**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 8 - Part 2**

**Episodes 792-896**

**Episode 792**

GREYSON

I lay on my side in bed, my head propped up in one hand, watching Cali doze off next to me. How had I ever, for even a single second, believed that sleeping with Ava had been the real thing? The difference was like day and night.

Where sleeping with Ava had been all eager lust and devastating emptiness, finally joining with Cali had felt like coming home. So *right*.

I knew I’d never forget our first time together—how perfect and wonderful every movement and gasp had been, how simply seeing Cali come undone beneath me had taken my goddamn breath away.

I’d been with plenty of women, but never in my life had I experienced the connection I’d felt last night. And now that we’d finally connected, soul and body, it felt like my whole world had shifted on its axis. It was the mate connection, it had to be. I was the biggest idiot in the universe for not having seen through Ava’s lies the moment all the lust and hormones had faded away.

Now that I’d had Cali, really had her, there was no way I could ever let her go.

I gazed down at her sleeping face and smiled softly. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

“It’s creepy to watch people sleep.” Her drowsy voice broke through my reverie, and I saw a smile tugging at her lips. Her eyelashes fluttered with the effort of staying open as she slowly woke up.

I leaned in and brushed my lips over her forehead, and she sighed and relaxed in my arms. I swear I felt my heart swell three sizes, like a lovesick werewolf Grinch. Then suddenly she stiffened, and I pulled back to look in her eyes. “What’s wrong, Cali?”

I couldn’t stop my mind from racing at the slightest sign of distress, the slimmest indication that the rug was about to be pulled out from underneath my feet.

Did she not feel the way I did? Maybe last night hadn’t been good for her? Maybe now that we’d finally slept together, she was full of guilt and regret, and had realized that she truly wanted to be with Xavier. She’d said she loved me, but what if it wasn’t *true* love?

“Last night…” she began, her voice soft and her eyes anywhere but on my face. “Was that… Was it good for you?”

There was a beat of confused silence as her question sunk in. And then I laughed. And laughed. And laughed so hard and for so long I could tell my response wasn’t actually doing a thing to answer Cali’s question. But I couldn’t help it. How could she even ask that question with a straight face?

She stiffened further and sat up, and I pulled her into my arms, hugging her tightly. “Was it *good*?” I echoed. “Good doesn’t begin to describe it. I’ve never felt… *anything* like that before.”

She relaxed, but only slightly. “Even with Ava?” she asked hesitantly.

And then I recognized the heart of her worry. I relaxed and stroked her hair, still chuckling.

She pulled back, a frown on her face. “You know what? Never mind.”

Cali sat up and I followed suit, reaching out and entwining our hands. “I’m sorry for laughing. Cali, I felt absolutely *nothing* when I was with Ava. It actually completely freaked me out.”

“Really?” she asked, looking at me through her eyelashes.

“Yes, Cali. I swear it,” I said. “Sleeping with Ava was… empty. I thought there was something wrong with us. But I know now how wrong I was. How much of an idiot I was to not realize who she was right away.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said, squeezing my hand. “She tricked everyone.”

“Please believe me when I say this, Caliana: sleeping with her was *nothing* compared to you.” Emotion clogged my throat, and I swallowed it back down and took a deep breath. “I thought we’d lost our mate connection, but last night… Last night showed me it’s stronger than ever.”

I looked down into Cali’s eyes and felt that sting of loss and grief and love and gratitude wrapping tight around my chest, burning in my eyes. The truth was, I had never in my life felt as lost as I’d felt after being with Ava. And I intended to do everything in my power to never feel that way ever again.

I cleared my throat and forced my trembling lips to smile. “I’m never going to let you go, Cali.”

Slowly and gently, I pulled her in close and pressed my lips to hers. It took only a few seconds of our mouths moving together for her body to soften against mine. I couldn’t believe how amazing she felt, relaxed and naked in my arms.

I pulled back and gave her a wicked grin as an idea popped into my head.

Cali pouted at the loss of contact and tried to pull me in again, but I resisted her siren call. I had much better plans for us. Plans that I’d been fantasizing about for ages. “Last night, we did what we’ve wanted to for so long. But this morning, I want to do something I’ve been dying to do.”

She blinked at me, apparently at a loss for words. And then her lips quirked up into that teasing smile I loved. “Something you’ve been *dying* to do?”

I didn’t laugh, didn’t take the bait. I’d meant every word I’d said, and Cali’s playfulness died as she took in my serious expression.

“Only if you’ll let me, Cali,” I said gently. “Tell me what you want me to do, what brings you the most pleasure.”

Heat rushed up her neck and into her cheeks, and she looked away, mumbling, “I mean, I don’t know.”

Oh my god, this was going to be so much fun.

I slid a finger under her chin and tilted it up so our eyes met. “That’s okay. I’ll start slow.” My other hand slipped beneath the covers to rest warm and heavy on her exposed hip. “We’ll *experiment*. Do you like this?” My thumb drew circles over her hipbone, and she squirmed.

“That tickles,” she giggled, lying back. This wasn’t exactly the erogenous zone I’d been hoping to start with, but she was relaxed and smiling again, so it hadn’t been a total loss.

Bracing myself on one arm, I laid a line of gentle, open-mouthed kisses down the column of her throat as my fingers skimmed up her stomach and rib cage to stop just beneath her breasts. I nipped and sucked at her sweet skin, alternating the pressure and heading lower and lower while my fingers teased her breasts, skimming the undersides.

By the time my mouth reached her breasts, her nipples were tight buds, and I let my breath ghost over them, reveling in the whine that escaped her throat. I’d barely even touched her and she was already on the verge of begging.

I prided myself on being an adept lover, and I always tried to make sure my partners had a good time, but there was something about making Cali squirm that drove me absolutely insane in a whole new way. I didn’t even care if I got off. All I wanted was to blow her mind.

When my tongue covered her nipple, circling the tight bud before flicking at the tip, her hips rose off the bed and she let out a moan that went straight to my cock.

“*Greyson*!”

“I know you like that,” I murmured against her breast. “Then I think you’re going to love this.”

I threw back the covers and pulled her thighs apart, draping her knees over my shoulders. Cali started breathing faster, watching me with wide, darkening eyes.

“Greyson,” she breathed. “What are you—”

My thumbs found her sensitive lower lips, gently teasing them apart. I slowly traced her slick, pink folds. “You’re fucking perfect.”

“*Greyson*.” Her voice was almost a whine.

“Patience, love.” I blew cool air over her heated sex and she moaned, wriggling her hips beneath me.

“*Grey*,” she moaned.

God, I loved the sound of my name on her lips.

“I’ve dreamed about doing this,” I told her as I lowered my mouth to her skin.

My tongue swept over her folds before finding her clit. This was what I’d selfishly been longing to do. Taste Cali on my tongue. I circled my tongue around her nerves, grinning against her as she threaded her fingers into my hair.

“Feel good?” I asked, knowing by her shaking legs that it did.

“*Ohmygod,* *fuck*,” she said. “Don’t stop.”

Glad not to. I sucked on that cluster of nerves, relishing in her whimpers. To have her like this? It was heaven. Cali pulled on my hair, making me groan. I reached up to caress her tits, teasing her with a pinch of her nipple. She sucked in a breath.

“So close,” I heard her gasp. “Oh my—”

Her thighs tightened around my neck and her body began to shake, her hips rocking against my mouth. Two of my fingers found her folds, working in time with my tongue, and seconds later she came apart. I eagerly lapped up the taste of her, savoring the sweet and saltiness. My hands ran up and down her thighs, coaxing her into relaxing a bit.

“Oh my god,” she sighed.

Her inexplicable gratitude pulled a smile to my lips. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that.”

It was everything to see her blush.

“Greyson!” she said, trying to wriggle away from me.

“Oh no,” I said. “You think I’m done with you?”

“Y-you’re not?”

My mouth found her soaked pussy again, and the sexy melody of her moans filled my ears once more.

My cock was throbbing with need, but I made sure to coax two more orgasms from her body before untangling her legs from around my neck and coming up for air. I was sweaty, and so fucking turned on it hurt, but I’d never been happier.

Cali’s eyes widened when she saw my face, and she gasped in horror. “Greyson, your chest!”

I looked down, confused. And then I saw the black vein swirling over my heart.

**Episode 793**

I scrambled backward in bed, staring at the swirling black patterns on Greyson’s chest as panic spilled into my veins and erased every ounce of orgasmic bliss.

*Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!* I could barely stand to look at the marks, but I forced myself to not dive right under the covers and hide. This was my fault, after all. So what if seeing the marks on Greyson and Xavier was somehow worse than seeing them on my own body? This was my fault, and there was no hiding from that reality.

I reached out a trembling hand to trace my fingers over the swirling veins. “Does it hurt?” I asked with a grimace. When the veins grew, it felt like a goddamn heart attack to me, but I hoped that maybe it’d be different for Greyson.

He caught my fingers and gently pulled them away from his chest. “No, it doesn’t hurt at all.” Worry was etched into the lines of his face, but I knew it wasn’t for himself. As usual, he was trying to minimize things for my benefit.

Greyson kissed my knuckles. “Hey, don’t let this distract you from the main event.” He gave me that roguish smile he’d perfected. “All that matters is that we’re here. Together. Finally. And I don’t want to waste another second of our time together, okay?”

He leaned down and tried to gently pull me back into a kiss, but I turned my face at the last second so his lips landed on my cheek. It was still nice, but honestly it was kind of bonkers for him to expect me to just roll with this horrifying new development. Like, *“Sorry you caught my curse, Greyson, but on the bright side, let’s bone!”*

Yeah, that was so not going to happen. If Greyson was showing curse signs too, then things were not okay. *He* was not okay, and unless my vagina had gained some magical, curative powers lately, fooling around wasn’t going to help anything.

I jumped out of bed and started pulling on my clothes. “You really think I’m going to have any fun at all with your new magical, creepy-ass tattoo staring at me? Come on, we need to see what we can do about this.”

He sighed and made no move to get out of bed. It was honestly kind of ridiculous how good he looked stretched across the mattress like that. The covers had long since been tossed to the floor, but the sheet puddled around his hips and made him look like one of those models that art students used to perfect their understanding of human anatomy.

*Gah! Not now, Cali. You can eye-fuck him later!*

“Come on!” I insisted, snapping my fingers at him to get his geometrically perfect ass out of bed.

“Cali, it’s really not a big deal—”

“NOT A BIG DEAL?” I screeched, so loudly I was sure everyone in the house had heard it, werewolf or not. “We’re *cursed*, Greyson! We’ve got to talk to Big Mac. Now.” I bundled up his clothes in my arms and tossed them at him. “Hurry up!”

Greyson’s eyebrows lifted. “You do realize we’re in a house full of werewolves, right? If you and I charge out of the room now, all covered in sweat and pheromones, everyone’s going to know exactly what we were up to last night. And just now.”

I froze, my hands clenching into tight fists. Damn these werewolves and their sensitive noses! Still, I raced to the shower to wash the Greyson off of me. I didn’t want Xavier to find out—at least, not like this. Even if I had told them I needed to be with both of them, that didn’t mean I should rub their noses in it.

Greyson chuckled as he watched me pace around the room and yank off the clothing I’d just haphazardly thrown on. “You’re so cute when you’re worried.”

“Shut up,” I snapped. “This is serious, Greyson. Come on! Get up!” I grabbed his arm and tugged with all my might—which, compared to the strength that arm possessed, wasn’t all that mighty. “Shower!” I grunted. “Now!”

He gave me a lazy grin and finally got out of bed. “Much as I love wearing your scent all over me, I guess a shower with you is a nice consolation prize.”

We finally got into the shower together and I quickly dumped a handful of shampoo into my palm before beginning to work it into my hair. Greyson, it seemed, had other ideas, and he took his sweet time getting his hands all sudsy before rubbing them down my sides, over my stomach, and up to my breasts.

I bit back a moan and softened against him. God, he knew exactly what to do with his hands, and between the gentle but firm teasing, the hot water, and the feel of him warm and hard behind me, I was lost.

The curse marks had brought an abrupt end to our play this morning, but my *god*, I’d never realized oral could be so good. I’d also never once had a guy ask me what I wanted, what I liked best, and then tried to deliver on that. It was a revelatory change of pace, and I promised myself that once things settled down, figuring out all the things I liked was going to the very top of my to-do list.

Then Greyson’s teeth grazed over my sensitive earlobe and I shuddered. “Hey, stop that. Greyson, we need to focus.”

“Do we, though?” he murmured against my neck. One hand was slipping down, down, down, and I knew if I didn’t stop him, we were going to have to take a second shower to wash off the first one.

I leapt away from him. “Yes! Curse! Imminent danger! Crazy swirling tattoo! Are any of those ringing a bell?”

He chuckled again but finally stopped his sensual advances, and we quickly finished showering and then toweled off. Next, we needed to make it out of this bedroom and down to Big Mac without anyone taking notice and putting two and two together. Especially Xavier.

“Okay,” I said, a plan already beginning to form in my mind. “I’ll go out first and you wait a minute and then come down and play it cool.”

“Oh, I’ll play it all kinds of cool,” he teased.

“Can you at least pretend to take this seriously?” I groaned. “Xavier is here, in this house, and I need to be sensitive to his feelings.”

Greyson snorted. He clearly didn’t give a shit about Xavier finding out. “Right. Xavier. Like you guys have always been so sensitive to my feelings.”

I frowned. That hurt a little. “That’s not fair. You know I didn’t plan for any of this. I’m not trying to hurt anyone.”

He took in the pain on my face and sighed. “I know. And I’ll respect your wishes, for now.”

“Thank you.” I brushed my lips over his, pulled my clothes back on, and headed downstairs to the living room, where Sage and Zainab were cuddling on the sofa.

“Hey,” I said to them. “Have either of you seen Big Mac? I need to talk to her, now.”

Just then, the witch in question breezed in. Wow, had I conjured her with my thoughts or something? “What is it, Cali? Did something happen?”

A *lot* of somethings had happened, but I didn’t want to get into them with an audience present. “Can we speak privately?”

Greyson walked in, his hair still wet from the shower like mine, and I thought I saw Sage and Zainab give each other a knowing look. *Great. We were pack gossip already.*

“Let’s go into the kitchen,” I suggested. I hadn’t seen anyone in there on the way downstairs.

Once we established a bit more privacy, which wasn’t saying much in a pack house, I turned to Greyson. “Show her.”

He rolled his eyes and pulled his shirt up to show Big Mac the swirling veins.

The witch nodded gravely. “I suspected this would happen when you two finally slept together.”

My jaw dropped. How did Big Mac always know to bring up the exact thing I did *not* want to talk about? “What? Slept together? No, no, we just—”

Jay walked into the kitchen, a scowl on his face. Clearly he’d come at just the right time. This was exactly why I’d wanted to keep things with Greyson on the DL. Anyone with a pulse who had spent more than a day or two around the pack knew about the *due destini* thing, and my connections with both Alphas. I had no doubt that the pack members had a lot of thoughts on that topic.

But that had all been before I’d started sleeping with both Greyson and Xavier. And now I could only assume things would get much, much worse.

Jay looked me up and down, the judgment clear on his face. “Have any of you seen Xavier?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “Isn’t he here somewhere?”

Jay’s scowl deepened. “No, he’s not. He never came back.”

**Episode 794**

XAVIER

I glared at Ava.

Where the fuck did she get off, following me out here into the woods and spouting some bullshit about being my only hope? *She must have a death wish*. It was infuriating that my wolf had decided to ditch me again. Right now, Ava was much more likely to kill me than the other way around.

I scoffed at her. “Seriously? You really think I could trust you ever again?”

“I understand, but you need to listen,” she insisted. She sounded more desperate now than I’d ever heard her, like she really did care about me and was distressed by the possibility of me pushing her away. God, she was so manipulative. “Xavier, I am the only one who can help you right now. All you have to do is let me. Is that really so difficult?”

She was a better actor than I would have given her credit for.

I shook my head with a growl of frustration. If I could shift, I’d rip her throat out all over again. There was no regret anymore, no peace with my ex-mate or wishing her well. As far as I was concerned, she’d signed her own death warrant when she’d shown up back in my life pretending to be Cali. When she’d threatened my bond with my real mate and reminded me that she was poison to me and my life. To say nothing of the literal bear trap she’d left me in. And now that she was finished with murdering my mother and impersonating my new mate, here she was finding new ways to ruin my life.

But I couldn’t shift. I was more vulnerable than she was, despite her pleading tone. There was nothing I could to do her right now beyond keeping her talking. Maybe I’d learn something useful along the way.

“Fine. Then explain. How on earth could you possibly help me?”

“I know how this must look from your perspective, but you have to believe me. I’m not your enemy, Xavier. I’m actually on your side.”

A bark of laughter slipped out from between my lips. “On my side?” I echoed. “The last time I saw you, you left me in a silver trap. If you’re on my side, I wouldn’t want to see who my actual enemies are.”

She shook her head. “I had to leave you in that trap, Xavier. You don’t understand. I’m trying to protect you, don’t you see?”

Jesus. By that logic, she’d just *had* to kill my mother too. I snorted. “All I see is a manipulative traitor.”

I’d hoped my flippant remark would hurt her—and let’s face it, she was getting off easy—but as I looked into her face, her true face, the one I’d fallen in love with all those years ago, I realized my words had struck home. She was wide-eyed and pleading. Her lower lip trembled as she looked at me, seemingly devastated that I wouldn’t allow her to help me the way she wanted, and I felt an odd twist in my chest at seeing her true form after all this time.

I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to hate her, but somehow I couldn’t bring myself to do it. And even hurting her sent a pang of… something through my stomach. It couldn’t be regret, could it? No, I’d already gone down this road, and it had ended with Ava betraying me once again. I couldn’t let my guard down, couldn’t let her in ever again—even if some idiotic part of my heart still wanted to.

Snarling, I turned away from her.

Ava let out a shuddering breath, and I glanced over my shoulder to see her face twisting with something like pain. Did she really want to help me, or was she just *that* committed to her role? I didn’t have to wonder long, though, because her expression hardened when she realized I wasn’t going to budge.

There was the Ava I knew. The stubborn, belligerent pain in my ass.

“Fine,” she said. “Go ahead and hate me. I’m the enemy, right? Hating me is what you’re supposed to do.” She shifted and lunged at me. I tensed, trying to shift with everything in me, but my wolf was gone, and it wasn’t coming back.

Ava stopped mere inches away from me. Why wasn’t she attacking? She circled me, her hackles raised, but didn’t come any closer.

As much as I wished I could fight her properly, that clearly wasn’t on the table right now. The best thing I could do was stand strong and pretend that staying in my human form was a choice, not a death sentence.

Ava’s voice slipped through my mind. *What’s wrong, Xavier? Got cold feet? I’m here now. You can finally finish this, so what’s stopping you?*

I ignored her words and glared down at her wolf, showing her I wasn’t afraid.

She stopped right in front of me. If I really wanted to be a shit about this, I could probably reach out and kick her. Of course, it would probably be the last thing I ever did.

*Isn’t this what you wanted?* she demanded. *A chance to end me once and for all? I bet I wouldn’t be coming back this time.*

“Get out of my head!” I growled. “You don’t belong there anymore.”

Her posture changed, less aggressive and more self-satisfied. *Right*, she drawled. *That’s for your shiny new mate. Cali. Except, she’s not really your mate, is she?*

“Shut up!” I snarled.

*Your brother certainly doesn’t think so. Although if it were me choosing between you two, I have to say I find you so much more enjoyable. Being with Greyson… It wasn’t terrible, but you really know how to press all my buttons.*

Fury rushed through me, and I forgot about everything except how badly I wanted to wring Ava’s neck. It didn’t matter if she was a wolf or a human—if I got my hands on her, I was going to watch the light go out of her eyes.

I charged her with a snarl, slow, vulnerable human body and all. But Ava’s wolf danced back, staying out of my reach all too easily. Suddenly she shifted back to her human form, staring at me with a crease between her eyebrows. “Your wolf…” she said slowly, as if the realization was just now dawning on her. “It’s left you, hasn’t it?”

A chill ran down my spine. I crossed my arms, but I didn’t respond.

Ava kept staring. “Well, isn’t that interesting?”

I snorted. *More like catastrophic. And humiliating.* I could just imagine Greyson’s response if he ever found out: *“It’s all right, Xavier. Everyone has performance issues sometimes.”* I shook my head. No, he wasn’t going to find out. Nobody else was. It was bad enough that Ava had put two and two together.

Ava moved close enough for me to smell her, that intoxicating combination of floral notes and the scent of the woods at dawn. It was a scent that was all Ava, one that would forever be imprinted into my mind. It sent me reeling back to a time when she was everything to me, and I didn’t fight her when her arms slipped around my neck and she pressed her lips against mine.

Ava’s lips were soft and gentle, soothing me in a way I hadn’t known I needed. And yet…

I pulled away. “Don’t do that again.”

I didn’t want her anymore. I hadn’t wanted her for a long time. Even before I’d met Cali, really. Since the woman in front of me had killed my mother. It was all wrong now, and even if there was still something between us—some primal connection from our broken mate bond and patched with memories of the people we used to be—we didn’t have that bond anymore. Not in any way that mattered.

We stared at each other for a long string of seconds, each of us watching the carousel of emotions on the other’s face. Her eyes welled with tears. “I can’t reach you anymore, can I?”

She reached out to touch my chest. I flinched but stood my ground.

“I really do want to do right by you, Xavier,” she said softly, sadly. A few tears slipped down her cheeks. “I never asked to be disguised as Cali. If it had been up to me, I would’ve come back to you as myself. And when I was intimate with you as Cali…” She swallowed. “That was truly how I felt as myself. I hope that you have it in yourself to forgive me someday.” She leaned in and kissed my cheek before shifting and bounding off into the woods.

I watched her disappear and then turned to go back into the old pack house. But then something moved in my peripheral vision, and I glanced over to see a ghostly form in the bushes. With a jolt, I realized what it was.

It was my wolf, and it was running after Ava.

**Episode 795**

AVA

I raced through the woods, away from Xavier, even though it felt like I was leaving a piece of my heart behind. I could barely wrap my mind around our encounter. Sure, we had a lot of baggage. I’d killed his mother and pretended to be his new mate, and he’d actually killed *me*. But… I don’t know. Somewhere along the way, I’d started hoping that maybe things weren’t damaged irreparably. That maybe this was our second chance, an opportunity to atone for the sins of the past and move forward together, happily, the way things were meant to be.

But instead, he hated me. He wanted me out of his life—one way or another. Hell, he’d tried to attack me even though he was trapped in his human form. He had to have known that he stood no chance against me, but he’d still gone for it. He hated me that much. And even though I should have known better, I was devastated.

I wanted him to want me back, but I had no idea how to make that a reality. Was it even possible for us to move past everything we’d done to each other? It still felt like he was my mate, and some of those moments when I’d been pretending to be Cali and I’d been able to pretend Xavier was in love with me had been the best parts of my second life. I’d hoped that maybe now that the truth was out, we could work through things, but I was seeing now that it wouldn’t be so easy.

But I needed his help if I was going to truly become free. Isaiah and Demeter had made it clear that they had their eyes on me, and that they hadn’t taken the bracelet off without expecting a favor in return. I didn’t know what they would ask me for, but I had a feeling it wasn’t going to be something I’d want to give.

I pushed myself harder, despair and panic adding speed to my feet. When I’d kissed Xavier tonight—as my true self and not some cheap facsimile of his Cali—I’d expected our bond to come rushing back. I’d been so sure of it, especially after learning that his wolf had left him. It couldn’t be a coincidence that his wolf had suddenly broken away from him when his old mate had come back into his life. I’d thought for certain it was a sign that we were still meant to be together, that we could pick up where we’d left off, before things had gone so terribly wrong.

And then I’d kissed him, and the bond just hadn’t been there the way it once had. Rage and despair flooded my veins, and I let out a snarl. Something somewhere was broken between us, maybe irreparably so.

And I knew exactly what had broken us—Cali.

Honestly, what the hell did the Evers brothers see in that silly girl? There was nothing all that special about her. Sure, she was pretty enough, but beyond that, what about her had Xavier and Greyson wrapped around her fingers? Based on what Nolan had told me, and my own conclusions I’d gathered while pretending to be Cali, she was nothing more than an impulsive, awkward half-Fae who had somehow swindled two of the strongest werewolves I knew into thinking they loved her.

It wasn’t fair. Xavier was *my* mate. The only person he should love was me, and Cali had no business getting in the middle of things. Cali was probably the reason Xavier’s wolf had separated from him. His wolf knew it belonged with me, but Xavier was too caught up in Cali’s spell to realize what we had.

If Cali had never come into his life, and we’d still received this second chance to be together, would Xavier have reacted differently? Would he have listened to me? His true mate? I had to believe he would have.

If Cali was out of the picture, everything could be as it should be. Xavier would come back to me, and our bond would return. We could still have the future that I so desperately wanted.

I abruptly changed directions and put on another burst of speed, heading toward the Redwood pack house. Cali had spent enough time wrecking my bond with Xavier. It was time to put this—and that imposter—to an end.

I slowed down as I neared the edge of the Redwood property. Now that I no longer looked like Cali and the pack had learned my scent, I’d have to be very careful not to alert any of the pack members. Greyson would want vengeance on me too, no doubt. With any luck, I’d be gone and Cali would be dead long before he realized I’d ever been here.

I slipped into a nearby stream to wash off my scent and shifted back into my human form. Thank god I’d had the foresight to leave a hidden cache of clothing after that debacle when I’d been caught “skinny dipping”. I slipped a dress on and crept toward the house.

I made it to the edge of the yard before my blinding fury ran out and I realized there was no way I’d be able to get to Cali by myself tonight. Not with the pack around her. And now that Greyson knew the truth, he was probably acting as Cali’s bodyguard. There was no way in hell I’d ever be able to fight him and win.

Despair washed over me, and I froze in place. What was I going to do? Where could I go? I didn’t even have a home anymore, now that the Samara pack house had been burned down. And I couldn’t find any trace of my brother. But even if I did find him, would I be able to trust him? He was the one who’d sent me here to pretend to be Cali…

Voices sounded in the distance, and I crept toward them, taking cover behind a bush when I was close enough to make out their conversation. Two pack members were huddled close together. I didn’t know them very well—they’d come back to the pack house with the real Cali. What were their names? Lola and Jay?

“Now that we have the spell book, Big Mac can use the werewolf spell,” Jay said.

“We don’t have the book,” Lola grumbled. “*She* has it now. It’s not like I was going to do anything bad with it. Besides, I’m not sure I even want her to do the spell. What if she takes my wolf away forever?”

I froze. Was this possible? To take a werewolf’s wolf away? What else was in this book? Dozens of new possibilities washed over me. *Maybe I could start a new life.*

The prospect was absolutely intoxicating. I was all alone in the world, after all. I didn’t trust Isaiah, and I didn’t trust Nolan anymore either—not since he’d used me to hurt Xavier. Ever since I’d come back to life, I had been used as a pawn in a game I didn’t understand, and I was tired of it.

And I really, *really* didn’t want to die by Xavier’s hand. Not again.

Determined to find the book and at least learn a bit more about these new options, I crept past Lola and Jay and up to a window on the ground floor. This was Big Mac’s room, the one she shared with Mrs. Smith. The women were locked in a heated embrace. I looked past them and spotted an old book on the bedside table. That had to be the one Jay and Lola were talking about.

I needed to get the witch and her girlfriend out of the room.

A howl echoed through the house, and the two women broke apart and rushed out of the room. I recognized the howl instantly. It was Nolan. Oh god, were they holding him captive somewhere? Should I shift and save him?

The answer came immediately. No. No, I shouldn’t try to save him. Lately all he’d been interested in me for was using me to serve his own vendettas. He’d done nothing to deserve my help, and even if I wanted to help him, I knew I’d be slaughtered in the process. I was so, so sick of this. The constant in-fighting, being trapped in a war I didn’t want to fight on a side I no longer belonged to.

I didn’t want to be a part of this world anymore. And the book was *right there*. I could take it and figure something else out for myself.

And now was my chance.

I snuck up to the window and tried to open it. It wasn’t locked, and it slid open easily. I silently jumped inside, took the heavy book from the nightstand, then snuck back out the window.

Before dashing off into the woods, I took one last look at the Redwood pack house.

*Brother, I hope you’ll forgive me.*

**Episode 796**

JOSS

Ravi was so cute when he slept. He was so peaceful, unburdened and unbothered by everything going on around us. This shitshow we’d all been living in for far too long.

I wondered what it was like to *not* carry the future of the entire pack on your shoulders, what it was like to sleep through the night without worrying what the next day would bring, imagining worst-case scenarios or even weighing an approach to a simple conflict between pack members. No wonder Ravi was sleeping so soundly. He didn’t live in constant fear of breaking what little trust he’d managed to gain with the pack. He didn’t wake up every morning wondering if this would be the day that it became too much and that burden he’d been carrying was finally going to crush him.

I rolled away from him and stared up at the ceiling. I couldn’t sleep. Restlessness buzzed beneath my skin, making my fingers thump against the blanket, urging me to roll this way and that, to think when I should have been sleeping. I might have been the Luna, but I needed rest just as much as anyone else in the pack. I couldn’t afford to lose my head—any misstep could spell disaster for us all.

When the ceiling didn’t prove to be the distraction I’d hoped for, I rolled back and watched Ravi sleep. Sure, it was probably creepy, but I didn’t get the impression he’d care too much if he caught me in the act. Even though our time together had been brief so far, he seemed to understand me on an innate level. One that I’d never experienced before. I smiled softly as I took in his sleeping face. I cared… *so much* about him, and yet he wasn’t my mate. I knew it in my bones, in that deep primal part of me. But he made me so happy. It had stopped being solely about sex some time ago.

But that begged another question that spun around and around in my head: how could you love someone without that mating bond?

Like so many of the other things weighing on me, I didn’t have an answer to that question. When he’d suggested we run away together, I should have put an end to this… whatever we were to each other. But I hadn’t. Because honestly, I wished I *could* run away with him. Things with Ravi were easy, simple, and felt so right. And with Halloween just nine days away, serving as Luna to the pack had never felt so impossible.

