sit. Maybe you need to lie down—”

“I don’t need to lie down!” I screamed. “I need to get the fuck out of here, far away!”

He stared at me, startled. “Away from *me?*”

“I can’t control it, Jay!”

“Of course you can control it,” Jay told me severely, like he was fighting to convince both me and himself. “This isn’t right, Lola!”

The wolf wanted to get me out of here, out of these four walls that had started to spin. She wanted to be in the woods, where Jay and I would be free, where we both belonged.

I couldn’t stay inside any longer.

“Lola, let’s talk about this,” Jay said, eager to help me like the good boy that he was.

I wanted to tear his composure into pieces.

“Do you want some water?” he asked. “Maybe something to eat? Tell me what you’re feeling, maybe I can help!” He moved closer, *closer*, reaching out to wrap strong, muscular arms around me, to hold me when the wolf wanted to *RUN*.

“No!” I growled, pushing past him. Shoving the door open, I stepped into the hallway—just as the realtor and the pack started coming up the stairs.

*Shit!*

I slammed the door shut. Hyperventilating, feeling my control slipping as my whole body burned, as my insides twisted for relief, I looked wildly around the room. I couldn’t go through the house to get outside, but what about the window? It loomed a few feet away, showing me a clear view of the trees, of clear air. Of freedom.

I breathed deeply and was running toward it when something blocked my way.

*Jay.*

“Lola, please calm down!” Jay’s voice had gotten louder, more desperate.

Good boy Jay, with all his practical solutions, was finally freaking the fuck out. That *never* happened. He was always thoughtful, always analyzing things, and now he was looking at me like he had no idea what the hell to do with me. His panic would’ve been hilarious and adorable if I didn’t feel like I was about to explode.

“Get out of my way!” I hissed, snarling. “I need to get to the window!”

“Lola, you can’t jump out the window—oh my *god*!” He reached out to grab my arm, but I couldn’t be stopped. Not in the state I was in. My wolf clawed at my mind, demanding to be heard, and I was helpless to stop it. I growled, shaking Jay off as I raced to the window, slamming it upward and open. I inhaled sharply, taking in the cool air. And then I realized it was too high—I couldn’t just fucking jump as a human. I wasn’t Cali!

But as a wolf…

“What are you *doing?*” Jay hissed from behind me.

Turning to face him, I made a sound that was a little like a sob as I whispered, “I’m sorry.”

The second I shifted, my whole body was overcome by an eruption of power. The heat surged upward and exploded, and suddenly everything inside me felt smoothed over, like a balm spreading over scorched skin.

The relief of the shift was so soothing that I felt like crying.

The moment my paws hit the ground outside the window, my wolf let out a satisfied howl.

I could feel freedom pulsating through every atom of my being as I raced toward the woods. The trees, the fresh air, the sounds of the forest fed my soul, made me feel invincible. My wolf was rejoicing, released at last.

I vowed to never leave her behind again.

*This is it. This is what freedom feels like.*

I was elated. This was perfection. The only thing missing was…

*My mate.*

Jay’s scent hit me first. That musky, harsh scent of a male looking for his female. His raspy bark interrupted my thoughts, and I turned around to face him. He had shifted too, his dark brown fur glowing, his form strong and relentless. He caught up to me with ease, his speed unmatched.

*Oh my god, you’re going to be the death of me!* he told me through our mind link. His panic remained, only now there was an edge of anger mixed with the worry. It took a lot to rattle Jay, and there was a secret part of me that rejoiced at witnessing this rougher part of him. I loved knowing that I was the reason for it.

*What are you doing, Lola?* he demanded. *Where are you going? What’s happening right now?*

I hoped he could hear the smile in my voice. *Isn’t it amazing?*

As I ran, I was acutely aware of everything—sounds, smells, the details in the leaves, the scent of Jay… Why did I ever want to be in human form? This was so much… *more*. More of everything.

I turned to Jay, yipping.

*Bet you can’t catch me!* I taunted him, changing direction with a jump to one side. I raced as fast as I could, skipping over rocks and fallen trees. I could feel and hear Jay catching up behind me, his deep voice echoing inside my head.

*Lola, this isn’t you! Something’s wrong!*

*Oh my god, lighten up!* was my reply.

Jay made a sound that resembled a growl, and I chuckled. I loved it when he lost control, when he followed me down this path where no rules existed.

*Two can play this game!* he said. You *try and catch* me*!*

His wolf changed direction abruptly, so fast that I had to stop and look around. I sniffed the air, fighting to spot him—where had he gone?

I paused, taking a deep breath, scenting the air once more.

My ears perked up when I heard his feet thundering on the ground.

*Hah! There you are!*

I followed the pounding, elated and excited to have spotted him. I saw him dart behind a cluster of trees, his wolf’s massive body moving as fast as an arrow. Putting all my strength into it, I purposefully raced past him, then circled back around and came up right behind him.

I slowed down, admiring the view of this werewolf who I loved. Who I’d *always* loved. The feeling was animalistic, primitive—a sensation torn between human and beast.

It made me rejoice.

My heart raced, adrenaline peaking as I acknowledged my wolf, as I asked for permission to shift back to human and savor what I wanted—savor my *mate*.

The beast within me relaxed, and I shifted back to human a moment later. Easily. Thank goodness.

Jay’s wolf huffed in alarm, facing me as I changed. It was as sharp as ever. The pain had become something familiar to me, though. Something that didn’t overshadow the experience.

I was *exhilarated*.

Jay shifted a second later, panting as he melted down to his human form. His jaw clenched, his chest heaving. His body was made of sharp, stone-like muscle, the V of his abs like an arrow pointing downward. He was hard already.

I wanted him so badly it felt like every inch of me had started to liquefy. It was insane how being his mate made me feel. Like a constant sex queen. I should start a blog.

He was about to speak, but I didn’t give him the time. I closed the distance between us, shoved him up against a tree, and kissed him. We devoured each other’s mouths as I reached between his legs and stroked him, as I felt him touch me all over before rubbing between my legs. I was shaking with pleasure seconds later, the ground trembling underneath me. The sensations kept climbing and climbing, quicker and quicker. The air between me and Jay felt electrifying, raw—so intense that I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d felt like this.

“I want you,” I moaned against his mouth, looking deep into his eyes. He was wild with desire, biting at my fingertips as I caressed his face. “Fuck me,” I begged, trembling. “*Please* just fuck me, just—”

And then my good boy Jay shoved me down onto the muddy forest floor.

**Episode 539**

I looked around in confusion, but there was no one there—no one but the trees. I looked up at the nearest one, a towering pine, and took a chance. “Why can’t we go this way?” I asked.

“Uh, over here,” a voice responded.

I looked over in the direction of the voice. Now that I knew in which direction to look, I could see the eyes looking at me. I smiled and walked a few yards closer to the willow tree. “Okay, so why can’t we go this way?” I asked again.

The tree blinked. “Mercutio is a friend of yours, yes?” it asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, he’s a friend.”

“Yes. Mercutio sent word that Nybor is looking for someone by the name of Cali of the Midwest.” The willow’s leaves shook. “Based on the description he gave, I assume that would be you.”

I glanced back at the group, meeting Greyson’s eyes. He gave me a dark look. I looked back at the tree, wondering for a moment how exactly Mercutio had described me, but decided now was not the time to ask as it probably wasn’t the most important part of this conversation. I heaved a sigh. “So, how are we supposed to get back to Light Fae territory, then?”

But before the willow tree could answer, Artemis stepped forward, away from the ground of miners. “Wait, hang on a minute. What’s the story there? What did Cali of the Midwest do to piss off Nybor?” She paused. “Not that it takes much to piss off Nybor.”

“Oh.” I rolled my eyes. “It was stupid. She kind of attacked me and stole my necklace and then I pretended to be an all-powerful goddess of the forest and she got all bent out of shape about it. Total misunderstanding.”

“She stole your necklace?” Artemis asked. She pointed to my throat. “Your pendant?”

I nodded. “She said she was going to use it to help the poor.”

Artemis took this in. “She probably was. Nybor is a hero around here. To a lot of people.”

“To you?” I asked, raising my eyebrows. Artemis didn’t seem the type to have heroes.

Artemis shrugged. “I wouldn’t go that far. But at least she stands up for what she thinks is right.” She sighed. “She asked me to join her band.”

“She did?” I asked, surprised.

Artemis nodded. She rubbed her forehead, looking tired. “A while ago. Maybe I should have joined them when I had the chance. Might have saved me a lot of trouble, in the end.”

I had a lot of follow-up questions to this enigmatic pronouncement, but now was not the time. I was on a mission: I had to get the flower to my mom. *Fast*. I looked up at the willow. “Okay, is there some other way we can go then, so we can avoid Nybor?”

The tree’s leaves shook again, as if in a strong wind, though none blew down the wooded road. “I might suggest you take the path not taken.”

I stared at the tree. “Right, I’ll bet. The path not taken. Really helpful, thanks.”

“No, I mean that literally,” the tree said, sounding amused. “To avoid Nybor, but to get to where you want to go, you’ll need to take the path that veers away from the river, to the west.”

I looked toward the river. “You’re sure about that?’

“That path may take a little longer,” the tree admitted, “but it will lead you back to where you want to go.”

I squinted in the direction the tree had indicated, squinting into the setting sun. “And I should be able to avoid Nybor that way?”

“Nybor *and* her crew,” the tree assured me.

The path was rocky. As I looked down the path the tree had indicated, I could see boulders jutting up in the rutted pathway, and I chewed the corner of my lip. It was going to be rough going. I hadn’t realized it until this moment, but as I looked down that road, I realized how tired I was. It felt like I’d been going non-stop for weeks, even though it couldn’t have been more than a few days since we’d entered the Fae world.

But I had no choice. My jaw tightened and my hands clenched into fists. I *had* to get to my mom. I rubbed my tired eyes and looked up at the tree’s high branches. “Thanks for your help. And thank Mercutio when you, um, *talk* to him again.”

“Cali,” Greyson said, stepping up next to me. “You’re tired. You need to rest.”

I shook my head.

His mouth thinned. “You do. Look at you. You’re going to fall asleep if you stand still for too long. You’ve been pushing too hard. It’s not going to do your mom any good to push yourself to the point of breaking down.”

I bit my lip. “Are *you* tired?” I asked, looking up.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I can keep going if we have to. I’m just worried about you.”

Xavier walked over. “As much as I hate to agree with Greyson, I think he’s right about this. We’re werewolves, Cali. Our endurance can’t be a benchmark for you. You’re human. You need to rest.”

“I’m not.”

Xavier looked confused. “Not what?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Not human. I’m half-Fae.” Xavier’s jaw worked, like I’d said something that worried him. “And I’m not as weak as you think.”

“I don’t think you’re weak,” Xavier said quietly.

“It’s getting dark,” Artemis said, stepping forward, cutting off our conversation. “And even Fae need light to travel.”

I had to admit she was right.

“We could have a campfire!” Torin said enthusiastically. “We could sing some songs! Who’s got a lyre?”

“Um, maybe we could skip the songs,” I said. “But I guess we can stay here for the night.”

“You’re staying?” the willow tree said, its leaves rustling excitedly. “Oh, how wonderful. I get so few visitors.”

Greyson’s gaze met mine. “It’s the right choice, Cali.”

The campfire hadn’t yet been built, but his words filled me with warmth. I loved when Greyson agreed with me—probably because it happened so rarely.

As I dropped down to the ground, leaning against the willow, I suddenly realized how very, *very* tired I really was. Exhausted, actually. I closed my eyes.

*It’s going to be cold tonight. Come lie next to me. I’ll keep you warm.*

I opened my eyes. Xavier was looking right at me, smirking.

Before I could answer, either speaking or through our mind link, I heard Greyson’s voice in my head too.

*I wish I could have been there when you got the moon buttercup, love.*

My heart sank. I could hear sadness in his voice and, instinctively, I understood it. We’d been through so much together—he’d been with me every step of the way—I knew he would have wanted to be there when I found the flower. I looked over at him, but his eyes were down. After everything we’d been through, I owed him a conversation. I swallowed hard. We had to talk.

*I think we should talk.*

That came from Xavier, and my eyes darted to him. He was looking at me, his gaze intense. If I spoke to either man, the other would hate it. I covered my ears, squeezing my eyes shut. I couldn’t deal with this. I couldn’t be in the middle of this. My head felt so confused and overwhelmed. My heart felt like it was being ripped in two.

Scrambling to my feet, I drew in a deep, shuddering breath. I needed some space.

Astrid looked up as I stood and waved, smiling. “Come over here, Cali. I want to hear everything that happened at the zoo!”

The last thing I wanted to do was tell that story, but I was grateful for the distraction, and I walked across the clearing toward her. Torin was crouched down, fiddling with a pile of small sticks, building what looked like a log cabin.

“Torin, you’re doing it wrong,” Astrid teased, nudging him in the ribs.

“How dare you,” Torin said, looking outraged. “No one builds a campfire better than me.” He held out a hand. “My flint, please.”

Astrid rolled her eyes at me but handed Torin two small rocks. Torin struck them together and created a spark. He touched the spark to the dried leaves inside the tiny cabin he’d built and they flamed to life.

“See,” he said proudly, looking back at Astrid.

Astrid laughed and I gave her an answering smile.

“Nicely done, Torin,” I said, and he beamed with pride. I looked up at the movement in my peripheral vision. Artemis had stood and walked over to Greyson. They spoke quietly, their heads bent together. Greyson leaned in, listening as Artemis spoke. Then he leaned back, chuckling.

I stared at them as Greyson took Artemis gently by the arm and led her out of the small clearing. I watched as they walked down the road, disappearing into the darkness.

Excuse me? What. The. *Hell?*

**Episode 540**

LOLA

Back in human form, I prowled around Jay, drinking him in. He turned as I circled him, watching me, his eyes roving down me, lingering over my breasts. I stood on two feet—my fur was gone, but the animal was in me still. Everything about me felt feral and animalistic. I wanted to claw and bite, pant and growl. I looked up at Jay and could see his single eye darkening as he looked at me.

He wanted to fuck me.

We moved, crashing into each other like a sonic boom. Hands were everywhere, touching and groping and grabbing. I moaned as Jay moved his mouth down to my ear, biting hard on my earlobe. Pain shot through me and I tightened my grip on him.

“More,” I murmured. Then, louder, “More, MORE!”

He moved down to my shoulder, biting me, his fingers digging into the flesh at my waist, yanking me hard against him. We stumbled through the trees, ignoring the branches that pulled at us as we moved, and the animals that scurried out from under our feet. We moved until my back hit the scaly hardness of a wide oak and Jay pushed me against it, moving back up to my mouth.

I opened my mouth to him, claiming him, my tongue tangling with his. I could feel his rock-hard cock twitch against my hip. I wrapped my hand around it and gave it a long, hard stroke.

“*Fuck*,” Jay said, breaking away from my mouth and leaning his head back, his eyes closed. He took a couple of deep breaths in through his nose, like he was gathering himself, then surprised the hell out of me by grabbing my hips and spinning me around so I faced the tree. Jay was usually content to let me take the lead, so when he pushed his cock against my ass, then pushed inside my sex without another word, I gasped in pleasure.

“Oh, fuck yes,” I panted. “Yes, baby, yes!”

He grunted as he pumped into me, pushing me against the tree, taking me hard and fast. I hardly had a moment to think as he reached around and pushed his fingers into the seam to find my clit.

Stars burst in the corners of my vision as waves of pleasure broke over me. I pushed back into him as he drove into me, fucking me until I screamed his name over and over.

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“Okay, that was fucking hot,” I said, snuggling into Jay on the carpet of soft moss we’d found. “The best ever. Fifteen out of ten starts.”

Jay smiled and buried his face in my neck, laughing. “Yeah, that was pretty great.” He kissed my neck. “I’ve never seen you like that before.”

“Yeah,” I said, brushing away a leaf as the breeze blew it into my face. “And the running—god the running, Jay. Why didn’t you ever tell me? Running through the woods as a wolf… That was almost as good as sex, wasn’t it?”

Jay pushed himself up on his elbow and looked down at me. I craned up to look at his face which, to my surprise, seemed worried.

“What?” I asked, laughing. “I’m not saying you weren’t amazing, babe. You were. You rocked my world and my socks off. But…” I shrugged. “But maybe part of how great it was came from the rush we felt from shifting, you know? I haven’t been able to experience that as much…”

This didn’t seem to make Jay feel any better. “Lola,” he said, his voice grave, “listen. About that—should I be concerned about this sudden enthusiasm for shifting? I mean, I know it’s fun, but—”

“Stop, Jay,” I said, holding up a hand. “Just stop, okay? Look, I’m fine. I know I’ve had some problems in the past, but look at me. I shifted back without any problems. And, let’s face it,” I said with a grin, ignoring that part of the reason I shifted back was because of Big Mac’s potion, “that sex was off the charts.”

Jay grinned back, a little reluctantly.

“It was,” I teased. “You can admit it.” I sat up and gestured between us. “I mean, we’re connecting on a level I never thought was even possible. Don’t you feel it?”

The grin vanished from Jay’s face. “I’ve always felt connected to you, Lola.”

I huffed a sigh. I felt like he was going out of his way to misunderstand me. “No, I know that, but this is, like, a whole new level. Don’t you think?”

Jay smiled again, and this time it wasn’t reluctant. “I think I love you, Lola. How’s that?”

I stared at him. “You *think?*” I smacked his bare arm playfully. “You *think?* You’re not even *sure?*”

“I’m sure, I’m sure,” he said, laughing, batting my hand away. He reached for me and brushed a kiss across my lips. Then he pulled back and looked at me. “I love you, Lola.”

I smiled back at him and pressed my lips to his in answer.

He pulled away and looked up into the sky. “We should probably get back to the house,” he said with a sigh. “We don’t need a repeat of the last time we slipped into the woods.”

I followed his gaze upward. I wasn’t great at using the sun to tell time, but even I could tell it was getting late. I got to my feet and offered a hand to Jay, pulling him up after me. Hand in hand, we started back the way we’d come.

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We stopped by the car on the way back to the house to grab the clothes we had stashed in the trunk. I pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, then tossed some to Jay.

He pulled them on, then pulled me in for a kiss. “Maybe we should go in separately, so it’s not quite so obvious we were out for a romp in the woods.”

I snorted, burying my face in his shoulder. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. Okay, you go ahead.” I stepped back and watched as he walked toward the house. I took a moment to button my jeans and straighten my shirt, then I used my fingers to comb through my hair, making sure there were no stray leaves tangled in it. I smiled to myself, thinking of the rush I’d felt as I’d run through the woods. It made my body tingle, just thinking about it, and I hungered for it in a way that felt elemental. The need for it was so deep, I felt sure it was what I was *supposed* to do.

With a sigh and a final brush through my hair, I walked toward the house. When I opened the door, I saw Joss in the entryway, shaking hands with the realtor. They both looked up at me as I walked in. Joss’s gaze was suspicious, but the realtor beamed at me.

“Congratulations!” she said. “The deal is done!”

“Great!” I said, surprised.

“Now, as far as the payment goes,” the realtor started, turning back to Joss, “we’ll want you to get in touch with your bank first thing in the morning and get the paperwork going on the loan.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Joss said.

The realtor’s smile faltered a little. “Not necessary? But if we want to close quickly, we’ll need—”

Joss looked over her shoulder and, behind her, Rishika opened the leather briefcase she was holding in her arms. It was filled with row upon row of neatly stacked cash.

My eyes bugged out, and so did the realtor’s. That was a *serious* amount of cash! Where did Joss get off having all of that?!

The realtor recovered and cleared her throat, looking a little flushed. “Well, all right. I guess I thought you’d be making a down payment with a check and then using a bank loan for the rest.”

Joss stared at the woman. “Will this not work?”

“Yes!” the realtor said quickly. She smiled brightly. “Yes, this will work just fine.”

I was tempted to laugh, but I looked down as my phone began to ring. I checked the caller ID. *Dad and Pops*. I stepped outside to answer.

“Hey,” I said, unsure which of my two fathers was calling.

“Hey, Lola,” Pops said. His voice sounded tense. “Do you know where Cali is?”

My heart rate kicked up. “What’s wrong?”

Pops made the little sound he always made when he was stressed. Kind of an irritated half-sigh. “Dad and I have been trying to reach her. Her dad can’t get ahold of her. She’s not returning any phone calls. I was hoping you might be with her, or at least know where she is. We’re all looking for her.”

“Why?” I asked, starting to panic. “What’s happened? What’s going on, Pops?”

He didn’t answer me right away. He didn’t sound irritated anymore. I could hear the change in his breathing. He sounded scared. “It’s Cali’s mom, Lola, honey. She’s sick, you know.”

“I know,” I said, my mouth dry. “She’s been sick for a long time.”

Pops sighed again, but this time he sounded very, very sad. “I know. But she’s taken a turn for the worse.”

**Episode 541**

GREYSON

“Yeah, this way should work,” I said, leading Artemis along the darkened path toward a softly gurgling stream. Trees rose up on either side of the path, looming shapelessly in the blackness of the night. I turned to look at her, the light of the distant fire just enough to see her face. “You wanted to talk, yeah? We can talk here.”

Artemis looked uncomfortable. She rubbed a hand across her forehead and chewed the corner of her lip, the same way Cali did when she got nervous or stressed. “Listen, just to start, I’m not great at talking about… like, my feelings.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, wondering where this was going.

“I’m terrible at it, actually,” she said, taking a breath. “I’ve spent a good part of my life trying to keep *feelings*”—she shuddered a little, like the word made her uncomfortable— “to a minimum. But, being around Cali, I’m finding it harder and harder to avoid thinking… *things*. Feeling shit. It’s awful, actually.”