I sighed and rolled to my other side, my back facing Ravi. Being Luna to the Redwood pack was so much harder than I’d expected it to be, especially without an Alpha mate to help me out. It was thankless, most of the time. There weren’t many perks, and though I took in pride in all that I’d done for this pack, I didn’t know how much longer I could continue to give it everything and receive so little in return.

Yes, I was being dutiful and responsible and honorable. But what good was all of that if it made me miserable? I’d thought I was leaving that deep unhappiness behind when I’d become Luna, but the prestige hadn’t fixed anything.

Staring into the darkness of my bedroom, I thought about what Big Mac had told me about the Luna mark, that she’d never heard of a Luna having their mark removed, that the Luna/pack bond was so strongly cemented with the ceremony that it was meant to be unbreakable.

But still, Big Mac hadn’t outright said no. “If it’s something you honestly want,” she’d told me, “then I’ll look into it.”

I sighed. I didn’t really know if that was even something I wanted, and I felt like the worst kind of traitor for even considering abandoning the pack, especially now. And while Greyson wasn’t the best Alpha in the world—not by a long shot—I knew I couldn’t dump this on him without even discussing it first.

I rubbed at my temples, where a headache was beginning to bloom. I’d done the best I could with the circumstances I’d been given, and I was proud of that. But did it make me a garbage person to hope for something more?

Suddenly a loud howl echoed through the night, coming from the basement. I froze. *Nolan*. That was my cue.

I slipped out of bed and pulled on some clothes.

“Joss, come back t’bed,” Ravi mumbled sleepily.

I smiled and leaned in to kiss his cheek. “Go back to sleep.” I’d never wanted to crawl under the covers and forget the world more, but I couldn’t ignore this.

It was time to figure out what the hell Nolan had been up to.

I headed down to the basement, and as I moved through the house, other pack members came out of the bedrooms, no doubt also roused by the howls. Greyson, Mrs. Smith, and Big Mac all joined me wordlessly, and we made our way down to the basement.

The moment I stepped into the basement, lit by a single bulb, my hackles raised. Nolan was still secure, tied to a chair with silver chains. What pissed me off was that Cali was already down in the basement, poking Nolan with a large stick. She jabbed the stick into the werewolf’s side so hard, he was too busy snarling at her to notice the rest of us had arrived.

“What. Did. You. Do. With. Xavier?” she shouted, jabbing our captive to punctuate her words.

I rolled my eyes and gave Greyson a pointed look. *You want to get your plaything under control?*

He didn’t take the bait, but he did rush forward to pull her back. “Cali, you shouldn’t be down here, it’s not safe.”

I glared at her as Greyson dragged her over to the doorway. So typical. Of course she’d just rushed in willy-nilly, letting her emotions get the best of her. It was what she did best, wasn’t it? Following every impulse that came along and leaving the rest of us to clean up her mess.

Cali jerked her arm out of Greyson’s grip. “This is exactly what we should be doing! Xavier’s missing, and we all know that the Samara pack must have done something to him.” She pointed her stick at Nolan, almost taking out our captive’s eye in the process. “Nolan has to know where he is!”

“I have no idea where Xavier is,” he growled. “You killed all the pack members who came with me, remember?” He jerked at his chains. “Believe it or not I’ve been kind of caught up with something, and I’m *not* actually a mind reader. So who knows what that idiot is up to? He probably ran off again. Isn’t that his deal? Making messes and running off?”

Cali jabbed the stick into his shoulder. “Don’t talk about him like that!”

Greyson finally confiscated the stick, thank god. He snapped it in half and tossed it to the floor. “This isn’t going to help. Even if Nolan does know something, he’s not going to tell us.”

Nolan smirked. “For once, he’s right.”

“Can’t we do anything?” Cali demanded. She turned to Big Mac. “What about some kind of werewolf truth serum?”

The witch shook her head. “We don’t have anything like that.”

Great. Cali had literally poked the wolf-bear and we had absolutely nothing to show for it. And I had a feeling Nolan would be significantly less interested in opening up and telling us anything after Cali’s stick attack.

“This is a waste of time.” Greyson sighed. “He won’t tell us anything about Silas, either. Just let him rot down here; he’s not worth it.” He turned around and walked back up the stairs.

Cali threw another dirty look at Nolan but, fortunately, followed Greyson out. The rest of us followed suit, leaving our captive alone for now.

As I headed for the kitchen, no doubt where we’d be discussing our next move, Big Mac caught my arm and pulled me into the living room.

“What’s going on?” I asked when we were alone.

Big Mac met my eyes. “Were you serious about wanting to remove your Luna mark?”

“Oh…” I still didn’t know the answer. Did I really want to tie myself to this pack forever? I’d been a Rogue for so long, but it was nice to be part of a community. To feel like I had a place. But the way things had been going lately, spending the rest of my life with this pack was sounding more like a life sentence than an opportunity. “I’m not sure.”

The witch nodded. “Well, I was looking in the spell book before bed last night, and I think I’ve found a way for you to break the Alpha/Luna bond, if that’s what you truly want. But I’m going to need something from you in return.”

**Episode 797**

VIOLET

I woke up to sunlight’s long, warm fingers stretching over my body. I was curled up on the ground in my wolf form, which wasn’t so surprising. When the temperature dipped too low for me to sleep comfortably in my human form, I often found a warm and cozy refuge in my wolf body.

What *was* surprising was that I wasn’t alone. Charlie, also in his wolf form, was curled up next to me. My head jolted up at the realization, first out of confusion. Then the memories from last night filtered in.

We must have fallen asleep while we’d been talking. I felt a twinge of embarrassment at the thought. How irresponsible was it to have slept out here alone together when we could have been found by pretty much anyone? Anyone like, say, the *psychotic Rogue werewolf* who was still on the loose? But as I thought back, I realized that we’d been so caught up in each other last night that the possibility of danger hadn’t even crossed our minds.

As soon as Charlie had told me he was beginning to believe that I was right, that we had some kind of connection he couldn’t explain, all of my logic had flown out the window. Last night had been the most amazing night of my life.

*“What you said about mates…” Charlie said slowly, looking everywhere but my face. “I think you might be on to something.”*

*I waited for him to say more, and I was so afraid of him changing his mind that I could barely breathe, as though the simple act of exhaling too loudly would break the spell.*

*Finally, he met my eyes. “I can’t explain it—and I really, really wish I could—but I feel so… drawn to you. After you went back to Oregon, it felt like I was missing a piece of myself… I don’t think I could stay away from you again, even if I wanted to*.”

*This time I was the one who closed the distance between us. My heart was exploding with happiness, giddiness flooded my veins, and I couldn’t hold myself back any longer. Finally, it was happening! My mate was choosing me!*

*I threw my arms around him and kissed him with the moonlight washing over us. It was absolutely perfect.*

I shifted on my side to take in Charlie’s sleeping form next to me, and awe crept into my heart. I couldn’t believe this beautiful creature, this wonderful man, was really mine. Really and truly mine.

Charlie must have felt my eyes on him, because he began to stir. Slowly, he lifted his head, glancing around in surprise before his gaze landed on me. He shifted back to his human form and I followed suit, taking him in with just as strong a sense of awe as I had when he was a wolf.

His wolf was a gorgeous creature, but I had zero complaints about his human form.

Charlie blinked slowly, like he was still waking up. “I guess we fell asleep out here.” His voice was rough from sleep and disuse, and I wanted nothing more than to curl up in the sound, to hear it every morning for the rest of my life.

I grinned. “I guess so.”

He gave me a sleepy smile, and then froze. “Shit, shit, shit!” He shot to his feet. “I totally just ran off on Sandi last night. She’s going to wonder where I am.”

Just like that, all the happiness and relief blooming in my chest withered away. He was *still* talking about Sandi, even after we’d kissed? What had happened to not being able to stay away from me? Or… Oh god, was he planning to keep us *both* around? I didn’t think my heart could handle that kind of betrayal.

“Oh.” I said, because I had no idea what else to say. “Right. Sandi.”

Charlie saw my face fall and he sighed. “This is all still so complicated, Violet. I didn’t mean for any of it to happen.”

He couldn’t have hurt me worse if he’d tried. My body lurched backward just a bit, like he’d physically sucker-punched me instead of just crushing my heart. Tears stung my eyes, and I blinked them back. How could this be happening? Again? I’d come back for him! I’d come back to help him, and he’d saved my life and we’d mind linked, dammit! Our mate bond was strong, and he’d just admitted believing in it—more or less—and we’d had the most amazing kiss of my entire life!

How could he act like none of that mattered? Like it was all just some stupid mistake?

I was seconds away from turning tail, shifting, and running away. In my mind, I was already booking a flight home to Oregon. I was already erasing his number and cutting him out of my life—

“Violet.” Charlie grabbed my hand, probably more to keep me from running off than anything else. “After last night… I know that I can’t be with Sandi. It’s not fair to her. Not when I feel… whatever this is between us.”

My heart soared just as quickly as it had tanked. God, this guy knew how to inflict emotional whiplash. “So you’re going to break up with Sandi?” I couldn’t even bother to keep the hope out of my voice.

He nodded. “Yes, but I need to get back to her now. I don’t want her thinking something happened to me. Plus, I owe her a conversation.”

I nodded so hard I was sure I looked like a deranged bobblehead. “Oh, totally. Do what you need to do.” I was giddy at the prospect of finally being with my mate, like we were meant to be.

Charlie smiled softly at my response, and then he glanced between our naked bodies and grimaced. “It’s probably better if I go back alone.”

“You’re right. This might look kind of bad, otherwise. And I actually need to check in with some people too.” Hopefully Tom and Orla weren’t too worried about me. Best case scenario, they hadn’t noticed I was gone, but I knew better than to hope for that. “But Charlie, you have to promise me you’ll be careful. It might be daytime, but there’s still a killer wolf on the loose.”

“Don’t worry about me.” He leaned in and brushed his lips over mine. It was a simple, sweet gesture, and I felt heat flooding my cheeks and neck. And then he shifted and ran off, and I was left standing alone on the cliff, grinning like an idiot.

It wasn’t until I’d run most of the way back to the Hart house that my romantic haze cleared enough for me to remember how foolish we’d been to stay in the woods all night after we’d fought that Rogue.

*Well, I just avoided getting murdered by a psychopath, guess it’s as good a time as any to spoon with my mate on a goddamn cliff, where anyone or anything can sneak up on us. God, Violet. It’s a miracle you haven’t gotten yourself killed yet.*

Plus, if there was truly some kind of serial killer werewolf on the loose, I had to do something. So many innocent people had been hurt already, and many more would join them if we didn’t stop the Rogue.

So many more would end up like Lilac. Alone and vulnerable. An easy target.

I stumbled for a step. *Lilac*. What the hell had that been about last night? Had I conjured him in my time of need? He’d given me just enough of a head start for Charlie to catch up and save me. I didn’t even want to think about what would have happened without that precious window of time.

I arrived back at Orla and Tom’s house and snuck in through the back door and up to the guest room to pull on some clothes. When I came back downstairs, I realized the sneaking hadn’t been necessary—Tom and Orla weren’t there. Hopefully they weren’t out looking for me. I’d have to text them, though, just to make sure. I felt a twinge of annoyance at having to check in with them. It wasn’t like I was a child. My eighteenth birthday was coming up in just a few days!

I paced the house, waiting for them and trying not to think about where Charlie was and what he was doing. Was he breaking up with Sandi at this very moment? No, I didn’t want to think about that.

My mind kept circling back to Lilac, no matter how much I tried to focus on other things. It was so strange and horrifying to remember that he wouldn’t be turning eighteen with me. We’d done everything together, and yet now I was reaching this milestone alone. Grief twisted in my chest, and I swallowed back the emotion that threatened to drown me.

Why did I keep seeing his ghost? Did seeing him mean I’d be able to see him again? But how?

Suddenly my cell phone rang, and I jumped. Compared to the silence I’d been stewing in, the sound was deafening. I answered it on the second ring. “Hello?” Was it Charlie? Had he already finished breaking up with Sandi?

But instead of my mate’s voice, I heard a low chuckle that sent a chill down my spine. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, little girl, but if you make any trouble for me I’ll rip out your little mate’s throat.”

**Episode 798**

XAVIER

After spending the entire night in the woods, I finally headed back to the pack house. Exhaustion pressed down on my limbs, and every step sent a jolt of pain through my feet and up to my knees.

After that terrible confrontation with Ava, I’d spent the rest of the night sprinting after my wolf, trying desperately to catch up to it and somehow pull it back into myself. But of course a human body couldn’t compare to the speed and endurance of a wolf—magic or not—and I’d never even come close to catching it.

The whole thing was a mindfuck of epic proportions. I’d never seen my wolf outside of my body before, even when I’d lost it after Ava’s death. What did it mean? Even though I’d lost the trail in an embarrassingly short amount of time, I’d still spent the night trying to somehow call it back into me. I hated being without the other half of myself. I was weak, vulnerable, and helpless. In my human body, all my senses were muted, and my instincts were wrong. My body didn’t move right, either. It was all gangly, clumsy limbs and exposed skin.

I slowed as I made my way through the forest on the outskirts of the property. What the hell was I going to tell the others? I didn’t want anyone to know, but how could I keep something so important from them when there was a battle looming on the horizon? Halloween was only nine days away, which meant that a little over a week from now, everyone would find out the truth—one way or another.

And—most importantly—what would Cali think about all this? She knew that the last time I’d lost my wolf had been because of Ava. Would she think this meant that I was still tied to Ava above all? I wouldn’t blame her mind for going there, especially since Ava had successfully paraded around with Cali’s face and I hadn’t realized until it was far too late. Still, just imagining Cali thinking she didn’t completely have my heart and soul sent chills down my spine.

I blew out a breath. No more hiding out in the woods and chasing after ghosts. I felt a visceral urge to get back to the pack house, to see Cali’s face again, to feel the familiar comfort of her presence. She was my everything, and if I didn’t have my wolf to protect her on Halloween, when she needed it most, I’d never be able to forgive myself.

Finding my wolf had to be my first priority, but I couldn’t just bail on my mate without explaining what was wrong, and how I intended to fix it. Because I was going to have to leave again, and soon, if I wanted to go through with the plan that I hoped against hope would lure my wolf back to me. But first, Cali. And the rest of the pack—including Greyson—because they were all a package deal these days.

God, I did not want to have that conversation with my brother.

I took a deep breath, dreading the thought of facing everyone, and stepped into the yard.

Everything looked perfectly calm as I approached the house, as if I hadn’t been visited by the ghost of my mom, had a weird encounter with my former mate, and then spent the rest of the night chasing after my own wolf.

As I got closer to the back porch, the back door swung open and Cali shot out of the house, racing toward me without slowing. She barreled straight into my arms. If the joy of seeing her again wasn’t enough to knock the breath from my lungs, her body slamming into mine sure was.

Still, I wrapped my arms tightly around her, closing my eyes and savoring the sensation of her body pressed against mine. And there it was, humming between us like a living thing. Our mate bond. Relief plowed into me, and I buried my face in Cali’s neck with a sigh. Our bond was still there. I hadn’t lost it when my wolf had decided to go AWOL.

I held Cali tight for a long string of seconds, just breathing her in, before she wriggled in my arms to put some distance between us. Then she whacked me on the chest, harder than I would have expected. I tried not to grimace at the sting.

“Where have you been?” she demanded. “You scared the crap out of me!”

Laughter bubbled out of me. “There’s the Cali I know.” And then something moved in my peripheral vision, near the back porch, and I froze.

Greyson stepped onto the lawn, heading toward us, his expression completely unreadable. “Where the hell have you been?” Greyson demanded. And though his words were almost identical to Cali’s, the snarled delivery and fact that it had come from… well, not my least favorite person in the world, but pretty damn close, set my teeth on edge. If my wolf form had deigned to have anything to do with me these days, I knew its hackles would’ve been lifting at this challenge.

I shrugged. “I just needed some air.”

“Air?” Greyson repeated, his lips twisting into a frown. “For hours? Are you fucking kidding me? You can’t just go disappearing into the woods right now!”

A litany of responses rushed to the tip of my tongue, none of them particularly polite, but I stopped before I let them fly. Something was… off. Cali eased herself out of my arms, inching ever so slightly closer to Greyson, though they weren’t touching. Still, there was something in Greyson’s protective body language around her—the way he stepped ever so slightly in front of her like she was his to protect, even from me—and Cali’s awkward response to it, shuffling her feet and folding and unfolding her arms, that set off alarm bells in my head.

Something had changed between the two of them. I knew it deep in my bones. But what had happened? Was it the curse?

But before I could figure out how to ask what the fuck was going on, Big Mac made her way across the lawn. “Look who decided to show up!” she called.

I smirked at the witch, falling into my careless persona. “I was just blowing off some steam.”

She gave me a look that meant she didn’t believe me. “Great. Have any of you three taken the spell book, by any chance?”

Greyson rounded on the witch. “What?”

Cali and I both shook our heads, and Big Mac sucked in a breath and let out a long-suffering sigh. “The spell book that Cali and Lola stole from Vancouver Island. It was in my room last night, and now it’s missing.”

*Well, shit.*

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A short time later, Greyson gathered the entire pack in the living room to discuss the missing spell book, which meant I was also paraded in front of the pack, who all welcomed me back with more warmth than I probably deserved.

Joss, of course, had tried to give me a lecture for “going Rogue,” but thanks to the stolen spell book, my recent behavior was no longer quite such a big deal.

Cali, I noticed immediately, didn’t pick a spot next to me, and when I moved over to sit near her, she was still awkward. I couldn’t figure out what was wrong with her, but I got the sense that it had something to do with Greyson. After all, she’d been her normal self with me on the lawn—right up until Greyson had interrupted us.

Even now, she kept sneaking glances at me under her eyelashes and then looking away, over at Greyson at the head of the group. I leaned over to say something to her, but then Joss stood up to speak.

“If anyone took the book, they need to speak up now,” the Luna said.

“It’s full of ancient, powerful magic,” Big Mac said. “It’s not something to play around with.”

Everyone denied having any involvement with the disappearance of the book, and then there was a beat of silence as that realization sank in.

“So who has it, then?” Joss asked.

“Maybe the library has some kind of magical return policy?” Cali said, looking stricken. “Could it have been called back somehow?”

Lola groaned. “That book could have helped us!”

Chaos broke out, with all of the pack members speculating on who might have taken it, and even accusing each other of stealing the book. In the hubbub, Mrs. Smith stumbled and accidentally spilled her steaming white chocolate mocha all over Greyson’s shirt. He leapt up with a curse and tugged his shirt off.

Gasps echoed through the room, everyone’s eyes zeroing in on the veins on Greyson’s chest. My jaw dropped. Greyson had them now, too? The veins had appeared on my chest when Cali had given me her blood. I’d thought it had been because of our mate bond. I’d been sure of it.

I inched closer to Cali, determined to find out what had happened. “Hey, Cal—”

She spun around to face me, and her hair swung over her shoulders. A new scent washed over me, coming straight from Cali, and all the puzzle pieces snapped into place.

My stomach bottomed out. “Did you sleep with Greyson?”

**Episode 799**

No one said anything. They all just looked at me, waiting for me to speak. I could feel their eyes on me, and the attention made my skin crawl. I felt trapped under their collective gaze. My chest tightened like it was being squeezed by some kind of giant vice. My eyes kept ping-ponging between Greyson and Xavier.

I had to say something. I’d known on some level that the truth was always going to come out, but I’d hoped to do this privately.

I could see Xavier getting increasingly upset. His hands were clenched into fists, and his jaw was working as he ground his teeth. Every second I didn’t speak, I was extending his misery.

“You really thought you’d be able to keep something like that a secret?” Xavier asked me, his voice cold. “Just because you guys took a shower, doesn’t mean I can’t smell it on you.”

If I hadn't been bright red before, I was now. I wanted to melt, to run away, to somehow not exist anymore. This was mortifying.

As much as I just wanted to look at my feet, I forced myself to meet Xavier’s gaze. He deserved that from me, at least. I expected to see him fuming, nostrils flaring, the vein in his forehead throbbing. But instead, he just looked utterly devastated.

I felt sick to my stomach.

“We don’t have time for your little soap opera,” Joss cried out, frustrated. “You two”—she pointed at Xavier and me—“go talk it out and don’t come back until it’s settled. We can’t get to the bottom of what’s happened to the spell book with you sucking all the oxygen out of the room.”

Greyson stood up and moved toward me, clearly wanting to help me. But Joss put her hands on her hips and glared at him, practically daring him to take another step.

“You need to stay here,” she ordered.

“I’m the Alpha here,” Greyson reminded her, clearly taking umbrage at her tone. “And I’ll go wherever I want to go.”

*Greyson, please,* I pleaded through our mind link. *Let me talk to Xavier alone. It’ll only be harder if you’re there.*

Greyson froze, clearly taken aback. I hated pushing him away, but I knew right now it was for the best. He slowly sank back down onto the couch, giving me an apologetic grimace.

*I’m sorry, love,* he told me, turning to face Joss and masking his emotions. *I know this is awful for you. Will you be okay?*

I honestly had no idea. It felt like I was being torn apart. My mind was reeling, and I didn’t know if I could make it through another hour feeling like this. But I didn’t have a choice.

I got up and turned to Xavier. He must have known Greyson and I were talking, but he didn’t say anything. He just turned and walked toward the porch. I followed him.

I took a deep breath of fresh air once we got outside, hoping it would steady me. Xavier sat down in one of two deck chairs that were several feet away from each other. I took the other, feeling like the distance between us was widening more with every second, even though we were in the same place.

I squeezed my eyes shut and took in another shaky breath. How was I going to do this?

I opened my eyes. Xavier was staring over my shoulder at the woods. I could practically see him imagining leaping off the porch, shifting, and getting as far away from this conversation as possible.

*Can you please look at me?* I asked him through our mind link, not trusting my voice.

He flinched at my words but didn’t move.

*Please,* I tried again. Still nothing.

He was so still, like he was turning into stone before my eyes. Hardening. Did he feel so betrayed that he was shutting down? Would he stop fighting for me? For us? It scared me to see him like this. Like a part of him was dying.

Unable to take the silence a second longer, I blurted out, “Please just say something, Xavier.”

He sighed wearily and finally looked up to meet my eyes. He looked older than I’d ever seen him. He’d been through so much, and that was easy to forget when he looked just like any other guy his age. But he wasn’t just any other guy.

“I don’t know what to say, Cali,” he admitted. And it felt like a punch in the stomach.

“Xavier, I’m sorry,” I said, the words tumbling out faster than I could control. “I know you must feel awful. And I don’t know what to tell you to make it better. But, please understand… Things are complicated with Greyson, and I *told* you I needed to figure this out. To try—”

Xavier gave a dry little laugh.

“To try fucking my brother?” he scoffed, but the words barely had bite, he was so resigned. “I’m sure it was a real chore trying to make an informed decision, Cali.”

Xavier’s fists were resting on the armrests of the chair, and I watched them clench so hard I could see every tendon and vein underneath his skin.

“Do you seriously think I asked for this?” I cried out, my composure completely dissolving. “You slept with Ava!”

“And I thought she was you!” he growled. “There’s a big fucking difference, Cali!”

He was right, but my composure was totally gone. I pulled down my shirt, showing off the swirling dark veins painted all over my skin. I shivered in the cold October air, but I didn’t give a shit if I caught a cold. I had a point to prove.

“This is *killing me*!” I shouted at him, tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. “Literally!”

Xavier jumped like I’d poured a bucket of cold water on him.

“What do you mean, literally?” he asked, the anger still there but now paired with concern.

I choked out a sob and the tears started to fall in earnest. I couldn’t keep holding all of this stuff in. It wasn’t helping anyone. It was just hurting us all.

“We have to face facts.” I forced the words out of my mouth. “The *due destini* is real. And this curse isn’t just affecting me—it’s affecting all three of us. If we don’t figure this out, we… we’re all going to die.”

I clapped my hand over my mouth, ashamed at myself for blurting it out like that. It wasn’t how I wanted Xavier to find out about the details. Not at all. But it wasn’t like I could take it back.

I wondered if I should’ve been telling him about the Halloween deadline. But maybe that was too much to pile on one person at once. I wanted to give him some time and space to process.

Xavier, for his part, looked stunned. His hands twitched and he jerkily reached out toward me. I felt hopeful, eager to feel his touch. But he pulled back at the last minute, and the desperation settled inside my chest. I was losing him.

Xavier shook his head. His jaw was so tight, I was worried his bones might shatter. I knew he’d been hurt by all of this, but I could also sense that there was something different about him.

He seemed… lost. Like the Xavier I’d met way back at the beginning of everything. Closed off and cold. Anger masking fear.

Finally, Xavier leaned in close and took my hands. He looked me in the eye, and I couldn’t believe how sad he looked. It broke my heart even more—if that was even possible.

“I love you,” he told me, his voice close to breaking. “And I know—from the bottom of my heart—that you are my mate. You—”

He cut himself off. And I could tell he was trying to choose his words carefully. To say what he meant and not just lash out. He took a deep breath and tried again.

“What’s done is done,” he said. “I can’t change what’s happened, and it doesn’t seem like I can tell you not to be with Greyson right now.”

He looked up, like he was trying to keep from crying. I squeezed his hands, trying to give him any support I could offer. Letting him know he could take his time to say what he needed to say.

He gave me a tight smile.

“I know you well enough to know that telling you not to do something is just going to make you do exactly that thing.” He huffed a little laugh and I joined him, struggling to find any lightness in this moment. “I have some… things I have to work out. Really big things.”

He looked down at our hands and I wondered what he was talking about. Ava? His father? Something else I didn’t even know about, because we’d been so distant lately?

“And I need to make sure I’m ready for whatever comes next,” he told me, but it sounded like he was trying to convince himself as well. “But I want you to know this: no matter what you do, who you choose, where you go… I will come for you. I will *be there* at the end. And I will never give up on you, or on us. I swear, Cali.”

“What are you saying?” I asked him, confused by his speech. It felt like there was so much I didn’t know. So much I wished I could help him with. But he seemed to have decided that he needed to handle things alone.

Xavier stood up and started to walk away.

“Xavier?” I called after him, not ready for our talk to be over. Not ready to get left again for something I didn’t understand.

“You’re mine, Cali,” he told me, seeming lighter than before. Like a weight had been lifted. “And when I have my wolf back, I’ll prove it to you.”

**Episode 800**

GREYSON

I sat staring straight ahead, trying to focus and pretend that a bomb hadn’t just gone off in front of my entire pack. That the woman I loved hadn’t just left the room to sort things out with my brother. Now, I had to sit here instead of helping her through it, and the guilt made it almost impossible to sit still. Xavier was angry with Cali because of a decision she and I had *both* made. But because of Joss, because of the pack, she had to deal with the fallout alone.

I didn’t feel guilty for what we’d done. For finally letting go and being with her. For proving to her that I could and would always do everything in my power to make her feel good. Adored. Worshipped, even.

I knew in my bones that crossing that line and finally sleeping together had been the right thing to do. And I would do it again. In fact, I was really hoping to.

The feeling of her naked body pressed against mine was seared into my memory. It felt like the world had been reduced to this tiny pinpoint, where it was just us, just what had happened in that room, in that bed, between us. I’d never felt anything like it.

The intimacy, the connection, the heat…

I shook my head. I had a pack meeting to focus on. I’d promised Joss that I would step up as Alpha, and I knew I needed to take that responsibility seriously right now. There were lives on the line that I was responsible for.

Also, I really didn’t want to prove her right when she’d just scolded me in front of everyone.

And unfortunately, that meant listening to everybody squabble while we tried to get to the truth of what happened to the spell book Lola had brought back from Vancouver Island. No matter how frustrating it got.

“Perhaps someone was so scared of losing their wolf, they decided to steal the book back,” Big Mac suggested, pointedly not looking in Lola’s direction.

“Are you *kidding* me?” Lola squealed. “That makes absolutely no sense!”

“Why would she take it back?” Jay was quick to back Lola up, while also placing a hand on her thigh to restrain her. “She needs your help to use it. She brought it to you.”

Artemis’s brow furrowed as she glanced at Lola. Something in her gaze was critical. I wondered what she knew. If it didn’t come out in this shouting match, perhaps I’d try to get it out of her later. How was *that* for being a good Alpha?

“Hey!” I stood up, holding up my hands and putting on my sternest Alpha voice. “Everyone, *quiet*.”

Almost immediately, silence fell over the pack. Their eyes all landed on me, and I felt the weird mixture of pride and guilt that came with the job.

“Look, if everyone says they don’t have the book, then I believe it,” I told them all. I knew that paranoia was our problem here. Ava had come here and created mistrust that had no basis in reality. I wasn’t a perfect Alpha, but I knew the people in this pack. I saw them clearly. They weren’t liars.

I felt the tension in the room start to dissipate. Everyone’s shoulders seemed to relax a bit, like they knew they didn’t have to be so defensive anymore.

“Now’s not the time to be pointing fingers at each other,” I reminded them. “With Halloween coming up, we have to come together as a pack and start trusting each other. Because if you can’t go into this fight knowing that the person next to you, the person behind you, the person in front of you has your back, then we might as well give up now.”

I saw a few of them nodding, like they knew what I was saying was true. But all of this stuff was easier said than done. So I had to lead the way. That was what it meant to be a leader.

“I know I haven’t been present recently,” I admitted. “But that’s not because of a lack of faith in all of you. I’ve been trying to de-escalate all of this. To save us from a dangerous fight. But I want you to know, my head is in this. I am here for each and every one of you. I want to help solve all our problems. Not just the ones that involve my scheming, conniving, bloodthirsty father.”

Jay chuckled, and I saw Rishika crack a smile. Maybe I could pull this off.

“So why don’t we stop pointing fingers at each other and spend our time working on the things we know we can do, instead?” I asked, hoping I was making the right call. “Everyone, go attend to your duties for the day. Let’s focus on keeping ourselves safe.”

All of them started standing up, a few of them looking to Joss, who actually nodded for them to listen to me. It felt strange to know how much my Luna had stepped up lately, to the point where some people were deferring to her. But I had to remind myself that she’d been holding the reins for a while. It was about trust—not a lack of respect.