I gave her a rueful smile. “Yeah, I know what you mean. Cali’s like that. Being around her can bring out a lot of things, whether you’re ready for them or not.” I ran a hand through my hair. “But what does any of this have to do with me? What did you want to talk to me about?”

I hoped she didn’t have the wrong impression of me. I’d helped her in the mine because it was what Cali would have done. Me? Not so much. I didn’t need people getting mushy over that kid of shit.

Artemis looked right at me. “I want to apologize to her. For everything.” She swallowed hard. “For everything I’ve done to her.”

I hadn’t been expecting that, and I raised my eyebrows. “And does that apology extend to me, too?”

Artemis closed her eyes for a moment, and it looked like she was trying to wish herself away. But she was braver than I gave her credit for because when she opened them again, she looked right at me. “Yes, I guess it does.”

I wasn’t going to forgive her for capturing me in a net like a fucking carp, but it was kind of strange to see her so uncomfortable. From the moment we’d met her, Artemis had always presented herself as fiercely independent—a strong warrior woman—and now she was asking for help just to talk to Cali. She didn’t even know how to apologize.

I glanced back the way we’d come. The fire was burning brightly in the clearing, and I could see a little group gathered around. Cali was silhouetted against the flames. Astrid was next to her, and I watched as Cali turned to her, her beautiful face upturned and smiling as she spoke to Astrid.

“I have to admit,” I said, tearing my eyes away from Cali and turning back to Artemis, “I’m not always so good with people either.”

“You seem to be good with her,” Artemis said, tilting her chin in Cali’s direction.

I gave her a level stare. It made her laugh, and the sound was swallowed up in the warm darkness of the night.

“Okay,” she acknowledged with a wave of her hand, “maybe not at this *exact* moment in time.” She looked back at Cali. “I guess things do seem a bit tense right now. You know, what with the whole two brothers thing.”

“Yeah,” I grunted. “You could say that.”

“But mostly, you seem like you know how to talk to Cali. And I want to talk to Cali,” Artemis said, peering up at me. “I have this feeling that if anyone can help me connect with her, it’s you.”

I thought about this for a moment. I had a feeling, too: it was that if Artemis knew my history, she wouldn’t have been seeking my help. But, the thing was, despite everything that had happened—everything she had done—I actually sort of *wanted* to help her. I couldn’t explain it, but I could feel some strange connection, and it was something I didn’t feel often.

I shifted uncomfortably and glanced back at Cali. I knew why she was angry at me. It was because of Xavier. Cali was confused and frustrated—as she had every right to be. We were both asking a lot from her. But if she knew what had happened back at the zoo… But no. I wasn’t a snitch. If Xavier wasn’t going to be a fucking man and tell her what he’d done—how he’d abandoned me and left me because of his pathetic insecurity—then fine. Fine by me. Iwasn’t going to be the one to tell her.

“So,” Artemis said, bringing my thoughts back to the present, “will you help me?”

“Um,” I stalled, trying to remember what we’d been talking about. I ran a hand though my hair again. Right. She wanted to apologize to Cali. “I guess so. What do you want to know?”

“How do I convince Cali that I’m really sorry about what happened? Because I am. Really sorry. I wouldn’t have done it if—” She broke off, looking uncomfortable. She glanced back at the fire. “I’m just really sorry.”

The thing was, I believed her. I was still mad as hell about her capturing Cali and everything that had happened afterward—all the danger she’d put Cali in—but there was something in her tone. It sounded like Artemis really did regret it. I didn’t really have any reason for it, but I couldn’t help but trust her at least on this.

“There’s just something about her, you know?” Artemis said, glancing over at Cali. “She kind of reminds me of me, you know… What I *could* have been, if I weren’t so mean and bitter.”

She looked up at me when I chuckled.

“It hurts me that I’ve hurt someone like her. Does that even make sense?” she asked, looking up at me, her expression miserable.

“Yeah, I guess it kind of does,” I said reluctantly. I glanced over at Cali, then back to Artemis with a sigh. “Listen, despite what you think, Cali and I do have our own problems. It’s not all kissing babies and Fae world vacations—”

“What does ‘kissing babies’ even mean?” Artemis asked, clearly baffled.

I ignored her. “I don’t have any special tricks for talking to her. Half the time my attempts just blow up in my face, so, you probably don’t want my advice. But for what it’s worth, I think you should tell her everything you’ve just told me. That seems like your best bet.”

Artemis gave me a long look. Then she nodded. “I thought so. I kinda did, anyway. I think I just needed to hear someone agree with me before I actually said it to Cali.”

I chuckled, the sound rumbling in my chest. “Well, practice makes perfect, right?”

Artemis looked down, shuffling her feet on the mossy ground. She was quiet for a moment, like she was steeling her nerves for what she had to say next. “What happens if she won’t accept my apology?”

I thought about this for a moment. I looked over at Cali, who was looking up at Torin, listening as he spoke, her expression thoughtful. I thought about everything I knew about Cali. About how she was always fighting for what was right, and always looking out for her friends—even though it was constantly putting her in danger. I shook my head. “She’s not going to do that. It’s just not in her nature.”

Artemis looked up and nodded. “Okay.” She smiled. “Thanks, Greyson.” But she didn’t move back toward the fire. “I hope you’re right. And I really appreciate you talking to me about this. I mean, I did capture you back there at that spring, too.”

“Yeah, I remember,” I said dryly. “It’s not the easiest thing to forget, trust me.”

Her face flushed. “Anyway. Thanks. Not everyone would be so forgiving.” She paused, and her face flushed hotter. “I get why Cali’s attracted to you, Greyson.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Artemis. It’s not like I’m cool with the fact that you captured me and sold me to the Kollector. I ended up in a fucking zoo. You know that, right?”

She glanced away, clearly uncomfortable. “I’m sorry about that, I really am.” She looked back, looking up at me from beneath her eyelashes, and laid her warm hand on my arm. “Is there anything I can do make it up to you?”

I looked down at her hand on my arm, then up into her pretty face. My brain felt slow and sluggish, and I was having a hard time processing this surprising turn of events. Was I way off base, or was Artemis hitting on me?

Then, from over my shoulder, I heard a familiar chuckle. I turned to see Xavier standing behind me, arms folded, smirking.

His gaze ranged over Artemis, then traveled back to me. He raised his eyebrows. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

**Episode 542**

COLTON

I stared at Teddy, my eyes wide. “*You* know where my father is?”

Teddy stared back, his expression blank. “Huh? Wait, who’s your father, man?”

“*Silas,* you numbnuts.”

Now it was Teddy’s eyes that went wide. “Holy fuck. You’re Silas’s *son?*” He started to back away, looking terrified, but Mrs. Smith stepped behind him, holding his arms in a light grip.

“You don’t need to be afraid,” she said, her voice gentle. “Colton isn’t like his father. He’s not going to hurt you.”

*I wouldn’t bet on that*, I thought*.*

Teddy’s eyes were still on me, and he looked like he was about to piss his pants. He did not look like he’d even heard Mrs. Smith, much less believed her.

“Besides,” she said in a firmer voice, “if you don’t stay still and settle down, your wounds are going to get worse and you’re going to bleed through your bandages.”

“All right,” Big Mac said testily. Her eyes were darting around, taking in the trees as they shook in the wind. “Let’s get inside. We don’t need to keep standing out here in the open.” She looked closely at Teddy. “How do we know he didn’t lead Silas right to us?”

“I *didn’t!*” Teddy swore, his face alive with sincerity. “I would *never!* God, I was so glad to get away. I ran as far as I could—as *fast* as I could—away from that bastard. I hope I never have to see him again.”

“But you can take us to see him?” I asked. “How does that check out?”

Teddy looked up at me, clearly surprised. He stared for a beat, then, when he saw that I was serious, he nodded. “Yeah. I guess I could stomach it.” He grimaced as Mrs. Smith bent and applied antiseptic to his wound. I watched as it instantly started to heal faster. “That feels like fire.”

“Feels better than dying from an infection,” she said dryly.

“So are we going inside?” Big Mac asked.

“Fine,” I said, biting off the word. “Whatever, let’s get inside.” I shuffled into the house, following everyone, but my mind was on Silas. If this idiot Teddy could really lead us to him, then maybe I could solve everyone’s problems. It would make things real easy if I just killed the bastard.

Maya and Mrs. Smith had both helped carry Teddy through the door. As soon as I followed them inside, Big Mac slammed the door behind me, making Teddy jump.

She leaned over as Mrs. Smith and Maya carried him into the living room. “If that little shit tries anything—anything at all, I’ll spell him into oblivion.”

I wasn’t sure if she meant that as a threat or a promise, but I didn’t care either way. I just shrugged. “Fine by me, but you’re going to have to wait until he takes me to Silas before you do anything to him.”

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I was sitting on the dusty old couch in Big Mac’s library, staring into space when Maya walked in, holding the purring cat in her arms. I looked over and smiled at her before I could stop myself and—surprisingly—she smiled back.

She recovered quickly, and her face returned to the irritated expression she usually wore whenever she looked at me. “Mrs. Smith told me that Teddy’s going to have to rest overnight.”

“What?” I asked. “Why?”

She shrugged. “She’s worried about his wound, I guess. It’s not totally healing over as quickly as it should be.”

“That fucking scratch? Please.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t decide this,” Maya said. “They’re putting him to bed now.”

I grinned up at her as an idea sparked in my head. “Hmm. I wonder if there are any spare beds.”

She stared at me. “Are you kidding me right now, Colton?”

“What? Why not?”

“Um, maybe because you just found out that your murderous, psychopathic father is out there?”

“Um, correction, I just found out that my murderous, psychopathic father is actually *far* from here. That’s what Teddy said, anyway. That he ran as far away as he could get.”

Maya raised her eyebrows. “Yeah, if he was telling the truth.”

“Well, that’s depressing. But true.” I blew out a breath and stood from the couch. A cloud of dust rose into the air. “I’m hungry. Are you hungry? Could you eat?”

“God,” Maya said, shaking her head. “How can you be hungry at a time like this? You’re always either hungry or horny.”

I looked at her, wounded. “You say that like it’s a bad thing. What’s wrong with that?” I turned to the kitchen. “Wonder what this witch has to eat. God, I hope she didn’t become a vegetarian. What a nightmare.”

There was a small hallway that led toward the kitchen and I headed down it, but stopped short just before the doorway. Mrs. Smith and Big Mac were in there, standing with their backs to me, just in front of the sink.

I gestured to Maya and she stepped over silently. Together, we watched as Mrs. Smith reached over and took Big Mac’s hand in hers.

“It will be okay,” she said, her voice low. “It’s going to be okay.”

Big Mac didn’t respond for a moment. Then she nodded, covering Mrs. Smith’s hand with her own. “Let’s hope so. For everyone’s sake.”

Maya pushed her elbow into my ribs. “Maybe we should give them some space,” she mouthed, her voice barely a whisper.

I grinned down at her. “And miss this?”

Quick as lightning, she gave my arm a smack that stung like a bee sting and yanked me out of the hallway and back into the library. She bent, setting Lion down on the floor, and I admired the view of her perfectly rounded ass. As much as Maya and I grated on each other’s nerves, I’d always found her so damn sexy. The pull I’d always felt to her never ceased to catch me off-guard.

Maya straightened and turned, catching me staring at her.

Wait, did she just blush?

If she had, it dissipated quickly. She crossed her arms over her chest, the movement defensive. “So, what do you think we should do?”

I shrugged and leaned against the doorway. “Well, I came here to get Big Mac’s help to get into the Fae world and reach Xavier.”

Maya nodded. “Yeah. You could still do that.”

“I could, but I can’t stop thinking about Silas.” I shook my head. “If Teddy can really take me to him—"

“Stop, Colton,” Maya said, holding up her hand, “I’m not just going to let you go after Silas by yourself. Maybe you should just stick to helping Xavier for now.”

I thought about this for a moment. “You’re not wrong. Going after Silas solo… That could be trouble. And the fact that you don’t want me to go after him by myself…” I smirked. “You must really care about me, Maya.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I wouldn’t read too much into that if I were you.”

I smirked. “Oh, I don’t think I am.”

Maya looked like she was about to breathe fire, but before she could respond, Mrs. Smith appeared in the doorway.

“MacKenzie is worried,” she said, her eyes grave. “I wonder—would you two mind checking on the property? Just to give her a little peace of mind.”

That was the last thing I wanted to do, and I opened my mouth to tell her so, but Maya answered before I could.

“Of course.”

I glared at her, but she stepped toward me and grabbed my hand, hauling me from the room. “Stop being such a baby,” she hissed, towing me down the hall toward the front door.

We opened the door and stepped outside. Before I took another step, I paused, drawing in a deep breath.

“What are you doing?” Maya asked, eyeing me warily.

My eyes were closed as I took in the surroundings. “I’m just making sure I don’t sense any more Silas than I did before.”

She waited until I opened my eyes. “You good?”

I nodded and we started to walk, moving quietly around the house, keeping our eyes open for any signs of movement. We made it to the hot spring before I even realized we were heading in that direction. I stopped and tipped my head toward it.

“Remember that?” I asked, raising my eyebrows suggestively.

Maya smirked. “Of course I do.”

“Maybe we should, you know, test it out.”

“What?”

“You know,” I said, shrugging, “make sure it’s still working properly.” As I started walking toward the spring my heart rate kicked up, and I wondered if Maya was going to follow me.

“Wait.”

I turned.

“Hang on.” She stepped closer, stopping right in front of me. “You shouldn’t get your clothes wet.” And she slipped her hand beneath my shirt and onto my skin.

The feel of her hand on my skin set my nerves on fire, and I reached for her before I even knew what I was doing.

“You either,” I said, my voice husky.

**Episode 543**

“And how do you get around?” Astrid was asking. She sat next to me at the fire, leaning close, her chin in her hands like she was listening to a bedtime story.

“Cars,” I answered vaguely, not looking at her.

“And what are cars?”

“They’re like… You drive them around.”

“Okay, that doesn’t clear that up at all for me, but fine. Where do you live? Being royal-born, I assume it’s a castle situation of some kind.”

“An apartment. Off-campus.”

“And is that like a palace?” Astrid asked, sounding awed.

“It’s like a hovel,” I muttered. “But with Wi-Fi.”

“Hmm, that’s interesting. Kinda like a fairytale, which is fun, too. Okay. So, what I’ve always wanted to know about is what you do as a grown human in the human world. Because as a grown Fae, the options are limited, and I’m like, going back and forth about what I should be doing. Like, what’s even my calling, you know…”

Astrid continued on, but I’d stopped listening. I was thinking about Greyson and Artemis, speaking together. About Artemis saying whatever it was that had made him laugh. About them disappearing into the darkness together. Where the hell were they going? And why?

Was he interested in her? Was she interested in him?

I mean, that wouldn’t have surprised me at all. Artemis had eyes, after all, and what woman in her right mind wouldn’t have been interested in someone like Greyson? He was magnetic. Everything about him—his face, his body, his whole being—drew me in. It had been like that since the day I’d met him. I could remember it, even now, that dark magnetism that had pulled me in like an undertow, though I’d known I should have fought it. And I *had* fought it. I’d fought like hell, for all the good it had done me.

But now, seeing him with Artemis… What was the point of it all? All that internal struggle, all the mental gymnastics I’d been going through. Had this just been a game to him? Before, back in the human world, it had seemed like that sometimes with Greyson. He’d say one thing and seem like he meant another. Like at the Lupo Finale. *Trust me*, he’d asked.

But here, in the Fae world, he’d been different. *We’d* been different. We’d communicated, we’d been honest. We’d put trust in each other for once.

Or, at least, I’d *thought* we had.

I took a deep breath, but I couldn’t loosen the knot in my chest. Maybe I was just being silly. Maybe I hadn’t seen anything more than just two people having a conversation. It was possible that I was making something out of absolutely nothing, just letting my wild imagination run away with me. This happened to me every now and then, and it was always fueled by insecurity. I was always my worst enemy.

And this time, it was all coming from the feeling of being torn between these brothers. I gritted my teeth. Damn *due destini*!

“Cali. CALI!”

I looked over, startled. “What? God, Astrid, don’t yell like that!”

She gave me an odd look. “Are you okay?”

“Um, yeah,” I said quickly, blinking and trying to look like I’d been paying attention to her. “Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

Astrid looked confused. “You were staring into space. I don’t think you heard a word I said.”

“Of course I did,” I lied.

Astrid wasn’t fooled. “But you looked so intense, like your mind was a million miles away. What’s going on?” Her expression grew gentle. “Oh. Are you worried about your mom?”

“Yeah, I am,” I said with a sigh. “But I’m tired, too. Just really, really frickin’ tired.”

“Yeah.” She tipped her head. “Mentally, not physically tired right?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

“I’m just wondering if you need to sleep, or if you’re just mentally worn out.” She shrugged. “I wonder if you being so tired has something to do with having to deal with Greyson and Xavier.”

I hesitated. I had no idea what to tell Astrid. She must have guessed that something weird was going on, but *how much* had she guessed? If I explained what was really happening, would she understand? Even if she would, *should* I tell her? I liked Astrid, but the reality was, I barely knew her. I rubbed my head, feeling a headache building. “It’s hard to keep this all inside.”

“I’m sure it is,” Astrid said quietly. “Whatever’s going on looks very… complicated.”

I laughed. “Yeah. Complicated. You could say that.”

She gave me a rueful smile. “I saw how Xavier put his arm around you. It was like he was staking his claim. He was looking at Greyson while he did it, too—the way dogs do when they mark their territory.”

“Astrid,” I groaned. “Gross.”

She smiled. “Xavier was clearly trying to piss off Greyson.”

I chuckled, but the sound was hollow. “It was that obvious?”

“I’m a natural observer,” she said. Then she added, with a shrug, “But, yeah, it was that obvious.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I guess it was.”

Astrid peered at me closely. “I mean, we’ve been traveling together, Cali. I’ve seen you and Greyson together this whole time, so I know the story there. But there’s something going on between you and Xavier, too, right?”

I pulled at a blade of grass between my feet. “Do you know that werewolves have mates?”

Astrid nodded. “Remember, I thought Greyson was your mate?”

“Well, I’m Xavier’s mate,” I said, shredding the grass between my fingers.

A frown creased Astrid’s forehead. “Xavier? But what about Greyson, then? You two have been… together. A *lot*.”

My face heated. It wasn’t hard to think of what Astrid must be remembering. Greyson and I had arrived in the Fae world as a unit, and had traveled everywhere together. He’d protected me a thousand times, and we’d looked out for each other. Then, of course, there were the kisses, and the closeness we’d shared.

I dropped the grass with a sigh. “I’m also Greyson’s mate.”

Astrid’s eyes went wide. “*What?* What does that mean? Wait, does that mean you’re like Cassandra then? Oh my God, Cali. Tell me you’re not going to jump off a cliff like in that story. Cali! Tell me!”

“I’m not,” I assured Astrid with a laugh. Then the smile slid off my face. “But I understand why she got so sad and desperate in the end. This situation really sucks. I feel like I’m being pulled in two different directions, like, all the time. It’s hard to know where my heart lies.”

Astrid nodded sagely. “I can understand that. It must be excruciating.”

“It is,” I said, tears pricking the corners of my eyes. “That’s the word. *Excruciating*.”

“I wonder…” Astrid said, narrowing her eyes, studying me. “Have you spent as much time in Xavier’s company as you have Greyson’s?”

The story of how I’d met Xavier was so complicated and I didn’t want to tell it to a person who didn’t understand the concept of a car, so I skipped that part. I just nodded. “Xavier and I dated exclusively. For a long time, it was just us.”

“And Greyson?” Astrid asked.

“Greyson…” I started, thinking about him. “Greyson just kind of snuck up on me, if you know what I mean.”

Astrid nodded. “I think I do. I was in a relationship once. Well, I’ve been in a few relationships, but this one was serious.”

“What happened?” I asked, leaning forward, curious.

“He broke up with me,” Astrid said simply. “I didn’t see it coming.”

“Oh, Astrid,” I said, my hand over my mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

But she looked unbothered by the memory. “I was devastated at first—I used to rely on him for everything. But once I was able to distance myself from him, I realized that it wasn’t a good relationship. At least not for me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, curious.

Astrid looked up, her eyes on the blanket of stars in the sky. “When I was in it—especially when I was with him—I thought it was perfect. That *he* was perfect. It was like living in a glass bubble. But once the bubble burst, I realized how wrong that relationship was for me.”

“Astrid,” I said, shaking my head, “I’m really sorry, but I can’t think of a nicer way to ask this: why are you telling me this?”

She gave me an even stare. “It took distance for me to see the truth about that relationship. And I think you need some distance, too. From both Xavier *and* Greyson.”

“Really?” I asked, shocked by the suggestion.

She nodded. “So you can think for a second. So you can figure out what’s best for you. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Yes, of course,” I said quickly.

Astrid looked back at the fire while I considered her proposal. Then it hit me: what if I took the time she suggested, and discovered that neither Xavier nor Greyson was best for me?

**Episode 544**

XAVIER

“God, you two are a picture,” I said, smiling at them. “Here, in the dark, with the trees and the little river. Makes me wish I could paint or something, or at least had my camera. Wouldn’t Cali love to see this cozy little scene?”

Artemis dropped her hand from Greyson’s arm and stepped away, her pretty face expressionless as she gazed at me. She was a hard one to read.

Greyson, however, I could read like a book, and he looked furious. “You need something, Xavier?” he growled.

I shook my head, smiling, enjoying his fury. “Nope. I just saw you two slip away and I thought I’d take a little walk in the moonlight, too. So calming after a hard day. And I’m glad I did. I would have *hated* to miss this.”

“If you don’t need anything, then get lost,” he spat.