The room started to clear out. But when Big Mac and Mrs. Smith filed past me, I stopped them.

“Big Mac.” I held a hand up. “Could you take me to the last place you saw the book?”

“Very well,” she answered, clearly still not fully warmed up to me.

But that didn’t matter. This book had powerful magic in it, and the idea that Silas could have gotten his hands on it made me incredibly worried. The spells in there were ancient and strong. What he’d already done with the orb had nearly torn us apart. What would he do with an even greater weapon?

I had no doubt it would be horrible.

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith led me up to the room Big Mac had been staying in. I tried to remind myself to be patient with whatever magic bullshit she told me—Big Mac wasn’t always great at being straightforward.

“That’s where it was last,” Big Mac told me, pointing to a dresser next to the window.

I walked over to the standard-looking wooden dresser. Nothing seemed out of place. I took a deep inhale and smelled Big Mac, Mrs. Smith, and… something else. Someone foreign. But I couldn’t quite place it, it was so faint.

I poked around a bit, trying to follow the scent, but it was mostly contained to just the window and the dresser.

“Do you mind if I…?” I pointed to the dresser.

“Please,” Big Mac gave me a big, fake smile. “Search through my things.”

I opened the drawer and noticed a bit more of the scent, but nothing that helped me put a name to it. It didn’t seem like this person I was smelling had touched anything but the book.

“Do you remember if either of you left the window open?” I asked.

“I can’t recall, I’m sorry,” Mrs. Smith said.

“If you two don’t need me,” Big Mac piped up, “I think I’ll go look into some locator spells. Maybe we can track it down that way.”

“Sure.” I waved her off.

And then I was left there with Mrs. Smith. Alone. I wondered if that would ever stop being awkward, especially given the way our last interaction had gone.

Mrs. Smith cleared her throat loudly. “How are you… holding up?” she asked, feigning nonchalance. “Things with Cali seem… complicated. Would you have any interest in talking about it?”

Oh god.

I couldn’t think of a thing I wanted to talk to my mother about less. *Mother*. That word still felt weird to use.

“I know a fair amount about complicated romantic entanglements with magical beings,” she offered softly.

“I really don’t want to talk about it right now,” I told her curtly. “I want to focus on saving us from Silas.”

I was also *very* not interested in hearing about her relationship with Big Mac right now.

“And do you think there’s anyone in this house who wants to see him destroyed more than I do, Greyson?” she asked, bristling and standing up to her full height. “More than *us?*”

Well, when she put it like that…

“You’re right,” I nodded, softening. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” Mrs. Smith gave me a soft smile and took a step toward me. “I’m on your side in all this. I meant what I said about wanting to help… and wanting to be there for you. As a… mother.”

I felt lost for words. I’d never been offered something like this. Parental support. Not sure what else to do, I gave her a small nod.

Mrs. Smith stepped forward again, spreading her arms out for a hug. She moved slowly, so I could pull away if I wanted to. But I didn’t want to.

She wrapped her arms around me and I did the same. A hug from my mother. It felt… nice. Safe.

But after a few seconds, I felt the need to pull back. I opened my mouth to talk, but was shocked to see Xavier appear in the doorway. His expression was dark and stormy.

That expression told me most of what I needed to know about his conversation with Cali. He pointed at me, the accusation clear. He looked positively murderous. So I decided to cut him off before he could get going.

“Xavier,” I started, my tone a warning.

“I can smell her,” he said. “This room reeks of Ava.”

“What?” I said. “Ava took the spell book? You’re sure?”

“Her as a human, I’m sure,” he said. “I’ll kill her. I’m going to find her and fucking kill her.”

“Stop. You need to think, Xavier,” I said. “Halloween is coming, and it’s nearly the full moon. You know what we’re about to face. We need everyone to defend this pack. Your pack.”

“Oh, so now it’s my pack too? You’re only saying that because you need me.” Xavier laughed bitterly. “I’m leaving.”

Of fucking course. “Are you so focused on one thing that you can’t look at the bigger picture here?” I asked.

“I *am* thinking about my pack,” Xavier snapped, getting in my face. “And I want you to know that when I come back, I intend to challenge you as Alpha.”

**Episode 801**

XAVIER

Greyson and Mrs. Smith gaped at me. Mrs. Smith’s eyes flitted between Greyson and me like she was wondering if there was anything she could say to de-escalate the situation. At least, I assumed that was what she was thinking. She’d always been a peace keeper.

But there was no way to un-ring this bell. We were going to have to have it out.

“I think I’m going to give you two some space.” Mrs. Smith slipped between us and rushed out of the room as fast as she could, closing the door softly behind her.

Which left Greyson and me alone, glaring at each other. In any other situation, we might have fought, but we both knew that was pointless right now. The pack wouldn’t survive if either of us was out of commission for Halloween.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” Greyson growled at me. “Be honest with me—did your dick just take over your brain?”

But I didn’t let him rile me.

“I think I’m seeing things pretty clearly,” I told him, refusing to back down. “And what I see is making me think I should put my foot down. You’re still new here, but I’m not. This pack was supposed to be mine. It is my right, and we both know it. And I want it back.”

Greyson scoffed and I started to see red. Was he really going to pretend that he hadn’t taken everything from me? That he hadn’t swooped in out of nowhere, saying he was going to help?

In what world was *he* the one who had the right to be indignant right now?

“I beat you—”

“At the Lupo Finale.” I finished his sentence, making it clear I wasn’t disputing that. “But that wasn’t a fair fight. I think we both know what would have happened if I’d been at my full strength. Maybe next time *you* should be poisoned with silver to make it even.”

“Seriously?” Greyson asked, incredulous. “Is that fucking right? Then why wait? I’m ready right now. You want to fight, Xavier? Let’s fight.”

I could see the light in his eyes, the way his hands balled up into fists. I could practically taste the bloodlust in the air between us. Greyson was ready, and I wished with my whole heart I could fight right now.

But I had lost my wolf, and I wasn’t about to tell Greyson that. I refused to reveal any weakness—not just after I’d practically declared war. There was no way he wouldn’t use that weakness against me.

It wasn’t difficult to imagine him telling the others. *“Do you really want an Alpha who’s lost his wolf… twice?”*

Greyson was a master of manipulation. I wasn’t going to give him a cudgel to beat me to death with.

Plus, I was going to get my wolf back. I had a plan. I just needed a couple of days, and then I’d be myself again.

“Not now.” I shook my head. “When we do this, we’ll do it right. We’ll follow the rules. I don’t want to risk you trying to say it was an illegitimate takeover. The next full moon is a couple weeks after Halloween.”

It was hard to picture a time beyond Halloween. Lately, we’d all been consumed by preparations for the battle. The whole pack had been working so hard. Even then, I couldn’t lie and say I wasn’t scared we might lose. But we’d get nowhere if we didn’t plan to win.

“I’ll follow you through whatever comes at Halloween,” I told Greyson. “I’ll do what’s right for the pack. But if we both make it out of the fight alive, there are gonna be some big changes around here.”

Greyson crossed his arms. He looked at me, apparently still stunned. But I wondered if maybe, just maybe, he was also a little bit impressed.

“I can’t believe you would do this right now.” He shook his head in disbelief. “You’re an idiot. You can talk all you want about how you’re doing this because of Silas or the pack, but it’s about Cali. The timing alone makes that pretty obvious. You’re jealous. But it’s not my fault Cali and I have this connection. It’s not my fault that she’s my mate. But it is time for you to accept it.”

So much for being impressed. Greyson was talking to me like I was a child—someone too selfish and immature to be reasoned with. The kind of person who could only be criticized, embarrassed, or muscled back into submission.

And I really didn’t think that point of view had any validity. At least not until he’d had the audacity to call Cali *his* mate.

Because that made me angry. White-hot, spitting mad. I’d thought I had a handle on it, that I’d be able to do this maturely—be upfront, tell Greyson what I wanted to tell him, and then leave.

But right now, I was wishing I could shift just so I could leap across the room and rip his throat out. But I had to keep it together.

So I stepped up to him and made sure to get in his face.

“Cali is *my* mate,” I hissed. “Not yours. At the end of the day, it’ll be *us.* Together. I’ll be Alpha and she’ll be my Luna. Like it was always meant to be. Like it was going to be before you showed up to ruin everything.”

I was trying to play it as cool as I could, but I was shaking with rage. I didn’t have a handle on my emotions, and I was this close to losing control entirely.

I wished that Colton were with me, that he had my back, that we could take Greyson on together. But he wasn’t here, which meant I had to get the hell out of this room before this whole situation could boil over.

I turned on my heel and stalked out of the room, down the stairs, and out the door. Once I reached the yard, I paused and turned back.

I wished I could go back to Cali.

I wanted to hold her, to talk to her, to tell her why I was leaving—that it wasn’t like before. I wasn’t trying to escape anything. I was trying to get something to bring back with me. To make us better and stronger. But I didn’t know how to make her understand.

I meant what I’d said—I was sure she’d be mine in the end. I just needed to make this right and come back as soon as possible, so I could be there for Cali and the pack.

With a twist in my chest, I turned and headed into the woods. I kept a close eye on the ground, searching for a specific shrub. I remembered exactly what it looked like. Colton had kept pushing it on me, the first time my wolf had left—well, that and various girls before Cali’d come around.

But I hadn’t wanted it back then. I’d been a shell of my former self, completely hollow, with barely any fight left in me. It hadn’t been until I’d met Cali that I’d remembered why I’d fought in the first place.

It was like the spark in me had gone out, and she’d reignited it.

And now I needed to get it started again so I could fight for her. I needed to believe that the fire could burn again. And it could. Because she’d taught me how.

Sure, it was different this time. This time, I was fighting for her. This time, I’d have to use the plan I’d always written off as dumb hippy bullshit from Colton. But with my entire future at stake, I’d do whatever it took.

But first I needed a real plan. To calm down and make some choices.

And that was when I spotted the shrub. Green, leafy, with tiny vines clinging tight to the forest floor. I carefully pulled it out at the roots and snapped them off.

I looked at the pile of dirty tubers in my hands and sniffed at it.

This was so stupid.

But Colton had said it would work, and I didn’t have any other choice. I’d have to trust him for now.

I popped it into my mouth and chewed. I winced at the grimy taste of dirt on my tongue, at the bitterness of the root. But I chewed and swallowed it down all the same.

I stood there for a several minutes, feeling stupider and stupider with every second that passed. Had I really had this whole epiphany only for the stupid plant not to work?

Of course. Of fucking course.

I’d forgotten who I was, forgotten that nothing was ever easy for me—that just wasn’t how my world had ever worked. Why the hell would it change now?

Time to come up with a Plan B.

But then, suddenly, everything went black.

**Episode 802**

LOLA

Jay sat on the bed and watched me pace back and forth across our room while I fumed. I was furious. Beyond pissed.

We had gone all the way to *fucking Canada*. I’d spoken with a gargoyle that had come to life. We’d faced weird clones of ourselves and dealt with a creepy witch librarian. And, yeah, we’d had some really good sex after we’d come in contact with a particular sculpture.

But what mattered was that we had risked our *lives* to get that book from the library. To bring it here so I could save myself from all the problems I was having with shifting.

And now it was just gone.

“I should never have let Big Mac take it from me,” I finally said out loud, the words spilling out of me in an increasingly intense monologue. “What are we going to *do* now? The spell needed to happen on the horned moon. On Halloween—which is becoming a scarier day by the second. Which I’m telling you completely devoid of any irony because OBVIOUSLY HALLOWEEN IS SUPPOSED TO BE SCARY.”

I was really cooking now. I could feel my cheeks heating up. I must have been bright red. The turns I was making every time I reached a wall were getting more and more violent. Nothing at elbow height was safe as I pumped my arms at my sides so I could walk even faster.

“And now, if we don’t get the book back before then and get everything we need for the ritual,” I continued, wanting to scream with frustration, “I could be messed up forever!”

“Lola.” Jay’s voice was low and full of warning.

But I didn’t answer him—I just kept pacing. I had more nervous energy to burn off than I knew how to deal with. I couldn’t stop walking. Because if I stopped, all of this could catch up with me.

“Lola,” Jay tried again, leaping up from the bed and grasping me by the shoulders. He held me still and looked me right in the eye.

“That’s not true,” he told me. “The horned moon happens a few times a year. Halloween is not our only shot at this.”

“But Cali,” I argued, pulling at another thread in the tapestry that was all of our problems. “What about her?”

“We didn’t find anything in the book to help her,” he reminded me. “Why don’t we see if Big Mac has anything else we could look at? Books, scrolls, blogs, whatever she has.”

I snorted. Jay gave me a look.

“You really think she’d let us look through her stuff?” I asked him, raising an eyebrow. “I think we’d sooner have a better chance of going to a real library and opening an encyclopedia.”

“You’ve never opened an encyclopedia, have you?” Jay countered. “Maybe we should take some time and ask her. Try to look through what she has. She’s a witch. She’s got to have spells somewhere.”

But the idea of sitting here for hours on end pouring through dusty old books sounded unbearable to me. I was agitated. Panic was squeezing my chest like a vice—for Cali and for me.

“What if we missed our chance to fix it all?” I asked him, my voice small and scratchy.

The second the words escaped my lips, I felt a hot flash go through my body. I wanted to shift. *Now*.

It was like my wolf was climbing the walls of its cage inside me.

“Whoa.” Jay looked at me wide-eyed, stepping back to give me room. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, Lola!”

But I felt no reaction to his fear. No desire to placate him or de-escalate what was happening to me. I just wanted to run. To get away from all of this.

Almost like he could read my mind, Jay leapt in front of the door. But he was no match for me in his human form. I fell to my knees, shifting before they could even hit the ground. The nails of my claws dug into the carpet. But it felt wrong to be here.

I wanted the forest floor under my feet.

I lunged at Jay, growling, but veered away at the last moment. I didn’t want to kill him, I just wanted to scare him. Get him out of my way.

But he stood his ground.

*Lola.* He mind linked with me, his tone low and soothing. *Try to calm down. Remember who you are. Who I am. You’re okay, we’re going to be okay. I love you, and we’re going to figure this out together.*

But it was like he was speaking a different language. Why was he talking about this? I wanted to *run.*

Confused, I growled at him and stumbled back a bit, still trying to figure out what his words meant. It was like the human part of me was hanging on, trying to reach up and surface and explain it to the wolf.

Jay reached out tentatively and put a hand on my side. He meant to soothe me, but the second he touched me I felt the human part of me disappear.

I turned and jumped out the open window, bolting into the woods. Barely touching the ground as I leapt and bounded toward the trees.

For a moment, it was pure bliss. My mind was empty. I just took it all in. The stretch of my muscles, the sight of the trees flying around me… It was almost like I was still, and everything else was moving.

It felt like flying. Pure and simple.

I could take on anything.

But then I caught a strange scent. An unfamiliar wolf. It was old. The wolf who’d left it wasn’t nearby anymore. But still, I felt curious.

I slowed down and followed the scent all the way to a pile of clothing close to the pack house. I moved toward it carefully. I didn’t know why, but I was filled with this strange sense that something bad was about to happen.

A chill ran down my spine and before I knew what was going on, I had shifted back to human.

Now, standing in the forest completely naked, I couldn’t shake the feeling of unease. I took a few more steps toward the pile of clothes. I got the feeling I’d seen it before, but I couldn’t place it. And the human scent on the clothes was unfamiliar, too.

I scooped the pile up into my arms, feeling shaky and afraid and out of control. I’d shifted again without meaning to. Guilt and shame were starting to creep in.

Why couldn’t I keep myself under control? Why couldn’t I just be normal?

I stood there, clutching the clothes to my chest. Something was telling me I had to take them with me. That the pack needed to know that I’d found signs of an unfamiliar female wolf shifting in the woods. That couldn’t be a good thing, right?

I started jogging back to the house on shaky legs. My breath was coming out ragged. I felt tired and on edge, like after the night I’d blacked out in the woods in Minnesota. I felt out of control and afraid of what I might do.

Dread filled my stomach like lead. My senses stretched out, trying to protect me. But as a result, the slightest rustle of leaves in the wind had me jumping.

I couldn’t keep living like this. I had to find a way to fix it.

I remembered the way Jay had looked when I’d started to shift in our bedroom. The fear in his eyes. The worry. The resignation. All because he knew he couldn’t control me, knew that I was going to do whatever I was going to do, and he could only do so much to stop it.

I hated myself for making him feel that way. Like I was dangerous and unpredictable. I could have hurt him so easily. I hadn’t, this time.

But what about next time?

Because until I fixed this, there would always be a next time.

I finally made my way out of the trees and into the yard. Luckily, it was empty and I was able to creep in through the back door. No one was in the back of the house, and I raced up the stairs as fast as I could and darted into my bedroom.

But Jay wasn’t there.

He was probably out looking for me, scared and worried and defeated. I didn’t want that for him. I didn’t want it for either of us.

I slipped on some clothes and snuck a glimpse at myself in the mirror.

“See?” I told my reflection. “Not a wolf.”

But before I could head downstairs and start my search for Jay, I heard something. A commotion. Things breaking, people crying out.

Shit.

I ran downstairs and saw the pack all gathered around someone. A chiseled, muscular silhouette loomed in the doorway. Greyson pushed his way to the front.

His movements were quick and aggressive, and suddenly I couldn’t breathe. What was happening?! Was this Silas? I thought we had until Halloween!

“Who are you?” Greyson growled. “What do you want?”

The man took a step closer to Greyson, getting up in his face. When he spoke, his voice was raspy and deep.

“I’m here to take what’s mine.”

**Episode 803**

Was locking myself in my room the most mature thing I’d ever done? No.

But after the conversation I’d had with Xavier—when he’d walked away from me, left me again—I needed some time away from the others.

My headphones were blasting my “Sorry For Myself” playlist, and I was lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling. Willing myself not to fall apart. I couldn’t bear to face anyone right now.

My mind was racing, and I couldn’t settle down enough to figure out what my head, my heart, and my body were actually trying to point me toward. Mostly because it felt like they disagreed. Everything was such a tangled-up mess.

Halloween was nine days away, and I was no closer to finding any kind of solution than I had been when I’d arrived at the library. Maybe I should have told Xavier about the deadline. But it just hadn’t seemed like the right time.

He’d been so angry about me and Greyson, like he was on the verge of snapping. And somehow, telling him that we needed to wrap this all up in only nine days’ time hadn’t seemed like a helpful fact to add.

I reached for my nightstand and grabbed Cassandra’s diary. Because, at this point, what else did I have to turn to? Just the act of holding it was comforting. It was nice, feeling a connection to someone who’d gone through the same thing.

I was grateful that the journal hadn’t been taken along with the spell book, because it was the only thing in the world that made me feel less alone. And that was a relief—as long as I was careful to avoid thinking about how Cassandra and her mates’ lives had ended.

I groaned.

“What’s next, Cali?” I grumbled to myself. “Are you going to tell yourself not to think about pink elephants?”

Of course, now all I could think about was how Cassandra and her mates’ lives had ended. How mine and my mates’ lives might end. Would we throw ourselves off a cliff? Drown ourselves? Overdose on pills? Shoot ourselves? Or would we get more creative? Maybe Greyson and Xavier would swordfight for my honor…

I felt a tight pain in my chest, and the room spun. I took a sharp breath, worried I was going to pass out. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to concentrate on my breathing.

After a few moments of remaining conscious despite my fears, I cracked an eye open. Everything still looked normal.

I opened the journal and flipped through the pages, feeling like I was going crazy. I wondered if there would be anything inside about Halloween. Wait. Did they even have Halloween back then? Probably not, right?

And now my mind was racing too much to focus on the words. Great. It was “History and Cultures of the American South” all over again. Would I live long enough to be bored in class but also really anxious I’d get called on and exposed for not doing the reading ever again?

I stared at the page, trying to regain my focus and wishing for one of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mochas. Or maybe just a mug full of espresso. Not that I needed to be climbing the walls any more than I already was.

And that was when it popped out at me on the page: *Anthesteria: The Festival of the Dead.*

That was what Halloween was too, right? Or it was close, at least. Maybe it would be worth reading. The entry was later in the book than all the passages I’d read before. For the zillionth time, I squinted and pulled the book as close to my nose as I could. Cassandra’s spidery cursive was really starting to get on my nerves.

*Today was the start of Anthesteria: The Festival of the Dead. And so begins the window of time for me to enact my plan.*

*The veil between the words is always thinnest during the Festival of the Dead. It will be the perfect and only time to strike. I will have to gather my courage about me and do what needs to be done.*

*When I visited the Oracle for a second time, she told me to remember the story of the Titans. Specifically, the story of Kronos. My mind stretched back to my childhood, when I would listen to the legends before bed, my mother’s fingers curling in my hair as she recited them by heart.*

*The story of Kronos is a terrible one. He ate all his children.*

*Why would the Oracle want me to look to the Titans for a solution? Perhaps because Kronos was destroyed by consuming all of his children—Zeus being the one exception, of course. Despite all his power, Kronos’s creations were his undoing.*

*Does this imply that if I chose both Symeon and Arion, it would destroy us all?*

*Would choosing* not *to choose bind our fates together? Would choosing both do the same? If only there were a way to break this wretched curse put on all of us…*

*Perhaps I should consult a sorceress. One schooled in dark magic. Someone much more brutal, with a cunning eye toward finding out what needed to be done.*

*Only there hasn’t been such a person in our village in so long… Would I have better luck praying to Zeus and begging him to have mercy on me instead?*

Well.

That wasn’t helpful. Reading it had made me even more confused. Anthesteria? Kronos? Titans? I’d never even heard of Kronos. Had all that ancient Greek mythology stuff I’d zoned out on in ninth grade actually become important now?

A few months ago, I wouldn’t have believed it. But now…

Now, I was wondering if *Hercules* was streaming anywhere.

But I had understood one part of the journal entry perfectly. The choice. Was Cassandra right? Would choosing both Xavier and Greyson screw all three of us over? And, more than that, was Cassandra’s non-decision tied to the way all three of her trio had died?

I could feel the pressure of the choice weighing on my chest like an anvil. It wasn’t fair. I shouldn’t have to do this. I hated it with everything in me.

I was startled when my door opened and Artemis barged in. I ripped out my headphones and stared at her, annoyed. I opened my mouth to complain about her not knocking, but she beat me to the punch.

“I knocked,” she gestured to my ears. “But your… earmuffs—”

“Headphones,” I corrected half-heartedly.

“Something’s going on downstairs,” Artemis told me, but she lost a bit of steam when she took a second to really look at me. “But… something’s wrong.”

I nodded.

Artemis’s expression hardened, and she shut the door and walked over to my bed. She perched on it and tried to soften her expression, like she wanted to look understanding—the picture of a good sister. I felt a tug at my heartstrings. It was nice that she was trying.

“I just read this entry in Cassandra’s diary,” I explained. “It was about Athesteria, a festival of the dead. Which sounds like Halloween to me. The entry said that there’s a thin veil between worlds, but then it started going on about someone called Kronos. Do you know who that is?”

“I don’t know anything about this world or your history, Cali,” Artemis reminded me. “Sooo…”

“Right.” I nodded. “Well there were a bunch of Greek gods, and one of them had a bunch of kids. And he ate all of them—except one—and died.”

“Well, thank goodness no one like that is around anymore,” Artemis offered with a smile.

Now didn’t really feel like the time to tell Artemis about politicians and corruption, or even power-hungry PTA moms. So I decided to let that slide.

“Was there anything useful about the curse in that entry?” Artemis asked hopefully. “Did you learn anything new?”

I sighed. I really wished I had.

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “Cassandra just kind of rambles on about the Oracle and her feelings. She says she wishes she could see a witch. But it’s not like Big Mac has been a huge help, beyond being the first to tell me I’m a *due destini* mate.”

“It’s too bad we don’t have the spell book,” Artemis mused. “If there’s something in it for Lola, it could have something in it about curses. Maybe even just something that could give us some time…”

“*Due destini* is about more than just a curse, Artemis,” I told her, feeling defeated.

“Is it, though?” Artemis asked bluntly. “I mean. A curse is a curse. And if it *is* a curse, then shouldn’t there be a way to get rid of it?”

I felt something harden inside me. As much as it sucked, I was making a decision. I was picking a path. Because I knew there was someone who’d walk that path beside me.

“Artemis?” I asked.

“What?” she said, equal parts intense and confused. I almost wanted to laugh. If I made it out of this thing alive, maybe I’d get to learn what it would really be like to have her in my life.

“Can you promise me to really be my sister on this?” I asked her nervously. “To help me, and to not tell anyone about what I want to do?”

“Sure,” she agreed easily. “But… what is it I’m agreeing to help you with?”

“Promise me first,” I grabbed her hands. “Like, Fae promise.”

Artemis’s eyes widened, like she’d just realized how serious I was.

“I promise to be your *sister*, Cali,” she told me, meeting my eyes steadily. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Good.” I nodded. “Because we’re going to get that spell book back.”

**Episode 804**

VIOLET

“Hey, this is Charlie! Please leave a message! Or text! Texting’s probably better!” Charlie’s voicemail chirped for what felt like the thousandth time. I hung up, groaning. Where the hell *was* he? How long did it take to break up with a cheerleader, anyway?

I knew that was a mean and possibly selfish thought, but I blamed it on the fact that I was pretty close to fully panicking. My mind was racing. How had that Rogue gotten my number? Well, the number of the phone I’d found in Lola and Cali’s apartment. It was clear that he’d been watching Charlie and me, but what could he possibly want from us? We had no connections to him—aside from him possibly having turned Charlie.

We needed to leave now. I had to get Charlie to Oregon, where there were people who could protect him, who could explain what was happening to him. I clearly wasn’t the right werewolf tutor for him, and neither of us could handle this Rogue—together or alone.

I ran upstairs to the guest room and packed the few belongings I’d brought with me. I shoved them into my duffle as fast as I could, knowing all of it would probably wrinkle but not caring at all.

But just as I was about to check my phone for flights, I heard a knock at the front door. I froze. Tom and Orla wouldn’t have knocked. But Charlie might.

I raced downstairs and threw the door open. Charlie was there, bundled up in a parka to protect himself from the Minnesota weather. He looked a little down, but his eyes lit up when he saw me. My heart practically did a loop-de-loop. He was excited to see me!

And, more importantly, he was all in one piece and hadn’t become the victim of some psycho werewolf serial killer. I dragged him inside and all the way upstairs to my room, closing the door behind us just in case Orla and Tom came back.

“We need to talk,” I told him, bracing myself for some pushback on the whole “Let’s go to Oregon!” thing.

“We do,” Charlie agreed, leaping in before I could start talking. “I broke up with Sandi. It wasn’t easy. I really hate disappointing people and she was… *really* upset—”

“Charlie.” I cut him off with a tight smile. “I want to hear about all of that. Later. For now, we need to focus on getting out of here. How quickly can you have a bag packed with a week’s worth of clothes?”

“What?” Charlie squawked. “Violet, I came over here to tell you that—”

“Whatever it is,” I interrupted, stopping him again, “you can tell me all about it on the plane back to Oregon. We need to leave.”

My palms were sweating and my heart felt like it might beat out of my chest. I didn’t want to scare him by outlining exactly how dangerous it would be to stay here, but I also didn’t want him to get the wrong idea and think that this was no big deal. I wanted to bolt. I was one more ominous phone call away from suggesting we *run* back to the Pacific Northwest.

Charlie seemed to sense my panic. He grabbed my hands, trying to soothe me. He looked so cute when he was concerned. His teeth sunk into his lower lip and his mouth curled up in this worried little smile. Another time, I might have let that distract me. But I knew I had to be smart here.

“Violet, what’s going on?”

“I got a phone call,” I explained in a rush. “From the Rogue. He told me he’d—he threatened you. I don’t get it, but for whatever reason this guy is fixated on me. Maybe because I’m a girl and a werewolf? But whatever the reason, it’s not safe.”

Charlie took a few steps back, eyes wide. He let himself sit down on the bed. I could tell his head was spinning. I took a breath and tried to slow down.

“Charlie.” I tried to keep my voice even. “I have to go back to Oregon. I mean, things with the Redwood pack are… complicated right now, but there’s backup there.”

Charlie just stared at me, wide-eyed. I realized that I was asking him to leave everything behind. He wasn’t used to moving around like I was. He’d been a normal kid a month ago. This all had to seem insane to him.

I sank down on the bed next to him.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, facing forward and trying not to crowd him too much. “I get that this is such a whirlwind. I know you have your whole life here and I keep coming and going. Everything’s been so upended by all of this…”

I felt anger swell inside me. Anger at this Rogue for attacking Charlie in the first place—even if it had made him my mate. Anger at him for threatening us. Anger at anyone who would hurt Charlie.

“*But*,”I said, forcing myself to keep talking, “Am I leaving you here with some murderer stalker? Oh my god—”

Charlie grabbed my hands, his expression resolute. He pulled me closer, and didn’t let go. He looked so determined to calm me down, to help. And to have someone do that for me made me feel… better than I’d felt in so, so long.

“It’s okay, Vi,” he assured me. “It’s all going to be fine. I promise.”

He squeezed my hands, and for a second it felt like I could catch my breath. Like things might actually be okay.

“Did you really break up with Sandi?” I asked. I had to know.

He nodded. “It wasn’t easy… I feel bad, but… This, with you? Is right.”

I couldn’t believe how perfect he was. How cute. There was nothing standing in our way anymore. You know, except for the werewolf serial killer. And the fast approaching possible pack war.

Still, I smiled at him, so hard it hurt my face. I could feel my heart expanding. This was what it was like to have a mate—to have someone fully on your side, always on your team.

I leaned into him and closed my eyes. I just wanted to let the world fall away for a moment. Charlie must have known exactly what I wanted, because he wrapped his arms around me so I could press my cheek against his chest. I let myself breathe in his scent and focus on the gentle thud of his heart. It felt like I could stay there forever.

But that wouldn’t be wise.

“Okay.” I pushed myself away, trying to focus again. “First things first—packing. We need to get you in and out of the dorm as quickly as possible. It’s daytime, but we shouldn’t take any chances.”

I heard the front door open downstairs, accompanied by the sounds of Orla and Tom making their way inside. I leapt up and opened my door.

“Hello!” I called down the stairs.

I heard the sounds of someone rushing up the stairs and peeked out, only to see Orla clapping a hand over her heart.

“Oh, Violet!” she cried, her eyes wide with surprise. “I’m so glad to see you. We’ve been out of our minds with worry.”

I curled in on myself a bit, feeling terrible for leaving them waiting. I hadn’t meant to worry them, I just wasn’t used to having people to report to like this.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Hart,” I gushed. “I was out late and I didn’t mean to worry you. It totally slipped my mind to text you.”

“It’s all right dear,” Orla said with a sigh. “I’m just glad you’re safe.”

But something about the way she said that bothered me. There was a weight to the words, like she’d had a reason to believe I wasn’t okay. I wondered if the Rogue had found the Harts’ phone number and given them a call, too.

“Why?” I asked. “Did something happen?”

“Yes.” Orla nodded, her brow wrinkling in concern. “There was a group of hikers found in the woods last night. Their bodies were completely mutilated.”

“What?” I interrupted, shocked.

“It’s been all over the news,” Orla continued. “Three hikers, ripped to shreds.”

“That’s terrible,” I said. “But, you won’t need to worry about me anymore. I’m going to go back to Oregon tonight.”

Tom looked startled. “But there’s a snowstorm coming! A freak one. It’s not even November yet!”

Orla seemed on the fence too. “Okay,” she said after a moment. “Maybe that’s for the best, but I’m not sure I won’t worry about you or my girls even when you’re not here. Let us know when you’re ready to go.”

I nodded and they went back downstairs. Immediately, I started pacing and could feel panic rising in my throat.

“It has to be the Rogue who killed those hikers,” I said, walking furiously. “What if he goes after more people? What if he comes looking for me and attacks you, Charlie?”

He blocked my way from making another lap around Cali’s room. “Stop,” he said, putting his hands on my shoulders. “Take a deep breath.”

I did, but it wasn’t helping.

“All I want is to be with you, and to take the time to figure out what’s going on between us.” He gave me a small smile.

“Yeah?” I asked, breathless.

“Yeah. And there’s only one way I can do that,” he said. “Can I go to Oregon with you?”

**Episode 805**

GREYSON

The stranger was pale and square-jawed. His skin was almost grey. He was built with broad shoulders and muscular… well, everything. It was like he’d been carved out of a slab of granite. His body filled the doorway, blocking out almost all of the light that would normally have been streaming in.

I stood my ground. I could feel the pack just behind me, and I knew I had to stand between them and whatever this thing was. It was my duty as Alpha.

“Take what’s yours?” I asked, confused by his words. “We don’t have anything of yours. I suggest you leave right now.”

But the man didn’t budge.

“I’m here to collect what’s mine,” he repeated, his voice rough like gravel.

I sniffed the man, trying to get a read on him. Was he another wolf? Or was the pallor a vampire thing? But instead, I smelled something… almost *mineral*. He was like no creature I’d ever scented before. Not a wolf, not a human, not a vampire… So, something else.

My hackles rose. This had to be another of Silas’s tricks. Maybe Demeter had created some kind of sentry to come and distract us. Well, I wouldn’t be the fool who underestimated it. I took a step closer, wanting to prove that I wasn’t intimidated by whatever this guy was.

Adrenaline flooded my body as I prepared for a fight. The guy might have been big, but he couldn’t take on a whole pack. Right?

“Listen, man,” I told him, keeping my voice low and firm. “You’ve got one more chance to get out of here unscathed. I recommend you take it.”

But he stood still as a statue in the exact same spot, refusing to move. So much for diplomacy.

I stepped out onto the porch, shoving the man in the chest as hard as I could. He barely moved. It almost felt like he understood that he *should* have moved back as a response to being shoved. The guy was seriously built like a brick house.

“I am not going anywhere until I get what’s mine,” the man intoned.

“Jesus,” I murmured. “Kind of a one-track mind.”

I prepared to shift. Maybe that would intimidate the guy. A lot of people’s cockiness tended to fade away when they found themselves face-to-face with a wolf the size of a grizzly. That should scare the guy off the porch—whatever the fuck he was.

But before I could shift, I noticed the man’s expression change for the first time since we’d started speaking. His face lit up and he grinned broadly when he saw something over my shoulder.

I followed his gaze over to Cali and Artemis, who were making their way down the stairs—probably to see what all the yelling was about.

“You!” the man boomed jovially.

What the hell?

He pushed past me and the entire pack, swatting us aside like flies as he walked into the living room. I got ready to shift, leap onto his back, and start tearing at his neck, but then I heard a loud popping sound.

And then the huge guy I’d been planning on tearing to shreds turned into a stone gargoyle. A gargoyle that moved. And talked. Because clearly, things in our lives weren’t weird enough.

All of us froze in surprise, staring at what most of us had only seen in Disney movies. A talking statue.

“*You?*” she cried, confused but not entirely displeased.

Did Cali *know* this guy? Thing? What was the proper pronoun for a statue?

Whatever it was, the gargoyle nodded its head. And then, with another pop, it turned back into the linebacker-looking version of itself that we’d met at the door.

“Can someone please explain what the *fuck* is going on?” I snapped, still not sure if I should start dismembering our uninvited guest or not.

The man turned around to face me, his grey complexion now making a lot more sense. He glowered at me—at all of us—as he pointed at Cali and Artemis.

“They’ve got my books!” he shouted.

Artemis crossed her arms over her chest, annoyed, but Cali took a step back, nervousness and guilt all over her face.

“They’re overdue and stolen,” the gargoyle growled.

And that was when Lola pushed her way through the crowd and planted herself in between Cali and the gargoyle.

“Actually, we don’t even have them,” she chirped. “Well one of them. Someone stole the spell book last night.”

She looked over the gargoyle’s shoulder at me and held out what looked like a pile of dirty laundry.

“I found these in the woods early this morning, outside the pack house,” she told me. “I think whoever took the book was wearing these, and shifted in the woods. I was just coming back to tell you about it when I saw the big guy over here.”

I grabbed the clothes and brought them to my nose, inhaling deeply. I recognized the scent—it was the same unfamiliar smell I’d found in Big Mac’s room. The one Xavier had said was Ava’s.

“Someone *stole* the spell book?” the granite man thundered, his face contorting with anger. “It’s been around for thousands of years and you’re telling me a werewolf STOLE IT?”

His features started to twist with something I couldn’t pinpoint. Perhaps pain? Or maybe worry?

“And what of the journal?” he asked, desperation starting to color his voice.

“Well it makes sense to bring both books back together, doesn’t it?” Cali asked. “Why don’t you find the other one first?”

“We have reason to believe a werewolf named Ava took the spell book,” I said, stepping forward. There were murmurs all around the group and Cali looked at me, her eyes questioning.

“Oh, Hypatia’s going to kill me!” the man said.

He grabbed the clothes out of my hands. My fingers brushed against his, and it felt weird. Stone come to life. I’d seen some weird shit—especially in the last few months—but this one was tough to swallow.

The gargoyle buried his face in the wad of fabric and sniffed. “I’ll be back,” he announced. Then suddenly, with a loud POP, he was gone.

“What the FUCK?” Joss yelped.

“Was that a living STATUE?” Ravi shouted, eyes practically bugging out of his head.

But I was focused on Cali, who was exchanging furtive glances with Artemis as they started to sneak away from the group. I jogged over to the stairs to try and head them off.

“Cali,” I called, making her turn around. “What’s going on?”

Cali looked at Artemis, who glanced between the two of us. I could practically see the gears in her head turning. She really wasn’t one for melodrama, so I imagined that she’d probably bail on us if she could.

“Well.” She patted her belly with all the robotic qualities of the worst community theater actor in history. “I’m starving! Just going to go look in that magical cold box of yours!”

And with that, she darted away toward the kitchen. I watched her go, confused by her odd behavior—and her and Cali’s secretiveness.

When I turned back to Cali, her eyes were darting around the room. She seemed jittery and on edge.

“Cali?” I put a hand on her shoulder, hoping that if I could calm her down a bit she might tell me what was on her mind.

“Sorry.” She rolled her eyes, like she was so annoyed with herself. “Long day. Just being weird.”

I was sure her mood had everything to do with Xavier finding out about us and then dramatically whirling out of here. And now this added granite guy and Ava having the spell book. It was a lot to handle.

“I think we need to talk about what happened earlier with Xavier,” I told Cali, trying to be honest. Because if Xavier was going to be the immature one, that meant I had to be the one who acted like an adult.

“Greyson,” Cali started, but I took her hand and led her upstairs. She reluctantly walked alongside me. I could feel the nerves radiating off her as we walked to my bedroom, but I knew this was the right thing to do.

We had to clear the air.

I shut the door behind us and turned to take her in.

“Talk to me,” I urged, as gently as I knew how. I was tired of guessing at what was bothering her—I wanted to hear it from her lips.

But instead, she looked up at me with her big beautiful eyes and let her teeth sink into her lower lip. An adorable silence. In another situation, I might have delighted in pulling the secret out of her, touching, teasing, catching her in a small lie.

But this was serious.

“I just want to know if you’re okay after talking to Xavier,” I said, trying again. “It seems like you’ve been avoiding me since you two talked.”

Again, she said nothing.

I gently touched her cheek, hoping that offering her some physical comfort, some reassurance, would help. She leaned into my touch and her eyes fluttered shut. She looked like an angel, her face cradled in the palm of my hand.

“Hey,” I murmured, not wanting to spook her. “I know everything’s so uncertain right now, but I’m here for you, Caliana Hart. Always.”

Cali opened her eyes and looked up at me. Her eyes flicked back and forth, almost like she was reading, as if she was trying to memorize my face. It looked like there was something on the tip of her tongue, but whatever it was, she wasn’t talking.

But before I could ask, she grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me close, kissing me fiercely and desperately.

I was taken aback. We needed to talk. That was the whole point of going to my room. But then her tongue slid along my lower lip, and I couldn’t resist pulling her closer to me and deepening the kiss.

I lifted her off the ground and she wrapped her legs around my waist, holding me so tight I almost couldn’t breathe.

“I want to feel you,” she whispered against my lips.

**Episode 806**

XAVIER

I opened my eyes and saw blue sky and green trees. I was lying flat on my back on the forest floor.

*What?*

I blinked in confusion, as if closing my eyes and opening them again would change where I’d found myself or bring me some kind of clarity.

It did not.

What the hell was I doing here?

The sky looked *really* blue. Like, sapphire blue. Like, the most perfect cloudless-day-on-the-beach-blue. And the trees… It was like I was in a Christmas card, they were so green. In fact, everything was colorful. Like… *Oz* colorful. Was something up with my eyes?

I tried to push myself up so I could sit, but that was the wrong move. My stomach lurched and the earth seemed to tilt around me.

I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on my breathing. The world wasn’t spinning. Well, it was. It always was. But the spinning was no different than usual. Everything was okay. I’d just…

I’d done something.

I had a plan.

Or I *had* had one.

Now that the world was still again, I slowly, *slowly* rose to my feet. And what I saw was… beautiful. The woods were beautiful.

I wandered over to a cluster of wildflowers and marveled at the colors. The yellows, purples, and pinks, all co-existing in a perfectly natural bouquet. How could a person look at that and not smile?

“Magnificent,” I murmured to myself, savoring the sound of the word. Because it was appropriate. Everything around me was beautiful beyond belief.

I turned to look at the clearing I’d found myself in. I saw a flowering apple tree with gorgeous pink apples dangling off the branches. I raced over, my mouth watering.

I plucked an apple and held it close to my face, marveling at how smooth and unblemished it was. It was better than any other apple I’d ever looked at. It was the kind of apple someone would draw, the apple you’d imagine if someone told you to imagine one.

I slid it into my pocket for later, not ready to eat it and remove its beauty from my life.

God, I felt good. So *good.* Like I was vibrating at the exact frequency of everything around me. Like I existed in some kind of liminal dream space. I felt cocooned by warmth and safety and color.

I saw a rosebush, then a stunning red rose. Suddenly, I felt like I’d die if I didn’t smell it. When I tried to tilt the bud to my face, the flower erupted in a shower of sparkling pollen that captivated me as it glittered in midair, settling on the leaves.

Oh, Cali would *love* this. This place was almost as pretty as she was.

Where was she, anyway?

I put a hand over my heart and wished she could be with me. But the second I touched my own skin, I shivered.

It didn’t feel like my own hand. It felt… It felt like Cali was touching me. I felt so safe and comforted and… at peace. If I could feel her like this, maybe it meant she was close by.

“Cali?” I called out, turning around to see if she was hiding behind me. “Cali! Cali?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught some kind of movement and moved lazily toward it. There was no need to rush. Everything was going to be just fine.

It felt like I was gliding, like I was in a dream as I walked toward the edge of the clearing.

“Cali,” I tried again but was surprised to discover that I hadn’t seen Cali.

I’d seen a wolf.

I locked eyes with the creature, and it felt like some weight I hadn’t even known I was carrying was lifted off me. I felt so connected to this wolf. It felt like I was looking back into my own soul. And what I saw was breathtaking.

The wolf turned away from me and started to run. After a few steps, it looked over its shoulder at me.

I smiled. The wolf wanted to show me something.

I started to run after it, and the wolf led me through the woods. I enjoyed the wind whipping through my hair and the solid feeling of the ground beneath my feet. It felt good to run like this, to stretch my muscles and tire myself out doing something other than worrying.

The wolf stopped at a stream to drink. I paused as well. I was thinking I might get a drink myself, but then something caught my eye. There was a woman across the stream.

It was my mother.

I felt something else loosen in my chest.

“Oh, Mom,” I found myself saying out loud. “I’ve missed you so much.”

She gave me a small smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. I felt a burning desire to know what was upsetting her so I could help.

“You haven’t been following my instructions, Xavier,” she told me sadly.

I frowned. Instructions? What was she talking about?

But then a memory came floating to the surface of my mind. A ghostly voice saying, *“Remember the Titans.”*

“All you said was to remember the Titans?” I furrowed my brow, confused. “What the hell does that even mean?”

Marlene just smiled at me gently. It was a smile I knew well—the one I used to see whenever Colton and I were being particularly rowdy and Mom was feeling lenient. When she felt like enjoying our boyish antics instead of fretting over them.

“It means that the answer is in your blood,” she told me, as if it were perfectly clear.

But that didn’t answer my question. In fact, it just made me feel more confused. And a little angry. A very unwelcome emotion, given how happy I’d just been.

“Why are you speaking in riddles?” I asked, frustrated. “Just tell me what you want me to do. I’m so confused, Mom. Please.”

Marlene moved forward, and it took me a minute to realize she wasn’t walking through the stream—she was gliding over it. A moment later, she was at my side. I could smell her, feel the warmth radiating off her skin. My mom was here.

“I know, honey,” she told me, sympathetic as always. “I just need you to stay true to yourself. Can you do that for me?”

“I—” My voice broke and I swallowed hard before trying to speak again. “Mom, I don’t know what you’re talking about. What do you mean?”

But she was already starting to fade away, dissolving into the air like the pollen from the rose.

“No!” I shouted, panic crawling up my throat. “Don’t go! I need you, please!”

But then she was gone, and I was just yelling at the air.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to focus on my breathing. I felt hollowed out. I’d been so joyful before, and it had felt so *right* to be with my mother. But now… Now, I just felt empty.

I opened my eyes again and looked around for any sign of where she could have gone. But all I saw was the wolf.

It looked at me, calm. It slowly rose and started walking away from the stream. I knew I had to keep following. It was time to move on.

We continued to move through the trees, but this run felt different than the last. Then, I’d been carefree and thrilled by all the sights. But now, things looked darker. More ominous. And there was something in the pit of my stomach telling me it was all wrong.

The woods were still beautiful. Still magical. But I could sense something underneath the polished veneer. Something dark that I couldn’t ignore.

I put my hand in my pocket, reaching for the apple I’d picked what felt like minutes ago. But instead I pulled out a rotting, withered, brown sphere, which seemed to be rapidly aging in my hand. I threw it to the ground, disgusted.

When I looked back up and ahead, I could see that the trees were changing. Where there had been flowers and bright leafy trees, there now were leafless branches and cold winds.

I wanted to shout to the wolf up ahead, to tell the creature that we were heading toward some kind of icy cold danger. But when I called out after it, the wolf didn’t turn around.

And for some reason, I couldn’t stop myself from following it. From wanting to make sure it didn’t come to any harm.

Suddenly, the wolf stopped and I ran to its side, carefully checking it for any signs of injury. But it looked fine. Better than fine—still beautiful and regal.

Up ahead, there was a massive brick house. An old-looking lodge with a wraparound wooden porch.

The wolf started moving forward, but some strange instinct told me to hide. I ducked behind some nearby bushes and watched the wolf walk up the stairs and onto the porch. I tried to keep my breathing quiet, not wanting to alert anyone to my presence if I didn’t have to.

The front door swung open and I felt an intense desire to call out to the wolf, to warn it. But before I could, I was hit by a scent I’d have recognized anywhere. One that sobered me instantly.

*Silas*.

**Episode 807**

VIOLET

I couldn’t stop from smiling ear to ear. Charlie was coming with me to Oregon! My mate was coming with me! He was going to meet my pack!

Charlie grinned. “Let’s go let them know?”

I nodded and we hurried downstairs to the kitchen. We’d have to get Charlie some clothes if we had time, and of course now a plane ticket. But the plane hadn’t been very full… My head was spinning—*buzzing*—with excitement.

“Tom, don’t be ridiculous,” Orla said. “Violet is not a murderer!”

“Are you sure? We don’t know her very well,” Tom continued. “And you know the types of company our daughter keeps nowadays. *Werewolves*.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked, entering the kitchen.

Both of Cali’s parents turned to face me, surprised. Did Cali’s dad really think I was a murderer? My cheeks flushed. Did I really seem like the kind of person who could do something like that? And what were you supposed to do when someone accused you of multiple homicides? I’d never found myself in a situation like this before.

Orla gasped and turned on her husband, looking scandalized.

“*Tom*!” she cried, her voice accusatory. I felt the balloon of stress Tom’s words had blown up inside me deflate a little. At least *she* didn’t seem to think I was a killer.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Tom apologized to his wife, still sounding tense.

“Well, Violet didn’t do that,” Charlie interrupted, indignant. “We were together last night and saw a really creepy wolf and barely got away—”

I grabbed Charlie’s hand and squeezed it as tight as I could, trying to encourage him to stop talking. The less the Harts knew about the werewolf world, the better. I didn’t want them worrying about Cali or sticking their noses where they didn’t belong. And I really didn’t want Tom making any more accusations.

“So you’re a werewolf, too?” Tom asked Charlie, exasperated. “Is no one a regular human these days? Is it only me? Am I the last normal man on earth?”

Orla turned to look at me disapprovingly.

“Violet.” Her stern tone worried me. “You mean to tell me you were out in the woods when there’s a wolf serial killer on the loose? What were the two of you thinking? What would your mothers say?”

I flinched. I knew Orla didn’t know that I didn’t have parents. That she was speaking out of concern. That she was trying to scare us into being careful, because she wanted us to be safe. But if I was going to remain sane for the duration of this conversation, I was going to have to tune out her advice almost entirely.

She might have been Fae, but that didn’t mean she knew what to do in this situation. And she definitely didn’t know me. I had a good plan, and I was going to see it through.

“Forget it, Mrs. Hart,” I interrupted, sounding a bit harsher than I wanted to. “I agree with you. It isn’t safe for us in these woods. And that’s why I’m not the only one going back to Oregon.”

“I’m going with her,” Charlie said.

Orla nodded, taking this in. If she was annoyed about being cut off, she didn’t show it. I wondered if I’d been too harsh with her before. I hoped not. The Harts were nice people who had been nothing but hospitable to me—minus the murder accusation.

“Given the circumstances, that might be the best idea for everyone,” Orla said thoughtfully. A bit of the emotion was gone from her tone, like she knew she’d overstepped and was trying to make up for it by leaving things up to me.

“Are you kidding?” Tom spoke up, incredulous. “You’re just going to leave when one of your kind is murdering innocent people?”

I bit my tongue and did my best to refrain from asking him why he’d failed to catch Ted Bundy. After all, he’d been one of Tom’s kind, running around killing people.

Orla put a hand on her husband’s wrist and gave him a hard look.

“Tom.” She sounded as stern as I’d ever heard her. “They’re just kids. They aren’t responsible for the actions of others. We need to do our best to keep them safe. We’ll figure out how to stop this werewolf ourselves, *and* keep the kids safe. Because it’s the right thing to do.”

I bristled at being called a kid, which I knew was childish, but I was about to be eighteen, dammit! A legal adult! I was sure I’d seen things that would make Mr. Hart faint. But I knew complaining about Orla’s word choice wasn’t going to get us what we wanted.

So instead, I ducked back into Cali’s room and grabbed my bag.

“Thank you so much,” I told Cali’s parents, making sure to look at each of them.

“Of course.” Orla put her hand on my shoulder—she must have sensed that I was still a little too keyed up for a hug.

“We’ve enjoyed having you,” Tom mumbled, seeming chagrined.

“Come on, Charlie.” I took his hand and we headed for the door. Orla and Tom whispered to each other in the background, but I didn’t listen to what they were saying. I didn’t want to know.

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We’d ended up agreeing to let Tom and Orla drive us to the airport. I appreciated the gesture—and their desire to make awkward small talk during the drive—but I was much more focused on keeping my eyes peeled for the Rogue. The daylight was comforting, but I knew we could still be attacked any time. We reached the campus parking lot and Tom slid into a space and killed the engine.

“As fast as you can, okay?” I reminded Charlie. “Don’t stop to talk to anyone. Just in and out.”

“Got it.” He nodded. “I’ll be back in a second. It’s better if you stay here. It’ll keep me from having to answer questions if anyone sees us together. Especially after…”

After Sandi.

“Go.” I waved him off, giving him a strained smile. “We’ll be here.”

Charlie ran off, slamming the door behind him. I brought my knees up under my chin and watched him get smaller and smaller as he jogged to his dorm. Once he was out of sight, I started scanning the area, remaining on alert in case the Rogue attacked.

I felt jittery. The overwhelming desire to protect Charlie had my anxiety on overdrive. My palms were sweating and I was practically shaking with nervous anticipation. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Charlie not to do anything to endanger himself, it was just that there was so much he didn’t know about his new werewolf nature. What if he saw something that scared him, and he shifted in front of people? I remembered almost losing my cool at Artemis. My whole hand had shifted without me even trying. And I was an *experienced* wolf.

Meanwhile, Orla was lecturing Tom, who was white-knuckling the steering wheel while listening to his wife’s speech on how to be politically correct around supernatural creatures.

“It’s rude, sweetheart,” she admonished. “And you aren’t a rude man. Think about it this way—the way things are going, you’ll likely be a grandparent to one or more young werewolves soon enough.”

I heard Tom gulp.

Clearly, he hadn’t thought of that before. The shade of purplish red he was turning was proof of that. But, to his credit, he didn’t say anything to dispute Orla’s argument. He just nodded.

I noticed that the sky was starting to look green and heavy. It felt foreboding, like a sign of bad things to come. My stomach clenched, but I tried to tell myself that things were going to be okay. We were doing the right thing by heading back to Oregon.

Soon enough, Charlie was running back to the car, waving at us. Snow was starting to fall around him, blanketing the street in a thick layer. Charlie did his best to dust himself off before getting into the Hart’s car, which was adorably polite.

“Okay, Tom,” Orla said. “We’d better hurry—it looks like this could be a nasty storm.”

“You know snow before Halloween is a bad omen,” he grumbled. “Until recently, that never would have worried me, but now? Who knows what’s next? Is the snowman from *Frozen* gonna show up on our doorstep? Is Freddy Krueger gonna pop out of our dreams? Or maybe it’s just Minnesota…”

Orla chuckled and patted his arm. “We’ll hang a cross over the bed just in case, huh?” she offered with a twinkle in her eye.

We all quieted down, watching the snow get heavier and thicker as we continued our drive. There were a few cars around, but it seemed like the roads were starting to clear out. No one wanted to be driving during this weather.

“I hate to say this,” Orla said, looking back at me nervously. “But maybe we should turn back. It’s unlikely the plane will be taking off in this.”

But before I could answer her, I heard and felt a loud thud. We must have run over something. Tom cried out and the car jerked to the side, like he’d lost control of the wheel.

I screamed and Charlie grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly as the car skidded to a stop. He looked at me, concerned. I was so used to protecting him that I immediately felt guilty. I shouldn’t have freaked out like that.

The engine sputtered to a stop and Tom twisted the key in the ignition once, twice, three times. But each time, the car just made a pathetic sputtering sound and remained exactly where it was.

“Shit, it sounds like the engine’s flooded,” he told Orla.

The windows were all fogging up, and I couldn’t see outside. I didn’t like being blind. The hairs on the back of my neck started to stand up, and my palms started to sweat.

I didn’t know how, but I was abruptly sure that something was outside the car.

Charlie must have sensed my worry, because he immediately met my eyes.

*Am I crazy, or is something out there?* I asked him through the mind link.

But before Charlie could answer, a long, sharp claw scraped down the window.

**Episode 808**

I melted into Greyson’s arms. He held me so tightly against him, I almost forgot how to breathe. I almost forgot all the things I was trying to avoid talking about by kissing him.

*Almost*.

As Greyson’s hands tangled in my hair and brushed up against the nape of my neck, I shuddered. It felt so good, and I was desperate for more. But I was just as desperate to lose myself completely. To let Greyson make me forget about everything. There was just so much uncertainty about our future… This could be my last chance to enjoy the now with him.

I’d kissed him to distract him and keep him from questioning me, because he could always tell when something was wrong or when I was keeping a secret. My poker face was beyond terrible. And I couldn’t tell him Artemis and I were going to go after the spell book, because he’d try to stop us.

So I wound my arms around his neck and willed myself to forget about all of the terrifying stuff on the horizon and instead focus on the stability and safety I felt in his arms.

I was ready to make up for some lost time.

Greyson sat down on the bed, my knees on either side of his hips. His hands sent shockwaves of tingling warmth throughout my body. He ran his fingertips over my arms, my back, my waist, then he lowered them to knead my ass.

I moaned into his mouth. I wanted him to let go. To *really* let go.

He must have gotten the message, because he grabbed my hair and tugged on it until I tilted my chin up and exposed my throat. He kissed my neck, biting and sucking and leaving marks all the way down.

I liked the idea of being able to look at them afterward and know he’d left them there. *Greyson was here…*

“Feeling a little territorial?” I asked, teasing.

Greyson leaned back and tore his shirt off, revealing the wide planes of his chest. “Maybe I just want you to return the favor.” He smirked at me, a challenge in his eyes.

I stripped off my shirt, not wanting to back down, my competitive nature sparking inside me. I leapt off his lap, and he groaned at the loss.

But he changed his tune when I shimmied out of my clothes until I was standing fully bare in front of him.

Greyson scooped me up in his arms and threw me onto the bed. I squealed as I bounced on the mattress. Before I realized what was happening, Greyson was covering my body with his. We were both naked now, and he was spreading my thighs with his hands, holding me open in front of him.

He looked at me, eyes burning. It was enough to take my breath away. “Can I?”

“Please,” I sighed, barely able to speak.

Slowly, he pushed inside me, gripping my hips tightly and tilting them so he could go even deeper. I gasped. I almost came undone at this alone—the weight of him on me, the pressure on my most sensitive area.

He whispered in my ear, his breath hot on my neck. “Mark me, Cali. Make me yours.”

He wasn’t asking, he was pleading.

Begging to be mine.

I raked my nails down his back, positive I was leaving red, angry marks. I began rolling my hips toward him, needing him to give me what we both wanted. Greyson pushed inside me and then found his rhythm.

He reached for my clit and rubbed his thumb across it. And in one gasp he was lifting my legs up over his shoulders, pushing me down into the mattress.

“Touch yourself,” he said, his voice raspy. “I want to see it.”

I moaned out as a response. Cupping my own breasts, I looked into Greyson’s eyes. “Like this, Grey?”

“*Yes*,” he growled.

He slipped his hand between us and found my clit again. And soon enough, we were both crying out. Sharing a perfect climax.

Afterward, I was panting like I’d run a marathon, my chest rising and falling rapidly. For a moment, I remembered that fight training I’d sworn to myself I’d do with Rishika. Maybe I should get on that when I got back. If there was time for it…

Greyson propped himself up on his elbow and looked at me, studying my face. He looked a bit bemused—an emotion he wore well. Honestly, he always looked hot, no matter what his mood was.

“That was… unexpected.” He chuckled to himself. “But incredible.”

He beamed down at me, and I grinned back so hard my face hurt.

“Cali…” he murmured, stroking my cheek. “There’s something I want to tell you.”

I felt my chest clench up. I had a feeling I knew what he was about to say. And for some reason, the thought of him saying it to me was absolutely unbearable.

“Cali, I lo—”

But before I could figure out how to stop it or why I didn’t want to hear it, I burst into tears. Full-on, body-shaking, snot-nosed, ugly crying.

Because it was all too much. I was torn up inside about the choice I had to make. About hurting whoever I didn’t choose, about the pack getting mad at me, about Lola’s shifting problems and the stolen book, about the curse, and about the fact that I was going to have to lie to Greyson.

I just couldn’t let him admit that he… felt that way. Not right now. It didn’t feel fair. Things with me and him were different than they were for me and Xavier. Greyson could still protect himself. He didn’t have to give it all to me.

And more than that, I was sure if he said it to me, I’d break.

“Whoa, whoa.” He pulled me close and laid my head on his chest. “Baby, where’s all this coming from? I thought we were having a great time.”

He sounded so worried and was treating me so sweetly that it made me cry even harder. What had I done to deserve someone like him?

Grasping at straws and trying to keep the conversation from turning back to the four-letter word I did not want to hear come out of his mouth right now, I pulled back and looked at him critically.

“Are you sure you’re not just saying that?” I asked.