My grin ratcheted up. “No, I don’t think I will, Greyson. You and I have some things to discuss.” I looked at Artemis. “Especially now.”

Greyson glared, but didn’t disagree. Good. For once he knew to keep his mouth shut. He glanced at Artemis quickly, then looked away. I couldn’t exactly tell what was going on between the two of them, but knowing Greyson, whatever it was, it wasn’t going to be good for her. Or for anyone, for that matter.

“Um,” Artemis started, moving away from Greyson’s side, “I’m pretty tired. I think I’m going to go find somewhere to sleep.” She started to walk away, back toward the fire, but stopped and turned back. “Oh, and Greyson, thanks again.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Now,” I said, crossing my arms, “I wonder what service you’ve provided that makes you worthy of thanks, Greyson. Feel like sharing, Artemis? No fair keeping secrets.”

“Leave it, Xavier,” Greyson snarled as Artemis tensed.

“Whatever it is, I wouldn’t be surprised if it came back to bite you in the ass,” I said to Artemis, my teasing tone gone. “So I’d watch out if I were you. There’s a lot of shit that I don’t understand around here, but the one thing that never changes is that this bastard can’t be trusted.”

Artemis didn’t answer, and she didn’t look at me as she passed by, just kept her gaze determinedly ahead. I waited until she was out of earshot before I stepped toward Greyson.   
 “Looks like you’ve got another one wrapped around you finger. That sure as hell didn’t take long,” I said.

Greyson’s icy gaze could have frozen water in July. “Is there a reason you’re talking to me now, Xavier? I thought you never wanted to speak to me again. Could it be that the guilt is finally catching up to you?”

I scoffed. “What the hell are you talking about? What guilt?”

Greyson’s hands twitched at his sides. “Maybe you’re finding it hard to sleep after leaving me stranded.”

I took another threatening step forward. “Okay, let me make one thing clear. The only thing I’m *sorry* about is that you managed to get out of that place.”

Greyson stared at me for a quiet moment. “Then we have nothing to talk about.”

“*I’ll* decide that,” I said, stepping in front of him. It was dark as hell by the stream. The trees rose up on all sides, black and oppressive, blocking all light from the sky, but I could still see the outline of Greyson’s face in the flickering light of the distant fire. We were roughly the same height, and he made direct eye contact with me.

“You don’t want me to walk away?” Greyson asked, pushing his shoulder against mine. “Then what do you want to talk about? What could you possibly have to say that needs to be heard? You want to talk about your fear, Xavier? Is that it?”

“What fear?” I snapped.

Now he smiled. “Come on, baby brother. You’re afraid that you’ve lost Cali. That you’ve lost her to me.” I shook my head, but that just made his smirk grow. “That’s why you came here, isn’t it? You think showing up here will bring her back. You wanted to play the little hero, didn’t you?”

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” I growled.

“I don’t, do I?” Greyson asked. “Don’t bullshit me, man. I can see it in your eyes. Because even though you’re here now, you know the truth, don’t you?”

I ground my teeth. “And what’s the truth?”

His grin was victorious. “That *I* was the one who came with her. *I* was the one who fought for her. *I* was the one who protected her here, time and time again. I know it, you know it, and she knows it. No matter what you do, no matter what you say, she will always know the truth, and that scares the ever-loving shit out of you.”

It was like being punched in the gut over and over. For a moment, I felt sick. I couldn’t breathe. I fought to keep my face neutral, expressionless. I couldn’t let Greyson see how fucking sick his words made me feel. I planted my feet and met his eyes. “It sounds like you have a good memory, Greyson. That’s a good thing, because all of that is *past tense*.” My hands curled into fists at my sides. “You’re pathetic, you know that? You think you’re something special, but you’re a fucking *placeholder*. All you did was fill in where I left off.”

“You mean when you *chose* to leave her,” Greyson corrected, his tone icy. He shook his head slowly. “You should know that by now, Xavier. I mean you’ve had two chances after all—you never leave your mate.”

Fury surged through me. “I’m not looking for your advice, Greyson. And I’m back now,” I said, my voice thick with anger. “I’m not going to leave again. So you’d better get used to me.”

Greyson’s face was blank for a moment, then he smiled, his eyes disconcertingly calm. “Of course. Anyone can get used to anything. It’s like having an itch on your arm. All you have to do is scratch it. And if that doesn’t take care of it, you cut off the fucking arm.”

He moved to walk away, but I blocked his path. “I’m not done yet.”

Greyson stopped and eyed me. I could practically feel the anger radiating off him. “What?”

“I’m warning you, Greyson.” I swallowed the bitter taste of hatred in my throat. “You stay the hell away from Cali.”

His mouth twisted in a smirk. “Says the man who abandoned her.”

“Says the man she *loves*,” I snapped.

Greyson regarded me for a long moment, almost as though he was sizing me up. Then his eyes narrowed. “Don’t forget, Xavier—I spared your life once. I won’t do it again.”

Animal instinct pulsed through me. I wanted to rip his beating heart out of his fucking chest. I wanted to shred his skin to ribbons. If Cali hadn’t been there, I would have killed Greyson the moment I’d seen him. The instant I’d heard Silas’s name—heard that he was back—I’d known Greyson was involved. I could feel it in my gut. “You know, don’t you, Greyson? That Cali’s the only thing that’s keeping me from ripping your throat out.”

Greyson’s eyes darkened for a moment, then he lifted his chin, exposing his throat. “Cali’s not here now, Xavier. Go ahead. Take your shot.”

Cali *wasn’t* there. I *could* have killed him. Easy. But I knew it was a bluff, but he was giving me such an easy shot—even if he fought back, I could do fatal damage before he reacted. I eyed the jugular vein pumping through his neck, delivering blood to so many vital organs.

God, it would be so easy to just rip through it. End it all. I calculated the odds. He’d get a few good shots in. I might sustain some damage, but nothing too bad. Nothing that would kill me. I could do this. I could take him out. I could have him out of my life forever. Out of *Cali’s* life forever.

I swallowed hard, resisting the urge. I wanted to do it. I wanted to lunge for him, but I couldn’t. Not when I was trying to regain Cali’s trust. I took a step back, every muscle in my body rock hard. “I’m going to tell you one more time, Greyson, and I hope you’re fucking listening—you stay the *fuck* away from Cali. You might have her fooled, but you’re not fooling me.” I turned to walk back to the campsite.

“And who are *you* fooling, Xavier?”

“What?” I asked, turning back around.

Greyson’s face was shadowed, and the effect made him look like stone. “Who are you fooling?”  
 “I’m not fooling anyone.”

He shook his head. “Then when are you going to tell Cali about what you did?”

The zoo. He was talking about the fucking zoo again. I opened my mouth, about to tell him to cry me a fucking river, but before I could say anything, another voice spoke up.

“Tell me what?”

**Episode 545**

MAYA

Colton grasped the hem of my shirt and I ducked, letting him pull it over my head. When I emerged, Colton was looking at me, a smile growing on his face as his gaze traveled over me, taking me in.

I smiled back and, when he met my gaze, I put my hands on his belly and ran them up to his chest. Then, with a grin, I shoved him as hard as I could. With a yell, he stumbled backward, falling—still in his jeans—into the hot spring. He vanished beneath the water, then, after a moment, lunged back to the surface, sputtering and shaking water from his hair. With a toss of his head he flung his short hair back, and, with a growl, reached for me. I skittered back, laughing, but I wasn’t fast enough, and he caught hold of my wrist.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he half-growled, half-laughed. He towed me toward him and yanked.

The water was warm as a bath and, as I sank down, I felt Colton’s arms encircle me, pulling me close. The warmth of the water and the rush of his body next to mine made me feel strange—dizzy, almost, like the world was tilting sideways—and I reached up and kissed him. There was so much shit going on—with Silas and Big Mac, and now Teddy just showing up at our door—but being here with Colton just felt… right. Colton didn’t even hesitate before he kissed me back, his hands roaming across my naked skin.

I moved to his ear, running my tongue lightly along the inner ridge. “Do you remember,” I whispered, “when we played truth or dare? Right here?”

He nodded, grasping me tighter. “You mean that time you couldn’t resist kissing me?” he asked, his voice husky.

I moved my mouth down and ran my tongue along the planes of his collarbone. “I didn’t want to stop,” I admitted.

Colton’s hands slid up my ribs—his thumbs brushing the sides of my breasts—and pushed me back just far enough to look me in the eyes. “Then don’t stop now,” he said, and covered my mouth with his, consuming me. He pushed me to the edge of the hot spring and reached down as he kissed me, his fingers caressing me through my sodden jeans.

My fingers fumbled with the buttons of his jeans, desperate with hunger for him. His tongue teased mine, distracting me, but I managed to get his jeans off in the water and I reached for him. One stroke of my hand later, he went boneless against me.

“Fuck, Maya,” he gasped. “Don’t do that again.”

“What? This?” I asked, and did it again, stroking him from root to tip.

He gripped the sloping sides of the hot spring on either side of my shoulders for a moment, then he reached down and, faster than I would have thought possible, unbuttoned and slid off my jeans, despite being soaking wet. Once they were off, floating in the water somewhere, he grabbed me around the waist. I gasped as he lifted me up against him, and I wrapped my legs around him.

For a moment his lips hovered in front of mine. I squeezed my legs around his waist and he groaned. “I dare you,” I said.

“Is that so?” he asked, quirking up an eyebrow. He reached a hand down between us and pressed his thumb against my most sensitive spot. He teased me until I couldn’t bare it anymore and I took a fistful of his short hair, forcing him to look at me.

“If you don’t fuck me right now,” I said, panting, “I will *kill* you.”

He chuckled darkly, sending a delirious shiver through me. “Don’t have to tell me twice.” And then he drove into me.

I increased my grip on Colton’s hair, my nails driving into his skin as he pumped into me. I couldn’t keep my eyes open as he did. He felt good. So good. It wasn’t *fair*.

I rocked myself against him, trying to pull him further in until we were both gasping for breath, both swearing, both squeezing our eyes shut against the waves of orgasm.

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When we got back to Big Mac’s house, my fingertips were still wrinkled like prunes. I held them out to show Colton and he laughed.

“Hey!” he called when we got to where the house should have been. “We’re here! Someone let us in!” The house was still invisible to us, so we waited for someone to show.

After a moment, Big Mac appeared and frantically motioned us forward. “I hope you two had a good time while the rest of us were here, hiding and scared for our lives.”

“Um,” I started, feeling my cheeks start to burn. I was starting to feel a little stupid about stopping at the hot spring. It had felt great in the moment, just to forget everything, but Big Mac was right—it had been irresponsible to go off alone while we were all so vulnerable.

Colton, apparently, didn’t share my thinking, because he smiled and threw an arm around my shoulders. “Yeah, thanks. We had a fucking great time.”

I rolled my eyes and shoved him away.

Big Mac looked irritated as hell. “Was everything safe out there? Did you see anything? What did you see?”

“Nothing,” Colton assured her. “There was nothing to see. And I didn’t sense anything unusual.”

She looked at him for a moment, warily, like she was deciding whether or not to trust him. “You’d better be right,” she finally snapped. “I’m going to bed.” And with that, she turned away and stomped up the stairs.

Colton looked over at me, his eyebrows raised, and I laughed. “Okay, okay. I get it. She can be a little on the paranoid side.”

“That’s the understatement of the year,” Colton said, shaking his head.

“Colton? Maya?” Mrs. Smith appeared in the kitchen doorway. “I wondered if I could speak to you two.”

“Sure,” I said, walking into the kitchen. “What’s up?”

Mrs. Smith leaned against the counter and, when she looked at us, I could see that her face looked tired and worried. “It’s about Teddy.”

“What about him?” Colton asked, standing behind me in the doorway.

“I’m worried for his safety.”

“Really?” I asked. “Who would hurt him? It’s just us in the house. The place is invisible. No one else knows it’s even here.”

Mrs. Smith’s mouth was pressed into a thin line. “It’s MacKenzie. She doesn’t believe Teddy. She still thinks he’s a spy for Silas.”

I glanced up at Colton, whose face was stony. I looked back at Mrs. Smith. “So what’s Big Mac planning?”

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Smith admitted. “But we need to get some proof to support Teddy’s story, or there’s no telling what she’ll do.”

“Proof?” I stared at Mrs. Smith. “What kind of proof? How are we supposed to get proof?”

Mrs. Smith shook her head, looking lost, but then Colton spoke.   
 “I have an idea,” he said before he turned and headed toward Teddy’s room.

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We found Teddy asleep in the darkened room, and Colton looked at him for a moment, his expression irritated.

“What’s your problem?” I whispered.

“*Him*,” Colton said, gesturing to Teddy and not bothering to keep his voice down. “Like this situation wasn’t complicated enough already.” He strode forward and grabbed Teddy by the shoulders, shaking him awake.

Teddy woke with a start, looking around in confusion. “What’s up?” he asked blearily. “What’s going on? Who’s that? Where are the pancakes?”

Colton leaned down so his face was right up close to Teddy’s. “I need to know if you’re telling us the truth.”

Teddy seemed to wake up a bit more. His eyes focused and he swallowed, hard. “I’m telling you the truth, dude. Everything I told you was true.”

“They you’re leaving something out,” Colton insisted.

Teddy shook his head. “I told you everything.”

Colton gave Teddy’s shoulders a shake. “I need some proof, man. Something.”

“Proof?” Teddy said, looking alarmed. “What kind of proof?”

“Anything. If you don’t come up with something, I’m going to turn you over to Big Mac. And you do not want me to do that.”

“I don’t?” Teddy asked, sounding scared.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Colton asked. “Do you have any idea how bad a witch can be? You got off so fucking easy.”

Teddy shrugged, looking terrified.

“Then let me say this,” Colton said. “There is nothing worse than a paranoid, pissed off witch coming at you—you get what I’m saying?”

“But how can I *prove* anything? How can I get proof?” Teddy asked.

“Colton,” I said, stepping forward. “What are you doing?”

Colton ignored me and gave Teddy’s shoulders another shake. “Give me something, man!”

“Who was the witch who cursed you?”

We all turned around to see Big Mac standing in the doorway, glaring at us. As one, Colton and I turned back to Teddy.

He swallowed hard. “Um, I’m… um, trying to remember. I think he called her… Demi? No, Demeter! That was it! Demeter.”

Big Mac gasped and when I swung around to look at her, her face had gone ashen.

“What?” Colton asked. He was also looking at her, and had seen her reaction. “What’s up? Do you know a witch called Demeter?”

Big Mac’s eyes flitted over to Colton, then to Teddy, then away, into the darkness of the room. The color had not returned to her face. “It’s too late,” she said, her voice low and distant.

I shot a glance at Colton. “Too late for what?” I asked.

Big Mac looked at me like she didn’t know me. Like I was a stranger and she had no idea how I’d gotten into the room. “It’s too late for anything,” she said. “Silas already knows where we are.”

**Episode 546**

I stared between Xavier and Greyson. They both looked furious, but neither of them said a word. Anger rose in me. “You stupid boys and your secrets. You know what? Don’t even bother telling me, okay? You’ll probably just make some shit up, anyway.”

In my heart of hearts, I had a sinking suspicion that, whatever they were fighting about, I was at the core of it, and that realization made me feel sick to my stomach. Their relationship had always sucked, but it had only gotten worse. They were always fighting, and it was always about me. And I was getting sick of it.

I pointed an accusatory finger at them. “You know what, Astrid was right! She was totally fucking right.”

“Right about what?” Xavier finally asked, looking confused.

“I *do* need some distance, from both of you.” I turned to storm back to the fire.

“Cali,” Greyson called after me.

“What?” I snapped, spinning around.

Greyson took a step toward me. “I’ll tell you what we were talking about.” He glanced at Xavier, then back to me. “My brother has something to tell you.”

“What?” I asked. It was my turn to be confused.

“It’s more of a confession, really,” Greyson said.

I narrowed my eyes. There was a hint of sarcasm in Greyson’s voice that I was having a hard time ignoring, but I turned to look at Xavier. “What the hell is he talking about? What do you have to tell me? What confession?”

Xavier looked completely disgusted. He rolled his eyes. “I confess that my brother is a fucking asshole. But you should already know that.”

“That’s it!” I exploded. “I’ve had enough! I’m out! You can both fuck off!” I threw my hands in the air and stormed away, back toward the fire. “I’m going to bed.”

I walked toward the fire, but slowed before I reached it. I didn’t want to rejoin the group that had gathered around it. Astrid’s words went around and around in my head. *Distance. Get some distance. You need distance.*

Frankly, right now, the only distance that I was really concerned about was the distance between me and my mother. I lifted my hand to the necklace at my throat, and I felt tears prickling in my eyes.

If they both loved me as much as they claimed, why couldn’t Xavier and Greyson bury whatever resentment and distrust they had for each other and think about how to help me? If they were truly my mates—a fact I was seriously beginning to doubt—then they should stop their fighting. It was exhausting me.

I stopped walking, remembering the nightmare I’d had of them fighting in the Lupo Finale. I shuddered, suddenly feeling cold. This was like that all over again. I wrapped my arms around myself. When was it going to stop?

“Can we talk?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Artemis touched my shoulder. I spun around to find her looking at me, a strange, sheepish expression on her face. My mind flashed to her bending close to Greyson, speaking to him, walking with him into the darkness. Anger flooded through me.

“I don’t want to talk to anyone right now,” I snapped. “I just want to be left the fuck alone. Is that too much to ask?”

Artemis took a step back like I’d raised a hand to slap her. “Fine,” she said, and walked away.

I turned my back, and, choosing a spot away from the others, settled down for the night. I listened as the rest of the party did the same.

The miners were still in their own group, though their vibe had changed. They didn’t seem angry anymore; they were now wistfully reminiscing about life in the human world.

“Remember gas station hot dogs?” I heard one guy say. “I used to love those.”

“Yeah,” another guy said dreamily. “When I get back, I’m going to take a shower. A real hot one, the minute I get back.”

“Yeah,” the other guys chorused.

Astrid and Torin were sitting by the fire, their heads bent together, speaking quietly.

With a huge sigh, I dropped to the ground at the foot of a tree and lay down, resting my head on my arm.

“Rough night?” the tree asked.

I huffed out an irritated sigh. “You have no idea.”

The tree shook its leaves in a sympathetic way, and I closed my eyes. All I wanted to do was sleep. Sleep would take me away from this. Sleep would help me clear my mind. Sleep would—

I awoke with a start, and found myself on a brightly lit platform.

“—and I’m your host, Cort Haverson!”

His voice boomed into the void that lay beyond us and I looked over at him quickly. What the hell was going on? Who was Cort Haverson and where the hell was I?

The stage was bare except for me and Cort, and I couldn’t see whatever lay beyond it, because the lights pointed at us were too bright. All I could see was a bright white glare, and I squinted into it. I looked over, wondering if I could ask Cort, but he wasn’t finished talking into his long, thin microphone.

“And we want to welcome you to a very special finale of *The Faelorette*!” He paused, smiling a wide, blinding white smile, like he was waiting for cheers to die down—though all I heard was pulsing silence. I opened my mouth to ask him a question, but he spoke again. This time, he lowered his voice dramatically. “And I can promise you, you will not want to miss this one. Follow Cali’s journey to find her one true mate. You’ve been with us the whole time. We’ve laughed, we’ve cried, we’ve wondered how we let ourselves get so emotionally involved with people we’ve never met!” He guffawed in a way he probably thought was charming.

I rolled my eyes and looked around. The stage was all white, and still empty except for the two of us. Cort was dressed to the nines in a shimmering gold suit with purple velvet shoes, and I was—

Hang on. Just hang the *fuck* on. Was I wearing a *prom dress?*

I looked down, grabbing hold of the stiff silk fabric. It was the prom dress I’d worn in my senior year of high school. Lola and I had gone together—we’d had a blast—but how in the world had I ended up in this lilac ballgown-like thing again? I looked up, baffled. There had to be an explanation for this, but, as I looked up, it suddenly occurred to me that my every movement was being tracked. There were about thirty giant video cameras on me, their red recording lights blinking, following my every move. I stared at them.

“—and when he told her how he felt about her? Well, will we ever forget?” Cort asked, smiling again at some unseen, unheard audience.

And then, without warning, I heard them. I jumped about a foot in the air as the sound of thunderous applause broke out. I squinted past the cameras, and there they were. Maybe my eyes were just adjusting to the light, but I could see them now, clear as day—a huge studio audience, all sitting in seats ranging up, up, up, the levels soaring into the sky.

They grew quiet again as Cort dropped his voice.

“And it all comes down to this. Tonight, in a very special episode, Cali has to make the most important decision of her life!”

Two spotlights heaved on, sounding just like gunfire. I looked over, my heart racing, and saw Xavier and Greyson standing in individual pools of light on the far side of the stage. They were both looking at me, desperately. They weren’t bound, but they seemed unable to leave their spotlights, and they both looked terrified.

I looked up at Cort, my heart racing, about to tell him to shut this all down, but he wasn’t looking at me—his eyes were still on the audience. “Only one of these men will get to claim Cali as his true mate. Only one of them will survive.” Suddenly, he smiled toothily. “And Cali must pick which one lives and which one dies!”

The audience went *crazy*. Cort had a remote control in his hand, and he pushed a button on it. Greyson and Xavier both moved to the outer edges of their spotlights, and it became clear that they were positioned over trapdoors. Both trapdoors began to open, revealing flames that licked up, reaching hungrily upward.

Cort didn’t have to explain what was about to happen—whoever I didn’t choose would drop down into those flames. The audience gasped, then, after a moment, broke into applause, stomping their feet and cheering.