He tilted his head, looking bewildered for a moment. Like he had no clue what I was talking about.

“About the *sex?*” he asked. “Cali.” His voice lowered and he leaned in close, so I couldn’t possibly miss how satisfied he was. “You were… something else. And I mean that in the best way.”

He grinned at me and I laughed softly. I couldn’t believe he felt that way. It was surreal. It wasn’t long ago that I’d been a fumbling virgin, and now the most gorgeous man was telling me I was good in bed.

“What’s up, love?” Greyson asked. “What’s wrong?”

But I was hung up on the word he’d just almost used. The one he *called* me. Of all the strings that came attached to it. Suddenly, it felt dangerous. Like something I needed to protect us both from.

“Sorry!” I blurted out, louder than I meant to. “I think lunch isn’t agreeing with me!”

And with that I leapt out of bed and darted into the bathroom, kicking myself for not coming up with a sexier excuse. Before I slammed the bathroom door behind me, I shot Greyson an apologetic look. He just stared back at me, clearly extremely confused.

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Later, I found myself throwing everything I could in a backpack. But even though Artemis and I had agreed to leave together, it still felt like I was drowning in indecision.

Was leaving right now a terrible idea?

And the way I’d left things with Greyson… He had to have so many questions for me. He’d tried to tell me that he…

*That he loved me*. Maybe. Maybe it had been something else entirely and I’d freaked out for no reason.

And all of that didn’t even touch on how awful I felt about everything that had happened with Xavier. The look on his face when he’d realized Greyson and I had been together was burned into my memory. The hurt, the betrayal… All of it.

Everything was so messed up and complicated. I wished there was something I could say to Xavier, to Greyson, to both of them. But I just had this feeling that neither of them could help me this time.

That I needed to make this decision on my own.

And that was a terrifying idea.

I looked around the room. Would this be the last time I saw it? Either I went out there and found Ava and the spell book, a spell to remove the curse, or I’d have to choose between the brothers. Even if it killed one of them. Even if it killed me.

There just weren’t any other options left.

I hoped that while I was gone, Xavier and Greyson would come to understand why I was doing this—even if it looked foolish on the surface. I knew they’d both be furious with me for going out when Silas was hanging around, but this was my last shot to save us.

I heard the softest knock on my door, then Artemis slipped into the room and looked at me, studying my surely worried expression.

“Are you sure that you want to do this?” she asked. “The gargoyle went to look for the spell book too. He might find it.”

But I nodded, trying to look more certain than I felt.

“I need to know if there’s something I can do to save us,” I told her. “All three of us.”

“Okay. Then it’s time to get going. The patrols are changing and the coast is clear, but it won’t be for long.”

I strapped on my backpack and followed her. I stepped where she stepped, making sure to be as stealthy as I could. We padded down the stairs, walked out onto the porch, and shut the door behind us as softly as possible. Then Artemis led me in a silent sprint across the yard.

Just as we reached the woods, I looked over my shoulder and stole one last look at the pack house. I hadn’t been there long, but my vision still blurred with tears. It broke my heart to leave.

But I had to.

So I took a deep breath, blinked furiously until the tears went away, and ran into the woods.

**Episode 809**

VIOLET

The ear-splitting sound was so terrifying that chills ran down my spine. It was the result of a long, slow scratch down the car that made the air in the enclosed space shudder.

“Tom,” Orla breathed, grabbing his hand. I wasn’t sure if she did that because she felt she had to protect him, or because, for some weird reason, she felt that *he* could protect *her*. It seemed impossible, a human protecting a Fae, but I guess love can make us believe in weird things. It can make us believe that our person is invincible.

When I looked at Charlie right then, I was stupidly certain that nothing could ever kill him.

I realized he’d moved closer to me, like he was getting ready to cover me with his body.

“What was that?” Tom asked, his voice gruff, and we all tried to look outside. But the blizzard had gotten so intense that the windows were completely white. The car was suffocated in snow, completely covered. I had never seen snow like this before. I couldn’t believe how quickly it had come up.

“Tom…” Orla started, but he shook his head.

“Dammit, this isn’t the right time for car trouble!” Tom declared while trying to start the engine again. It stalled.

“We’re stuck,” Charlie whispered, his eyes wide as he stared at the blocked windows.

“Could we have run into a tree?” Tom asked, sounding like he was grasping at straws. He obviously wanted that noise to have been nothing supernatural. He stared at Orla, blinking rapidly. “Was it a branch that scratched the car?”

Tom was lying to himself, but I knew the truth. I knew what the sound had been.

My fear was multiplying by the second. I could feel it deep in my bones, as piercing as the cold. The Rogue had been following us, and I was pretty sure I’d seen his form before the windows had fogged over. And now, all I could think about was the image of that animal circling the stalled car. Lurking, plotting his next move.

“Violet, are you okay?” Charlie’s voice was a whisper as he squeezed my cold hand in his. I met his gaze, swallowing roughly. He seemed anxious to see me worried, and I hated it. I hated feeling so scared, but at least we were together. Charlie was with me.

“This is ridiculous!” Tom started to open his door, huffing. “I’ll figure out what’s going on.”

I choked, watching with wide-eyed horror as he made a move to head outside. “I’ll have a look under the hood,” he was saying, “and get us going in no time, it’s not—”

“No!” I cried out.

Everyone in the car turned to stare at me. Charlie squeezed my hand, eyeing my face. His concern was obvious, electrifying.

“None of us can get out of the car,” I said shakily. “I’m pretty sure there’s a werewolf out there.”

“What? *Who*?” Orla twisted to face me.

“The werewolf that’s stalking me and Charlie,” I explained. “It must have followed us.”

“Ha ha that’s not, it’s not…” Tom’s awkward chuckles died a second later. “*Excuse me?*”

I could see where Cali got that tone of voice from.

“There’s a werewolf outside of our currently stalled car?” Tom exclaimed, flailing slightly. He reminded me more of Cali by the second. He turned to Orla. “Is this a joke?”

*Are you sure?* Charlie asked me through mind link. *How could he have followed us?*

*I’m not sure*, I said. *All I’m certain about is that the Rogue has been stalking you.*

Charlie pressed his lips together, alarm decorating his beautiful features. *But why?*

*I don’t know*, I said through the link. *He must not want you to leave. Either way, we’re in trouble.*

“A werewolf?” Tom was saying, huffing and puffing in aggravation and obvious fear. “Is that what I’m up against today? And here I thought the ghost was bad!”

“Tom, calm down.” Orla caressed his arm, but he shook his head.

“I can’t! If anyone hurts you,” he said, “if anyone hurts these kids in the back seat, I’ll be…”

I started to realize that perhaps Tom hadn’t realized that he was the least powerful person in this car. Did this human seriously consider himself responsible for all of us supernatural creatures? That would be absurd.

He really was Cali’s dad.

“Tom, nothing’s going to happen,” Orla said as we all looked around, craning our necks to search outside the car for the threat. “It’s—”

Her calm words were demolished by a sudden *BANG!*

The entire car shuddered with the impact, and the snow was shed from the windows. Charlie held my hand so tight it was throbbing. He shielded my entire body from the window to my left.

But the danger was right in front of the car.

The Rogue stood there, leering at us with a sneer. He was terrifying and massive.

*Oh no!*

We all screamed at once, and the thing jumped away.

“Where did it go?” Charlie panted, looking around.

“What do we do?” Tom said, panicking. “Where’s my baseball bat when I need it! I’m gonna smash its teeth out!”

I wanted to tell Tom that he really had zero self-preservation instincts, much like Cali, when Orla said, “Everyone, stay in the car.” She glanced at the trees around us and was reaching for the door handle when Tom grabbed her wrist.

“You can’t go out there alone!” He really seemed worried about her, which was sweet but also made no sense.

“I’m Fae, darling,” Orla said. “I’ll be fine.”

*She’ll be fine? I’m a werewolf!* I’ll *be fine too!*

I hoped.

Orla got out of the car, her hands up in an offensive posture, but all I could think about was that there was no way that I was going to just sit tight like a child. I could fight back!

As if reading my mind, Charlie sat up. “I’m coming with you. We’ll fight together.”

Tom turned to both of us, eyes wide. “Where are you going? You can’t fight off that werewolf!”

“We’re also werewolves, Tom,” I told him.

He choked. “It’s not safe! You’re just kids—”

“We’re not,” I said grimly. “We can’t just sit there and wait for him to break in. There are two of us.” I pointed between me and Charlie. “We’ve fought this Rogue off before and we can do it again.”

Tom protested again but Charlie and I slipped out of the car and into the howling wind. My head was pounding with adrenaline, and the wind was confusing my senses. I couldn’t pick up the smell of the wolf, I couldn’t hear well, and I also had no visibility. I had no way of knowing where the wolf would be coming from. These were the worst conditions for a fight.

Still, I turned to Charlie with a nod. Seeing him so close, his eyes fixed on me, gave me hope. Both of us shifted. At least the snow was so thick that we could shift in the open on a highway and no one would see us. *Small victories!*

*Are you seeing anything?* Charlie asked through the mind link.

*No. Stay close!* I said. He did, still shielding me. Warmth bloomed in my chest at his attentiveness, even while there was danger all around.

We braced ourselves, ready for the blow we knew would come. Sure enough, there was a sudden growl from behind us.

*It’s him!* Charlie said through the mind link.

Both of us spun around just as the Rogue lunged toward us. Charlie roared, and a branch that Orla hurled toward the Rogue narrowly missed his head. It all happened fast, too fast, because a second later the Rogue had Charlie pinned to the ground.

*Charlie!*

Fierce rage and protectiveness were all I could feel as I went for the Rogue’s back, snapping at his head. I had never felt like this, so unhinged, so furious.

*Let go of my mate, you fucking psycho!*

“THAT’S IT! THIS ENDS NOW!” someone yelled, and it was—*Tom*.

Freaking Tom had walked out of the car with an ice scraper. Furious, he screamed, “LEAVE THAT BOY ALONE, YOU HORRIBLE MONSTER!”

“Tom!” Orla yelled. “Get back in the car!”

“THIS SUPERNATURAL NONSENSE HAS GONE ON FOR TOO LONG!” Tom bellowed, tiny ice scraper in hand as he charged toward the Rogue.

*Oh my god!*

I was scared for him—for everything, for everyone—but the only thought in my head was that he was Cali’s dad through and through.

*No DNA test required!*

“Tom, NO!” Orla screamed, and the Rogue saw both Tom with his ice scraper and her. It leaped off of Charlie, who—thank heavens—didn’t seem injured.

*Are you okay?* I asked him through the mind link.

*I am*, he said. *But—Tom!*

The Rogue was heading straight for Tom.

“YOU’RE THE RUDEST FUCKING WEREWOLF I’VE EVER—”

The wolf snapped Tom’s ice scraper in half, cutting him off.

And a split second later, it sunk its teeth into Tom’s shoulder.

**Episode 810**

“Are we done yet?” I whined as we wandered through the woods.

“No, Cali,” Artemis told me sternly, much like an annoying older sister would. “I need to find the right spot.” She’d been keeping a close eye on the ground for what felt like the past three million years.

*This is exhausting!* I thought. *And ridiculous!*

“What was wrong with that last meadow?” I asked. “Or over here—it’s pretty flat, looks like you could drag stones over with no problem!” I gestured at the spot, but Artemis brushed me off.

“No. The location has to be just right for a fairy ring to be effective.” She gave me a pointed look. “Be patient.”

I gritted my teeth—patience had never been my strong suit. “Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of expert tracker? What’s the hold up? Why is this taking so long?”

“I’m a Fae bounty hunter,” Artemis told me, offering a long-suffering sigh. “And it takes time, I’m not a *werewolf* tracker who just sniffs out the scent.”

“Well, werewolves are better at this than you are,” I said pettily.

She glared at me.

I cringed. “Too far?”

“Way too far,” she said, offended. “Never compare me to your furry friends! You’re Fae, too.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Besides,” Artemis said, “building the stone ring is the best way for us to track Ava.”

I squinted at her. “Can you explain your plan one more time? Because you never told me how we’re gonna do this, exactly.”

“We will use stones to form a ring at the right location. And then we both stand in the stone circle and ask for directions,” Artemis said.

“And then what?” I asked.

“It will tell us which way to go.”

I stared at her. “How?”

She rolled her eyes. “Can you just be patient? You’ll see. It’s not scary, I promise.”

I huffed. “I’m not scared! And that sounds easy, actually,” I said, slightly appeased. *Slightly*. “I guess all we need is the right spot then, huh?”

“Exactly,” Artemis said.

We kept walking, and she found no spots that she liked. I was bored.

But then Artemis said, “So why couldn’t we tell Greyson that we were leaving to find Ava and the book? Seems like he’s going to be super angry when he realizes we’re gone.”

I flinched at the thought. I didn’t even want to imagine how angry he would be.

“I couldn’t tell him,” I said. “He’s too protective. He’d never let us go, especially not now, when things are so tense.”

“Well, he would have a point,” Artemis told me, eyebrows raised.

“But we can’t wait to do this after Silas’s threat has passed,” I said. “It would be too late. And I’m still certain that this is a decision I have to make on my own. The guys can’t help me.”

“You mean your mates,” Artemis said.

“Yes, my mates.”

She waggled her eyebrows. “Your *lovers*.”

I stared at her, unimpressed. “Artemis.”

“What?” she asked defensively. “You’ve had sex with them. Both of them, in fact, if word around the house is correct.” She gave me an innocent look. “And I know none of the details. What kind of sisters are we?”

“Stop it, okay? We don’t have time for this,” I said, my cheeks flaming. “Find the spot we need to get this done.”

“Oh so now you’re all business?” she said with a laugh before continuing to search.

I spent most of the next hour pointing out spots and having Artemis rejecting them. One was too clear. One was too rocky. One had too many flowers. One had a dung beetle around and that was the wrong vibe. One had two porcupines in a compromised position and that was *definitely* the wrong vibe.

If this was how Artemis made all her choices, I looked forward to never going clothes shopping with her. I couldn’t even imagine her in a fitting room. I would probably end up stabbing her, and then I’d stab myself just to embrace the sweet release of death and get the whole thing over with.

At some point, we *finally* reached a stream. This looked great, actually, because now I could hide my scent. I’d been worrying about Greyson tracking and following us, so the water would help with that. I had left him a note telling him not to come after us, but he was the Alpha—who knew if he’d listen?

*Look at me being so devious with the love of my life*, I thought. *One of them, at least!*

Artemis and I waded through the water and once we ended up on the other side, a miracle happened.

“Here!” Artemis said, gesturing at the small clearing. “We should do it here.”

“Thank god,” I said. “Finally.”

Artemis ignored me. “This is perfect.” She pointed at some rocks from the stream. “Let’s use those to make our circle.”

I followed directions and kept my mouth shut, scared she’d change her mind about the clearing’s suitability. She didn’t, thankfully, and together we formed a small circle with the stones.

“Get in the circle,” Artemis told me. As I entered it, I felt a slight change in the air. Nothing major, but something definitely shifted. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Okay,” I mumbled. “This is weird, what—”

Artemis grabbed me by the hand. “Be quiet and think only of the thing you’re seeking. It’ll be more powerful with two of us.”

I nodded. This didn’t seem like a good time to cross Artemis. I needed this to work. I fell silent, and a small moment later, I could feel warmth travelling from my arm into Artemis’s arm and back again. The sensation could only be described as an intense connection to this place and the space around me. The dirt, the trees, the stars—everything was suddenly focused on me and what I was looking for. I had closed my eyes, thinking about the book.

The image of it was vivid in my mind, and as we stayed silent, I felt that charged sensation again.

“Open your eyes,” Artemis finally murmured.

When I did, the first thing I saw was a wisp, dancing in the air in front of me.

I gasped. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen a wisp!”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “I’m surprised to hear you’ve seen one at all.”

“Seriously?” I scoffed. “We were, like, BFFs at the Lupo Finale. You never told me that I could summon them. I thought they just showed up!”

Artemis shrugged. “Sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t. You never asked.”

I took a deep breath and asked for the one thing I didn’t have—a.k.a. *patience*—to deal with my older sister. But the truth was, I didn’t know many things about the Fae world and my powers. I was loving this new info about the wisps, especially because it instantly made this whole quest so much easier!

“Let’s go,” Artemis told me, the moment the wisp started moving. We followed it, and I was bursting with excitement.

*The wisps!* I thought. *My friends that sometimes fuck me over but usually help me—my dear wisps are back!*

We had to be on the right track, though the wisp was moving way too fast for my taste, and even Artemis was struggling to keep up with it. We reached a part of the forest that I’d never seen before, and I wondered where the wisp would lead us. How much longer would we keep following it? Where was Ava hidden? How far could she have gone after stealing the book?

She’d probably wanted to bring the book to Silas, the idea of which was quite nerve-wracking. What if the wisp led us straight to Silas’s house?

Artemis was a badass, and I was, well, kind of a badass sometimes, but how would we be able to steal the book if a sinister evil-king-werewolf-type was guarding it?

*Don’t think negatively, Cali.* I told myself internally. *Those are all problems we’ll face when we get there. One thing at a time, okay?*

One thing at a time was the only way to do this.

The wisp suddenly slowed, veering off to the side. “Where is it going?” I asked Artemis.

Before she could answer, the wisp started moving even faster.

“Make sure not to lose sight of it,” she said. We pushed through the trees, breaking into a full-blown run. Artemis was, of course, faster—ugh, I hated that—but then she stopped dead in her tracks.

*Ha! Did Miss Perfect get tired so soon?* I thought, smirking.

But then she grabbed me by the arm, literally dragging me to a halt. “We’re not alone,” she whispered.

We were both panting, and I squinted at her. Did she look alarmed? Was she intimidated? What the hell? That never happened with Artemis!

“What? What are you talking about? How do you know?”

“Cali, it’s—” Before she could finish her sentence, a huge granite man moved out of the woods. Scowling, he eyed us both, a menacing look in his eye.

In a low, gravely tone, he said, “Well, well, well. Fancy seeing you here.”

And then he advanced toward us.

**Episode 811**

XAVIER

The house reeked like Silas.

It was his. It had to be.

I watched, holding my breath, as a wolf entered the estate and the door closed quietly behind it. The trippy, dream-like quality of my soul journey had worn off now, and I was feeling more like myself. More like a person instead of a shadow. My head was clearing; the world was settling back to normal. But my sense of dread and unease had only intensified.

The whole house had an ominous feel to it.

I wished I could charge in, attack Silas directly, slit his throat and get even for all the things he’d done. For the torture he’d inflicted on us—me and Colton, our mother, even that fucker, Greyson. Anything Silas touched, he broke and polluted, and that had to stop. The whole supernatural world would rejoice knowing that he was gone.

But the truth was, I couldn’t do anything to Silas without my wolf.

*Fuck*.

How would I get it back?

How would I get it back, especially after seeing it enter the home of the most feared werewolf in the country?

I wished I could see what the fuck was going on inside that house. If Silas was even inside. Had he channeled some sort of ancient magic to make my wolf come here? Had the witch he was working with done it? I needed answers, but I didn’t dare get too close before I figured out who was already inside the house. I had to case the place before breaking in.

I settled back into the bushes to watch, wishing my wolf would just saunter right out of the estate again. I needed just one fucking thing, for once, to be easy. Especially when it came to something as important as finding my wolf again.

I fought to concentrate, staring at the door, trying to communicate what I wanted. The wolf should’ve listened. The wolf should’ve felt the connection we had. But as the seconds ticked by, nothing happened. I was just about ready to say fuck it and leave when I felt something. A presence—the shadow of my wolf, stirring inside me.

I begged for the wolf to stay, fighting to grasp at it, as if it were tangible.

But it disappeared as quickly as it had come, and I was left with a sick feeling to my stomach. It felt like someone had died.

After that, nothing happened for a long time. Even though the windows didn’t have any drapes covering them, nobody was moving inside. Were they not here? Was Silas off on a fucking picnic while my wolf paid his house a visit?

This made no sense.

My patience was running thin. I had no patience on a good day, and much less of it at a time like this when there were so many things at stake. I hated not being able to do anything. I was a man of action, and the anticipation was killing me.

I waited out there for a really fucking long time, trying not to tear my goddamn hair out or start pacing like an animal in a cage. But then something changed.

A light suddenly came on in an upstairs window, and I sat up instantly, staring at it. A figure crossed the room and stood by the window. The sight hit me like a boulder. I got so furious that I could taste it.

“Ava,” I hissed under my breath.

There she was, as if I’d never killed her. Her long black hair hung down her shoulders, and it was still surreal to see her here in front of me. Ava was beautiful, always had been, but that didn’t matter right now. All I thought of when I saw her was my anger toward her, an anger that I’d never felt before in my life. It was only rivalled by the way I felt toward Silas.

Ava scanned the yard, her gaze taking in the scenery before stopping on the bushes where I was hidden.

Directly.

I felt my throat dry. There was no fucking way that she could see me. I was completely concealed. It couldn’t be, it was not a possibility.

And yet she stared at exactly where I was for a long time.

I made sure not to move, not to squirm, not to let my anxiety and aggravation overwhelm me. I hated Ava in a way that I’d never expected, a way that fucked me up and hurt me as well, but I needed to shove all that down right then. I didn’t have my wolf, I was exposed, and Ava was working with the enemy.

Ava *was* my enemy.

Finally, she moved away from the window and I breathed a sigh of relief.

But my relief was short-lived.

Not a minute later, the front door opened and Ava stepped out onto the yard in a nightgown. It was a flimsy little thing, one of the ones she used to wear for me that would drive me crazy. I couldn’t believe how much I’d wanted her, once.

I couldn’t believe how much I’d loved her, once.

It felt like that time was eons away.

She looked around nervously while I fought not to make any kind of movement. I wished my heart would stop thumping so hard. I wished I could control my temper, my fury, my urge to walk up to her and rip her in half after all the things that she’d done.

And then, she whispered, “Xavier, I know you’re here.”

I scoffed under my breath.

There was no point in pretending anymore. I straightened up and glared at her. My wolf was gone, so I couldn’t fight her. I couldn’t trust her not to shift and attack me first, either. The only thing I could do was speak to her, as much as I hated it.

My voice dripped with venom when I spoke. “I should have known you’d be at Silas’s.”

Ava’s eyebrows knitted in confusion. “You mean Isaiah?”

I took a deep breath, shaking my head. “I don’t have the time for your bullshit, Ava. I mean my piece of shit dad.” I pointed at the estate. “This is his house. He’s the only man here.”

Ava’s eyes widened in something like understanding.

I didn’t want to deal with whatever fucked up ploy she had in mind, so I barreled on. “You lured my wolf away, Ava,” I said in a low voice. “What kind of magic did Silas use to do that little trick?”

Ava shook her head. “I have no idea. Like I told you before, I’m on your side.” Swallowing roughly, she took a step closer to me. “I want to help you.”

I laughed coldly. “We’ve been over this. I don’t believe you. I don’t want you on my side. I don’t trust you not to shift right now and kill me first. Because I promise, Ava, once I get my wolf back, you’re dead.”

She sniffled, her eyes glistening. “Xavier, please. I never meant—”

“To play games with me?” I snapped. “You pretended to be my real mate. You *slept* with me, you slept with my brother—you fucking *violated* both of us.”

She looked struck.

“You’re a manipulative *bitch*, Ava. You always have been.” I gestured at the estate. “And I know that this is Silas’s house. You’re clearly working with him.”

“I never knew—”

I cut her off. “What? You never fucking knew what?” I spat. “What are you planning? What the hell are you doing with my wolf? Whatever twisted magic you’re using, it won’t last forever—my wolf *will* come back.”

“I don’t know why your wolf left,” Ava said, wiping away her fake tears. “I didn’t have anything to do with that, and I wish—I wish you’d stop blaming everything on me.”

I scoffed, clenching my fists. “You’re unbelievable.”

“I mean it, Xavier,” she said quietly. “I never asked for any of this—to die and to come back from the dead. I didn’t ask to look like Cali. You’re not the only one who’s being messed with right now, okay?”

“I don’t give a fuck about any of your problems, Ava.”

Her lips twisted into a jaded line. “Typical. You never were one to think much about my feelings.”

“Did you trick both me and my brother into *fucking you* because you’re so sensitive?” I asked. “Is that’s what’s going on?”

Her mouth dropped open. “Xavier, I regret everything that—”

“It doesn’t fucking matter,” I hissed, glancing at the house behind her. “What’s done is done and I’m not here to have a former lovers’ spat with you. I’m here to get my wolf.”

“So why are you staring at the house?” she asked, frustrated. “Isn’t the wolf out in the woods?”

I paused, narrowing my eyes at her. “No. I saw the wolf go into the house.”

Ava frowned. “That’s not what I saw. Or heard.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. Was she lying? Or was I losing it? Had I really seen the wolf go in there, or had that been part of my goddamn visions? I hesitated, trying to decide what to say next, what the fuck to do next, but then the door to the house opened.

Silas came out and stood on the porch.

The night suddenly quieted, as if the forest recognized the apex predator that he was. He looked between Ava and me and, with a cold smile, he said, “Nice to see you again, son.”

**Episode 812**

The enormous stone man was walking toward us ominously, and I was not-so-secretly freaking out. “Artemis!” I hissed. “What do we do?”

She still looked a little intimidated. The gargoyle had seemed friendly enough back at the pack house, but now he had a pretty bad vibe.

“I guess we can use magic against him if needed,” Artemis whispered. “I’ve never dealt with a stone person before, but—”

But then the stone man laughed, pointing at us. “Hey, it’s you guys!”

I shot Artemis a nervous look. “I guess?”

“This is great,” he said, grinning. “You’ll be able to help me find the book!”

Artemis and I blinked at each other. His menacing vibe was completely—*thankfully*—gone, but I still wasn’t talking, which was a first for me. I just wanted to see what he was getting at, and he didn’t disappoint.

“I’m sorry, we’ll what now?” I asked.

*That didn’t last long.*

“This whole debacle is your fault, so you should help me put it right,” he said. “I haven’t had to go on a retrieval mission in three hundred years—your world has changed quite a bit. Ever so confusing!” He stopped walking in front of us, towering like only a massive stone man could, and winked. “I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced—I’m Steinar.” And then he stretched out his hand toward us.

“You’re a pretty chatty stone man, Steinar,” Artemis told him, eyebrows raised as she shook his hand. He chuckled, but then I realized that all his chattiness had had a very bad consequence.

“You made my wisp disappear!” I scowled. I said that after shaking hands with him, of course, because my mom had raised me well.

“I did what to your what?” Steinar asked, clearly weirded out.

I huffed. Artemis looked around, but the wisp was gone. “The wisp wouldn’t have disappeared unless it thought that Steinar was the way to the book, Cali.”

I looked Steinar up and down, skeptical. “He doesn’t really *seem* like he knows what he’s doing.”

He chuckled at my words. “Don’t worry, Fae. I’m connected to the books. I have a sense.”

I squinted at him. “A sense? Like a sixth sense?”

“No,” he said, looking confused. “Like a book sense.”

I turned to Artemis, sighing. “Doesn’t sound too promising.”

Artemis rolled her eyes, but then Steinar spoke again. “It’s this way! I can feel it calling to me! Hang on there, sweet parchment!”

*What the hell?* I thought, bewildered. *Does his book sense actually work? How is that even a thing?*

Steinar walked off into the woods, and Artemis and I fell into line with him. His brow was set, his pace steady.

I turned to Artemis. “At least he seems confident,” I whispered in her ear.

She looked at him up and down. “I’ll *bet*,” she said. “If I were made of stone, I guess I’d be confident, too.” And then, in a louder voice, she said, “So, how long have you been at the library, Steinar?”

“Oh, centuries,” he said, waving a hand. “Millennia, maybe? It’s hard to keep track.”

Right then, I realized that this dude had to have a lot of knowledge. Maybe he knew something that could help me with the *due destini*? That would be amazing!

As I mulled that over and wondered how to broach the subject, Artemis had no issue asking Steinar whatever popped into her head. “When was the first time you left the library to retrieve a book? Were we the first people at the library in three hundred years? How did you end up being a library gargoyle in the first place?”

Steinar blinked at Artemis before breaking into a huge smile. It was pretty cute, actually. “No one ever asks questions about me! I love this girl, she’s so nice!” he told me. I had to stop myself from snorting. He was only saying that because Artemis hadn’t tried to kidnap him yet.

“I actually came to the library because of Hypatia, back when I was a regular man,” he told Artemis.

“How come?” she asked, her gaze alight with interest. I wasn’t sure if it was genuine interest or if this was one of her little tactics to get what she wanted. She was a tricky one, all right.

“I led a… let’s say a ‘colorful’ life.” Steinar laughed awkwardly. “I had a beautiful estate, dozens of serfs, and I was something of a collector. When I heard a rumor about a magical library, I couldn’t stop myself—I wanted to have a magical object for my own library.”

I shot Artemis a look. “We used to know a man like that in the Fae world. Though he was more of a—” Artemis elbowed me before I could say the world “tyrant”.

Steinar went on. “I traveled all the way to the new world and made my way inside, but Hypatia caught me. She didn’t like that I wanted to steal from her.” He shrugged. “Bing bang boom, then I was a stone gargoyle.”

Artemis gasped, horrified. “That’s awful!”

“I know,” I said dryly. “How dare anyone be mad at him for trying to steal their stuff?”

“We literally stole from her too, Cali,” Artemis told me.

I opened my mouth to protest before I realized that she did, in fact, have a point.

“So you’ve been trapped there for hundreds of years?” Artemis asked Steinar, tucking her hair behind her ear.

I narrowed my eyes at her. Was I missing something here?

“Oh, it’s not all that bad,” he said. When did he become so stone-cold cool about everything in his life?

*Stone cold. Get it? Because it’s a gargoyle!* I thought to myself, snickering at my own joke.

“I like reading, actually,” Steinar continued, “and I got lots of downtime in my position, so I’ve been able to read and really elevate my mind.”

“That sounds great,” Artemis said, glancing at me. “So you’ve read a lot of the books, huh?”

Crafty little Fae.

Steinar puffed up. “I’ve read MOST of the books.”