Cort turned to me, the remote control pointed at me. His face was tanned and oiled, and pulled so tight it barely moved when he spoke. He aimed that smile at me. “So, Cali,” he started, and the audience went dead silent, “you remember, of course, that if you can’t make a choice tonight, all three of you will end up in the pit.” He looked at the audience, giggling. “That’s part of the fun!”

The audience laughed back, but I flinched. The sound was too loud, too harsh. It sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

“Now,” he said, producing the moon buttercup from the breast pocket of his suit and holding it out for me. “Who’s it going to be?”

Staring at the flower, I watched as my hand reached out to grasp it. I looked up at Cort, who smiled encouragingly. Then I opened my mouth to answer.

**Episode 547**

When I jolted awake, the sun was streaming into my eyes. There was a tree root pressing into my back and I stiffly raised myself to sitting. Remnants of the dream were still lingering, the way nightmares do, and my heart beat hard as I looked around. If that nightmare wasn’t a sign that I needed some distance from Greyson and Xavier, I didn’t know what was.

I looked around the clearing. In the morning light, I could see that it was hardly a clearing, more like a turn-off from the wooded path. Someone—Torin, probably—had built the fire again and the miners were gathered around it, looking nervous and excited. They looked like they’d been up for hours, waiting to leave. Xavier was on the far side of them, and I spotted Greyson on the other side, the two of them as far away from each other as it was possible to be. I rolled my eyes with a sigh. I was so over the drama with these two.

When he saw me looking at him, Xavier stood and stepped toward me, but I put my hand up to stop him. I had nothing to say to him. Not this morning. As I got to my feet, I met Greyson’s eyes. He was still sitting, keeping his distance, but watching my every move.

There was a familiar pull in the pit of my stomach, but I tried to ignore it. It was the feeling I’d experienced every time I’d looked at him from the moment I’d met him. I’d always felt this inexorable pull toward him. But I gave my head a firm shake. This wasn’t that fucking dream. Xavier and Greyson might have been in the Fae world, but they had both feet on solid ground. They were not suspended over an open fire ready to consume them if I didn’t choose. I didn’t have to choose anyone.

I gritted my teeth. Not today, at least.

Anyway, I thought, as I straightened my shirt and tied my shoes, if I had to choose anyone, I was choosing my mom. That was why I’d come here in the first place. It was nice, in a weird way, having such a straightforward objective. Even though everything else was really complicated, that much was simple: save my mom.

I looked around. “Is everyone ready to go?”

The cheer that went up from the miners surprised me, but it made me smile.

“On to the human world!” someone yelled, and the rest of them cheered in agreement.

I appreciated their enthusiasm, and their confidence. I didn’t know exactly what I was doing, but they were willing to follow me. It made me feel like maybe I *could* figure this out. It made me feel like a leader, someone people could look up to. I just hoped to hell I was up for it. But I didn’t lie to myself as I looked down the rocky path: I had no idea what lay ahead.

I glanced up. “Thank you for your help,” I said to the willow tree. “And for such a nice place to sleep.”

“You are most welcome,” the tree said slowly, kindly. “Good luck to you. And remember, no matter where you are, wherever there is a tree, you will have a friend, young one.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling up. Then I looked down at the pendant around my neck. I opened it up for a peek at the flower suspended inside. “I’m coming, Mom,” I whispered, before snapping it shut again.

When I looked up, Artemis was walking toward me, looking intent. “Cali—”

A wave of guilt hit me. “Listen, I’m sorry about last night,” I said. “I was in a really bad mood. That had nothing to do with you. I’m really sorry—”

“We can get into all that later,” Artemis said briskly, cutting me off. “Right now, I want to talk about today’s journey.”

“What about it?” I asked.

Artemis tipped her chin down the road. “We’ll be approaching the border between the Light and Dark territories. Everyone has to be alerted. We’ll all have to be on guard.”

My palms began to sweat. “Why? What happens at the borders?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Many things. If there is going to be trouble, the borders are the place for it. Unless I’m very much mistaken, we’ll be meeting a few border patrols, as well.”

I let my gaze wander down the path as I worried at the corner of my lip. “Okay. Good to know. Thanks, Artemis.”

She nodded and turned to gather the group so we could begin.

I relayed the information—“Everyone keep an eye out, we’re not taking a stroll here,” I told everyone sharply—and we started down the path the tree had indicated.

It curled around, looping and doubling back on itself. It was rocky, and it seemed to take ages to traverse. As we walked, I couldn’t help wondering how far out of the way this path was taking us. I was hot and growing tired, but, thinking of my mom, I kept moving.

*You can run, but you can’t hide from me, love.*

We were about an hour into the march when Greyson began speaking to me through our mind link. I ignored him.

*Why are you fighting me, Cali? You know we belong together.*

I ignored Xavier, too. I didn’t want to talk to either of them, and I didn’t want them talking to me. I looked up, taking in the wide blue sky and the towering trees of the Fae forest. The birds lined the branches thickly and they called to each other, singing their mating songs. I took them in, glad to have something to listen to that didn’t require a response.

*Talk to me, Cali. Tell me what I can do.*

Xavier wanted me to look back at him, but I wouldn’t do it.

*I came here to be with you,* Greyson said. *Remember all we’ve been through.*

*We’re mates, Cali. Remember that? Don’t forget, I was going to turn you. I promised*, Xavier reminded me.

*Cali, love, look at me,* Greyson implored. *Please.*

*Look at me, Cali,* Xavier urged.

*Cali—*

*Cali—*

“Enough!” I screamed, wheeling around, clapping my hands over my ears. “Get out of my head! I didn’t invite you in here!”

This pronouncement was met with complete shock from everyone, except for Xavier and Greyson, who both looked away.

Torin looked at me, his expression one of grievous injury. “But I thought you *wanted* us with you.”

As I took a deep breath, I realized the mind linking had stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Good. At least they’d listened to me. I cleared my throat and turned to Torin. “I *do* want you here, and of course I invited you here.” I smiled, trying to make this into a joke. I wasn’t in the mood to try to explain mind linking to Torin, who would have upwards of twenty questions, bless him. “I was going to do a big speech a little later, thanking you all for being here. I invited you all here. That’s what I was…” I trailed off. “That’s what I was saying.”

The crowd looked at me, clearly still puzzled, but they nodded.

I swallowed, trying to smile. It was the dumbest excuse I’d ever managed, which was saying something as I’d come up with some really stupid excuses in my time.

Spinning back around, I stomped away, down the path. If I’d needed distance before, now I *really* needed it. From everyone. Behind me, I heard the clomp, clomp, clomping of the coal miners’ boots, beating a steady rhythm. I let the sound lull my heart to a slower beat and took a deep breath. I just had to keep going. I was leaving this place. I’d gotten what I’d come for, and now I was going to get out of here. I was going to save my mom.

I led the group down the path and across a small footbridge that spanned a gurgling brook. As I stepped back onto the path on the other side, I paused, listening. It was quiet. Too quiet. Even the birds had gone quiet.

I turned to ask the others if they heard the same unnatural silence, but when I turned around, I gasped. There was no one there. I spun in a terrified circle. I was completely alone on the path. Goosebumps broke out over my skin.

“Greyson! Xavier! Somebody! *Anybody!*”

The sound of my voice was loud in the vastness of the forest, but there wasn’t even an answering echo. Something was very, very wrong. Then the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I turned slowly, and there, standing on the path in front of me, was Nybor.

She held a sword in one hand. The other hand was held in front of her, outstretched, palm up.

“Shit,” I breathed.

Nybor tilted her head. “You have something that belongs to me, Cali of the Midwest.” Her expression hardened. “Hand it over.”

**Episode 548**

The witch Big Mac looked like she was about to scream. Or cry. Or be sick. Or all three at once. “Listen,” she said, speaking to the ones named Maya, Colton, and Mrs. Smith, who had all gathered hastily in the little library. “Demeter is a witch. A dark witch—”

“Unlike you, Glinda the Good Witch,” Colton broke in, but Maya smacked his arm, silencing him.

Big Mac glared. “She’s got dark powers. If Silas has been using her…” She shook her head. “Then there’s no doubt she’ll find us. Especially with him here.”

Everyone looked at Teddy.

Teddy, who was sitting in the corner of the couch with his leg propped up, widened his eyes. “Me? What did I do?”

“Well,” Colton said coldly, “from the sound of it, you’ve led Silas straight to us, that’s what.”

“Look,” Teddy said, struggling to sit up, “I didn’t *do* anything. All I did was try to run away from them.”

“Relax,” Mrs. Smith said soothingly. “No one is blaming you, dear.”

“No, we’re blaming him,” Big Mac corrected. “He’s to blame.”

“Are you sure about this?” Colton asked her. “All of it?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Big Mac snapped. “Do not doubt me.” She bent and picked up Lion from the floor. The cat mewed softly as Big Mac placed him inside a cat carrier backpack.

“You’re bringing your cat?” Colton asked in disbelief, eyeing the cat carrier.

“Of course,” Big Mac shot back. “I can’t very well just leave him here, can I?”

“Where did you even get a cat, MacKenzie?” Mrs. Smith asked, as though the question had only just occurred to her.

Big Mac pointed vaguely at the mirror.

Colton looked at the mirror, then back at Big Mac. “You’re not serious.”

She looked up from the cat carrier and gave him a glare that would have made braver men quake. “Stop questioning me, boy.”

Colton stood and walked toward the mirror, his expression baffled. “How is that even *possible?*” he asked, speaking to himself. He stared into the glass, then, slowly, reached out to touch it.

“Leave it alone!”

Colton yanked his hand back as Big Mac barked at him.

“God,” he said, turning around. “Chill out.”

“Relax,” Maya said, standing. “Both of you. We’re all on edge. No one needs to make things worse.” She took a deep breath and looked at Colton. “So, what do you want to do?”

Colton looked back at Maya, clearly thinking. “I thought I was going to find a way to help Xavier.”

*Xavier.*

*That name,* I thought to myself. *I know that name. How do I know that name?*

*Wait.*

*What’s my name?* Colton turned back to the mirror, a strange expression on his face. He looked into the glass, his eyes roving, searching for something.

“What are you doing?” Maya asked him.

“Did you see that?” Colton asked, turning to her.

“See what?”

“That!” Colton said, looking back at the mirror.

It was like he was looking right at me, but there was no recognition that he was. A surge of something—excitement? —passed through me. He was close enough to touch…

Maya walked next to him and looked into the glass. “What are you talking about?” She shrugged. “I see our reflection. Was I supposed to see something else?”

“I don’t know…” Colton said, still staring.

“What were you expecting?” Maya asked.

After a moment, Colton shook his head and stood straight. “Nothing. For a second I thought I saw something.”

“What?”

He smiled sheepishly. “I thought the mirror moved.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “That’s great. Just what I want to hear. What a perfect time for you to lose your mind, Colton.”

He ran a hand through his hair, looking agitated. “Maybe I am losing my mind. I can’t decide what to do. There’s got to be a right choice here, but I don’t know what it is. Xavier’s gone and now I have a chance to get Silas.” He blew out a long breath.

Maya looked over at Big Mac, who had been moving quickly around the room. She was gathering bottles from shelves, opening and closing drawers, throwing everything into a large leather bag—like an old-fashioned doctor’s bag. I’d been watching her do similar things the past few days before the others had arrived. She had a never-ending number of *things*. Clouds of dust rose up as she moved around the room, and Mrs. Smith covered her mouth with a tissue and coughed quietly.

“Well,” Maya said quietly to Colton. “I doubt Big Mac is going to help you find Xavier.”

*Find him?* I wondered.

Suddenly, without warning, a flash of rage surged through me. Its power took my breath away, and suddenly all I could feel was the blinding fury coursing through me. Without understanding why, I reached a hand up to my neck.

Colton was shrugging “You don’t think so?”

Maya shook her head. “There’s no way. She’s not really the generous type at the best of times, and now that she thinks Silas is after her? Not a chance.”

Colton didn’t answer for a moment, seemingly taking this in. He watched Big Mac move around her dusty little library, going through books, reading their spines, discarding some, stuffing others into her bag. He watched Mrs. Smith speak quietly to Teddy. Then he turned back to Maya. “If Xavier were in my place, he’d go after Silas.” His face darkened until there was no trace of his usual smirk. “No one will be safe until he’s dead.”

If Maya had been planning on responding to this, she didn’t get the chance. Big Mac threw one last book into her bag and snapped the clasp shut. “Is everyone ready to go?” she asked, looking around the room. She didn’t appear to actually be looking for a response, because she spoke again immediately. “We need to leave. *Now*.”

Teddy raised a hand. “Could we—”

Big Mac glared at him, shutting him up. “If we wanted to hear from you, young man, we would have asked. And trust me, no one will be asking. Let’s go.” She hefted her leather bag in one hand and the cat carrier in the other.

Mrs. Smith stood from the couch and helped Teddy to his feet. He gingerly put his weight on his injured leg, then hissed and pulled his foot up.

She looked up. “Colton, would you help us, please.”

He huffed a sigh. “I don’t know how the hell we’re going to travel like this,” he said sourly, but moved forward to slip his shoulder beneath Teddy’s arm.

“He’ll feel better once he gets the blood flowing,” Mrs. Smith said. “Perhaps MacKenzie can give him something for the pain,” she added, with a pointed look at Big Mac.

Big Mac grunted and headed out the door. Mrs. Smith, Teddy, and Colton followed, and Maya brought up the rear. She paused in the doorway, looking around the dusty library like she was checking to make sure everyone was out.

“WAIT!” I yelled, my heart leaping into my throat. “WAIT! Please! Don’t leave!”

Maya didn’t seem to hear me.

I lifted my hands and pounded on the mirror. “Wait!” My fists hit the glass hard, but it was immovable. “Xavier! Tell me about him! I want to know more about Xavier!”

Maya’s eyebrows furrowed, just a little, then, with a tiny shake of her head, she walked out of the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

I paused, listening, my breath coming in gasps. I heard their footsteps on the stairs, then in the hallway. I heard the front door open, then shut tight.

They were gone. I was alone.

“*NO!*” I screamed, beating my fists against the mirror again. “Xavier! Tell me about Xavier!”

I beat at the mirror until I exhausted myself, then I took a step back, panting. I stared at the glass. Then, taking a step closer, I squinted at it the way Colton had done, peering at it closely. I lifted my fist and hit it, hard. My hand bounced back. Then, as an experiment, I slowly reached out, letting my fingers just brush the glass. To my astonishment, they passed through.

Moments later, my hand was wholly through the glass, and I stared at it. I could see it, there on the other side, in Big Mac’s messy little library. I could feel the warmth of the room on my skin. I could feel the air stirring around my hand. It was something I hadn’t felt in a very, very long time.

Was this even possible?

There was only one way to find out.

With a deep breath, I took a step forward and walked out of the mirror. The glass shimmered like water as I passed through, and suddenly I was on the other side.

This couldn’t be happening. And yet… I looked around the room. I could smell the dust, I could feel the warmth of the sun as it slanted through the window, I could feel the wooden floor beneath my feet. It didn’t feel like a dream. I turned to look at the mirror, and the glass shivered back into place. I found myself looking at my reflection.

As I reached up a hand to touch my face, it came back to me. Suddenly, I remembered.

*I’m Ava. My name is Ava.*

**Episode 549**

I stepped back, sticks crunching under my feet, and my eyes darted around me.

“Greyson?!” I called. “Xavier?! Can you hear me?” How could they have just disappeared? They’d been right behind me. Clearly, this was Nybor’s doing.

Nybor stood on the path ahead of me and smirked. She still held her sword at her side in one hand and the other out to me. “I’ll be taking that necklace now.”

*Shit, shit, shit!* How had this happened? After everything, how had I ended up alone to face down this Robin Hood wannabe? “Greyson!” I called out again, my voice rising. “Xavier! Where are you?”

Nybor rolled her eyes and walked forward. She gripped the pommel of her sword and pointed the blade out at me, a promise of violence in her eyes. “I won’t ask you again. Hand me the necklace, or I’ll take it from you. And you won’t like how I do that.”

I took another step back, but she was so much faster. Before I could blink, before I could so much as breathe, she’d lifted her sword so the tip just barely brushed against my throat. *Double shit!*

I backed up again, more an instinctive movement than anything else. She’d already proven to both of us that she could cut me down in a split second if she wanted to. Any space I put between me and her sword was an illusion.

How was I supposed to fight against this? I clearly couldn’t even hope to outrun her. Could I use my power maybe? It had been good enough to blast the Kollector to smithereens. It might be strong enough to knock Nybor back. But how did I access it? I was still having trouble, and now wasn’t the time for trial and error.

Or maybe she’d just slice me up and feed me to some Fae monster. *Here’s a little Cali shish kabob. As a treat.*

I gulped. “You can’t have my necklace, Nybor.” My voice and body were both shaking so hard I was practically vibrating, but I wouldn’t give in to her demands. I’d fought to get this damn thing back! “You can have anything else you want, but not this.”

Nybor raised her eyebrows. “And what else do you have?” Her eyes widened and she held her hand over her eyes as she looked around the forest path, overacting an imitation of someone searching for something.

“It looks like your little friends have vanished. You’re all alone, with nothing but the clothes on your back.” Nybor’s smirk turned feral. “And that necklace, of course. So I’m not sure what else you could really offer me. I want one thing: the necklace.”

“What is this, a mission out of total pettiness now?” I asked.

“Well now that you mention it.”

Fuck this. She was getting that necklace over my dead shish ka-body. There had to be something else I could offer her… I just had to THINK.

Except she was right. I didn’t have anything. And somehow, I was alone in the woods now. Not that Greyson, Xavier, or anyone else would have much to offer her either. Escaped miners probably weren’t exactly known for their wealth.

I blew out a breath. Screw this. I didn’t have time for her right now. The clock was ticking. My mom was dying and I needed to get the fuck out of here. So whatever petty beef Nybor had with me was going to have to take a back seat. “I’m not giving you anything,” I declared.

“Oh really?” Nybor raised an eyebrow.

“Really. I have magic too, you know. And if you don’t back off, I’m going to use it and you won’t know what hit you.” Nor would I, because I had no idea if it would actually work. I’d gotten really lucky during the whole Kollector situation, and I didn’t know my skills of reproducing that.

She laughed. “Whatever. Your powers are no match for mine. How do you think I got rid of your friends?”

So it *was* her doing. Anger poured into my veins. What had she done to them? I tried to summon my powers, pulling them from the depth of my being and concentrating all my anger on Nybor. She was wasting my time, my *mom’s* time. And she’d messed with my friends. She was officially on my shit list.

I was pissed.

And then I felt it, somewhere deep inside me. There was a surge of energy that pulsed through me and the ground beneath Nybor trembled—and then nothing. It stopped just as quickly as it had begun.

Nybor laughed again. “Performance issues?”

Heat rushed into my face. “N-no. That was just a warning. The next time I use my powers, it’ll be the last thing you’ll ever see.”

My body was shaking like a leaf. Why had my magic stopped like that? I’d felt it! It’d been right at my fingertips, but my powers decided they weren’t working right now. I was all alone.

What was I going to do?

*I’m here, Cali*. Greyson’s voice slipped through my head. Steady, calm, soothing my frayed nerves. *She’s using some kind of glamour magic, making us invisible and trapped inside a dome, but I’m here and I'll find a way out.*

I was so relieved my knees almost buckled. Greyson was *here*. He hadn’t left me. He was somewhere close by—probably outside of whatever Nybor had created to keep me in here. And once I took Nybor down, he’d be back at my side.

*It’s Nybor. I’ll take care of her,* I told him. *Just hold—*

Nybor’s sword slashed in front of my face, missing my cheek by mere centimeters. Well *shit*. “I’m tired of waiting!” she snapped. “Now give me that necklace!”

“Don’t do that!” I shouted. “You could have poked my eye out!” I lunged at her, fury and the knowledge that I wasn’t truly alone fueling my fight.

“That’s kind of the point!” Nybor grunted as we hit the ground, struggling and grappling for control. “It’s a fight, you idiot!”

“I’m not an idiot!” I cried. “And I don’t want to fight you!” My magic boiled inside of me and I let it loose again to knock us apart. The ground shook beneath us as we were both kicked backward from the force of my blast.

Nybor rolled to her feet and grinned. “That was better, but not good enough.”

*Ugh! Why can’t I make it work like when I fought the Kollector? Where’s a thunderbird when you need one?* I held a hand out and tried for a bluff. “My magic was more than good enough to take care of the Kollector, so it’ll take care of you too!”

She paused. “What do you mean you took care of the Kollector?”

I raised my chin ever so slightly. “Well, I defeated him. If you hadn’t heard.”

Nybor lowered her sword, and I felt the air rush out of my lungs. “*You* took down the Kollector?” she asked. Then she burst out laughing.

I folded my arms with a frown. “It’s not that funny.”

“Do you have proof?” she asked. “Or should I just take your word for it?” The look on her face made it very clear how much she trusted my word.

I pointed behind me, back to where I knew Greyson and the others were waiting. “Just ask them.”

She considered this for a moment and then waved her hand. The glamour dissipated and the miners, Torin, Astrid, Artemis, Xavier, and Greyson all appeared. I turned to the group of miners, who were looking around in confusion. Nybor wouldn’t trust my friends or the werewolves, but she might trust the word of the Kollector’s slave laborers. “Guys, what happened to the Kollector?” I asked for Nybor’s benefit.

They stopped and a few of them shouted, “He’s dead!”

Greyson and Xavier rushed up to my side, shifting to their wolf forms along the way.

Nybor backed up as she faced down the two growling werewolves. A sense of power and safety washed over me, feeling their presences on either side. “I wasn’t scared of the Kollector, and I’m not scared of you.”

She blinked at that, and then seemed to be thinking something over. “If it’s true, if the Kollector really is dead, then I’ve been wrong about you.” She lowered her sword and pointed at the miners. “Who are those people?”