This sounded very promising. I remembered my earlier train of thought that had been derailed by Artemis asking this guy every question possible—apart from what color underwear he wore.

“Do you remember reading anything about *due destini*?” I asked.

Steinar seemed thoughtful for a moment. But before he could respond, a chipmunk ran directly in front of him, and he gasped. “Begone, foul creature!” he bellowed, scrambling backward.

Both Artemis and I shared a look as he shook a stick in the direction the animal had vanished. He was an actual fortress made of stone, and that little thing had frightened him. Was this like elephants being scared of mice?

“Dude,” I told him slowly. “It’s a chipmunk. Chill.”

“They look cute now…” Steinar mumbled gravely.

I was beyond confused about what was happening. Before I could ask him more about his tree rodent phobia or *due destini*, there was movement at the edge of the forest.

My heart sank when I saw an enormous wolf walk out from behind a bush, its teeth bared. Artemis took a warrior’s stance, hands raised to use her magic. Steinar, fortunately, didn’t freak out. He just stood there as if he were made of… stone.

*Hilarious!* I thought, pleased, before I shook my head at myself. *No! This is no time for puns, Cali!*

“I’ve never see this wolf before,” I whispered to Artemis. And from the way it was glaring at us, it was certainly not friendly. The animal then looked directly at me and growled.

“What’s it saying?” Artemis whispered back.

I huffed. “I don’t speak wolf, Artemis!”

She frowned. “But you talk to the others.”

“That’s diff—Oh my god, I don’t have time to discuss this right now!”

The wolf lowered its head and howled, charging at us with a snap of its teeth. I raised my hands, as ready as I could be to use my magic, and Artemis did the same. We were both about to repel the wolf, but before either of us could do a single move, Steinar stepped between us and the wolf.

*THUMP!*

With a high-pitched whine, the wolf bounced right the fuck back after slamming into Steinar’s chest.

I gasped in shock, and Artemis clapped her hands. “Wow! How cool was that?”

I stared at Artemis like she’d grown two heads. “Since *when* are you so easily impressed?”

The wolf’s whimper interrupted our little chat. It seemed dazed, still on the ground. Before it could even move, Steinar calmly stepped closer to it, reached down, grabbed it by the neck, and…

Ripped the wolf in two, like it was nothing.

My eyes got so wide, they’d probably taken over my whole face.

Steinar wiped the blood off his hands and stone-y torso with some leaves, then turned to us with a smile on his face. “Anyway, what were we talking about? Books? I must say, I particularly enjoy Pliny’s take on early history!”

Artemis and I stood there, gaping at Steinar.

*What the HELL was this guy capable of?*

**Episode 813**

VIOLET

Orla shouted in horror as Tom groaned in pain. The wolf had clamped its teeth down on his shoulder, and Orla’s scream reverberated through the air around him.

It left me breathless and stunned.

*Oh, no…*

A second later, the trees above the highway began to quiver, and Orla raised a hand, flinging it toward the wolf. A large branch from the tree directly above it snapped off and smashed down onto the wolf. The sound of the impact and the Rogue’s howl made my bones shudder, but I had no time to process the strength of Orla’s power.

As the Rogue rolled on the ground, it was Charlie’s and my opportunity to attack. We growled in unison, our wolves in sync as we stalked toward the Rogue. He stood and looked between us, injured and bloody. Realizing that he was no match for the two of us together, the fucking coward, the Rogue howled and sprinted off into the woods.

*Should we follow it?* Charlie asked me through the mind link.

Still shaking from the adrenaline, I turned toward Orla. She was huddled over Tom, crying. I gasped when I saw the bite—it looked deep. I froze, guilt slamming into me like a wave. *Poor Tom!* He had no self-preservation instincts and I really hated it when he treated me like a child, but I knew that he cared about me—that he’d cared about my well-being all along. If it weren’t for me—if I hadn’t insisted on taking me to the airport—nothing would’ve happened to him.

*Tom’s hurt!* I told Charlie. The thought of the Rogue had taken a back seat in my head. *We need to see if he’s okay!*

Charlie’s wolf nodded as I ran toward Orla, dropping down to inspect Tom. She was entirely focused on him, sniffling over his shaking body. He was white and trembling, looking around while wincing in pain, but he didn’t appear to be losing too much blood.

“I’m fine,” he said, choking. “It’s fine!”

He really was so much like Cali.

“You’re bleeding!” Orla said, wiping her eyes before she reached down to caress his face.

“It doesn’t even hurt,” Tom said with a flinch of pain.

The urge to cry hit me hard, and Charlie’s wolf huddled closer to me, nosing at my ear in sympathy.

*It’s okay*, he told me through the mind link. *He’ll be fine.*

The sense of dread hadn’t left me, though.

Orla had run to the car and now brought back a blanket from the trunk. “We need to take care of this,” she said seriously. Tom sat up slowly, letting out a low groan. The tears had stopped running down Orla’s cheeks, and she wrapped the blanket around his shoulder, fashioning a little sling.

Patting at it, Tom winced again. “See? Right as rain,” he said, and gave her a small smile.

“Oh, Tom,” Orla said, sniffling again. She cupped his face and kissed him on the mouth. It was all very cinematic, what with the snow falling on their heads.

*How sweet!*

And then I realized that this only looked like a movie because we were still stuck in a blizzard and the car wasn’t working. What were we going to do? I turned to Charlie. He was already staring at me, his magnificent wolf peering into my eyes, as if waiting for my next move. His attention made me feel invincible.

*What now?* he asked.

*We’ll have to carry them back*, I said.

His eyes narrowed. *What, like a ride? On our backs?*

I nodded. *It’s not that weird, I promise.*

Charlie looked worried. *I hope I don’t fuck this up.*

*I trust you*, I said.

He nosed the side of my face again, and I felt a warmth inside me at the gesture. Feeling better about everything, I headed toward Orla, who was still fussing over Tom. These two had been married for years but still had a real connection. That was heartwarming, despite the cold.

“Look how big little Violet is,” Tom mumbled, taking me in as I approached.

My wolf snorted. Then I lowered my head in front of Orla, looking at her expectedly, and she instantly realized what I had in mind. She turned toward Tom. “We should ride back with the kids. You need to get on Charlie’s back.”

Tom eyed Charlie’s massive wolf, balking. “Absolutely not!”

“But Tom—”

He cut her off. “I don’t know what kind of fantasy book nonsense all of you are on, but I’m not riding a werewolf in a snowstorm! I haven’t even driven without a seat belt in decades!”

I huffed. Tom could really be stubborn. He scrambled unsteadily to his feet. “I’m sure if I can walk a bit I can get cell service for Triple A, it’s fine, we’re—”

“Tom, the car isn’t working and we need to get back and look at that shoulder of yours! We’ll freeze out here!” Orla pointed at Charlie, who tilted his head to the side like the precious puppy that he was. “This is the fastest way.”

“Yes,” Tom deadpanned. “The fastest way to death!”

Orla shook her head. “We have to trust the kids. We can’t stay out here any longer.” She moved closer to him, caressing his shoulder. She kissed his cheek, then his mouth. “Please? For me? Let me take care of you.”

Tom folded like a house of cards.

“Fine,” he grumbled.

As they interacted, I was taking notes. Were men really so easy to deal with if you pampered them? I glanced at Charlie. Then again, Charlie was a sweetheart. I couldn’t imagine him throwing fits like Cali’s dad. But then I suddenly remembered Cali saying something about her dad having been really easygoing in the past, before all the supernatural stuff. It made sense for a human to freak out, so I wasn’t going to hold it against him.

With some help from Orla’s magic, and a branch that worked like a stepping stool, she and Tom climbed onto Charlie’s back. All four of us raced back toward the Hart house. As we were sprinting through the snowy forest, Charlie mind linked with me again.

*What hell are we going to do about that Rogue wolf?* he asked. *He’s like, obsessed with us! Why?*

*I don’t know*, I replied. *It doesn’t make any sense, I’ve never met another werewolf who behaves that way.*

*So what do we do?*

*It feels like we’re not going to be safe as long as he’s on the loose*, I said. *And who knows how many other innocent people are going to die if we don’t bring him down?*

Charlie’s wolf nodded in agreement.

It felt so wonderful to have his validation.

\*\*\*\*

Before too long, we were back at the Hart house. Orla carefully helped Tom off of Charlie’s back while he grumbled.

“Well, that sure was a terribly uncomfortable way to travel.” He glanced at Charlie’s wolf. “No offense, kid.”

Charlie snorted.

“No more complaining,” Orla told Tom strictly. “Let’s go inside to check your shoulder!”

After they went inside, Charlie and I shifted back and immediately started to shiver in the freezing snow, racing into the house behind them. I made sure to keep my eyes off Charlie, and he did the same with me, so it wasn’t awkward getting dressed together. We instantly went downstairs to check on Tom.

“Shouldn’t we take him to a hospital?” Charlie asked, his expression worried.

Tom, sitting on a chair in the kitchen as Orla cleaned his wound, frowned. “And what am I gonna say? That I was attacked by some kind of rabid massive wolf?”

“Well, yeah, that’s exactly what you’d say,” Charlie said.

“I’ll be fine,” Tom said gruffly. He eyed Orla. “I just need everyone to stop fussing over me. I think I’ve spent enough time with werewolves to last me a lifetime.” He faced us and added again, “No offense, kids.”

I shook my head just as Tom winced from Orla working on his wound.

“I don’t think it needs stitches or anything. The wound is deep, but it should heal cleanly.” Orla glanced at Tom’s annoyed expression. “Some of my Fae blood might help heal it, but I’m not sure how it affects humans.”

Tom scoffed. “I’m very good with my wound, thank you very much. No weird blood rituals in his house, please.”

Orla chuckled, caressing his shoulder. He was pouting but looked up at her fondly. Still a little anxious, I stared at the wound.

“Make sure that you clean out all of the *lupus sputo*,” I muttered to Orla. “We aren’t Alphas so we aren’t any help with that...”

Orla stared at me. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” I said, glancing nervously between her and Tom. “If you miss any of the wolf’s spit, Tom’s going to turn into a werewolf at the next full moon.”

Tom bolted upright, eyes wide. “TURN INTO A *WHAT?*”

**Episode 814**

JOSS

“Holy shit,” Ravi rasped, biting his lip. He gripped the headboard tightly as I kissed up his gorgeous chest. I caressed him all over, anywhere I could reach, before straddling him and sinking onto him. He felt so good, so intense, always.

I rode him hard, the heat emanating from him devouring me as he rubbed between my legs. He let himself go only after I came, loud and satisfied, even though I’d been teasing and torturing him for a while. Sometimes, it was more fun that way.

“Damn,” he said after I rolled off him. He nuzzled my temple, wrapping his arm around me before he kissed my cheek. “Why are you so amazing?”

I laughed, facing him. He was so handsome; even more handsome now that he looked debauched. “Sex tends to make people feel that way, huh?”

He snorted, shaking his head. “Hope the feeling is mutual.”

I raised an eyebrow, tracing the hand that was cupping my cheek. “Are you fishing for compliments right now?”

He smirked. “Maybe.”

I pulled his palm over my mouth and kissed it, smiling. “It was amazing for me too.”

He looked so happy that it was just a bit adorable. What a dork. He squeezed with the arm he had wrapped around me, turning it into a hug. For a long moment, I just lay there, surrounded by his closeness. It was soothing, smooth and just… good.

This felt good.

But at the same time, it made me feel heavy with decisions I hadn’t made yet.

Ravi fell asleep a few minutes later, and I checked the time. I eyed Ravi. Could I get out of his koala death grip without waking him up? The man really knew how to cuddle the hell out of someone. Not that I was complaining—I loved a good cuddle myself when the other person looked and smelled as incredible as Ravi—but this was kind of ridiculous.

Doing the careful *Roll-Out-From-Under-His*-*Arm* move that I had perfected after spending so much time with Ravi, I slipped out of bed without making a sound. I went downstairs, heading for the fridge for a glass of water. After drinking two, I checked the clock again.

Time passed real fucking slowly when you had a choice to make and kept avoiding it.

What was I doing?

I hadn’t reached a verdict yet about running away with Ravi, and I had no idea what to do about removing the Luna mark. This was very unlike me—usually things were clean-cut, and I never stalled when it came to making choices that would define my life.

And yet, here I was.

Shaking my head at myself, I was about to head back upstairs when I spotted Big Mac out on the deck, looking at the lake. I debated returning to Ravi’s nice, warm bed, but this felt like an excellent opportunity to talk to her alone. Taking a deep breath, I headed outside.

She looked up as I sat next to her on the bench. “Fancy seeing you out here,” she said.

“I could say the same about you.”

“Can’t sleep,” she said, shrugging. “Happens sometimes.”

We fell quiet for a moment. Eventually, Big Mac broke the silence. “Did you think any more about what I told you?”

“A little, yeah.”

She shot me an odd look. “Now that the spell book is missing, we obviously can’t go forward with the spell that would release you from being a Luna. But if we get it back… Are you certain that you really want that to happen?”

I took another sip of my water. “Seems like you have an opinion on that.”

Big Mac snorted. “It’s none of my business. I’m just thinking that with everything that’s going on with the pack right now, they need a strong Luna more than ever.” She arched an eyebrow. “Especially since the Alpha has been so distracted with his personal life.”

I snorted. “That’s part of the reason why I want to get out of this. Greyson isn’t the Alpha I thought he would be. I’m not saying what he’s been dealing with isn’t intense, but I would’ve thought that he’d be able to handle it better.”

I didn’t mention Cali or Mrs. Smith, but Big Mac knew exactly what I was talking about.

“Forget Greyson. What about the pack?” she asked me.

I sighed. “I do feel an obligation to the pack. That’s why I’ve been hesitating. And while it’s true that the situation with the Alpha isn’t what I’d imagined when I pictured myself as a Luna, I’ve come to care for these people.”

“Where does that leave you?” Big Mac asked me. I’d never seen anyone with a better poker face.

“If I decide to leave,” I said, “I won’t do it before everything has been resolved with Silas. I owe them that much. Having a splintered pack when he makes his move would be disastrous.”

“And what about afterward?” Big Mac asked.

I paused.

The *due destini* situation was my biggest worry, because if Cali picked Greyson, then where would that leave me? And if she *didn’t* pick him, what would happen then? Would he just mope for all fucking eternity, leaving me to be the one putting out fires? How could I stick around for a distracted, irritating, asshole Alpha?

Hopefully if things worked out between him and Cali, he’d pull his head out of his ass. But in the meantime, the pack needed a leader, and I couldn’t keep carrying Greyson’s weight.

I couldn’t keep living for other people.

I had my own life to live, and in that moment, the idea of spending any more time being responsible for everyone’s lives without having anyone to support *me* felt suffocating.

It helped me made my decision.

It helped me realize that it was in my best interests to separate from the pack—whether Cali chose Greyson or not. It was time for me to start a life that was mine, not a life that I was just living for others.

“After the Silas situation is over,” I told Big Mac, “I will inform you of my final decision.”

Big Mac stared at me. Still with that poker face. “Whatever your decision, I will respect it. But if you do go forward with the removal of the mark, there would be a price to pay.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I would perform a simple spell that would drain the essence of your fertility. Afterward, you’d be unable to have a child.”

I looked at her, brow furrowed. This sounded way too fucking creepy. Also, weird. “What could you possibly want with my fertility in the first place?” I asked.

She waved me off. “That’s none of your concern.”

Witches. So damn creepy, through and through.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll decide after Halloween.”

I started to stand up to leave, but Big Mac put a hand on my arm. “I’m afraid it has to be now.”

I frowned. “Now? But we wouldn’t be able to do *my* thing until everything calms down.”

Big Mac stared at me. “It’s now or never, Joss. I give you my witch’s word that I’ll help you when the time comes. *If* you do this for me now.”

This was still really weird, but I didn’t want children anyway. Not now, not ever. Being Luna was a responsibility, but it was also about being a leader—about taking charge, which was something I enjoyed. But being a parent was a million times more complicated. And it was definitely a responsibility that wasn’t for me. I preferred to be as independent as possible, and I’d always believed that anyone who hadn’t thought out how important it was to take care of your kids should never have had them.

Much like Greyson shouldn’t have accepted the Alpha role if he wasn’t cut out to deal with the pressure.

“So this would be like a pre-payment?” I asked.

Big Mac nodded. “Exactly.”

I hesitated for a second. But then, I thought, *screw it.*

I had nothing to lose. Nothing that I wanted, anyway.

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

Still blank-faced, Big Mac told me to stand up, and then stood before me. She closed her eyes and whispered an incantation under her breath, then she placed her hands on my stomach. Even if I didn’t ever want to get pregnant, the whole situation gave me the creeps. A moment later, something that looked like a misty blue essence was pulled from my bellybutton.

Big Mac continued to whisper, pulling an ornate ring with a large, oval-shaped ruby from her pocket and guiding the smoke toward the gem. The misty blue smoke disappeared into the stone, and for a moment the gem glowed hotly.

But then it faded to back to normal.

“That’s it,” Big Mac said. I detected a note of satisfaction in her otherwise deadpan tone.

“I don’t feel any different,” I said.

“You *won’t* feel any different,” Big Mac said. “This shouldn’t have any noticeable effect.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So what are you going to do with the ring?”

She ignored my question. “You should get back to bed and rest up, Joss.”

“Looking forward to you keeping your end of the bargain,” I said.

She nodded seriously. At least I knew I could trust her word.

Feeling a little strange and still slightly creeped out, I didn’t want to sleep alone for the night. I headed back into Ravi’s room. He was snoozing peacefully, looking incredibly handsome. I couldn’t help but smile to myself at the sight as I sat down on the bed.

He stirred. The moment he woke up, he grinned up at me and pulled me closer. “You’re so pretty,” he mumbled.

Despite the oddness of the night, this moment felt right.

This felt like the best decision.

“I’ve made my choice, Ravi,” I said, just as he was about to kiss me. “After Halloween, let’s run away together.”

**Episode 815**

Steinar seemed completely unbothered, wiping the blood off his chest with some leaves.

*Oh, my god, this is insane!* I thought.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked, looking genuinely confused.

I swallowed roughly. “You just ripped a wolf in half.”

“Oh, that?” He laughed. “I’m made of stone, I’m very strong!” Grinning, he flexed his arms for us.

There were still some stray spots of blood on his side, and I wanted to scream but also kind of accept that this was a thing now? Stone men coming to our aid?

“Awesome,” Artemis breathed, her eyes a little too wide as she took in his biceps.

Well, then.

“Pretty glad the wisp led us to you if that means we get a bodyguard,” I mumbled, looking around. But then, as I looked away from the gory remains of the wolf, I realized one thing: there were probably other wolves patrolling the area. Lots of them.

“Uh, you know what?” I told the others. “Maybe we should find a place to hole up for the night. Get some sleep and all, and after that, we can move during the day when the woods will be safer.”

Steinar shrugged. “I don’t sleep.”

“Great!” I said. “You can be our lookout.” I turned to Artemis. “This guy is really useful, huh?”

She grinned. “I know. Such a change from other men.”

I frowned.

*Okay,* I thought. *But my mates are very useful, thank you very much! When they aren’t being annoying or fighting each other, they’re great!*

“I saw a cave not too far back,” Steinar said, remaining his useful self. I was kind of in awe. He led us to the cave, which was actually perfect.

“This should be safe,” Artemis said.

I agreed, excited to have found such a great spot, but when we got inside, it was really cold and dark. Obviously. Because it was a cave. *Duh, Cali!*

“We should head as deep as we can to avoid being detected,” Artemis said. I bet she had experience with hiding, shady as she was. We finally settled in a pitch-dark corner, far from the entrance. I looked around the space, frowning. “I wish we had some fire. This is not—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Steinar rubbed his hands together. A spark flew from his hands to a pile of leaves, igniting a cheery fire.

“You were saying?” he told me, winking.

“Thanks so much!” I said, huddling in the warmth. I turned to Artemis, who was also grinning, staring at Steinar.

When our eyes met, she mouthed, *Useful*. Her look was almost victorious, and I was loving it. I wondered if I could get Xavier and Greyson to be so effective without making a fuss or trying to eat each other.

“Sit down, dear friend!” I told Steinar. “Can I get you a snack? I’ve got plenty in my backpack!”

He looked sheepish. “I don’t eat, either. I guess that means more snacks for you.”

The perfect man did exist. Well, the perfect gargoyle.

“Let’s talk about tomorrow, then,” I said. “Artemis?”

Artemis turned her whole attention to our man of stone. “How does your book sense work?” she asked. “How do you plan on tracking down the book tomorrow?”

“As the guardian of the library, I feel a pull toward missing books,” he said. “I can’t explain where exactly I was headed earlier, but I did know that the book was in that direction. The journal is still at your house.”

“That’s better than nothing,” I said. “So I guess tomorrow morning we follow you, Mr. Amazing?”

He made an *aww, shucks* gesture. “I’d blush if I weren’t made of stone.”

We all chuckled because we were awkward, and agreed on the plan. When Steinar saw Artemis yawn a moment later, he got up. “I’ll let you two sleep. I’ll keep watch at the mouth of the cave.”

“Thank you!” I called after him.

“I’ll make sure to cover up the entrance so that the fire is hidden from the outside!” he called over his shoulder. “Nobody’s going to know we’re here!”

I thanked him again, and Artemis stared at me. “Is it weird that I’m a little turned on right now?”

I snickered while setting up the sleeping bags that we’d found in the basement of the pack house.

“So how are you feeling?” Artemis asked me once we were settled in. “Are you sure about this? We still don’t know what we’re walking into.”

I shook my head, my earlier good mood vanishing. “It doesn’t matter. I need to make a choice between Greyson and Xavier, and that book can help me. I need it, because without it…” I sighed. “Deciding seems absolutely impossible.”

Artemis eyed me carefully. “Isn’t there anything that makes you lean in a certain direction?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you should really think about each of them—about their strengths, their weaknesses—and compare,” Artemis said. “Think about how they make you feel when you’re with them.”

My cheeks heated up, and it had nothing to do with the blazing fire. Artemis noticed, of course.

“Ooh, what’s that?” she asked. “What are you thinking about?”

“I was just thinking about how I feel when I’m…” I gulped. “You know, with them.”

Artemis grinned mischievously. “Wait, actually, that’s perfect. Isn’t one of them, you know, *better* than the other?”

“I’ve actually never been with anyone else, so I can’t really compare them to anyone,” I admitted.

Artemis waved me off. “No, you *should* compare them to *each other*, that’s the point. They can’t be the same, right? Tell me everything!” Her eyes were alight with intrigue. “Who’s bigger?” She held her hands out and slowly started to move them apart, her eyes bulging as I didn’t stop her. She gasped. “BIGGER than this?”

I shook my head, still blushing over her question. It was like I was in *Sex and the City: Cave Edition*. “They’re both… big.”

“Then whose dick is prettier?”

I was mortified. “I’m not doing this!”

Artemis whined. “But you have to tell me! I can’t imagine werewolves being tender lovers. But then again, sometimes the macho ones surprise you.”

“They do, huh?” I squeaked, even though I knew the answer from experience.

“Of course!” Artemis smiled. “Like that one time when I hooked up with this massive, scary-looking bounty hunter, and he gave the best massages. Or this woman I met in a bar who punched anyone who looked at her cleavage but would braid my hair after going down on me for hours. It was amazing. And then there was that hot baker who looked like such a calm, unassuming intellectual type, but they were so rough with me in bed that it was amazing, you know? I love being surprised.”

As Artemis continued to talk about her very colorful love life—go her!—I thought about being with Xavier, and with Greyson. When Artemis asked me about how I felt again, I managed to say, “It definitely feels different with both of them, but not like, one better than the other. Both amazing, just different.”

Artemis peered at me. “But who do you feel a stronger connection with during sex?”

I scowled. “I don’t know. I guess maybe I feel a special kind of bond with Xavier because he took my virginity?”

Artemis stared at me. “What is that?”

“What is what?” I asked.

“Virginity. What is it, and why did Xavier take it?”

“I mean, it’s not a *thing*. It’s just an expression, for when you’ve never had sex,” I explained, thinking how archaic it sounded the longer I talked. “So when you have sex the first time, the other person ‘takes’ it… for me that was Xavier.” She was squinting at me. “It’s… pretty outdated.”

“Yeah, that’s not really even a concept for Fae.”

I blinked. “It’s not?”

“Nope. And back to the real task, so does that mean Xavier makes you come like five times?”

I gasped. Her blasé attitude reminded me of how werewolves were about nudity. *Madness!*

“Basically,” Artemis went on, “the first isn’t important. What’s important is how you feel now.”

I groaned. “But that’s the point! I don’t know how I feel. Sleeping with them was amazing, but I can’t rank them. It’s just not possible!”

“Okay, calm down—”

I couldn’t calm down. “I love them both, just in different ways, okay? I can’t rank them!”

“But one of them has to be more important, otherwise—”

“That’s just it! I can’t *fucking choose*!”

“Cali, calm down,” Artemis repeated, but I couldn’t.

I was starting to breathe harder, unable to stop my voice from rising. “They’re both equally important to me—”

“Cali—”

“And the idea of losing either of them makes me want to fucking *die!*”

The moment the word left my mouth, my chest constricted. Hard. I put a hand over it, gasping.

“The veins are spreading again!” Artemis said, clearly alarmed.

I was starting to feel woozy. The enclosed space was suddenly making me feel claustrophobic. Sniffling, I stood up. “I need—I need to get some fresh air.”

“Cali,” Artemis said softly. “I’m sorry if I pressured you. I didn’t know…”

I shook my head, stumbling toward the entrance of the cave. I pushed through the bushes, and I could see Steinar standing a little ways off, completely still. I waved hello, but he seemed to be in some kind of trance. Maybe this was his version of sleeping?

I thought about walking over to him but immediately decided against it. I didn’t want to chat with anyone—my head was still pounding. Just like my heart. I took in the fresh air, breathing evenly.

*It’s gonna be okay, Cali,* I thought to myself. *It has to be. Right?*

The sound of crinkling leaves cut off my thoughts. I looked up and choked in surprise.

A wolf had stepped out of the woods, looking ethereal. It was clearly a spirit, and yet I would have recognized it anywhere.

Xavier’s wolf.

**Episode 816**

XAVIER

Just seeing Silas sent a chill down my spine. I couldn’t control the reaction, and I hated myself for it. I hated the hint of weakness that overcame me the second he entered my line of vision, and how much that could cost me around him. The feeling was still the same—even though years had passed, even though I was now the same size as him in both wolf and human form.

He was so intimidating, always, and it made me feel sick to my stomach. Like I was a kid again. I clenched my hands into fists, wishing more than ever that I had my wolf. It was a powerful part of me—the most powerful—and I would have liked nothing more than to rip Silas’s fucking throat out.

Being human and vulnerable in front of Silas was incredibly dangerous.

I hadn’t been in such grave, insane fucking danger in a really long time.

“Son, what a nice surprise,” Silas said, taking a step closer.

I needed to get the fuck out of here if I wanted to survive.

But how?

Silas could easily outrun me.

Silas could ruin me in seconds.

And I didn’t even want to think what my death would mean for Cali.

“Why are you back?” I asked, fighting to stay calm.

Silas snorted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you’re not wanted here, and you know it,” I said. I fought to keep my voice even. Sharp.

“I’m back because I’m meant to be here.” He tilted his head to the side, smiling. Even that was terrifying. “This was always how it was meant to be.”

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

Would this man ever stop talking in goddamn riddles?

“What are you planning?” I asked. “I doubt any of your evil schemes have anything to do with fate. They’re all your doing.”

Silas sighed. It was mocking. “I need you to trust me, son.”

I laughed. It sounded bitter. Fucked up. “Trust you? You’re a monster! Did you come back to take out the entire Redwood pack? Is an absolute fucking massacre your final goal?”

Silas gave me an infuriating, creepy grin. None of my words were making him feel anything, and that was the problem here. He couldn’t fucking feel. He didn’t feel an ounce of empathy toward anyone or anything, and he was bloodthirsty to boot.

He loved seeing people die by his hand.

“You will understand everything in due time, son,” he said.

Ava let out a noise that reminded me of a whimper, and I finally remembered her presence. She looked at Silas with fear as well. At least she could see the truth of that.

“Why did you bring Ava back?” I asked Silas. “Was it just to mess with me?”

Ava’s expression morphed into pure panic the second Silas’s cold eyes fell on her. “Leave me out of this,” she hissed at me. “Don’t provoke him.”

Silas glanced between Ava and me, his nose twitching. “Something’s different about you today, son,” he said, his eyes narrowing.

I shivered, an automatic reaction that I couldn’t control. Fear had never been something I could control, and I was ashamed to admit that. Was Silas talking about my wolf missing? But didn’t he already know it was gone? My wolf *had* walked into that house… Or had that only happened in my head?

Being unable to trust my senses was putting me on fucking edge.

I’d always been a fighter, and using my surroundings to anticipate moves had saved me multiple times. But how could I do that when I had no goddamn idea what was real and what wasn’t?

“We have company, I see,” said a cold female voice. I looked up to see a white woman with a golden arm coming out of the house. She walked forward, standing next to Silas on the porch. She met my eye, and a jolt of horror ran through me.

For me to feel this way, this woman had to be pure evil. The only other person who ever brought this kind of emotion out of me was the man standing next to her.

“Demeter, meet my son, Xavier.” Silas gestured toward me as if I were a prize to show off. His voice was cold, chilling, as he spoke to the woman. “I thought he’d be harder to find, but he’s come straight to my door.” He arched an eyebrow, an amused sneer on his lips. “To kill me, perhaps?”

The woman—Demeter, Silas had called her—looked at me with her unnerving eyes. I fought to hide the sickness in my stomach, the thudding of my heart. It was like she was gazing straight at me, into me, scratching up my insides.

“No,” she said in a low tone. “He’s looking for something.” She walked down the porch, taking a few steps toward me. She paused, and then her lips stretched into a sinister smile. “His wolf. He’s lost it.”

The moment the words were out of her mouth, I went rigid. The adrenaline, the tension that coursed through me made my chest constrict. Silas looked between Demeter and me, and his expression was torn by something I hadn’t seen him demonstrate in a while. Surprise.