“They’re humans that were abducted and brought to the Fae world to work in the Kollector’s mines. I freed them, along with the creatures in his zoo, and I’m taking them to safety.”

The corner of Nybor’s mouth tugged up. Not into a smirk, but into a smile. “I owe you an apology. How can I and my women be of service?” As she mentioned them, her Merry Women dropped down from their hiding places among the trees.

I stared at them for a moment. *Wow, talk about a change of heart!* But could I trust that it was real? I met Nybor’s eyes. “Can you help us get across the border?”

**Episode 550**

LOLA

Cali’s mom was dying. And not in, like, the “we’re all dying every day” kind of way. Or even the “dying but hanging on” kind of way. She was really dying. In the “every second counts” kind of way.

Where the hell was Cali? Why hadn’t she come back yet? Her mom was dying, for god’s sake!

“—and the master suite is to die for!” Rishika gushed as she opened the front door and stepped out of the soon-to-be new pack house. She grinned at Joss, who was following her out. “Did you see that bathtub? It’s definitely fit for a Luna!”

I blinked, thrown by the loud, exuberant conversation breaking into my private freak-out session.

Sage nudged Zainab and tugged Violet along with them. “This place is going to be amazing! I can already tell,” she said. “There’s so much space! So many bedrooms, and the land!” She gestured to the woods surrounding the house. “We’re going to have so much…”

I turned away, ignoring the werewolves pouring out of the house. Yeah, the house was big. It had lots of trees. Whatever. Had they never seen a big house in the woods before? And while they were gushing and generally losing their shit, Cali’s mom was dying.

She might even already be gone.

Jay caught up to me. He had that sated smile on his face he always wore after getting laid. It slipped somewhat when I turned to face him and he took in my expression. “Hey, are you alright? You don’t look so good.”

“Have you heard anything from Colton?” I blurted out. “Have they been able to reach Cali?”

He paused and then shook his head. “I don’t know. I kind of doubt it. Colton probably would have told someone if he had, right?”

“Right.” I sighed. What was I supposed to do? Cali, as far as we knew, was still somewhere in the Fae world with both Greyson and Xavier. We had no means of finding her, of even communicating with her to tell her that her mom didn’t have much time left. What could I do now? How could I help?

I rubbed my face, running variables in my mind. I had to find Cali. That was the only thing I knew for sure. Had to tell her what was going on with her mom. But how? We’d been through hell to get Xavier into the Fae world so *he* could find Cali, and as far as we knew, he wasn’t back yet. What could I do that he couldn’t? It wasn’t like I could run back to Reno and hop into the Fae world portal. That wasn’t an option anymore.

And even if I did somehow make it to the Fae world, how would I find Cali? It probably wasn’t a small place, was it?

Jay’s hand closed gently over my shoulder. “Lola, what’s the matter?” he asked.

I looked into my mate’s face. We’d just barely sort of gotten past me leaving to help Cali the first time. If I left again, what would Jay think? Would he be able to forgive me? We still hadn’t truly come to an understanding about me going off to find Cali and leaving the pack and him choosing to stay. Would he understand this time?

I shook my head. “Nothing. Let’s get back to Colton and Xavier’s house.”

The first thing I noticed when we got back to Colton's house was that the windows had been repaired. Phil must have finished repairing things. But there was something else about the house, something less tangible. Something that put me on edge. The house seemed eerie, empty. Lifeless.

Maybe the new house would be a good way to bring everyone back together. We’d been through hell; we deserved a safe place to rest and heal. I looked over at Violet, who got out of Joss’s car and ascended the steps into the house. This could be a good change for her. A way to move forward after losing her twin brother.

I hoped the new house would be everything the pack needed it to be. Of course, I didn’t know what I needed it to be. Still didn’t know if I’d even be there to enjoy it. But I couldn’t worry about that right now. I had bigger concerns than real estate.

“Okay, everyone,” Joss called as she got out of her car. “Let’s start packing up. I want to get out of here by the end of the day.”

Jay got out of the car and came over to me. “Want some help packing up?”

I nodded. “Sure.” I couldn’t care less about packing right now, but it would be good to get some time alone with Jay. We had a lot to talk about, and I didn’t want anyone interrupting us.

We grabbed a cardboard box from Joss and headed up to our bedroom. Jay immediately went to our dresser and began packing clothes away in the box. I closed the door behind us and sat on the edge of the bed, watching him pack for the two of us.

“Gonna make me do all the hard work, huh?” He gave me a lopsided smile, and my heart melted. Just a little bit.

This was going to hurt him. But I had to do it. He went back to the dresser to fish out more clothing.

“How would you feel if I left the pack again to look for Cali?” I asked.

His back was to me when I posed the question, but even though I couldn’t see his face, I watched every muscle in his body tense. He set the clothes back in the drawer and turned to face me, worry and something colder etched into the line of his face. As I suspected, he wasn’t happy to hear me asking this of him.

Which was fitting, because I wasn’t exactly overjoyed to be in this position again.

He sighed. “Lola, I understand that you’re worried. That it feels impossible to just wait around and hope.”

“But?” I asked.

“But let’s say you leave the pack and somehow find a way into the Fae world. And then let’s say that once you’re there you even find Cali. It doesn’t change the fact that none of that is going to save Cali’s mom.”

My teeth ground together. “I get that, but Cali still deserves to know. And don’t forget—I’ve known Cali’s mom for like, ever. We’re close. This feels like a loss for me too.”

He took a seat on the opposite end of the bed so the half-empty cardboard box sat between us. “You know who I thought was close? You and me. And yet, once again, you’re choosing Cali over me. Over your own pack.”

I sighed and rubbed my face in frustration. This was the exact sentiment I’d been hoping to avoid. I’d thought that maybe if we could talk about things logically, he wouldn’t feel like I was abandoning him all over again. “I’m not choosing anyone over you.”

“But you are. You always do.” He didn’t even sound mad about it, just resigned. Like he was stating a fact as irrefutable as the existence of gravity. *What goes up must come down. Lola never chooses me when she can choose Cali.*

“How can I make you understand?” I blew out a breath, feeling a wave of frustration wash over me. “You know what? Forget it. I’m not going to apologize for caring about my friend.”

“And now we’re right back where we started.” He sighed.

I stood up. “Well what about you? Huh? You always choose the pack over me. Your mate. Why can’t you ever compromise with me?”

He scoffed. “And how would that work exactly?”

“How about you come with me, we find Cali, and then we come back to the pack? Together,” I suggested.

“So basically we just do your thing.”

“That’s not what I’m saying! This is me compromising, and if you want to expend even an ounce of effort, you can start by calling Colton and finding out what the hell’s going on!” I snapped.

Jay shook his head, his jaw tense. But he reached into his pocket and made the call.

“Put it on speaker,” I said.

He did, and once Colton picked up the phone I quickly explained everything: that I had to find Cali, that her mom was declining faster than we’d all thought.

“I don’t know where Cali is, or how to get to the Fae world,” Colton responded. “I’ve been a little busy with other things.”

“Like what?” I demanded.

“Things have gotten pretty fucked up since we left. Remember that woman we almost ran over?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“She’s like, a ghost or something,” he said, sounding distracted. “We think it has to do with the orb.”

My eyes widened, and I saw that Jay looked just as shocked as I felt.

“That’s not good,” Jay said slowly.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

Colton hesitated for a beat. And then he said, “We’re going to take it back. We’re going after my father.”

**Episode 551**

I never would have thought it possible, but Nybor and her Merry Women were actually proving to be a huge help.

I’d expected her to refuse to believe me when I told her that I’d destroyed the Kollector, and perhaps even refuse to believe the miners as well. My experiences with her had taught me she wasn’t the most flexible or easy person to work with, and even when she’d put down her sword I’d still half-expected her to change her mind and decide to use me as a pincushion.

But she had believed the miners, and now she and her band of rogue ladies were at our disposal. Maybe she’d changed, become more flexible and willing to see reason. Maybe she just hated the Kollector badly enough that whoever ended him got a golden ticket into her good graces.

Either way, it was a nice change of pace for some part of this quest to feel easy. And as Nybor and her women led us toward the border, the miners and the Merry Women chatted and got to know each other. Despite their many differences, they seemed to get along quite well. Torin, ever the social butterfly, had joined them on the walk and had even taught them a song to sing as we marched toward the border.

“When I came ‘cross the berries red,

My tongue began to cheer.

I picked them from the thorny bush—”

“Jesus, not this again,” I heard Greyson groan.

Once Nybor had agreed to help us, Greyson and Xavier had shifted back to their human forms, and Astrid glamoured them so I wasn’t being flanked by two hot naked guys. Now they were just two clothed guys dressed like sexy pirates.

Ever since our confrontation with Nybor, neither of them had left my side. It was a confusing mix of comforting and unsettling, and I could practically taste the tension in the air. It wasn’t the worst thing in the world, having them by my side, but they still couldn’t make it a hundred feet without glaring at each other.

“What’s he bitching about now?” Xavier asked me.

On my other side, Greyson snarled. “You want to join the choir, be my guest. Good luck getting that damn song out of your head.”

I coughed to cover a laugh. Torin’s song actually *was* pretty catchy. I caught myself humming along until Greyson glared at me. I shrugged. *It still slaps!*

“To plant me in my urn!” the miners behind us sang, mostly off-key, in unison.

Greyson rolled his eyes, and I shot him a smile. I thought I saw the shadow of a smile on his face, but he looked away before I could be sure.

We must have reached a spot near the border, because Nybor stopped suddenly and spun around. “Everyone, quiet!” she whisper-yelled. The group froze and didn’t make another peep.

I crept closer to Nybor and surveyed the land in front of us. It still just looked like a regular Fae forest. Which meant there were probably all sorts of monsters waiting to murder us. “What’s wrong?” I whisper-yelled back. “Is there a troll ahead? Like Heather?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Who’s Heather?”

“A really mean troll!” Torin whisper-yelled from the back of the crowd. “She almost crushed Greyson!”

“Should have tried harder,” Xavier muttered.

“Quiet!” Nybor hissed again. She lowered her voice this time so her whisper was actually softer than her normal voice. “We’re getting close to the Fields of Boscorth, one of the most hotly contested regions of the war.”

*The war? Oh.* I’d kind of forgotten about that. We’d traveled so long and so far without ever having to actually confront the war between the Light and Dark Fae. We hadn’t seen any fighting or battles. Was that about to change? Were we going to see an actual battlefront?

I imagined trenches and Fae warriors wearing metal hardhats and carrying big guns with magic bullets. Then I frowned. Come to think of it, what did a Fae war actually look like? And how likely were we to get caught in the crossfire? This wasn’t what I’d signed up for when I’d come to the Fae world to save my mom. I didn’t know how to lead a group of people, much less through an actual warzone. What was I going to do?

Greyson’s deep voice slipped through my mind like smooth silk. *Don’t worry, love. I’m here for you*. *We’ll make it.*

How did he know what I was thinking? Was it an educated guess? Or had he actually read my mind? I didn’t think I’d linked to him…

*If there’s any trouble, get behind me*. *I’ll protect you.* The voice in my mind wasn’t Greyson this time. It was Xavier.

Great. They were both back in my head, both looking at me, both trying to help me in their own ways. I avoided their eyes and continued ahead. I was still angry with both of them for essentially putting their rivalry over my mom’s life, but it was good to have them in my corner. Especially as we neared the war front.

We continued on for a while longer, silent now except for our footsteps along the dirt path. Nybor and the other Fae all walked near-silently. Greyson and Xavier did too. The miners and I, on the other hand, probably sounded like a herd of animals even though we were doing our best to step lightly.

Apparently I had not inherited my mom’s Fae grace.

Nybor held up a hand and we came to a stop. There were soft murmurs through the group and then Nybor whispered and pointed ahead. “Listen.”

We didn’t have to listen for long. It was pretty easy to hear the low rumble of faraway explosions—bombs, maybe?—and the clash of steel. Soldiers screamed, their voices echoing far and wide along the front.

We had reached the war zone.

One of Nybor’s Merry Women ran up, her face marked with dirt. “The tunnel is clear,” she said, “but you should hurry.”

“The tunnel?” I echoed.

“The smugglers have used this area for a long time to get people and supplies across the border,” Nybor explained. “This part of the war zone had been criss-crossed with tunnels that lead to the river. Most of them have been destroyed over the course of the war, but there are a few remaining. All we have to do is cross a few trenches to get to it.”

Greyson and Xavier stepped up. “I’ll go first,” they said in unison, and then glared at each other. It couldn’t have been more perfectly executed if they’d planned it that way. And if we weren’t about to try to sneak through an active war zone, I might have laughed. But right now, I couldn’t find anything about our situation even remotely funny.

“Stick close,” I told them before they could start another fight. “I’ll be okay.”

“Everyone, stay down and stay quiet. Now follow me,” Nybor said.

We formed a single-file line behind her, keeping our heads down and our shoulders hunched to stay low to the ground, and we followed her toward the battlefield.

As we followed Nybor closer and closer to the Fields of Boscorth, the sounds of the battle got a hell of a lot closer. The screams and shrieks of metal on metal rang in my ears, and the ground trembled like there was an earthquake.

Somewhere close—too close—a bomb exploded and showered us with dirt. I clutched my pendant to my chest. Okay, this time I might have gone too far. What was I doing here? Leading these people I’d promised to help into an active war zone? I couldn’t protect them here. I couldn’t even protect myself.

And what if I didn’t make it? What if, after all this trouble, all this grief, all the risks I’d taken and all the danger my friends and I had been thrown into, what if I got killed or captured in a war I had nothing to do with?

What would happen to my mom then?

We came to a trench and Nybor jumped in. “Hurry!” she barked, breaking into a sprint. We all jumped in after her and followed, doing our best to keep up as arrows zinged overhead, soldiers fought nearby, and more bombs threatened to bury us all.

We reached the end of the trench. A solid wall with no way out. “Wait, are we trapped?” I asked, feeling my chest constrict in panic.

Nybor reached down, opened a hatch, and jumped inside.

I followed behind her and found myself in the tunnel she’d promised. It was dark and damp and felt like it went on forever. The only thing I had to guide me was the sound of Nybor crawling ahead.

The ground shook above us and dirt and rocks crumbled on top of us with every blast. I tried to hold back my fear. *Come on, Cali, You’re almost there.*

Finally, I saw daylight up ahead, and I nearly climbed on top of Nybor to get to the sunshine and fresh air. I stepped out—and almost tumbled off a rocky cliff into the white rapids of the river below.

I looked at Nybor, baffled. “What are we supposed to do, dive?”

She shook her head and pointed downward. There was a dock far below us with an old, rustic-looking boat that was, quite frankly, small as fuck.

I looked at her again, my eyes wide. “We have to take THAT?!”

**Episode 552**

Staring down at the janky little boat that Nybor seemed to think could somehow carry my entire group away to safety, I decided to forget my earlier, very generous thought about her being helpful. We’d just run through trenches and crawled down a long, dark, icky tunnel in an active war zone. And now she was expecting all of us to get onboard the S.S. Deathtrap?

This was pretty much the exact opposite of helpful.

The boat was tied to the dock with a frayed rope that looked almost as old as the boat itself, and the current of the river made the boat tug at the rope and then ricochet repeatedly back against the dock. I was pretty sure I heard a cracking sound coming from the boat with each hit. I swallowed back the fear that clogged my throat. “Um, how are we supposed to fit everybody in that?”

She shrugged. “You’ll just have to. It’s all there is. Unless you’d rather swim?”

I looked at the river. That might be an option. Greyson and I had ended up treading water in our fair share of rivers in the Fae world, and we’d done all right.

*Weird flex, Cali. “Treading water” is not something to be proud about.*

The longer I watched the river, the more my heart sank. The current was much faster and stronger than any of the water Greyson and I had seen before. And the river was a hell of a lot wider. I couldn’t even imagine how deep it had to be. There was no way I could swim that, much less the emaciated miners. I didn’t even know if they all knew how to swim.

“Hey,” Nybor called to me. We were still standing on the edge of a cliff, and the rest of our group was still in the tunnel, waiting for us to move out of the way so they could finally crawl out. “This is your only shot. Do you understand?”

I blew out a breath and nodded. We had to make this work. We literally didn’t have another option, short of going back the way we’d come. And even if we could find another way across the border, one that didn’t involve huge rivers and tiny boats, or apple orchards run by irritable nymphs, or bridges guarded by trolls, my mom couldn’t wait for us to find a different, safer way around. We were doing this, and we were doing it now.

“Okay. Let’s do this,” I said, steeling myself.

Nybor smiled. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was proud of me. Then she led us down the steep bank to the dock. A crusty old man in a stained, shabby tunic and leggings stood to greet us as we approached. Nybor stepped just behind me so I was presented as the leader, the one to speak to. He pulled a corncob pipe out of his mouth and nodded at me. “Where are you headed?”

I paused. Was that a trick question? There was only one place we could go from here, right? I pointed at the boat, which, dear god, looked somehow worse up close. *It’s the only way, Cali. And if that overgrown pile of wood chips can get you across the river, then it’s worth a try.* “We want to cross the river.”

The old man eyed me, and I felt Greyson and Xavier step closer on either side.

“You gonna pay?” he finally asked.

Pay? My mouth went dry. I didn’t have any money. I barely had anything more than the clothes on my back, as Nybor had been kind enough to point out. I had nothing to pay him with.

Nybor stepped forward. “You should be paying *her*.” She pointed at me. “She’s the one who killed the Kollector.”

The captain frowned and spat into the river. “That right? Then I have you to blame—my business has dropped fifty percent because of you! You know how much smuggling the Kollector was responsible for? You ruined it!”

I glared at him. What a selfish old man. He was complaining because there were less innocent people and creatures being forced into captivity? What the fuck was wrong with him?

Nybor sighed and snapped her fingers. One of her Merry Women rushed over. “Pay the man,” Nybor muttered to her.

I watched the woman reach into a small purse at her belt and pull out several coins to pay for our passage across the river. “Thank you so much,” I said to her. I turned to Nybor. “I don’t know how I can repay you.”

She shook her head. “It’s the least we can do for Cali the Konqueror!”

*Good grief*.

One by one, the miners boarded the boat. I watched, my heart in my throat as the boat sank just a little lower as each one of them stepped onboard. Unless there was actual magic holding the boat together and ensuring it was seaworthy—or water worthy, or whatever—there was no way it was going to fit all of us.

“Should we take a couple of trips across the river?” I asked the captain anxiously.

He waved me off and spat into the river again.

*Super charming*.

“My boat’s a lot stronger than you think,” he said. “Just get on and you’ll see.”

Funny how I didn’t want to take his word for it.

While the miners kept boarding, I saw Artemis approach Nybor. She held out her hand. “It’s good to see you again,” Artemis said. “You’re a true hero of the people.”

Nybor smiled and shook her hand. “Maybe someday you’ll reconsider my offer to join the fight?”

“Maybe someday.” Artemis nodded at Nybor and then boarded the boat, followed by Astrid and Torin, who eyed the water nervously. Greyson and Xavier were next, and their shoulders bumped together when they tried to get into the boat at the same time. I sighed and rolled my eyes. If anyone in our group was going to put our boat to the test, it would be those two mini-Hulks. And the way they kept fighting with each other every chance they got wasn’t going to help anything.

I turned to Nybor. “Thank you for your help. We never would have come this far without you.”

She bowed her head. “I’m sorry we started off on the wrong foot. I wish you the best of luck.”

She held out her arms, and I accepted the embrace. Then I stepped back, gave her a grateful smile, and boarded the boat.

As I stepped onboard, I heard a shout from the cliff above us. A row of soldiers stood next to the tunnel entrance, pointing and yelling down at us.

Nybor glanced up at them from her spot on the shore and shrugged as I met her eyes, my brow furrowed with concern. “Don’t worry. We’ll be okay.”

The boat lurched a little under my weight, and both Greyson and Xavier practically tripped over themselves to help me. Xavier tried to pull me toward him while Greyson pulled me the other way. The boat rocked in each direction, and I yanked my hands free and took a seat on a row between them. Those two really needed to get their shit under control, but now wasn’t the time to demand it.

The captain untied the boat from the dock and hopped on board. He was surprisingly sprightly for a man who looked about a hundred years old. He added some wood to the fire in the back of the boat—surely that couldn’t be safe?—and we shoved off from the shore.

The little boat began to chug along, creaking and groaning and rocking against the river current. My fingers wrapped tight around the edge of my seat. I had a feeling I wasn’t going to breathe easy until we reached the shore on the other side.

Greyson leaned in. “Are you doing all right?”

“I’m nervous,” I admitted. “And excited. I’m so close.” I met his eyes and smiled. “*We’re* so close.” As soon as we made it to the Light Fae side of the shore, we’d be safe, more or less. We could make our way back to Grandma’s estate and then return to the human world. From there it was a quick plane ride back to Minnesota.

Excitement churned in my stomach. *We might actually pull this off.*

The boat swerved sharply as the captain steered it past some rocks, and my stomach lurched. Was it just me or did he look kind of worried?

The current picked up, pushing us sideways while the boat tried to chug on perpendicular to the river’s flow, and we ended up going in a diagonal trajectory, the boat lurching and groaning with every chug.

I watched the captain for any sign that things weren’t okay. The boat looked like it was one case of termites away from crumbling completely; was this journey normal? Or was something bad about to happen? Was that sweat breaking out on his grizzled face? I opened my mouth to speak. “Captain—”

Then a terrible cracking sound echoed around us, the boat slammed into a group of rocks, and we were tossed into the river.