It hit me, then. Silas hadn’t known about my wolf until that very moment.

I’d assumed that he was behind my wolf leaving—especially since it had come right to his fucking house—but now? How could I explain this? Why had the wolf led me here? What did that mean? How could my missing wolf be unrelated to Silas?

It seemed impossible.

But Silas now looked at me with an unreadable expression on his face. He sounded bored, almost, when he spoke. “So he’s just human.”

My stomach lurched. I hated the way he could affect me.

I fucking hated myself for it, too.

I hated how vulnerable I was, how stupid I was to be here without my wolf. I hated fucking *everything*.

“I have no use for a weak human son,” Silas said coldly.

He turned back to the house. For a second, I was twistedly relieved to be ignored. But then, he called out over his shoulder. “Ava, kill him.”

Three words, and they hit me like a pile of rocks.

Silas walked back into the house with Demeter and closed the door.

He didn’t even find me worthy enough to witness my murder.

My *murder*.

I met Ava’s eyes for a split second before my survival instinct kicked in and I broke into a run. I ran for my fucking life, literally. I knew that, logically, I couldn’t outrun Ava, but what else could I do? Just fucking stay there and offer myself up to her in a platter?

I looked around as I ran, fighting to keep my shit together, desperate to find a log or something that I could use to defend myself. From behind me, in a blur of sound and motion, I could hear Ava’s heavy breaths. I knew that she’d shifted. I knew that she was after me.

I knew that she would kill me.

*Cali!*

I couldn’t let my life end like this—if not for myself, then for Cali.

I almost tripped over a heavy stick, but that meant I’d finally found myself a weapon. The stick was sharp, and I grabbed it and spun around to face Ava. “Stay the fuck back!” I roared.

She didn’t listen.

She charged at me, and I swung the stick at her, but it did very little to stop her.

She tackled me to the ground, hitting so hard that I felt my whole body shudder with pain and horror. Her claws dug into my side, and I cried out in pain.

“You fucking liar! YOU LIAR!” I shouted, fighting to push Ava off. My fury was useless, much like my entire self—useless and human and broken. But then…

Then, I realized that Ava was rubbing herself against me, rubbing her scent in. What the fuck was she doing? What was happening here? What new torture was this? The pain was excruciating, the blood pooling out of my wound like a river.

The sick memory of something like this happening before hit me, leaving me dizzy.

Only it had been in reverse, back then.

It had been the moment I’d killed Ava.

Was this how she’d felt? Hurting and broken and useless?

I started to get dizzy, but just as my eyelids grew heavy, Ava pulled back. And then, to my shock, she began to lick my wound.

She was… saving me?

I felt the blood stop flowing as she kept licking. I felt the pain subside.

I couldn’t breathe, even though I had the ability now.

She took a step back when she was done, shifting into human while wiping the blood from her mouth. Shaking, she looked at me with wild eyes. “There’s not much time! Run, Xavier, and never come back!”

**Episode 817**

I froze for a moment, staring at Xavier’s wolf. I tried to mind link with him, panic seizing up inside me.

*Xavier?*

But even as I sent the thought, I doubted it would get through. Something was off with this wolf. Something was wrong. This wasn’t Xavier, it was just his wolf—or some kind of ghostly version of it.

*What the FUCK is happening?* I thought, shaking with adrenaline. *Where is Xavier? Where is my mate? How can this be?*

My mind flashed back to the other day. To the moment before Xavier had left. His last words. He’d said that we would be together once he got his wolf back. I hadn’t understood what he’d meant then, hadn’t focused on his words enough. But now I knew.

Now I realized the truth.

*What the hell…*

It was intimidating, scary, unnerving, and I just couldn’t understand—did the presence of the wolf mean that Xavier was nearby? My whole body was shaking as I moved closer to the wolf. It wouldn’t hurt me, I knew that, and I needed to take a better look at it, just to understand.

I needed to understand this fucking madness!

But the wolf stepped away, out of my sightline, even as I yelled after it. “Wait, ghost puppy! Come back!”

I followed it into the woods, slowly so as to not frighten it, before taking one last look at Steinar. He was very nice, but somehow I didn’t want to involve him—this felt like something private. Something too personal to share with him. Besides, he was stony and silent, staring into the distance, either brooding or sleeping. *I have to do this alone*, I thought, but as soon as I stepped into the woods, the wolf started running, dashing off and fading away.

I gasped. Fighting to keep my voice low, so as to not attract any other fucking predators, I hissed, “Wait! WAIT, COME BACK HERE!”

But the wolf was gone.

I’d lost it.

The urge to cry was sudden and sharp, hitting me out of nowhere. The sense of loss I felt was profound. I thought back to the last time Xavier had lost his wolf—it had been because of what had happened with Ava. Because of his mate.

Was I…

Was I responsible this time?

Had Xavier’s wolf left because I’d been with Greyson and it had messed with the mate bond between us? Or was it somehow because Ava was back and Xavier wasn’t with her? Xavier had promised me that he felt nothing for Ava, not after all the horrible things she’d done, but what if he still had some kind of tie to her? What if he couldn’t control it?

What if Xavier was making the choice for me by leaving me first?

*No, please, no*, I thought, whimpering. The notion of him rejecting me filled me with grief. My whole body pounded with a sensation I couldn’t pinpoint. It was as if someone had grabbed a piece of my soul and torn it off.

What if…

What if I was losing Xavier?

*Are we broken?* I thought, and the idea of it made my shaking get worse by the second. I needed to sink to my knees, to let everything out—this longing and sorrow that gnawed at my insides. I no longer felt like myself. I was someone else, a girl on the ground, in the woods, sobbing over her mate, her love, and all the things we’d had and lost.

All the things we could’ve had, if only.

*Has he really rejected me?* I wondered. *Is that what’s happening? Am I losing my mind?*

The veins on my chest throbbed, tightening along with the sobs that escaped my throat.

*This isn’t me,* I thought breathlessly. *What’s happening to me?*

“What the hell!” Steinar was here, crashing through the forest. He stared at me, wide-eyed. “Why are you crying? Who hurt you?” His expression darkened. “Tell me and I’ll tear them apart.”

I knew that Steinar could do that, literally, but I couldn’t speak. All that came out of my mouth was hiccupping sobs, and my shaking kept getting worse and worse. I was the girl in the woods, crying, the veins in her chest spreading, and for a moment I wondered:

*Is this how it ends?*

*Is this how my choice goes away?*

“Shh, it’s gonna be okay,” Steinar told me soothingly, lifting me from the ground. He led me back to the cave, and all I could think about, all I could process, was that I was responsible for all the horrible things that had been happening to Xavier.

*You did this, Cali. You did this!*

Someone covered me with a blanket, heavy and warm, and later on, much later, the veins stopped hurting.

The veins stopped killing me, but the pain remained, even as I drifted off to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

The next morning, I woke up to a pounding head.

Eight days until Halloween.

*Eight days until I make a choice, or… don’t?* I thought. *I have no fucking idea.*

I hadn’t slept well, and I was exhausted. Artemis was snoring next to me, so peaceful that a pang of jealousy hit me. I shook her awake. “Get ready,” I said. “It’s time to go.”

My voice was sharper than I’d intended, and Artemis startled awake. She stared at me. “Whoa… How are you feeling?”

I couldn’t remember much from last night. I was certain that I hadn’t explained anything to Artemis before she’d fallen asleep. Or had she already been sleeping when I’d gotten back? I knew she was a deep sleeper so she may have not woken up at all. I couldn’t remember. I couldn’t even remember if she was the one who’d covered me with the blanket.

In the end, none of that mattered.

“I saw Xavier’s wolf last night. He was here,” I whispered.

Artemis jumped up. “*What?* Xavier was here?”

“No,” I said quietly. “He lost his wolf. That’s where he went, to go look for it. But it was here.”

Artemis’s shock was evident. “I didn’t realize… I had no idea such a thing was possible.”

Steinar spoke up from the corner. “I’ve read of such things.”

I stared at him. “What?”

He stood up, coming to sit next to us. “I’ve always found werewolf lore fascinating.”

“Tell me…” I sniffled, wiping my eyes. “Tell me everything. Can you? What do you know?”

“I remember reading about Fyodor the Terrible, a powerful Alpha who lived centuries ago, and who lost his wolf after heartbreak,” Steinar said thoughtfully. Then, in a wistful tone, he added, “Romantic, don’t you think?”

I was struck.

*It’s not romantic*, I thought, *it’s a fucking nightmare.*

Xavier had told me he’d lost his wolf after finding out that I’d slept with Greyson.

I really *had* done this.

“Can you…” I stared at Steinar, grasping at straws. “Can you think of another reason why he’d lose his wolf?”

“As far as I’ve read, it’s always a profound heartbreak that does it,” Steinar said.

I felt like I was about to throw up.

*All my fault all my fault all my fault…*

Maybe Xavier and Greyson would be better off if I left and never came back.

“Cali?” Artemis squeezed my shoulder. “Should I even ask if you’re okay?”

I wasn’t okay.

I didn’t think I could be okay any time soon, whether I made my choice or not. I didn’t even know if it mattered anymore—not if choosing meant actively harming my mates, one way or another. What was the fucking point of *due destini* if it just ruined everyone caught up in it? Why was I the one cursed with this bullshit fate madness that was going to ruin me—and the men I cared for?

What kind of messed up joke was this?

“Cali…” Artemis trailed off, her gaze searching. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. I felt exhausted. I felt almost… empty? It was a horrible, terrifying sensation that made me feel like I was losing myself.

“Are you ready to go, then?” Artemis asked quietly.

“Yes,” I breathed, standing up.

*I’m done,* I thought. *I’ve survived so many supernatural disasters only to die or kill off my mates? I’m done with this bullshit.*

“Let’s…”

“We’re not going to go find the book,” I told Artemis, cutting her off. “Take me home.”

Artemis looked cautious. “You want to go back to the pack house already?”

I shook my head. The words were heavy as I uttered them. “Home to the Fae world.”

**Episode 818**

GREYSON

I rolled over to see Cali sleeping, looking gorgeous and tousled in my bed. Everything smelled like her. Like fucking heaven.

She was heaven, and she was all mine.

She opened her eyes slowly, facing me. She grinned. “You dork. Are you watching me sleep?”

I chuckled, tucking my chin in. I held her hand, kissing the top of it before resting it on my cheek. I adored her touch. “You’re beautiful.”

She scoffed. “Sure. Especially in the mornings, huh?”

“Especially then,” I said, pulling her into my arms to kiss the top of her head. “Because you’re in my bed.”

She laughed, pressing herself against me. “You’re so cheesy…”

The feel of her laughter made me dizzy. I raised an eyebrow. “And that’s a bad thing, huh?”

She smiled at me, a playful glint in her eye. “No. I love it.”

I kissed her mouth the moment she said the word “love”. I kissed her cheek, her jawline, peppering kisses across her neck as my hands roamed all over her soft, perfect body. “Say that again,” I whispered, nibbling at her earlobe.

“I love it,” she said. It sounded like a needy whimper, now. “I love you.”

I kissed her full on the mouth, devouring. Her breath caught, and she spread herself for me, pulling my hand between her legs. The feel of her—wet and hot and shaking, just for me—drove me fucking nuts. I couldn’t get enough of knowing I could make her act like this.

“Please,” she said with a little whine, arching her chest up to my mouth, her hips up to the hand that was working her over, that had her spilling and trembling for me.

“Only if you say ‘please’ first,” I said with a smirk.

She tugged at my hair, outraged. “I just did, you annoying—”

I interrupted her with a hard, searing kiss, hovering over her while she wrapped her thighs around my waist and her arms around my neck. She pulled me so close that I felt drunk on her. I loved her so much.

I loved her so much that without this, I would die.

“Cali.” I breathed her name. She whimpered, squirming for me as I prepared to enter her, to feel that euphoric fucking heaven again…

I woke up, startled.

My heart was pounding, and when I looked around, the bed was empty. I wished I could have slept longer—my dream had been cut off right before the good part, and I didn’t appreciate that. I would’ve enjoyed seeing how it played out. I was going to have a serious chat with my subconscious brain. I needed all my Cali content to be complete and full-figured, STAT.

But then again, maybe I could make that dream happen in real life?

Excited in every conceivable way, I pulled on some boxers and padded lightly to Cali’s room. It was early, so I didn’t knock, just entered with a grin—like the cat that ate the canary.

But her bed was empty.

My grin flew right out the fucking window, because the idea that she was in Xavier’s room made me sick. But then I saw the note on her pillow.

What the fuck?

Frowning, I crossed the room to read it.

*Greyson,*

*I need to figure out the* due destini *situation, and I need to do it on my own. DO NOT FOLLOW ME. Artemis is with me, we are Fae, we have powers, you know the drill. We will be okay. I will be back before Halloween. Please trust me on this.*

*Love,*

*Cali*

I turned the paper over in disbelief, as if a more reasonable explanation would be on the other side. But it was blank. All the happiness I’d felt moments ago was immediately replaced by anger.

Pure, messed up, never-ending anger.

I crumbled up the note, marched straight back to my room, and started throwing things around as I pulled on more clothes. I had to go find Cali. *Again*. What the fuck? I couldn’t believe how irresponsible she was being. She knew how dangerous it was in the woods right now.

Hopefully I’d be able to catch up to her in time.

I didn’t care if it ended with a screaming match—I just had to know that my stubborn, gorgeous, annoying mate was safe.

“Uh, everything okay?” a voice asked. Joss.

She was peering at me from the door.

“Fine,” I snapped.

She seemed dubious. “You’re slamming things around so loudly that you woke me up.”

Joss was the last person I wanted to explain this to.

“Cali’s gone,” I said curtly. “I need to bring her back. Hopefully it won’t take long.”

A look crossed Joss’s face. It looked like resignation, like she realized she should have been expecting this. Like she wanted to look at me and scoff, *“Typical”.* She looked momentarily exhausted, but then she seemed to steel herself. In a lower tone, she said, “Greyson, you can’t go anywhere right now, you know that. The pack needs you. Xavier’s already gone, too. You just can’t do this.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” I huffed, my aggravation climbing. “Cali thinks she’s going to figure out the *due destini* thing, but she can’t be wandering around right now. I need to fucking go.”

But Joss blocked my way. Her eyes flashed with anger, her resignation gone. “Absolutely *not*,” she declared. “If Cali’s gone to figure out the *due destini* thing, then good for her! She needs to—this ridiculous drama is tearing the pack apart.”

“Joss—”

“You’re the fucking Alpha, Greyson!” she exclaimed. “You simply can’t go. I won’t allow it, the pack won’t allow it.”

The fact that she was right was what enraged me most.

The fact that she was right and I was wrong and I would ruin everything—even myself—for Cali, enraged me above all, polluting me with a toxicity that made my whole body ache.

I was weak.

I was a fucking *mess* for her.

But I knew that the pack needed me now, especially with Xavier gone. I wanted nothing more than to find Cali, to make sure she was safe. But she wasn’t the only person depending on me. I was responsible for the lives of everyone in the pack.

I had failed them in the past, while Joss had been keeping things afloat.

I had failed them *repeatedly*, and the guilt was swallowing me whole.

“You know I’m right,” Joss said coldly.

Her judgement, her disdain, hurt like knives, because she was fucking right.

I was losing control, and it only made me hate myself.

It only made me seethe as I slammed the doorframe hard enough for it to crack and moved past Joss. I didn’t need her judgement.

I already knew that I’d messed up.

I already knew that I wasn’t a good Alpha.

I already knew I didn’t deserve Cali, even though I needed her like air.

My anger led me away from Joss and my room and to a place where anger was needed, was requested, was fucking expected, even.

I needed to be the Alpha and get something done after so much time spent disappointing everyone, myself included.

When I opened the basement door, Nolan sneered at me. He was still chained to the chair, but had the gall to say, “Here for another little chat?”

I walked straight up to him. “Enough talking. I’m done doing things other people’s way. I’m going to force you to explain Silas’s plan, once and for all.”

Nolan laughed. “Good luck with—”

I punched the sentence out of his mouth. He reeled back, wincing and spitting out blood. “I told you,” he said. “I don’t know the plan.”

I didn’t buy that for a second. “If you don’t tell me what you know, I’m going to kill you.”

I spoke calmly, evenly.

I spoke the truth.

But Nolan just shrugged. “Then I guess you’re going to kill me.”

He didn’t believe me.

He didn’t believe I could hurt him.

He didn’t believe I was enough to do what needed to be done.

He didn’t believe I was worthy, much like Joss didn’t believe I was worthy of the title of Alpha, and much like Cali… Much like Cali, who was struggling to decide if I was worthy of being her one and only.

I flexed my hand. When I looked down at it, I saw Nolan’s blood.

And then I snapped. I punched him again, and again, thinking of all the people I wished I was really punching—Silas, Ava… *Xavier*.

I howled in rage, my breathing so harsh it had overcome my ears.

Nolan was going limp, not responding, but I couldn’t stop.

Everything around me, in me, was dark.

I had reached a place that I hadn’t allowed himself to go to since I’d met Cali, and that primal rage felt real now. It felt true.

It made me feel worthy enough to complete a task, even if that task was fucking murder.

“Greyson, stop!” a voice said. It sounded far away, even if it was coming from right next to me. “You’re killing him!”

It was Joss, and she sounded horrified.

But I didn’t turn around.

I couldn’t, and my fist slammed into Nolan’s face again.

**Episode 819**

“Wait, what?” Artemis stared at me, baffled.

“I want to go back to the Fae world,” I choked out.

“What are you talking about?” Artemis demanded, her eyes growing wide. “What good is that going to do? The book definitely isn’t *there!*”

“I know that!” Tears were starting to prickle my eyes. “It doesn’t matter! That book was a pipe dream. We didn’t even know if there would be anything in there that could help me, anyway!” I exploded, and my angry voice bounced off the damp walls of the cave. “We don’t know where it is. Hell, we don’t even know where *we* are!”

Tears were coursing down my cheeks now, and I leaned against the cold stone wall. “All I know for sure is that as long as I’m in Xavier and Greyson’s life, I’m putting all three of us in danger. Life-and-death danger.”

“Cali—”

I shook my head, closing my eyes against the flood of tears. “I can’t be responsible for that, Artemis,” I whispered. “I just can’t. I love them too much. To think that I could be putting them in danger…” I covered my face with my hands. “Maybe if I just disappeared—back into the Fae world—Xavier and Greyson could just go on. They could live a normal life… without me.”

I stared into my hands and thought of this possibility—of Xavier and Greyson moving on, finding love, living their lives. I thought of never seeing them again. Never hearing Greyson’s low voice, never seeing Xavier’s knowing smirk. Never again feeling Greyson’s lips on mine, never again feeling Xavier’s hands brush my skin. My knees weakened and I sunk down to the floor of the cave, sobs wracking my body. I felt hollowed out. All my hope was gone. I didn’t have any more ideas. I didn’t know what to do next.

“Hey,” Artemis said, grabbing my hand. She had crouched down next to me and was pulling my hands away from my face. “Cali, think about this for a second. You think disappearing into the Fae world is going to solve your problems?”

“Maybe,” I wailed.

She shook her head. “Isn’t that basically what Cassandra did when she jumped off that cliff?”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, looking up.

Artemis gave me a hard look. “She tried to sacrifice herself, but that didn’t end up working out well for Symeon or Arion, did it? *Or* Cassandra.”

My heart sank. “No,” I muttered.

“No,” Artemis said bluntly. “Cassandra died.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know that.”

“And you know that’s what going to happen here if you don’t choose,” she said firmly. “Disappearing into the Fae world isn’t going to change any of that. You would just be running away.”

She was right. *Dammit*. I looked away, into the shadowy corners of the cave—anywhere but Artemis’s stern gaze. “But… maybe there’s something there that could fix the curse,” I ventured. I was grasping at straws. “Some magic solution or something?”

But Artemis was shaking her head, even before I finished speaking. “They don’t even have werewolves in the Fae world, Cali. I doubt there’s anything there that’ll help with werewolf mate problems.” She looked at me for a moment, and her gaze softened. “You know there’s still hope here. And running away from your problems never fixes things. Believe me, I know.”

There was nothing I wanted more than to just run away. But as I looked at Artemis’s face, I knew she was right. Running wouldn’t solve anything.

“We’re going to figure this out,” she said with a small smile. “Together. Right?”

I took a deep, shuddering breath. “Yeah. Together.”

We both looked up as Steinar strode back into the cave.

“With the dawning of the new day, my senses have been renewed!” he announced.

“What?” I asked, shooting a look at Artemis. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a sunny day out there; perfect for tracking. And I know in which direction we should be heading.”

“Really?” I asked, scrambling to my feet and dashing the tears from my cheeks.

Steinar nodded. “Absolutely. But we don’t want to waste the daylight. We must get moving!” He turned and headed out of the cave, into the sunshine.

I raised my eyebrows at Artemis, but she just shrugged and started after Steinar. I followed behind her.

“So,” I said, hurrying to catch up with Steinar once we we’d found the path through the trees, “I wanted to ask you—how did Fyodor the Terrible end up getting his wolf back?”

“Oh.” Steinar shook his head, his chiseled face suddenly sober. “It’s a sad story.”

“What happened?” I asked, my stomach dropping.

“He was attacked by a rival Alpha. He couldn’t defend himself, and he was killed.”

The sun was shining bright on us, but my whole body went cold. My head spun and I slowed, looking around for somewhere to sit down and put my head between my knees before I passed out. If anything like that happened to Xavier…

“But I’ve heard of other, happier, endings,” Steinar added quickly, seeing my face. “Wolves can come back when the heart is healed.”

My heartbeat sped up. That was what had happened to Xavier, the first time. He’d gotten his wolf back when he’d fallen in love with me. But… did that mean if I chose Greyson, Xavier’s wolf would never return? Or, if I chose Xavier and his wolf returned, that Greyson would lose his?

I closed my eyes. This was an impossible situation. Artemis was right—there was no way of getting out of this without someone getting hurt. I wished there was some way *I* could be the only one who was hurt. I could handle my own pain, but the thought of causing pain for Xavier or Greyson made me sick to my stomach. But I knew that taking all the pain upon myself wasn’t possible. *Due destini* didn’t allow for that.

Sacrificing myself wouldn’t guarantee anything for Greyson or Xavier.

Steinar and Artemis walked ahead. I tried to keep up, but I lagged behind, trying not to let my thoughts spiral into chaos. I looked around the woods, thinking of the soft carpet of pine needles beneath my feet and of the cool breeze blowing against my face. The more I tried to focus on these details, the easier it became to breathe.

After a while, I became aware of the lively conversation happening in front of me. Artemis and Steinar were chatting happily—both apparently very curious about each other.

“How is it that you aren’t bitter, though?” Artemis was asking with wonder. “I mean, don’t you miss being a human? And being a librarian…” She made a face. “That sounds like a huge bore.”

Steinar shrugged his massive shoulders. “I did miss being human, at first, but I’ve had a lot of time to come to terms with things. And as for being a librarian, I like it. I have nothing but time, and it gives me something to occupy my thoughts—”

There was a rustle of leaves at their feet and a tiny chipmunk darted out in front of them. It paused, looking up at them, and Artemis threw her arm across Steinar’s middle.

“Stay back!” she shouted dramatically. “Another deadly threat!”

Steinar sucked in a breath and took a step back, his expression terrified, but then he looked over in surprise as Artemis dissolved into giggles. “You’re having fun with me,” he stated. Artemis nodded, unable to speak. He looked back at the chipmunk with narrowed eyes. “I can see it’s small, but there’s something about the little ones that makes them the most frightening. They’re so quick and cunning.” He mimed little legs running quickly with his fingers, then shuddered, looking horrified.

Artemis leveled a look at him. “You’re not serious,” she said, barely able to keep her laughter under control.

“You’d understand if a family of squirrels had ever taken roost in your ear,” he said gravely.

Artemis grinned at him, and I looked up to see Steinar looking back down at her, a fond look on his sculpted face.

“You know,” Artemis said as they kept walking, stepping carefully around the chipmunk, “I have been around a lot of hard people, but it takes a truly strong man to admit his fears.”

Steinar chuckled—the sound low and musical—and I smiled. *This* was what I needed. This moment, in the sunlight, with the sound of laughter around me. But, as I looked up, what I saw made the smile slide off my face.

“Artemis!” I called, my whole body starting to shake.

She turned, surprised at the fear in my voice. “What is it?”

I pointed up ahead, over Artemis’s shoulder, and she spun around. There, a little off the path, was a section of broken branches, like someone had fallen into the brush. And just below the jagged points of broken branches was a huge pool of blood.

As I walked closer to investigate, I felt a sudden constricting pain around my heart. I didn’t have to look down to know that the veins were spreading.

Artemis stopped beside me, her eyes on the pooled blood, sticky and red and seeping into the soft earth. She shook her head. “There’s so much blood,” she said softly. “Too much.”

I swallowed hard. “Do you think it was an animal?”

She looked up. “You know it wasn’t. Someone was killed here. Recently.”

**Episode 820**

GREYSON

The force of every blow ricocheted up my arms and reverberated through my body, but the pain felt good. Nolan’s blood was warm on my knuckles, but that felt good, too. Every punch felt better and better. I hadn’t known it, but *this* was what I’d been missing. It had to have been, because it felt so damn right. No more thinking about everyone else’s feelings. No more fucking pack politics. I landed another punch on Nolan’s jaw and felt the bone crack under my hand. Now it was just me and my fists and the raw power of letting my wolf do whatever it goddamn wanted—*when* it wanted.

And why the hell not?

Cali was off doing whatever she wanted. Xavier was off doing god only knew what. He always did whatever the hell he wanted. So why shouldn’t I? And right now, what *I* wanted was to make this meatball in front of me pay for everything that had happened.

“You used your own fucking sister,” I ground out through gritted teeth, “like some kind of fucking siren.” Nolan blinked blearily up at me. Cali-Ava had lured me in and tricked me. My rage boiled up and I landed another punishing blow, slamming my fist into Nolan’s nose.

He let out a piercing howl and I looked down, surprised. “How the hell are you still conscious?” I growled. I tightened my grip on him. Was I going soft? Had I forgotten how to punish people the way they deserved? My thoughts clicked back to that night with Ava—when I’d thought she was Cali—and the strange, knowing look she’d given me after we’d had sex. *A nice distraction*, she’d called it. Then she’d *dismissed* me. The thought made me sick to my stomach. She’d made me question everything. She’d made me believe that my bond with Cali was broken—that it was gone, or false. *My* Cali. My one true mate.

Xavier strutted around her like a fucking peacock, thinking he was her only mate—but I knew the truth, and he’d already had his chance with her.

I landed another hit without thinking and felt a warm spray of blood splatter across my face. I looked down to see Nolan slumped over in the chair. My mouth watered. One more punch, and this would all be over. I could feel it. His pulse was slowing, his heart was winding down. I could end this with one more blow.

There were parts of this that would never be over—I knew that—but, as I raised my fist, I also knew that I could end *this*.

But, as I was bringing my hand down with the force of a sledgehammer, something stopped my progress, bringing me up short, and the pain of the sudden stop shot through me like a bullet.

“Fuck!” I yelled, startled. I stumbled back in surprise, then looked down in horror as a cold bracelet of silver snapped around my wrist.

I looked up, wildly.

“Make sure it’s tight,” Joss was saying to Ravi, her mouth pressed into a grim line. They were both holding onto the chain attached to the silver cuff.

“What the *fuck?*” I bellowed, yanking on the chain. “What the hell is wrong with you, Joss? Have you lost your fucking mind? This is *my* kill!”

“Greyson,” she started, still holding tight to the chain. “You—”

“This was my punishment to dole out,” I snarled, yanking the chain hard enough that she and Ravi stumbled forward. “*I’m* the Alpha, remember? Where the fuck’s your head, Joss?”

“You need to calm down,” Joss said, getting her feet beneath her again. She straightened and looked at me, her eyes cold. “You need to get ahold of yourself, Greyson.”

I stared at her, breathing hard, sweat pouring down my face, but I didn’t answer.

“Think, Greyson. Killing Nolan isn’t going to make Cali come back,” she said, her voice low. “It isn’t going to fix anything. It’s just going to make things worse.”

“This isn’t any of your—”

“If word gets around that we’re killing the Alphas of other packs, it’ll to start an honest-to-god war.” Her tone was icy. “We don’t want that, and we sure as hell don’t *need* that. Not right now. This is *exactly* what Silas wants you to do.”

Just hearing my father’s name made me bristle with fury all over again. I loathed him. That man had never given me anything but trouble and grief—and two know-it-all little brothers who I’d been charged with protecting, even when they went gallivanting all over the world without asking me first. If Xavier were here right now, I’d make him the fucking Alpha. Here and now. He wouldn’t even have to fight me for it.

What did it even matter? Without Cali, nothing mattered.

I looked up at Joss and, seeing the disgust written across her face, looked away quickly. I knew I’d earned it, but I didn’t want to see it. Ravi, who I barely knew, was looking around, shaking his head in shock. Looking down, I saw the blood. It was everywhere. All over the floor, on my shoes, my hands, my clothes. I looked at Nolan. He was a mess. Blood was streaming from every opening on his face, and his eyes were swelling shut, already purpling with bruises. He was still chained to the chair, but listing to one side, unable to keep his head up.

Rishika pushed past me and knelt beside Nolan, speaking quietly and looking carefully at his wounds. She had a small bag with her, and she started pulling out rubbing alcohol and bandages.

Revulsion welled up inside me, and I had to swallow it down like bile. Self-disgust coursed through me. I yanked the silver chain, pulling it out of Joss’s surprised hands, and stalked out of the room.

I stormed upstairs, veering off toward the kitchen. I meant to make it to my own room and my own bathroom, but I had to get Nolan’s blood off my hands—the sight of it was making me sick. I leaned over the sink and flipped on the water, letting it run icy cold over my hands. The water pooled in the bottom of the sink, blood-red.

Hissing, I looked down. There was a series of gashes across my knuckles—from Nolan’s teeth and bones—and they stung like fire as the water hit them.