**Episode 553**

COLTON

I hung up the phone with Lola and Jay. Lola sounded pretty upset. Hopefully Jay could calm her down. Cali had both Greyson and Xavier in the Fae world with her trying to help. As far as I was concerned, we’d sunk more than enough manpower into bringing her back. Now it was time to focus on our list of other, much bigger and more catastrophic problems.

Like the fact that my father was *not dead* and he had the Orb of Letifer and he was using it to harness the power of the dead—and in the process was likely bringing some ghosts out to play.

I slid my phone back into my pocket and turned to Maya. “It was just Jay and Lola. They wanted to know about—”

I stopped.

Maya looked pissed off. *Really* pissed off. I blinked. She hadn’t seemed angry before, or at least, not recently. I thought we’d had a good thing going. What had set her off this time?

She folded her arms over her chest, and her nostrils flared. Thanks to the sheer amount of time Maya spent pissed off (and, maybe in small part due to the fact that getting her angry was one of my top five favorite pastimes), I’d gotten to know her various expressions and accompanying anger levels pretty well.

For instance, an eye roll or a sarcastic comment was a level one: just the run-of-the mill anger that one (read: I) should expect from Maya at all times. It barely meant anything.

Level two was when it started to get real, and that usually included snapping at me or raising her voice. It counted, but like level one, was closer to a knee-jerk reaction than a fully processed emotion.

I was pretty sure we were at a level three now—where her body language got aggressive and pissy, a sign she was actually showing restraint. And if Maya was showing restraint, that meant she was holding back something big.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, all things considered. But it would only piss her off more if I didn’t ask.

She scoffed. “What’s wrong? How about you making an executive decision to go hunt down your father? Did you ever even think of discussing that with me first?”

“I made up my mind on the fly.” I said honestly and shrugged. “Besides, I didn’t think I needed to run it by you. I don’t need your permission to live my life.”

This was probably the wrong thing to say. But at least I was telling the truth. One thing I took pride in with the shitshow of mine and Maya’s relationship was that, even though it was a hot mess like 99.9 percent of the time, I’d always been honest with her.

Her eyes widened for a split second. “Well if that isn’t just typical Colton? Never thinking about anyone but himself.”

I frowned. This was the thing about Maya. She drove me crazy—and that wasn’t always a good thing. Would she ever, even just once, give me the benefit of the doubt? “I *am* thinking about everyone. That’s why I’m going to kill Silas. We can’t just ignore this problem and sit around playing house and hope it’ll go away. Finding Silas, taking the orb, and killing him is the only way the pack will be safe.”

“And what happens if you can’t kill Silas?” she asked. “What if he kills you? Tell me how the pack will benefit from that situation.”

Was this… concern? I moved closer to her. “Hey, I’m going to be ok—”

She shoved me back. Hard. “You don’t know that! I get that you have daddy issues, Colton, but running off on some half-assed mission to kill Silas isn’t going to help anyone!”

I stumbled back. Okay, this was a full-on level-four Maya. Pissed and ready to lash out at anyone who tried to reason with her.

I couldn’t win this. No matter what I did. No matter what I said. She would take it and twist it and use it against me. I shook my head and blew out a breath. “I’m going. It’s final. And it’s not up to you.” I headed to the door and she stepped in front of me.

“And what am I supposed to do?” she demanded. “While you’re off on this wild goose chase to kill your father?”

“Whatever you want.” I shrugged. “That’s what you do anyway, right?”

Her eyes widened, and hurt flashed in them briefly before that good old-fashioned anger set in. Guilt rushed through me, and I sighed. Yeah, bickering with her, teasing her—it was all in good fun most of the time. But actually fighting with my mate? I hated it. I hated it when she looked at me like that, and I hated the anger that I felt poisoning our bond whenever we had a real fight.

The truth was I wanted her to come with me. Even if it meant risking her life too. We made an amazing team in the rare moments we’d been able to put our differences aside, and I knew we could still be an amazing team in tracking down Silas.

But I couldn’t tell her that right now. She wouldn’t want to hear it, and I didn’t want to give her more ammunition to use against me.

“You’re going to have to deal with Big Mac and Mrs. Smith,” she finally said. Her voice was softer now. A peace offering, maybe.

“And what about you?” I asked. “What do you want to do?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’ll decide… on the fly.” And then she stormed out of the room.

Okay, so maybe I hadn’t handled that perfectly, but she had definitely played a part in things too. Why did she always have to be so difficult? I followed her out of the room and out to the car.

“Hurry up!” Big Mac snapped at me from her place in the back seat of the car. “The longer we sit here, the easier it’ll be for Silas to find us!”

I got in the driver’s seat and pulled out of the parking spot. God, I hated getting bossed around by a witch. Maybe when we got to Nneka’s I could leave Big Mac behind.

Silence filled the car as we drove away, and I could feel Maya’s anger radiating from the passenger seat. She was sitting almost as far away from me as she could while still sitting up front, practically pressed against the passenger-side door.

How was it possible that we’d had such a great time in the hot spring just last night and now she was giving me the silent treatment? I could not keep up with her! And even worse, just thinking about last night—the water in her hair, her kisses, her touch—made me want her again.

I shook myself, and my fingers curled tight around the steering wheel. No, that wasn’t going to happen again. If she wanted to push me away, fine. Two could play at that game. She wasn’t the only one who could give out the silent treatment. Let her be the one to speak. I was doing what I knew to be right, and I had nothing to apologize for.

The longer we drove in silence, the more time I had to think about it, and the more I thought about it, the angrier I got. Suddenly *I* was a level-four Maya. I pressed my foot down harder on the accelerator, and the world blurred past the windows. I swerved around a corner and kept going without letting up.

“Slow the fuck down!” Maya snapped. “You’re making me nauseous!”

I smirked and let go of the wheel completely. “Maybe you’d like to drive?”

“Fuck off.”

“Colton, Maya,” Mrs. Smith admonished us from the back seat. “This isn’t the time to be fighting.”

“Yeah, he needs to focus if he wants to outrun Silas,” Big Mac said. “Colton, speed up.”

I was suddenly reminded of the father in every family road trip movie who had all of his kids yelling at him at once. “Shut the fuck up!” I snapped.

An awkward silence set in, and I could feel everyone in the car glaring at me. Except Teddy. He seemed timid and submissive as ever.

A subject change was in order before we all lost our collective shit. “So, Teddy,” I said, fighting to keep my tone light. “What were you doing roaming around as a Rogue? You don’t seem like the type.”

“I led a pretty sheltered life. And after I left the Arrowood pack, I decided to do some exploring,” Teddy said. “Biggest mistake of my life.” He pointed out the window. “There are lots of bad things out there. And your father is definitely the worst.”

“Can’t argue with you there.” I gave Maya a pointed glance. She rolled her eyes and looked away.

“Who told you about me?” Big Mac cut in.

“Witchipedia.” Teddy smirked.

I rolled my eyes. I really hoped I wasn’t as annoying as this Rogue wannabe.

“Ha ha,” Big Mac said dryly. “I’m serious. How did you find me?”

“While I was exploring I came across another werewolf. She seemed friendly. She’d run away from her pack too.”

“Who was she?” Mrs. Smith asked.

“Her name was Wren,” Teddy said.

Suddenly Maya lurched from where she’d been resting against the window and pulled on the parking brake. The car came to a screeching halt, drawing blaring horns from passing, cursing drivers.

“Maya, what the fuck?!” I screamed.

She wasn’t even looking at me. She’d spun around to face the back seat and was staring at Teddy. “How do you know my sister?!”

**Episode 554**

When our boat collided with the rocks, I had about two seconds to react before I was tossed out of my seat and into the water. I was submerged beneath the surface, icy cold water wrapping around me. *Jesus god, so, so cold!*

I kicked and thrashed under the water, trying to find the way up, and finally surfaced, letting out a deep, throaty gasp and gulping down oxygen. All around me, the rest of the group had tumbled out of the capsized boat and into the freezing water, choking and screaming as they surfaced and trying to avoid dashing themselves against the rocks.

It was complete chaos, and I was helpless to do anything about it.

The current slammed me into a rock, knocking the breath out of my lungs for the second time in the last minute, and I groped desperately at the rock, trying to find something to latch onto. I managed to hold on, though the rock was too slippery and my hands were already too cold from the water to successfully pull myself up on top of the large, sloping surface. I heard a shout and looked up to see that a miner was half-swimming, half being carried by the current toward me.

“Take my hand!” I screamed. I reached out for him and our hands locked together. He was still kicking and swimming with his free hand, and mustering up all the strength I could manage I pulled him over to the rock. We did the same thing to the other miners that were swept toward us until we’d formed a huge, shivering group, clutching to the rock and each other. Torin, Astrid, and Artemis eventually found their way to our huddle as well. Now we were only missing the captain and my werewolf bodyguards.

I glanced around, blinking river water away from my eyes. Where were Greyson and Xavier? Had they fallen out of the boat too? Both of them were strong enough to survive swimming through the icy current—unless something had happened to them? Had they hit the rocks when they’d been thrown out?

I saw the side of the boat as it bobbed in the water. No sign of the captain, and no sign of—

Greyson and Xavier suddenly emerged near the far bank of the river, still in their human forms. Greyson treaded water, looking around wildly. “Cali?!” he cried.

Even though I couldn’t remember ever feeling so cold, my heart warmed a bit to hear him calling my name, worrying about me like he always did.

“Greyson!” I screamed.

He turned around and our eyes met. “Hang on!” he called. He turned to Xavier, who had already started toward me.

“Come help me!” Greyson shouted to him.

Xavier stopped swimming toward the shore and began treading water as well. “Stop ordering me around!”

Greyson swam over to the boat and tried to turn it over by himself, but his hands slipped over the boat’s edge, and, trying to swim against the current and keep himself upright while working on the boat, he was unable to flip it by himself. “Xavier, please! Give me a hand!”

Xavier glared at him but turned around and swam back to the boat. My heart in my throat, I watched in awe as the two powerful adversaries joined forces, trying to use their sheer strength to flip the boat over. They struggled against the current, against the physics that weighed the boat down, and soon some of the miners—along with Torin and Astrid—swam over to help. It was a huge feat of power, one that I knew we couldn’t accomplish without the werewolf brothers. And with the help of a few humans and the two Fae, they managed to finally flip the boat back over. It bobbed upright on the water, and Greyson and Xavier braced themselves against the boat to keep it from floating away from us.

“Everyone!” Greyson called. “Form a chain and get back in the boat.”

Those of us clinging to the rock linked arms and moved as one away from the rocks and over to the boat. I managed to pull myself on board first and helped each member of our group as one by one, they dragged themselves aboard the tiny ship. Even the captain managed to make it aboard from wherever he’d ended up when the boat capsized. He was still clutching his corncob pipe, even though it was now full of water.

I leaned over the edge of the ship and held out my hand to Greyson. “Come on, you and Xavier need to get back on board.”

He shook his head. “We’re not getting back on. We’re going to push the ship across the river.”

“What?” I shook my head. “You can’t!”

“The fire’s burned out now, and we’re too heavy for the ship to carry with the rest of you anyway,” he explained, and then he looked over at his brother. “Come on! Let’s get this death trap out of this fucking river.”

Xavier glared at Greyson.

“I’m the Alpha, remember?” Greyson snarled.

Xavier didn’t reply, but it didn’t take a mind link for me to know he was royally pissed. Still, he pushed the boat alongside his brother and the ship slowly began to move nearer to the bank. Unsurprisingly, two super powerful werewolves guiding the ship made for a much smoother ride than we’d experienced earlier on.

Still soaking wet and now shaking from the cold, I squeezed onto the nearest bench. As long as this oversized bucket stayed in one piece, we had a chance to make it to the other shore without any more incidents. I clutched my pendant again, relieved that I hadn’t lost it when I’d been thrown into the river. At this point, nothing would be worse than losing that moon buttercup. I had to protect it with everything I had.

Artemis took a seat on the bench next to me and we both watched Greyson and Xavier slowly push us to safety. Greyson looked determined, while Xavier still looked pissed off. I was glad they could put aside their differences long enough to save everyone, but I wasn’t looking forward to the fighting starting up all over again once we made it to the shore.

“You got a real problem, don’t you?” she asked.

My life seemed to have a never-ending supply of problems, so she was going to need to be a hell of a lot more specific. “What do you mean?”

She pointed to the werewolves and snorted. “Two super hot guys that want you? Poor you.”

I sighed. Oh, that. “I know I probably shouldn’t complain. Never in a million years did I ever think I’d be in this position.”

I expected Artemis to follow with a sarcastic remark. But instead she patted my knee. “Just follow your heart.”

I smiled, but it felt forced. *Just follow my heart? I wish it were that easy*. Part of me had been hoping that admitting I was in love with both of them would make things easier, as if by acknowledging the problem I could finally find some way to fix it or at least come to terms with it.

It hadn’t made anything easier thus far. My heart was confused. It didn’t know which one to choose because it wanted them both, and as far as I could tell, there wasn’t a way to reconcile that. Besides, all I could think about right now was my mom.

The boat ground to a stop as Xavier and Greyson made the final push to the shore. “Everyone, get the hell off my ship!” the captain yelled.

“Why are you so rude?” Torin shot back. “We’ve all almost died—including you! You’d think you’d show a little compassion.” He yanked the captain’s soggy pipe out of his mouth and threw it on the floor. “You’re a terrible captain!”

“Torin, enough! We’ve made it. Please don’t cause any trouble.” Astrid grabbed him and pulled him away and off the ship.

The miners scrambled to get off the boat, practically tripping over each other in their haste to reach the shore. It was just Artemis and me on the ship now, other than the grouchy captain.

Artemis caught my arm as we stood. “Wait. I’ve… I’ve never been to the Light Fae territory. Is it safe?”

“I think it’s a lot safer than the Dark Fae territory,” I admitted, “but you can go back if you want.”

She shook her head. “I’ve made up my mind. There’s nothing left for me on the Dark Fae side. I might as well see what life is like here.”

She stepped off the boat and I followed behind her.

I was instantly met by Greyson and Xavier. Both of them were soaking wet, their chests bare, breathing heavily.

“So what now?” Xavier asked.

I watched a water droplet slide down his neck, over his pec, and across his washboard abs, and Xavier cleared his throat to get my attention.

*Not now, Cali!*

I coughed and blushed. “Now we’re going to my grandmother’s, and then we’re getting out of this world. Tonight.”

**Episode 555**

LOLA

Our phone call with Colton didn’t last long after he announced his intention to go on a long and dangerous daddy quest. Jay told him to be careful and to call if he needed anything, and then ended the call. He tossed his phone on the bed with a sigh.

“Wow. I still can’t believe Silas is really back. I hope Colton takes care of himself.”

I was barely listening. Colton had been my hope for connecting with Cali, or at least getting some kind of lead to help me find her. But he was clearly too busy doing his own thing to be of any help.

*Okay, cool. Colton and Maya are on some quest to find his father and get back the magic ghost orb. Great. More power to them, etc., etc., etc. Except—*

“Isn’t anyone going to find Cali?” I blurted out, cutting Jay off. “She’s been gone all this time, and we have no idea what’s happened to her! Her mom is *dying,* Jay! At this rate Orla is going to be dead before Cali makes it back. *If* she ever makes it back.”

Jay frowned at my hysteria. “I get why you’re worried, Lola. I do. But Colton’s responsibility isn’t to Cali—it’s to the pack. That’s why he’s going after Silas and the orb.”

I hated how calm and measured he sounded, and I hated even more that he was making a whole lot of sense. My best friend was *gone*. And nobody seemed to give a shit about it—even after two of the pack’s strongest members had gone with her!

I stood up again. “Then I have to find Cali.”

He stood with me but didn’t move any closer. “How do you suppose you’re going to do that?”

Again with the calm logic. Why couldn’t he see how important this was to me? That it didn’t matter how high the odds were stacked against me? I had to find her and bring her home—before it was too late.

“I don’t know!” I snapped. “But there must be a way. I’ll figure it out as I go, Jay. And if you really love me, you’ll do something more than tell me what I can and can’t do!”

He stepped back, looking at me like I’d just slapped him. He blew out a breath and shook his head. “I can’t perform miracles, Lola. I don’t know how to get into the Fae world, and I don’t know anyone who can. And neither do you. What do you want from me?”

“I want you to care! To even pretend like you care about Cali! That you care about my feelings!”

“I do! But I also know I can’t change anything. No matter how much I care. You’ll just have to wait until Cali returns.”

No, that was unacceptable. I was done waiting around, hoping that my best friend would someday show up again. Like she was a stray cat who’d come and gone. “And what if it’s too late?” I demanded. “What if Cali’s mom is dead? How do you think Cali would feel if she found out I knew and did *nothing*?”

“I don’t know.” He sighed and looked around the room. “Can we please just table this for a little while? We should finish up here. We can talk about it more on the way to the new house.”

I picked up the cardboard box and tossed it across the room. It smacked hard into the wall and knocked a picture of Jay and me onto the floor. “I don’t care about the new house! I don’t care about where we live! And since you don’t give a shit about the one thing I do care about, I’m leaving!” I stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

I rushed down the stairs, so angry I could hardly see straight. I took a deep breath. I needed to calm down, try to think clearly. All I really wanted to do right now was break everything in sight. It didn’t matter that it was Colton and Xavier’s house—if they’d done a better job finding Cali and bringing her home, we wouldn’t even be in this situation.

I took another deep breath. There had to be a way to get to Cali. Surely Reno wasn’t the only way into the Fae world. Maybe I could even find a witch or somebody to make a connection with Cali. Like a supernatural text message or—

“Lola?” Joss’s voice cut through my thoughts. She stood in the kitchen, watching me pass through the open doorway. “Are you already done packing?”

“Nope!” I kept walking, ignoring Joss’s follow-up questions, and walked out the front door. I slammed it behind me for good measure. All anyone wanted to talk about was the new pack house, and I was in the middle of a crisis. I couldn’t deal with them right now.

I heard the front door open and close behind me. I sighed and turned around. “Jay, I don’t want—”

I stopped. Jay hadn’t followed me out of the house.

“What’s wrong?” Joss asked, her brow furrowed with concern.

Where to begin? My best friend was missing and nobody seemed to care. Or maybe we could talk about how my mate kept taking everything I did personally when none of it had anything to do with him? Oh, and there was always the fact that a woman I loved and respected was dying and her daughter was far, far away. Tears burned in my eyes, but I held them back.

“Nothing,” I said, my voice hoarse.

Joss sighed and walked up to me. “Listen, I get that you don’t really want to talk to me. We barely know each other, and I don’t want to push you into sharing, but I’m the Luna and if something is upsetting you, I need to know. It’s my job to help you however I can. You can tell me the truth, Lola.”

Her kindness was my undoing. A few rogue tears slipped down my face. “You want me to tell you the truth? Why? So you can tell me not to help too?”

She grimaced. “How about you try telling me what the problem is first?”

I quickly explained everything that was going on with Cali and her mom. I expected Joss to brush the whole thing off, especially after I mentioned Cali’s name. I could only imagine Joss didn’t appreciate her Alpha taking off after Cali and leaving her to care for the pack. But she listened, and then when I was finished, she asked, “How can I help?”

I blinked. She really wanted to help me? “Do you know how to get to the Fae world?” I asked hopefully.

She shook her head. “I don’t, but I have heard it’s not a safe place for werewolves. Probably even less so for hybrids like you.”

“I don’t care. I just want to talk to Cali.”

She pondered on this for a moment. “I have heard that Fae can communicate with each other across the two worlds. Unfortunately, I don’t know any Fae. I try to avoid them for obvious reasons.” She grimaced. “I’m sorry. That’s probably not very helpful.”

I shook my head, realization setting in. “No, Joss. You’ve been more helpful than anyone else here. Thank you.”

I went back up to my room, mulling over Joss’s words. Maybe I wouldn’t have to find a way into the Fae world after all. If I could just find a Fae, I might be able to reach Cali.

And unlike Joss, I did know a Fae.

I pushed open the door to mine and Jay’s room and found him where I’d left him: packing. His face softened when I walked in. “I’m just about finished packing,” he said. He’d gone ahead and packed both of our belongings. “Are you ready?”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I stayed silent.

He stood and walked over to me, touching my shoulder. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m not trying to fight with you. You know how I feel; you know I love you.”

He kissed me, and for half a second everything was forgotten. I sank into the kiss, taking comfort in our connection until we broke apart. Even then I stayed close, pressing my forehead against his and breathing him in. This was my mate. My love. And no matter what happened, he would always hold the other half of my soul.

“I’m sorry too,” I said, looking down and avoiding his gaze. “I’m just worried about my friend.”

“I know. I wish there was something I could do.” His hand slid down my back in a soothing gesture. “But everyone’s getting ready to leave. Maybe we can figure something out on the way? You’re going with us, right?”

I hated that he felt like he had to ask, and I hated it even more that he was right in feeling that way.

“I’m going.” I met his eyes. “To Minnesota.”

**Episode 556**

It was sort of surreal to return to the village where my grandmother’s estate was located. The place where our journey had first begun, more or less.

“Look!” Torin called. “It’s just up ahead!”

The small cottages and shops were visible down the road, with the Wrenthorn estate looming behind them. We’d really made it. I could hardly believe it. Even though this had been my plan all along, to venture to the Dark Fae realm to find the moon buttercup and return back here, it still didn’t feel real. There were so many close calls along the way, so many times I’d thought for sure that I’d never make it out of a situation alive, much less find my way back here with the moon buttercup.

Happy, relieved tears burned in my eyes, and I pinched myself, hard, and then winced. *Yup. Still real. We really made it.*

We stopped at the entrance to the village and Torin and Astrid approached me, tired, happy smiles on their faces.

“We’re returning to our homes now, Cali,” Astrid said softly. “Our part of this journey is over.”

Her words momentarily stunned me, though they shouldn’t have. It made perfect sense for us to go our separate ways now that we’d made it back. It wasn’t like I expected them to go with me to the human world, but I wasn’t quite ready to say goodbye to the Fae who had helped me through nearly every step of my journey. It wasn’t like communication existed between our worlds. This could very well be the last time I ever saw either one of them.

This was goodbye. Forever.

“I’ll never forget you!” Torin burst into tears. “And I’ll miss you, and your hunky werewolf.” He eyed Xavier up ahead, then waggled his eyebrows at me. “Werewolves, that is.”

Blinking back my own tears, I threw my arms around both of them and pulled them in for a group hug. “I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve both done. I could never have done this without you.”

When we pulled away, Astrid wiped the tears from her cheeks with a smile. “If you ever find your way back to the Fae world, look us up. Who knows what kind of adventures we could get into next?”

I smiled and nodded, even though I knew I would probably never be able to come back here. “I will.”

Then she pointed to Xavier and Greyson. “And those two should probably pick up some real clothes somewhere, or they’re going to make quite a scene when my glamour wears off.” She smirked. “Not that I imagine anyone would mind.”

Torin had moved on to say goodbye to Greyson. His tears had abated for the moment, but it seemed his supply of questions about werewolves would never die.

“One more thing,” Torin was asking as I drew near, “have you ever tried dog food?”

Greyson grimaced. “No.” He patted Torin on the shoulder. “Take care.”

After one more hug for each of them, we continued on to my grandmother’s estate.

“You okay?” Greyson asked.

I gave him a watery smile. “Yeah, I’m okay. I just want to go home.”

We reached the gates with the Wrenthorn crest, the same crest that was on my mother’s pendant. I still couldn’t quite believe I was a member of this family, that Hera was my grandmother. Once she’d learned the truth about my lineage, she’d been so reluctant to let me go on this quest to save my mom. I could only hope that now that I’d returned with the moon buttercup, she’d help me get home.

I turned back to the miners. “Stay out here, okay? I’m going inside to get some directions to the human world.” Then I glanced at Greyson, Xavier, and Artemis. “You guys, come with me.”

I didn’t know what might be happening inside my grandmother’s mansion, and I didn’t want to expose the miners to another Fae party. The werewolves and Artemis could hold their own, if necessary. But I wouldn’t let the humans come to any more harm.

We pushed past the gate and walked up the long drive to the grand door. Artemis and Xavier’s eyes were both wide as they took in the Wrenthorn estate.

“So this is your grandmother’s house?” Xavier asked. “Is she royalty or something?”

I shrugged. “Something like that, I think.” I didn’t know a ton about how the Fae government was run, but my grandmother definitely seemed to be a pretty important person in the Fae world. Not everyone had a giant mansion, for instance.

I glanced over at Artemis, who had gone a little pale. She hadn’t made a peep in the long walk up the drive.

We stopped in front of the grand door and I turned to Greyson and Xavier. “While we’re in there, I can’t have either of you trying to out-Alpha the other, okay? No fighting, no arguing—just behave. Can you promise me that?”

“I promise.” Greyson nodded.

“Okay,” Xavier said, giving a grudging nod.

I was about to turn back to knock on the door, but Artemis caught my arm. “I don’t think I should be here,” she blurted out.

I frowned. “Why not?”

Artemis’s eyes flicked over the mansion behind us before settling on me. “Your grandmother seems like a very powerful Light Fae. I don’t think she’s going to be thrilled to see her granddaughter slumming it with a Dark Fae.”

I shook my head. “It’ll be fine. I’ll protect you, okay? I promise.”

Before she could lose her nerve completely, I spun back around and knocked on the door. A few moments later the door cracked open and a servant poked his head out. “Yes?”

“My name is Cali, and I’m here to see Hera Wrenthorn. I’m her granddaughter.”

The servant nodded and pushed the door open to allow us inside. “Follow me please.”

We were led to a large, bright room. “This is the reception room,” the servant informed us. “Please wait here. Madame Wrenthorn will be with you shortly.” He left us alone in the reception room, and I glanced around, taking in the beautiful furnishings and hella fancy paintings on the walls.

Two werewolves could certainly do a hell of a lot of damage in a room like this. I narrowed my eyes at Xavier and Greyson. “Remember—you promised to behave.”

Before they could respond, another door opened on the opposite end of the room and my grandmother swept in, relief and joy written on her face. She rushed toward me. “You’re back!”

And then her eyes fell on Greyson and she came to an abrupt stop, frowning. “And you brought your werewolf with you.” She glanced at Xavier. “And who’s he?”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. I came here to—”

But Hera had already stopped listening to me. She’d looked disapproving when she’d realized I’d brought not one but two werewolves into her home, but then she saw Artemis and her expression shifted.

Artemis was pale but held her head high as Hera approached her. My grandmother looked Artemis up and down and then grabbed her chin, studying the Dark Fae with a strange expression.

*What the hell is she doing? Gram, you can’t just grab people like that!*

I had no idea what was going on in my grandmother’s head, but Artemis’s expression was easy enough to read. Hera was freaking her the fuck out. I sighed. I’d promised to protect Artemis, and it looked like I’d already have to step in and keep that promise.

“Grandmother—”

“Are you a Mauvais?” Hera asked Artemis, narrowing her eyes.

She shook her head as much as she could with Hera still gripping her chin. “Uh, no.”

“Are you sure?” Hera pressed.

“Erm, who or what is a Mauvais?” I asked.

My grandmother finally let go of Artemis’s face and stepped back. “The Mauvais are a family of Dark Fae. Possibly the darkest of Fae.” She turned to face me, her eyes menacing. “You wouldn’t invite a Dark Fae here to my home, would you?”

My mouth went dry, and I tried to swallow. What the hell was I supposed to say to that? *Yes, I did invite a Dark Fae into your home, but she’s actually turned out to be a pretty nice person?* “Um…”

Hera held out her hand. “Give me the stone I gave you.”

Shit. If Grammy Wrenthorn saw the stone light up, she’d know for sure that Artemis was a Dark Fae. And I could only assume things would *not* go well after that.

“Cali,” Hera snapped. “The stone. Now.”

*Wow, she’s really mastered that cranky grandmother voice, huh.*

I slowly and carefully pulled the stone out of my pocket. My fingers were wrapped tight around it, covering up the light that had to be emanating from it. I didn’t want to turn my hand over, to show her the truth about Artemis.

“Cali,” Hera urged me.

Clearly I didn’t have a choice. Taking a deep breath, I turned my hand over so my palm was pointed up and slowly peeled my fingers back to expose the stone.

Shock slammed into me.

The stone wasn’t lighting up.

**Episode 557**

MAYA

I hadn’t seen Colton so angry in—well, ever, maybe. He was practically roaring in my ear, his face contorted in fury and his eyes nearly bugging out of their sockets.

“What the fuck, Maya!” he screamed. His breath was hot on the side of my face, and I felt his body humming with barely restrained energy. My hand was still wrapped around the parking brake and I was practically lying across him, my body twisted toward the back seat.

“What were you thinking!” Colton demanded. “You could have killed us!”

Big Mac, Teddy, and Mrs. Smith were all ashen and trembling. They didn’t jump to anger quite as quickly as Colton had, but they weren’t far behind either.

“Are you insane?!” Big Mac screeched. “Do you have a death wish?! Because I do not!”

Still, I barely paid them any attention. I leaned over the seat and grabbed a stunned and terrified Teddy. “How do you know my sister?!” I demanded, my voice shrill.

“I-I-I—” he stuttered. His face was pale, and his eyes were wide. He stared at me like I was some kind of monster, like he was too terrified to form words.

Well, that wouldn’t do. I shook him, hard. “Tell me the truth!” I snapped.

“Maya!” Mrs. Smith’s voice was high and sharp, and I felt her tugging at my grip on the poor guy. “That’s enough. He’s still recovering from his wounds!”

I shoved her back with my shoulder and held on tight to Teddy’s shirt, pulling him even closer to me so we were almost nose to nose. “He’s going to have a lot more to worry about if he doesn’t answer my question.” I bared my teeth at him, my desperation bordering on feral. “I’ll ask one more time, Teddy. How do you know my sister?”

“What the fuck is going on with you?” Colton muttered. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. He was staring at me like he’d never seen me before.

What a fucking asshole.

Colton didn’t get to pretend to take the high road when he was barely dealing with his own family issues. He’d made it very clear that I didn’t get to be part of the decision-making process where his own shit was concerned, so why did he suddenly care now? He’d been the one to start driving like a maniac first. And he’d been giving me the silent treatment since we’d left.

Colton had made it very clear where he and I stood, and how much my opinion—how much *I—*mattered to him. And as soon as we got to Nneka’s he was probably going to take off on his own anyway.

He didn’t get a say. And he sure as shit didn’t get to look at me like that and expect an answer. We might be mates through some sick, twisted joke the universe was playing on us, and we might even sleep together and fool around sometimes, but that didn’t mean he got to weigh in on my shit. Not after he’d done such a great job showing me I didn’t get to weigh in on his.

I looked back at Teddy and growled. “Anytime now would be great.”

He looked absolutely stunned. I could relate. It was only very recently that I’d learned my sister was still alive. And now I’d met someone who claimed he’d actually met her. I was desperate for answers, desperate to find some connection, some clues to help me piece together everything I’d lost when I’d been banished from my pack.

“Why—why are you guys always so rough?” Teddy whined. His eyes were shining, and his lower lip trembled.

My jaw dropped. “Are you crying?”

Colton snickered. “Great job, Maya. You’ve broken him.”

Teddy sniffed. “W-will you let me go? Please? I’ll be happy to tell you everything I know about Wren,” he offered.

I released his shirt and crawled back into my seat, tucking my legs underneath me and turning so I was pointed at the back seat again. Teddy sank back into his seat with a sigh, breathing slowly like he was trying to calm himself down.

Mrs. Smith patted his arm. “It’s all right, Teddy. You’re okay.”

Colton put a hand on my shoulder. “Take it easy on the teddy bear, Maya. You might rip out his stuffing by accident.”

I rolled my eyes and flicked his hand off. The guy was a baby. And it was kind of a miracle Silas hadn’t killed him if he was truly this sensitive. I shoved Teddy again. “Come on, dude. Spill!”

“Okay, okay!” He held his hands up in surrender. “I met Wren on my way through Montana. We hit it off right away—we were both trying to find ourselves. But… but I also sensed she was dealing with some loss.” His eyes were soft. “Something that shadowed her. At first I thought maybe she was just lonely, but then I realized that might not be it. And whatever it was, she wouldn’t say…”

I frowned. This was not the information I was hungry for. I didn’t give two shits about whether Wren and Teddy had connected. “Where was she going?” I asked impatiently. “Did Silas find her?”

He shook his head. “I doubt it. We parted ways outside of Helena. I hated to see her go, but she made it clear she didn’t want to go back to Oregon. She swore she’d never go there again. But she never would tell me why.”

I knew why. Or, at least, I had a very strong suspicion. “And you never saw her again? Never heard from her?”

“No.”

I sat back in my seat, vacantly staring out through the windshield, my head spinning. Wren. She was out there somewhere. Still alive. I’d known she had gone Rogue—Adita and Bethany had told me as much. Had she been banished too? Or had she simply wanted to escape our grandfather? I sighed. So much time had been lost, taken from us.

But now that I knew she was out there—and had had a chance run-in with someone who’d seen her recently—maybe I could get some of that time back.

“Is the drama over?” Colton asked. “Can I drive again?”

I frowned at his tone and shifted so I was sitting facing forward. I didn’t care what he did. Not anymore. I didn’t have the mental energy to put up with him. Not even to get angry, which, around Colton, was as easy as breathing. “Sure, whatever.”

He didn’t push me anymore and pulled back out into traffic

Mrs. Smith leaned forward, resting against the passenger side of the car so we had some semblance of privacy from the three other people jammed in the vehicle with us. “Are you all right, Maya?” she asked.

I shrugged. How was I supposed to answer that? I was relieved and ecstatic to know Wren was still out there. I was angry and heartbroken over the time we’d lost. I was worried about her. Where was she? Was she hurt? Was she getting enough to eat? It was all too much to convey through words. The feelings were too fresh, too raw, and there were far too many witnesses here to open up.

She made a soothing noise and tried a different approach. “When was the last time you saw your sister?”

“It was a long time ago.” My voice was dull and empty, not inviting further questions. The truth was, I knew almost every detail of the last time I saw Wren. I’d recalled it obsessively over the years, so much that I’d never be able to forget it—even if I wanted to.

It had been when I’d been banished from my pack. When my grandfather ordered me to leave. I remembered the unforgiving timbre in his voice. I remembered the utter despair and complete heartbreak on my sister’s face. It was a look that I would never forget.

Mrs. Smith offered me a small, gentle smile. “I hope you can take some comfort in what you’ve learned today. I’m sure it’s a lot to take in. But now you know your sister is alive and seemingly well. And far, far away from Silas.”

I nodded. Those were all good things. “Thank you.”

She gently squeezed my shoulder. “Any time.”

I closed my eyes and tried to get some rest. Our journey wasn’t even close to being over, and I needed to stay sharp. It took far less time than I’d thought it would for the soothing hum of the car to lull me to sleep.

I opened my eyes as we pulled up to Nneka’s place. Mrs. Smith and Big Mac got out of the car first, followed by Teddy, who walked with a limp. I reached for the door handle, ready to get out of the car and follow them when Colton reached out and put a hand on my leg.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

His hand lingered on my thigh, and I shoved it off. I hopped out of the car before he could touch me again, and Colton got out too, coming up right behind me.

Big Mac spun around and held out a hand. “Let me do all the talking.”

“I won’t say a word,” Colton promised. “Unless you get all witchy.”

I smacked his arm. “Don’t be an asshole.”

Big Mac glared at both of us and then walked up to the door and knocked.

There was no reply.

“Maybe she went on vacation?” Colton suggested.

Big Mac ignored him and tried again.

This time there was a shuffling sound and then a series of locks unlatching before the door swung open. A woman whom I could only assume was Nneka eyed us and raised a shotgun. “Get the hell out of here.”

**Episode 558**

I blinked, staring down at the dull stone sitting in the palm of my hand.

The stone wasn’t lighting up. Why wasn’t the stone lighting up? I looked over at Artemis, who seemed to be just as surprised as I was. The enchantment on the stone flared up whenever a Dark Fae was nearby, and I had one standing less than four feet away. Was the stone broken?

Hera reached out and snatched it from my hand, examining it up close as if it would give her a different result. She shook her head. “I could have sworn your friend here was a Mauvais.” She held the stone out, inches away from Artemis’s face, and still it didn’t light up.

“Enough!” Artemis snapped. She yanked the stone out of Hera’s hand, tossed it on the floor and stomped on it until I heard it crunch beneath her boot.

Hera gaped at her. “What have you done?”

“First of all, I’m not some sideshow you can gawk at or shove stones in my face to see if they respond. Second, I don’t know who these Mauvais people are, and I don’t care,” Artemis seethed. “I don’t have a family; I was raised in an orphanage. And if it does turn out that I am a member of their family, I want nothing to do with them since they wanted nothing to do with me.” When she stepped back, the enchanted stone had been broken into small pieces and fine dust beneath her boot.

I stared at Artemis in shock. So much for being meek and afraid of my big, bad grandmother. Maybe her family baggage outweighed all of that. Apparently family was a sore spot for her. Honestly, I didn’t blame her for acting out, considering how Hera had treated her like some kind of criminal. “Oookay,” I tried to segue. “Now that that’s out of the way, I was hoping you could help us.”

Hera stared at Artemis for another beat like she was some kind of strange creature she’d never seen before, and then finally turned her eyes on me. “Help you?” she repeated. “All of you?” She looked unenthused, to say the least.

“All of us.” I pointed to Artemis, Xavier, and Greyson. “If it wasn’t for them, I would never have made it this far or survived the Dark Fae world. And if you help us, we’ll go back to the human world and you’ll never have to see them again.”

“You did find your way to the Dark Fae realm then?” Hera asked curiously. “What happened there? Did you find it? Did you find the moon buttercup?”

The whole story of everything that had happened in the Dark Fae realm would have to wait for another time. We didn’t have time to tell Hera the whole saga, and I was fairly certain she wouldn’t believe it all anyway. Plus, it didn’t exactly paint Artemis in the most flattering light, and my promise to protect her likely included *not* giving my grandmother a reason to lock my friend up in her murder dungeons.

I held up the pendant. “It’s in here.”

Hera’s jaw dropped. “Really? You found it? You made it all the way to the mountain and got the moon buttercup?”

“Um, yeah?” Wasn’t that exactly what I’d just said? She was the one who’d told me about the cure my mom needed and where to find it. I wouldn’t have ever even set on that path without Hera’s guidance. Had she thought I wouldn’t find it, even after being gone for so long? Why had she sent me on that quest if she’d thought I wouldn’t be able to complete it? Didn’t she want me to save my mom?

I opened the pendant to reveal the flower inside, and my grandmother’s eyes went wide. “It’s an actual moon buttercup,” she murmured, so softly I wasn’t sure I was meant to hear it.

She shifted her gaze to me, and I saw tears shining in her eyes and a look of pride glowing on her face. And it was then that I realized the truth: she’d been hoping all along that I’d come back, and that I’d bring the moon buttercup with me. She’d wanted me to save my mom, but she’d been afraid to admit that hope because the odds had been stacked against us, and it had been easier to try to accept that we’d fail than to hope for more and be heartbroken.

But I was here now, with the cure for my mom, and Hera didn’t have to be afraid any longer.

I nodded. “It wasn’t easy. You… probably wouldn’t believe everything we had to go through to get it back, even if I told you.”

Hera swallowed and shook her head. “But you succeeded, didn’t you? You did it.”

“*We* did it.” I gave Greyson a grateful smile and then turned back to my grandmother. “So will you help me—help us—get back to the human world?”

“And you’ll take this to your mother?” Hera asked.

“Yes, I will. But I don’t know what I'm supposed to do with it,” I admitted. I didn’t know any spells, or how to make a healing potion. Big Mac might, if we could find her. Would I need to take the moon buttercup to her?

“Just bring it to your mother,” Hera said. “She will know what to do.”

I nodded. Hope and relief rose inside of me. We were so close now. “Then I need to get back right away.”

“Yes, you do,” Hera agreed. “And I’ll take you to the portal on one condition.”

I froze. What could she possibly want from me? “What is it?” I asked.

Hera smiled. “You’re my only living granddaughter,” she said gently. “I would like to get to know you better, under less unusual and stressful circumstances.” She reached out and took my hand in hers. “Promise me something.”

This didn’t sound too bad. But I couldn’t help the way my heart raced. Sure, she was my grandmother, but that didn’t mean I trusted her. And I’d met enough Fae to know that when they made promises, it was rarely a mutually beneficial arrangement. “What?”

“Promise me you’ll come back to visit me.”

I blinked, thrown by her request. “Oh. You want me to come back here?”

She smiled and nodded. “Promise me you will, and I’ll help you. But remember, if you do agree, it will be a promise you can’t break.”

I hesitated for a split second. Did I even want to come back to the Fae world? Hera didn’t seem so bad, and Torin and Astrid were here, which was great. But this place was terrifying. And they were in the middle of a war. What if I agreed to this and when I came back everything that I’d loved about the Fae world was gone?

I sighed. If I agreed, I’d just have to make the best of whatever situation I found myself in. But if I didn’t agree, I’d have to find another way home. And Mom didn’t have time for that. Besides, it would be kind of cool to get to know Hera better. I nodded. “I promise.”

Hera’s eyes were shining. “Thank you. Now, you and your friends can follow me. We’ll get you home.” She led us to a guard who was waiting by the door. “Take them to the portal.”

I wrapped my arms around Hera and hugged her close. “Thank you,” I whispered. “For everything.”

Hera squeezed me back with a strength I hadn’t realized she possessed. “Remember, your promise cannot be broken.”

She let go of me and stepped back. Then she turned to Greyson. “I’m impressed by how you’ve protected my granddaughter, and I wish to show my gratitude. I release you from your promise to fight in the Fae war on the side of the Light Fae.”

My jaw dropped. I’d all but forgotten that little detail in all of the drama.

Greyson nodded. “Thank you.”

Then Hera turned back to me. “Our promises are an unbreakable bond. Even if you don't remember what happened in the Fae world, your promise will hold.”

I frowned. What did that mean? Why wouldn’t I remember?

The confusion must have shown on my face, because Hera explained, “When humans come into our world, their memories are erased when they return to their world. It’s a way of protecting ourselves. But it’s hard to say what will happen with you because you are only half-human.”

“What?” I gasped. Why had nobody told me this earlier? I looked from Artemis to Xavier and finally to Greyson. We’d all been through so much to get the moon buttercup, especially Greyson and me. When we’d started out, I’d been sure I couldn’t trust him. Now I’d admitted I was in love with him. I didn’t want to lose that. How could all those memories just disappear?

“Are you saying—Am I going to forget everything that’s happened?”

**Episode 559**

The mere idea that I could end up forgetting everything that had happened in the Fae world had me internally losing my shit.

I’d gone through *all that* just to forget about it?

I’d fought evil dictator Fae and trolls and armies, I’d fallen over waterfalls and into wells, I’d saved my friends from being roasted, I’d saved Greyson from the song of the ondines, I’d…

*Greyson!*

Was there a chance that I’d forget everything that had happened between us in the Fae world? Oh my *GOD.*

*Not today, Satan!* I thought, bristling as I marched down the road toward the portal to the human world. I needed to get through it and see what kind of mess I’d have to deal with on the other side. I wanted to figure out how this memory thing worked, because the uncertainty of not knowing was driving me up the wall.

The guard who’d led us to the exit kept shooting me strange looks, no doubt wondering why I was acting like the joggers at the Mall of America. Though he probably had no idea what the Mall of America was and just thought I was an anxious mess. I wasn’t about to correct him, mainly because I was, indeed, an anxious mess.

Greyson—who had saved me multiple times, all of which I might forget about because life was unfair—followed close behind me with Xavier. A few feet behind them were Artemis and the miners. I could hear their loud voices as they chattered. By some miracle, Artemis had managed to make the miners hate her a little less, mostly by telling them how other bounty hunters treated their victims. Apparently, Artemis was an innocent, welcoming ray of sunshine in comparison. It was like watching a Stockholm Syndrome plot unravel right before me.

That woman was seriously dangerous, even without a knife.

“Cali!”

I almost jumped when Artemis popped up next to me. “You scared me!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Are you really?”

“No,” she deadpanned. “I’m sure you’ll survive. You’re a badass.”

I scoffed. “Don’t try to flatter me. I saw what you did with the miners, but you’re not going to manipulate me into liking you.”

She arched her eyebrows. “You’ve already called me your friend multiple times.”

I paused. “Okay, you win this round.”

She smirked, changing the subject. “Anyway, so what was that whole thing with your grandma?”

“What thing?”

“Who are the Mauvais?” Artemis asked me. “And why would Hera think I was one of them?”

I frowned. That was the least of my concerns right now. “I have no idea. I don’t know much about the Fae world or my grandmother. I’ve only met her once before.”

“That’s weird,” Artemis said. Her expression became uncharacteristically thoughtful.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“I was thinking…” Artemis cleared her throat. “Could I come with you?”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“To the human world,” Artemis elaborated. She looked more nervous than I’d ever seen her—in the few hours that I’d known her, that was. “I… I don’t really fit into the Dark Fae world now. There’s no place for me. The Kollector’s gone, and so is the demand for bounty hunters.”

“A truly honorable profession going extinct,” I said dryly. “What a shame.”

Ignoring me, Artemis barreled through. “I thought I’d make a go of things in the Light Fae world, but it’s obvious I’m not welcome there.”

“Yeah, dear old Grandma made that pretty clear,” I said, scratching my chin as I weighed the implications of our conversation. Was it really feasible to bring Artemis to the human world? With me?

How on earth did I get into these kinds of situations?

*Trouble seems to follow you*, both Greyson and Xavier had told me time and time again, and I had to begrudgingly admit that they were right. Annoying, beautiful jerks.

“But are you actually prepared to live in the human world?” I asked Artemis.

She shrugged. “Not sure. But I’ve been thinking more and more about it.”

“But what are you gonna do there?” I asked. “Won’t you need, like, a job or something?” Somehow I couldn’t see Artemis holding down a waitressing gig. “Where are you gonna live?”

She stared at me with wide eyes, much like a kitten would. “I have no idea. I’ll be all alone in that world. I’ll probably starve to death, cry myself to sleep because I’m so sensitive, you know?”

The little *brat*.

“Artemis,” I said, peering at her. “Stop trying to con me into taking you under my wing.”

She gasped, pretending to be offended.

“Because I’ve already taken you under my wing,” I continued with a sigh. “That much is obvious.”

“I feel so special, being one of your million charity cases,” she told me cheerfully. I nudged her, rolling my eyes. But the truth was that no matter what Greyson or Xavier said about me wanting to help everyone and everything, about me needing to do right by people, there was something different about Artemis. Something that drew me to her.

Something I couldn’t explain.

The feeling could’ve been intimidating, scary, but it felt easier to accept it and see where it led me. Besides, Artemis had helped me when I needed her, and she would definitely be handy in a pack of werewolves. She was basically part of… *my* pack.

I sighed. “Okay. You can come with us. I guess we’re in this together now, huh?”

She offered me a brilliant smile. The kind that I’d never seen on her lips before. “Thank you, Cali.”

Despite knowing that the choice could bring complications, I felt all warm and fuzzy inside.

The feeling was short-lived, though. As we left my grandmother’s estate, my thoughts drifted right back to her warning. My grandma had seemed unsure about what would happen to my memory after I moved through the portal, seeing as I was only part human. But still, the nagging thought that I might not remember everything that had happened with Greyson returned, filling me with dread. Surely I wouldn’t just *forget* what we’d been through. How close we’d been. Our kisses…

*Please*, I thought mournfully. *Not the kisses! I can’t forget about those!*

It was great to see that my priorities remained as healthy as ever. Especially if you considered the Xavier factor. Was I going to forget that he’d come all this way to find me? Was I going to forget the other amazing kiss that I’d shared with Xavier in the Fae world? Was I just condemned to forget about events that would have otherwise formed a very important chunk of my masturbation material?

*This isn’t the time to joke, Cali!* I thought, scolding myself. Even though I wanted to start hysterically laughing at how outrageous everything was.

But, all kidding aside, if I forgot about what had happened with Greyson, would that be fair to Xavier? Or to Greyson himself? It would be like pretending it had never happened. And what would happen now between all three of us, back in the human world? The *due destini* situation was still something I had to contend with.

*UGH, my boy troubles are just too much trouble!* I huffed internally. *Especially considering I should really be thinking about…*

My mother. I froze internally for a moment.

*What if… What if I forget why I went into the Fae world in the first place? What about my mom and saving her?* I squeezed the pendant around my neck, hoping that I’d be able to figure out what the little flower was for, even if I lost my memory.

*This is insane, Cali!* I thought. *This entire thing!*

My head felt like it was going to explode. As soon as this was over, I was gonna take a long, LONG nap. But until then, I could continue stewing over the Greyson situation. Maybe he was worried about me forgetting him as well? I wanted to reach out to him, but I was nervous. We hadn’t really had a chance to talk about anything—*especially* since Xavier had shown up. We had barely even discussed his deal with my grandmother. I guessed that was neutral enough territory to talk about with him right now, wasn’t it?

*So, uh. You were really going to fight for the Light Fae?* I asked him through our mind link.

He responded right away. *I’d fight for anyone to keep you safe, Cali. Thought you knew that.*

I pressed my lips together to hide a smile. I did know that. Especially now, after everything we’d been through. I hated thinking that I could forget about it. Unable to help myself, I mind linked with Greyson again, determined to tell him the truth. He deserved that much.

*I’m so scared we won’t remember the time we had together… I can’t stop myself from wondering what’s gonna happen now that we’re going back to the human world. With Xavier.*

There was a long unsettling pause. Before I could turn around and raise a questioning eyebrow at Greyson, though, another voice filled my brain. One that sounded decidedly less pleased to hear from me.

*This* is *Xavier.*

I froze, utterly fucking horrified.

Had I—had I just mind linked with Xavier by *mistake?*

**Episode 560**

LOLA

I couldn’t believe that Jay had agreed to come with me to Minnesota. This was such an important step for us, both as a couple and as mates. Jay was going to meet my parents.

What would my dads think of him?

I shouldn’t have been worrying about that, though—what was there not to like about Jay? He was practically perfect in every way, much like Mary Poppins, but like, super-hot and manly. But also cute. He combined the best of all worlds, and he was also the kind of man who would know everything there was to know about taxes, and make sure our kids ate their broccoli. I, on the other hand, would not eat my broccoli, because broccoli was the worst thing that had ever existed.

Bottom line, there was no way that my dads wouldn’t love Jay, because he was wonderful. Sure, he and I had had our troubles, but in the end, once I explained why I wanted to talk to Cali’s mom, he’d come with me. Orla was a Fae, and Joss had said that Fae were able to make contact with people who were already in the Fae world, so why not have Orla reach out to Cali?

At least that way, I could be certain than Cali was okay.

Plus, I wanted to see Orla anyway. Ever since my dads had called with the dire news, I’d been anxious to see her. Jay’s presence on this trip calmed me, thank god. It was also kinda funny to see people’s reactions to his eyepatch. He looked like such a badass, which was funny considering he was the closest real-life thing to a pure cinnamon roll.

“What’s a hot dish?” my pure cinnamon roll asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Huh?”

He arched an eyebrow at me, my hand in his as we walked through the gates after getting our luggage. “Whenever anyone talks about Minnesota, they mention how nice the people are and something called a hot dish. I know the nice part is true, but what about the hot dish?”

I grinned at his confused expression. “It’s just another name for a casserole. Maybe my dads will make one for you later.”

He shot me an anxious glance. “I hope they like me.”

“Of course they will.”

He smiled, kissing my cheek. We headed toward the airport exit, our arms linked. Once we were outside, with the artificial lights of the terminals behind us, I rejoiced in the feel of the warm sunshine against my cheeks…

The sensation was immediately followed by a sudden urge, that burning feeling to shift.

I gulped, telling myself, *no. Not here.* I reached into my jacket’s inside pocket, tracing the vial there. Big Mac’s potion would help me, but now was not the time to be thinking about shifting.

“Lola!” a familiar voice called from my left. I turned to see my dads walking toward us, waving. I was thankfully distracted by their presence, and the need to turn into a wolf took a back seat. I looked up at Jay.

“You ready for this?” I whispered.

Jay smirked. “Bring it on.”

My wholesome baby Jay was secretly competitive, and that was yet another thing that I loved about him.

“Darling!” Pops said excitedly.

“There’s our Lola,” Dad said in a lower voice, as all three of us group hugged.

“I missed you guys,” I said, looking up at them both. I stared at Dad. “How are you doing after those awful blood sugar test results?”

“Your father forced me to work out with him,” Dad told me, grumbling. “It’s pure torture.”

Pops scoffed. “It’s one hour, three times a week!”

“I haven’t had chocolate cake in forever,” Dad told me mournfully.

“We literally had some two days ago,” Pops said, rolling his eyes.

“One slice *doesn’t count!*” Dad said, full of righteous indignation while I tried not to laugh. Pops was taller, much heavier than Dad, who was a small skinny guy, but Dad had always been the one with the massive sweet tooth. The two of us used to bake chocolate cakes all the time when I was a kid.

“We’re so happy to see you,” Pops said, caressing my cheek. “I just wish it was under better circumstances.”

“We were very sad to hear about Orla’s illness,” Dad added. He was asking me something else about Orla when Pops’s eyes flickered somewhere behind me.

“Why is that young man with the eyepatch staring at us?” he whispered in my ear.

*Oh shit!*

Startled, I turned around and faced Jay. “Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry, baby!” I told Jay, whose reaction was to chuckle. He knew me well by now. “We were catching up and I got distracted!” I fought not to flail about as I grabbed Jay by the arm, pulling him close.

Dad and Pops looked at him up and down, Pops looming over both of us with his usual light expression, Dad lowering his glasses just to examine Jay better with his usual suspicious frown. “This is my boyfriend, Jay,” I told them both, reaching up to kiss Jay’s cheek at the same time, like I was doing a demonstration.

Jay blushed at my display of affection but also squeezed my hand, so I knew he liked it.

“What about Ant?” Pops asked me, raising an eyebrow. “What happened to him?”

“He *is* Ant!” I gestured at Jay, who nodded and smiled sheepishly.

“Nice to meet you both,” Jay said in an even tone, shaking both my fathers’ hands. “I’ve heard a lot of great things about you.”

“I’m not sure I’m following here.” Dad, still obviously suspicious, now also looked confused. “You mean to tell me that his name is Jay Ant?”

“Or Ant Jay?” Pops asked.

“No,” I said. “‘Ant’ is his online name. Mine was FlowerPower123.”

“So he’s an ant,” Pops said slowly, “and you’re a flower?”

“Wouldn’t it have worked better if she were a flower and you were a bumblebee or something?” Dad asked Jay, in that deadpan way of his that meant he was trolling.

“Um,” was Jay’s eloquent response.

Pops and Dad started snickering like five-year-olds. A few moments later, we were all in the car, and Pops was talking about all the new healthy recipes he was making Dad eat. I turned to Jay, squeezing his hand once more. He was still a little nervous, I could tell—so different to his usual general level-headedness. It made me smirk.

“You’re kinda sexy when you’re stressed,” I said in his ear.

He silently scoffed. I winked at him, and he raised my hand to his mouth, planting a kiss there. Still smiling, I looked out the window as Dad gestured at some baby horses. It was so wonderful to see the expanse of fields, the big blue sky…

The desire to shift hit me again. Probably not a good idea to do that in the car, in front of my dads. I swallowed thickly, taking a deep breath.

I could control this. I had to.

“So are you kids staying with us?” Pops asked me then, pulling me out of my musings.

“I hadn’t thought about it,” I said.

Dad glanced at Jay, pushing his glasses up his nose. “There’s a spare bedroom for the boy.”

“We’ll discuss it later,” I said, sighing.

“Is your dad serious?” Jay whispered at me.

I eyed Dad, who stoically looked outside the window. “Sometimes it's hard to tell with him. But don’t worry—the two bedrooms share a bathroom. We can see each other when we brush our teeth.”

Jay grinned.

“And also while you go down on me in the shower,” I added, my whisper flush against his ear. Jay choked, and I grinned.

Unfortunately, the feeling of familiarity and warmth between us faded once we all arrived at the hospital. I started to grow restless, hyper, and anxious again. The urge to shift was always lurking, and I had to keep myself from running around, had to force myself to stay cool and collected. Especially if Orla really was as sick as my dads had said.

“We’re gonna wait in the lobby,” Pops said. “Last time we were here, the doctor said that it’s best for her visits to stick to one or two people max.”

As Jay and I waited for the elevator, I had to bite the inside of my cheek to distract myself from the vibrating feeling inside me.

“Hey,” Jay said, squeezing my hand. “Take a deep breath. It’s gonna be okay.”

I did as I was told, trying to focus on the positive. Orla was strong. She would be okay. There was no reason for me to freak out. Once we arrived on Orla’s floor, I had to physically contain myself from running frantically down the hallway, looking for her room.

When we finally reached Orla’s room, Jay gave me a soft kiss on the forehead. “You’ve got this, baby,” he said.

I swallowed, nodding.

Taking another deep breath, I knocked on the door, stepped inside, then gasped.

Orla’s bed was empty.

**Episode 561**

*This* is *Xavier.*

That was what freaking Xavier—obviously—had just said to me after I’d sent him a mind link *about* him, *meant* for Greyson, like it was a fucking accidental text.

*Why, God? WHY AM I LIKE THIS?* I screamed inside my head, wishing I could delete the text—uh, the mind link. But Xavier had already caught on, and everything was fucked.

*I’m guessing that wasn’t intended for me*, Xavier told me.

I didn’t turn to face him. Of course I didn’t. I was a coward. But if he picked a fight with Greyson over this right now, I would kill them both—just as any VERY FED UP coward would.

*Why didn't you tell me you can mind link with Greyson?* Xavier continued, since I hadn’t replied to his first mind link attempt. This was going *so* well.

Flustered beyond belief, I stewed over his question—why *hadn’t* I told Xavier about my ability to mind link with Greyson? Well, it wasn’t the only thing I hadn’t told Xavier. If only he knew…

*There really hasn’t been enough time to discuss anything*, I told him. *Besides, we were on a break. That* you *insisted on.*

I cringed, regretting the words the moment they landed in Xavier’s mind. They sounded like such a lame excuse. I should’ve been more loyal, in theory.

But then again, in theory, he should’ve been more loyal and not left me behind in the first place.

But then again-again, perhaps *due destini* was to blame for this mess all three of us had found ourselves in.

*Look at me, trying to avoid blame,* I thought, grumbling. Just to myself—I didn’t send that to Xavier via supernatural text message.

*And what*, Xavier said, *exactly* did *happen between you and Greyson?*

There was an edge to Xavier’s tone which I didn’t appreciate. I already had enough anxiety about being potentially unable to remember the situation with my mom once we’d passed over to the human world.

*Can we not discuss this now?* I asked.

Xavier fell silent for a moment. I ached to turn around and stare at his beautiful face, tell him that I knew that everything was fucked right now, but I just couldn’t deal with him at the moment. He had to take a back seat.

And then Xavier spoke to me again. *I did come for you, Cali. Don’t forget that.*

I didn’t offer a response. I didn’t want to tell him that even though I deeply appreciated what he’d done, he wouldn’t have needed to do it if he’d stayed with me in the first place. I was debating whether I had to continue this conversation when he added:

*I don’t want to fight with you. We’ll talk about it later, after you help your mom.*

That was a relief, honestly.

*Thank you*, I told him through our mind link, and considered the conversation finished. I knew that I’d have to fix this mess in the end, this supernatural triangle of *due destini* fuckery, but at least I didn’t have to do it right now.

But of course, the second Xavier settled down, Greyson piped right the fuck up.

*Did you hear me?* Greyson said, through our mind link. *Why didn’t you answer?*

Another big manly man who I’d reduced to serial mind linking. I was embarrassed for the lot of them while also dying from the intensity of the whole thing. Then again, the alternative—them not paying attention to me—didn’t sit right with me either.

Overall, this was going GREAT and I wasn’t confused AT ALL.

*I accidentally mind linked with Xavier*, I explained to Greyson.

*What do you mean ‘accidentally’? Weren’t you able to do that before?* Greyson asked.

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I *hadn’t* been able to mind link with Xavier before, beyond a handful of times. I wasn’t entirely sure what had changed.

*Yes and no. I don’t know how to explain it and I also don’t want to think about it, or talk about it with you. My brain cells are already fried for today*, I told Greyson.

I heard his laughter, deep and low, inside my head.

*Don’t worry about it. Your mother is more important.*

For a moment, I was struck by this. For someone so Alpha, Greyson could also be very understanding.

*Thank you, Greyson*, I said.

*Of course. I think the least Xavier and I can do right now is not create any more problems for you,* Greyson added smoothly.

*That’s what I’ve been saying,* I replied, somewhat annoyed. *I love it when you give me my own advice.*

I heard Greyson’s laughter in both my head and on the outside. I glanced over my shoulder just to see Xavier shoot his brother a glare. Instantly, I looked forward before Xavier could notice me, pretending that nothing had happened.

Both men had agreed to back off for now, and I wasn’t about to push my luck.

“The portal is just a little farther,” the guard said, startling me.

“Great.” The word sounded more sarcastic and nervous than I would have liked.

I turned to Artemis, who seemed to have been thinking about certain things herself. “Are you sure you want to come with me?”

“I am,” she said, right away.

“How are you feeling about it?” I asked. “It’ll be a huge adjustment, you know. The human world doesn’t really love anyone doing magic in plain sight.”

Artemis shrugged. “I’ve always lived a life of adventure, and this could be the greatest adventure of all. Don’t worry about me.”

I eyed her. “Yeah, you can probably take care of yourself better than anyone.”

She smirked. “One day, I’ll tell you about the time I captured a murderous Brownie.”

I blinked. “A brownie? Like the pastry?” I’d always considered brownies pretty friendly. I was the aggressive one who shoved them into my mouth and moaned with inappropriate ecstasy.

Artemis gave me a funny look. “It was more like—”

“We’re here,” the guard said, cutting her off. He pointed to the wall of rock before us. I remembered coming through it, what felt like a very long time ago. The stream glistened in the sunlight.

*This is it,* I thought. *I’ve made it.*

I swallowed, feeling a little choked up. Looking behind me, I found Greyson and Xavier watching me. Would I not remember anything that had taken place between us once I stepped through? How could that be? So much had gone on between us, all three of us. How would werewolves be affected by the passage? Hera had claimed that humans lost their memories, but she hadn’t said anything about werewolves.

*Maybe I should grab a pen and paper and write down everything that happened?* I thought, panicked. *Is there time for that? Would the paper survive my passage through the portal? I should have asked my grandmother for more information about this! But then again, she’s always so cryptic, so mysterious—of course she wouldn’t have given me a straight answer. She didn’t even seem sure about the effects of the passage on someone like me…*

With these thoughts twisting in my mind, I turned around to face the miners. Maybe, in their case, losing their memories of all the horrible things that had happened to them would be a good thing. A way for them to start fresh, without any nightmares weighing them down.

That wasn’t the case for me, though.

I needed to keep my memories intact for a million reasons—first among them, the moon buttercup. I peeked at the pendant, a lump growing in my throat. I had to remember this flower. I had to remember it once I saw my mom. I had to remember what I needed to do.

“Cali?” I heard Greyson’s smooth voice from behind me.

I faced him, looking up. Throatily, I said, “Promise me. Promise me that you’ll be there to remind me of everything that happened here.”

“I promise.”

“But what if you forget what happened too, after we pass through the portal?” I asked him, fighting panic.

He gave me a soft smile, reaching out to hold my hand. He raised it to the height of his chest, pressing it there. Glancing at my lips, he murmured, “I could never forget, Cali. Never.”

The way he was staring at me, so intense and raw, made my breath catch. A shiver ran through me. But before I could say anything else, Xavier walked up to me. He took my other hand, and a different kind of current jolted through me.

“It’s gonna be okay, Cali,” he said, his blue eyes piercing mine. “I’m here for you.”

This right here was my whole problem, actually. I was stuck between them, and I couldn’t see a way out. With both of them holding my hands, it felt like my heart was going to explode.

“Good luck,” the guard told us.

*Tell me about it*, I thought, exhaling sharply.

Nobody spoke as we moved forward. I turned back, taking a good, long look at the Fae world. I knew I would return someday, since my grandmother had made me promise. I gave Artemis one last look—trying to gauge whether or not her resolve was wavering. She looked utterly calm and confident.

“If I forget anything once we move through the portal, will you help me figure things out?” I asked her hopefully.

She gave me a slight nod and one of her enigmatic smiles.

Finally, I turned to the guard who’d opened the gate. “Thank you.”

I felt numb but determined. Powerful in my resolve.

*It’s now or never.*

And then I took a step into the portal.