I looked up with a start when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Mrs. Smith was next to me, and her eyes were warm with compassion. “May I?” she asked, taking my hand from the water. She’d brought a bowl filled with a milky liquid, and it rested next to her on the kitchen counter. Gentle curls of steam rose from the top of it and it gave off a floral, herby smell, like springtime in a sunny garden.

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded, and she reached into the bowl and took out a washcloth. She placed the soft cloth carefully over my bleeding knuckles. I sucked in a breath when it burned at the touch.

“It’s a bit hot, sorry,” she said quietly and went to work, gently rubbing the cloth across my hands. “Why did you go after Nolan?” she asked, without stopping her ministrations.

I didn’t answer right away. “He deserved it. He tricked us all,” I finally rasped out.

She was quiet for a moment. “And do you feel better now?”

There was a part of me that wanted to talk to her—to tell her everything, to explain how I was feeling—but I still felt strange about her being my mother. I didn’t know how to have a mother. I’d been on my own for so long.

I sighed. I wished to god this wasn’t so messy. “I just lost control,” I admitted. I shook my head, picturing Joss’s look of disgust. “It won’t happen again. You don’t need to worry about me. Thanks for this,” I said, pulling away from her hands. I turned to go but stopped when Mrs. Smith put her hand on my arm.

“I know all of this has been terribly hard on you, Greyson. But you have to have faith in the people you love.” She gave me a small smile. “You have to have faith in *love*.”

I raised my eyebrows. That sounded absurd, or at best overly optimistic, considering the circumstances I was in. And I was about to say so when something caught my eye. I looked down at Mrs. Smith’s hand, still resting on my arm. Her left hand was what had caught my attention—specifically, the ring she was wearing. An ornate gold ring with a large, oval-shaped ruby that glistened in the sunlight. I looked up curiously, and found her blushing.

“You see? You don’t want to believe me, but I’m proof of that very thing.” She looked down admiringly as the ring glinted. “This morning, MacKenzie asked me to marry her.”

**Episode 821**

VIOLET

When I woke up, it took me a moment to reorient myself. I lay still, blinking, trying to remember where I was. Then it hit me—I was in Minnesota, in Tom and Orla’s house. Alone. I reached out an arm and felt the other side of Cali’s bed, which was cold and empty. Charlie was downstairs on the couch. Tom and Orla had insisted.

Which was fine. It was their house, and they had a right to decide who slept where, but… I had missed him. I really wished I could have snuggled up with him last night. I curled onto my side, trying not to hear the Rogue’s warning echoing in my head. He had promised to rip out my mate’s throat, and the sound of his guttural voice still shivered down my spine. I wanted to keep Charlie near me because he was my mate, but it was more than that. I just felt this overwhelming urge to keep my eyes on him at all times. I just wanted to make sure he was safe.

I looked up in surprise when I heard a quiet knock on my door.

“Violet?” came a muffled voice.

My heart sped up. It was Charlie. “Come in,” I called.

The door opened and Charlie slipped in, his hair so adorably sleep-rumpled that my heart felt like it had leapt into my throat.

“Hey,” he said, smiling. His eyes traveled over me, taking in my tiny purple tank top and even tinier black shorts. His cheeks flushed and he looked away, feigning sudden interest in the blinds on the window. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t,” I said, shaking my head. “Come on in—I’m glad to see you. I was just thinking about you.”

He looked over curiously. “Were you? I was thinking about you, too. I just wanted to check on you. See if you were okay after last night.” He came to sit on the edge of the bed. “That was pretty intense.”

“I know,” I said, sitting up.

His eyes ranged down again, slower this time, taking me in, and this time he didn’t blush. “I hated being away from you last night.”

“Did you?” I asked quietly.

He nodded. “I don’t know how to explain it—I just want to keep you close right now. I want to keep an eye on you. Make sure you’re safe.”

I smiled. “I know what you mean.”

He looked at me. “Something just feels… *off,* when you’re not close. When that Rogue was attacking last night, it’s like I wasn’t even thinking about myself. I was just thinking about you—I just wanted to make sure that you were okay. Do you know what I mean?”

I leaned forward, heat rushing to my cheeks. “I know *exactly* what you mean, Charlie. I feel the exact same way about you.” I took a deep breath, gathering my courage. “And I don’t think it’s a coincidence that we both feel this bond. I think it’s more than just liking each other…” I trailed off. I was hesitant, remembering how he’d freaked out the last time I’d mentioned the idea of mates. But I shouldn’t have worried, because he leaned forward too, right there with me.

“Yeah, it’s like what you were saying about mates,” he said. “I think you might be on to something.”

“You do?” I squeaked, then waited breathlessly for him to go on.

“Yeah,” he said, his eyes burning bright. “I don’t think I could stay away from you, Violet. Even if I wanted to.” He shook his head. “And I don’t want to.”

It was *happening!* I could barely breathe. I leaned closer. “I don’t want to, either,” I whispered.

And then Charlie’s arms were around me, pulling me against him. Before, our kisses had always been quick pecks on the cheek, or closed-mouth kisses on the lips. But this—*this*—blew everything out of the water.

He was kissing me—once, twice, then so many times I lost count. I didn’t even notice that I’d slid down in my bed until he was over me and we were tangled together in the sheets—and in each other. His hands slid beneath my tank top like they’d been waiting to do that from the moment he’d walked into the room. I had *definitely* been waiting for him to do that from the moment he’d walked into the room, and I smiled against his lips.

But we both froze and looked up when there was another knock on the door.

Orla opened the door a crack. “Violet, breakfast is—” She stopped, surprised, then smiled. “Breakfast is ready. For both of you, when you’re ready.” Then she shook her head with a small smile and shut the door.

We disentangled ourselves and dressed in a hurry, then went down to the kitchen for breakfast. I was embarrassed when we walked in, but Orla smiled pleasantly, and Tom only looked up from his paper with a friendly, “Good morning.”

He looked good this morning. Better than he’d looked the night before. Thank god. Once we’d gotten him back to the house and had cleaned out the wound, it hadn’t looked quite so bad as I’d originally thought. There was blood at the surface, but it wasn’t as deep as I’d thought.

The biggest issue had been his anxieties about the possibility of becoming a werewolf. Now, I regretted bringing it up at all. We’d been so careful about the cleaning, there should be no problem at all.

But he was clearly still stewing about it, because as we sat down, he put down the paper and leveled a look at me. “Violet, I have some questions for you.”

“Okay,” I said carefully.

“I want to know more about this whole werewolf thing,” he said. He cleared his throat. “Now, this isn’t something you’re born with?”

“Well, sometimes it is,” I started.

“I was born a human, but I was bitten, just like you,” Charlie cut in. He glanced at me. “I didn’t know that if I had cleaned out the wound properly, I wouldn’t have turned.”

I looked back at him, reeling. Did that mean… Did he *wish* he’d known that? Did he wish he hadn’t turned? That he wasn’t a werewolf? That he’d never met me?

Just when I was about to start spiraling, Charlie reached under the table and took my hand, giving it a squeeze. He smiled and my whole body relaxed, then warmed.

Tom was smiling too, and nodding. “Okay, okay. I do have a few more questions. I would have asked Cali, but she hasn’t exactly been forthcoming. So,” he said, settling in, “clearly it’s not true that you can only turn on the full moon, like in the movies.”

“No.” I shook my head. “We can shift any time we want to, unless you’re bitten and turning. The full moon will trigger the first transformation.”

“So, the shifting,” Tom said, frowning. “You change shape, right? What happens to your clothes?”

“Um…” I started, blushing as Charlie gave my knee a playful squeeze beneath the table. “Well, we go through a lot of outfits,” I managed.

“Does it hurt to shift?”

“It doesn’t *hurt*, no. I guess it would feel strange to do it the first time, but you get used to it,” I said, looking to Charlie for confirmation. He nodded.

“Okay, so what do werewolves *eat?*” Tom asked hesitantly.

I looked down at the plate of pancakes Orla had put in front of me. I was about halfway through my stack. I looked back up at Tom.

He smiled. “I meant as werewolves. Is it… *common*, to hunt humans?”

I put down my fork. He was clearly asking about the Rogue, and I shook my head. “That Rogue is *not* normal. At all. Werewolves have a code. We don’t just go around biting people.”

“So what was going on with that wolf last night?” Tom asked, looking agitated. “And then there are those three dead hikers. This guy is clearly out of control.”

“I know, I know,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ve seen plenty of Rogues in my life, but I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Tom looked at me for a moment, clearly thinking hard. Then he pushed his chair away from the table and went into the kitchen. He opened a drawer and rummaged around, pulling out a business card. “Maybe we should contact the MIB,” he said to Orla.

“What’s the MIB?” Charlie asked.

“They’re these investigators who came around not too long ago. They look into supernatural events.” Tom looked back at Orla. “They’re like supernatural cops, right? Maybe they can help stop that wolf from attacking anyone else.”

I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t like the sound of them getting involved in this. Cops, supernatural or not, usually posed more of an obstacle in werewolf matters.

“I don’t know,” I began. “How do you know they’re really on our side?” I asked Tom.

He looked uncomfortable for a moment, but then his resolve seemed to stiffen. “Listen, Violet,” he said. “There are innocent lives at stake here, and it’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Then he grabbed the phone off the hook and started to dial.

**Episode 822**

The pool of blood was so dark it looked almost black against the earth around it. It was growing sticky and starting to congeal at the edges. Looking at it was making me feel sick to my stomach, but I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

“Cali? Are you okay?”

Artemis sounded like she was calling to me across a great distance. Her voice sounded so far away, and I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. My head was swimming, and black spots were starting to appear at the edges of my vision. The blackness was growing, crowding in, obscuring the sky and the trees around me. The pool of blood began to move, as though stirred by some unseen hand. It swirled, just like the veins on my chest had swirled when they’d first appeared, back in my bedroom in Minnesota. I stared down at it, transfixed.

“*Cali!*”

The voice was further away now. My chest tightened even more—it was painfully tight, now—and I began to fall. I braced for the impact, but before I hit the ground, everything went black.

When I opened my eyes again, I was confused. I must have fainted, but… I wasn’t looking up at the sky and the tips of tall pine trees—I was looking up at a lofted ceiling, crisscrossed with exposed beams. I squinted. I knew this ceiling. This was Xavier’s house—the one he shared with Colton.

Someone stirred beside me, and I looked over. Xavier was next to me. Through the window over his shoulder, I could see that the sun was only just rising, shooting out its first rays into the grey pre-dawn sky.

“Good morning,” Xavier murmured, smiling, but not opening his eyes.

I knew I should have been scared—I was meant to be out in the woods, I was lost, I had just fainted—but I wasn’t. Everything was peaceful, and I felt peaceful, too. I moved closer to Xavier, feeling the warmth of his body wrap around me like a blanket.

He opened his eyes and leaned down, brushing a kiss against my lips, and something cracked open inside me. Relief spread through me like a rushing river. It had all been a nightmare. A terrible nightmare. But everything was fine. I was here, with Xavier, and I was safe. I pressed in close to him, and Xavier smiled and kissed me again. This kiss was longer, more lingering, and something *else* stirred in me. It was heat, and it began too pool in my core, just below my belly. He was kissing me languidly and urgently all at once, and when his tongue slipped past my lips and into my mouth, I opened to him, blossoming like a flower.

“Cali,” he whispered, his mouth moving down, kissing to my jaw, then my neck. My head dropped back on the pillows and my gaze went up to the crisscrossing beams. Everything was right. I was here, in his bed. Xavier was with me, the weight of him pressing me into the mattress. I arched against him, wanting more—more pressure, more contact, more of him.

He pulled back to look at me and chuckled, his eyes sparkling down at me. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I breathed. I grabbed the hem of my tank top and pulled it off, flinging it to the floor.

Xavier looked down, taking in my bare breasts with hungry, possessive eyes. “You are so beautiful, Cali,” he growled, then he dropped his head, crushing his lips to mine. He pushed my legs apart with his knee and I opened willingly, ready for him.

“I’m ready,” I panted, dropping my head back and closing my eyes.

Above me, Xavier went still and quiet. I squirmed, grinding myself against him. I wanted him—what was he waiting for?

“Xavier,” I pleaded. “Please.”

Then I felt a warm, wet drip on my chest. I opened my eyes, surprised. Xavier’s face hovered above me, but he wasn’t smiling now. His expression was twisted in silent, excruciating pain. My eyes grew wide as they traveled downward. His bare chest—unblemished a moment before—was now a gaping, horrific wound, the blood nearly black. Hot, sticky blood dripped steadily from the yawning gash, plopping flatly onto my bare skin.

With a gasp, I scrambled back—my hands reaching out, grasping for a blanket or a sheet. I had to to do something—staunch the flow of blood somehow, but it was no use. Everything I grasped was already soaked with blood.

“*Xavier!*” I screamed, as he toppled to the side.

But he didn’t answer. He just lay there, motionless, staring up at me, his face ghostly pale.

I awoke with a gasp, sitting up so fast that blood rushed to my head and my vision swam.

Artemis and Steinar both took a surprised step back.

“What just happened?” Artemis demanded, her face lined with worry.

“I must have passed out,” I said, trying to order my thoughts. “I was dreaming. I dreamed—” I shook my head. I couldn’t say it. I couldn’t put into words the unutterable horror of that dream. I looked around, trying to remind myself it wasn’t real, but then my eyes fell on the lake of blood next to me and my heartrate kicked up again. I thought of Xavier, and the bed awash with his blood. Was that dream prophetic? Was that why I’d seen Xavier’s wolf?

*No*. I shook my head. No, I was being crazy. I’d had dreams of Greyson and Xavier dying before. That was one of the nastiest parts of the curse. But they were just dreams. They couldn’t hurt me—or anyone else. I repeated that to myself, trying to stave off panic as I drew in deep, calming breaths through my nose.

“We need to keep moving.”

I looked up, surprised. Steinar was staring around the woods, looking restless. He shuffled his feet anxiously. “The book is close by. I can sense it.” He glanced down at me. “Are you well enough to walk?”

I nodded. Whether I was well enough or not, I was anxious to get away from the pool of blood, so I pulled myself unsteadily to my feet. “Yeah. Let’s get out of here.”

Steinar gave a sigh of relief as we continued on, but he was the only one. Things felt… different. He and Artemis didn’t speak now as we trudged through the woods. And I had this strange, ominous feeling that I couldn’t shake. I kept looking around, half-convinced I was going to see something out of the ordinary. But there was nothing. The woods looked unchanged, but something in the air felt different somehow. It took me a long time to notice what it was.

“The birds have stopped chirping,” I said.

“What?” Artemis said, looking over her shoulder.

“Didn’t you notice?”

“Shh.” Steinar held up a hand for us to stop. He listened hard for a moment. “The book is closer. I can feel it. Let’s go.”

We began to move forward again, and had only gone a short distance when I saw something through the trees. As we drew closer, the shape resolved into a house. It was a small, quaint cottage, and from a distance it looked innocuous enough. But there was something about it that made me want to turn and run away as fast as I could.

From somewhere to the right of us, I heard the sound of a snapping twig. Steinar’s hand was immediately on my arm, pulling Artemis and me behind a large arrow-wood bush.

And just in time, too—moments later, a huge wolf, covered in blood, appeared on the path we’d just left. The wolf moved silently, heading for the cottage.

Blood rushed to my head. I knew that wolf. It was Ava.

But I was distracted from this startling realization when the cottage door opened and a man stepped onto the porch to watch the wolf’s approach. He was tall, handsome, and older, with a sculpted face and a strong jaw, but everything about him was so cold and hard that the sight of him made me shiver with fear. His expression held a slight smirk as he crossed his arms over his broad, muscled chest and watched as the wolf transformed into a young woman.

Ava stood before him, covered in blood, and the man let his eyes rake over her naked body before he raised his eyebrows, the expression a question. I didn’t like her, but the look he gave her made me want to puke.

She nodded, though she looked exhausted. “It’s done. Xavier is dead. I killed him.”

There was a sudden ringing in my ears that drove out all other sound. My mind was a blank blur, and I barely knew what I was doing when I pulled away from Steinar and stepped back onto the path.

Both Ava and the terrifying man on the porch looked at me, their faces wearing twin expressions of surprise. But I didn’t register their reactions. There was a screaming sound in my head as I turned to look at Ava.

“You did *what?*”

**Episode 823**

XAVIER

The woods were dense and branches reached out for me, grabbing me, pulling at my clothes, like they wanted to hold me back. I wanted to put as much distance as I could between myself and Silas’s house as possible, but I was tired. I’d lost blood and I was feeling dizzy as I stumbled along.

I was also reeling. What the *fuck* had just happened? I couldn’t wrap my brain around it. Had Ava just *saved* me? What the hell was she doing? What was she playing at? And what kind of game was it?

Silas had told her to kill me, and unless she wanted to risk death herself, she was going to tell him that she’d done it. I guess that was an advantage for me, the fact that Silas now thought I was dead. But I still didn’t how to process what had just happened. I didn’t feel like I could trust Ava. It wasn’t like she’d proven herself trustworthy in the past.

I yanked my shirt free from a thorny branch and pressed on. The only thing that was crystal clear was that I was still breathing, and I was lucky as hell to be doing that. Also, I couldn’t do a damn thing about anything else without my wolf. I had to stay focused. I had to get my wolf back, help the pack defeat Silas once and for all, and then claim my rightful place as Alpha of the Redwood pack, with Cali beside me as my Luna. The way things always should have been.

But, as I stormed through the woods, I knew I couldn’t do any of it on my own. I’d been looking for answers, but if anything, that dumbass vision quest the psychedelic tubers had sent me on had only confused me even further. I didn’t have any more answers coming out of it than I’d had going in, and I wasn’t any closer to finding my wolf. It sure as hell wasn’t in Silas’s hideout. Silas had looked shocked as hell when he’d found out I’d lost my wolf. If my wolf had been there, he would have already known.

As much as I hated to admit it, I was going to need help. But who the hell was I going to ask? Big Mac seemed like the obvious choice, but my hands balled into angry fists at the thought of it. There was no way in hell I was going to go back to the pack house and risk the rest of the pack finding out I’d lost my wolf again. Big Mac wasn’t an option.

There was Nneka, but she probably wouldn’t help me if her life depended on it.

My pool of possible witches was depressingly shallow.

I huffed out a frustrated breath as I stormed through the trees, making more noise than was wise, but I was thinking too hard to care. Then I stopped, struck with a sudden thought: I knew exactly who to call. Someone who had connections everywhere.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and wiped the blood off the screen before I dialed the number.

“Xavier!” Gabriel answered immediately. He sounded pumped to hear from me. “What’s going on, man?”

“I don’t have time to catch up, Gabe,” I said shortly. I needed the information but didn’t want to get into too many of the details. “I’m wondering if you know any witches who would be able to help reunite me with my wolf.”

“Your *wolf?*” Gabriel hooted incredulously. He laughed. “Not that again, dude. What did Ava do this time?”

I knew he was joking and there was no way he could have known she was actually back, but I tensed. “It’s not about her,” I ground out. “I just want to know if you know anyone, man.”

“All right, all right,” Gabriel said, his voice mockingly soothing. “Keep your shirt on. Well, I don’t think witches are going to be able to help you with a problem like that, actually.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I muttered. “You—”

“But,” Gabriel cut in, “I do know a shaman who specializes in souls.”

“What? A human?”

“Yeah. His name is Swift. He runs a yoga studio and tea shop out in Portland. He started out doing mostly guided meditation and asanas, but I think he’s doing hatha yoga and aerial silks now or some shit like that. Fucking Portland yuppies—”

“*Gabriel*,” I growled.

“Right, right,” he said, remembering himself. “So anyway, he’s got this back room for those in the know. You should go see him.”

I looked around the woods and, for no one’s benefit but my own, shrugged. “I guess it’s worth a try. Send me the address.”

“Yeah, I’ll sent his contact info over. And, when you get there, tell him I sent you.”

“Fine, whatever,” I said shortly.

“He’s cool, but if he gives you any shit, remind him about the time I sourced those goats he needed for the birthing ceremony.”

“The what?” I asked.

“He’ll know what I’m talking about,” Gabriel said, laughing. “That dude owes me.”

I rolled my eyes, but when I hung up, I felt better. I always felt better when I had a plan. Admittedly, this wasn’t a great one, but a shit plan was better than no plan at all. I looked around, thinking hard and doing some quick math. I should be able to get to Portland and back in plenty of time, if I played it right.

So, with that in mind, I started off again, heading north. After about three miles, I found an old access road cutting through the thick forest and, because it was easier to walk on than the overgrown trails, followed that. There weren’t any cars on it, so I walked in the middle of the road. Then, after an hour where the only sound was the call of the birds in the trees, I heard the distant rumble of an engine. I looked behind me and saw a dark sedan heading toward me. I walked to the side of the road and held out my thumb. The car slowed as it neared me, then pulled to a stop.

A dark-haired, dark-eyed man peered at me from the driver’s seat. “Whoa, man.” His gaze swept down me. “You okay?”

I looked down. Out of the shadow of the trees, I could see clearly how bad I looked. I was still covered in blood from Ava’s attack, and it had dried hard on my clothes. I shrugged, trying to appear casual. “I’m cool. I was biking up there,” I said, tipping my chin toward the hills, “and a deer jumped out right in front of me. I couldn’t stop. Ran right into it. This is all from the deer,” I said, waving to the blood matting my clothes.

“Yeah?” the guy asked, his eyes roving down me suspiciously.

I nodded. “Yeah. I tried my best to save it—I’m a big animal lover,” I added hastily, “but it died, and the bike’s ruined. Had to abandon it. Glad to see you, though. Think you could give me a lift to Portland?”

The dark-haired guy did not look like my story had convinced him, and I had to admit I didn’t blame him. I don’t know if I’d pick up a stranger covered in blood on an abandoned access road in the middle of nowhere. I felt a pang—if Cali were here, she’d have been able to convince him. She just had a way with people. She’d have smiled and talked too much and told this guy her life story, and he would’ve opened up the door and waved us in and probably given us the keys to his house, too.

“No problem.”

I looked up, surprised. “What’s that?”

The guy was eyeing me warily, but he nodded. “Hop in. I’m heading toward Portland. I’ll give you a lift.”

I pulled open the door, surprised—but grateful as hell—that he’d agreed. I slammed the door and the guy took off, accelerating quickly down the empty road.

“Thanks, man. You really helped me out,” I said, leaning back against the seat with a sigh. I hadn’t realized how tired I was.

“No problem.”

The car was old and filthy, and about two dozen little air freshener trees were hanging from the rearview mirror, in all different colors and scents. It was overload for my nose, wolf or no wolf. I frowned.

Stranger still, there were a dozen more air fresheners hooked around the gear shift. The gel kind were jammed into the air vents, which blew cool air and the smell of some kind of flowery coconut into my face. But none of it covered the underlying smell of shit in the car.

I glanced over as the guy stepped on the gas, zooming down the old road so fast the trees turned into blurs.

He was looking at me, too. When he caught my eye, he raised an eyebrow. “That’s not deer blood, man. What were you really doing out there?”

I stared at him. “And how the hell would you know what kind of blood this is?”

“Oh, man, trust me—I can tell.”

And when his face split into a grin, I saw his fangs.

**Episode 824**

AVA

Cali had just appeared, almost out of nowhere. It *was* Cali, of course. I’d have known her face anywhere. It was strange and jarring to see her looking at me with that oddly familiar face. She looked scared but furious, and her eyes sparked with a dangerous light.

My heart beat hard as I looked around, scanning the trees, smelling the air. I couldn’t pick up on anything. Xavier and Greyson were nowhere around. Neither were any other wolves. I looked back at Cali, fear coursing through me. She couldn’t have come without them. That would be suicide. What in the world was she doing here? I hazarded a glance up at Isaiah—*Silas*, I should have known—whose eyes were on Cali, nearly glowing with malevolent satisfaction.

What the *hell* was Cali doing? She had to know Silas would want her dead. What was her plan here? How had she even known where to find us?

Cali was pale as a ghost and shaking all over. She looked terrified, but, before either me or Silas could move, she stepped toward us and raised a trembling finger to point at me. “You’re a liar!” she screamed. “You’re *lying*!”

*What* I was meant to be lying about I never found out, because she held up her hand, palm out. I was confused for a moment, but then I realized she was about to conjure Fae magic—an instant before the blast struck me.

A flash of agonizing light emanated straight from the palm of her hand and hit me with the force of a truck. I fell back, completely stunned. I’d never seen anything like what she had just done, and the pain from the blast was excruciating. It continued to echo through my body, making it hard to breathe.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Silas on his back on the porch, so I knew the force of Cali’s magic had hit him, too. I hauled myself up to a sitting position and saw that Cali was still advancing. Instinctively, I tried to shift—I had to defend myself—but nothing happened. My eyes widened and my fear mounted. I tried again.

*Nothing.*

I couldn’t shift.

I knew Cali was Fae, but I’d had no idea what kind of powers she had. And apparently, she was a lot more powerful than I’d anticipated.

And now she wasn’t alone. Two others had joined her. Another woman who looked a little like her, and a man who was tall and angular and absolutely massive. The woman stood shoulder to shoulder with Cali and put her hand out, adding her power to Cali’s.

The second blast knocked me over again just as I’d struggled to my feet, and their combined blast hurt a hell of a lot worse.

Up on the porch, Silas was on his back again, but he was snarling. He curled onto his side, spitting with rage. He was in pain—a lot of it, from the twisted expression on his face—but he didn’t seem able to shift either. If he had been able to, I was quite sure he would have been attacking.

Something about seeing Silas prone, unable to shift, his body wracked with pain, made me go cold with fear. I had no love for the man, but he was incredibly powerful, and if Cali could debilitate him, then what could we do to defend ourselves? If we weren’t able to shift, we had no way to fight back.

Then the cottage door opened and Demeter stepped onto the porch. She looked around, curiously, then raised her own hands and sent out her own jolt of energy, aimed directly at Cali and the woman next to her. It echoed across the clearing like a clap of thunder, but before it reached the two girls, the strange man stepped in front of them. I blinked, unsure of what I was seeing. It looked like he was made of stone, but that couldn’t have been true. He moved too quickly, too smoothly. But then… *How?* He shielded the two women from Demeter’s energy blast, and the spell deflected off of him and bounced back toward Silas, Demeter, and me.

“Run!” the stone man rumbled, shouting to the women.

Cali’s stepped forward, her angry eyes on me, but the second woman grabbed her arm and tugged, towing her away from the cottage’s clearing. The woman must have been extraordinarily strong, because she managed to do it while Cali was fighting hard against her, struggling and screaming all the way.

The stone man watched the two women until they disappeared into the trees, then he turned back to us, his chiseled face curiously blank. He stepped toward the cottage, apparently unafraid. And why shouldn’t he be? Silas and I were still on the ground, struggling to sit up, to stand, even to breathe.

Demeter continued to send spells toward the man, one after the other, her face reddening with the effort, but the man walked determinedly forward. He brushed the blasts of energy aside with small, irritated waves, like they were nothing more than flies at a picnic. I stared up at him, horrified. What *was* he? I had seen the scope of Demeter’s power. What kind of being could withstand the kind of onslaught she was unleashing on him?

My mind was a blur as the stone man stalked toward the cottage—the pain from the blasts of power was still coursing through me. My lungs felt like they were smoldering ash, and I struggled to draw breath as the man stopped right next to me. He was massive, towering above me like some kind of terrifying marble statue come to life. I braced myself, waiting for the blow I was sure was coming, but he only narrowed his eyes.

“Where is my book?” he thundered.

I stared up at him, shocked. “What?” I breathed.

“My book. Where is it? I know you have it.” The tone of his voice was gravelly and terrible, like the sound of boulders crashing together.

The *book?* That was *not* what I’d been expecting. It was upstairs, hidden in a drawer. But, before I could even begin to come up with an answer, the stone man turned—irritated—toward Demeter, who had been moving stealthily closer. Perhaps she thought her spells might be more effective if she was closer to him. And perhaps they might have been, but she never got a chance to find out, because the stone man flung out an arm—almost lazily—catching her across the middle. She flew across the clearing with the force of a rocket and slammed into a tree. The tree shuddered with the impact and she slid down, collapsing limply to the ground, unconscious.

Then, as though nothing had happened, the man turned back to me. “Take me to the book.”

Next to me, up on the porch, Silas made a strange, gasping sound, and I looked up at him. He was struggling to sit up and moving his mouth like he was trying to speak, though no sound came out. I’d managed to duck when the stone man had deflected Demeter’s blast, but Silas had been hit right in the chest by the rebounded spell and now seemed unable to move.

With an irritated sigh, the stone man reached down, grabbed my arm, and lifted me to my feet. “The book.”

Every instinct I had told me to run, but my feet began to move toward the door of the cottage. It was as though I suddenly had no control over my body. I moved into the house and up the stairs, leading the stone man toward my bedroom, drawn inexorably toward the book hidden there. I looked over my shoulder at the man. His face was still blank and expressionless, but I had the strangest feeling that he was controlling my actions. I wanted to ask him—to *demand* to know—what power he was holding over me, but when I opened my mouth, I found I couldn’t speak.

When we reached my bedroom, the man moved past me, stepping inside and walking directly to the small dresser. Without hesitation, he pulled open the second drawer and removed the book. The drawer clattered to the ground as he looked at the volume, a relieved smile spreading across his angular face. Then, without looking at me or uttering a single word, he turned and left the room.

The instant he disappeared, I crumpled to the ground, all my energy drained away. I closed my eyes—struggling to keep pulling in air, feeling weaker than I’d ever felt before—and leaned my head back against the bed. But I looked up when I heard a slow, dragging shuffle at the door.

It was Silas. He looked pale and weak, but his eyes were filled with anger as he glared at me. “*You*,” he hissed.

“What?” I breathed, my head muddled.

He shook his head, his nostrils flaring with rage. “You never told me Cali was Fae. This changes everything.”

**Episode 825**

“Let me go!” I screamed as I struggled, straining, trying to wrench free from Artemis’s grasp. My vision was blurred with blindingly hot tears and my breathing was ragged, but I fought hard against her unyielding arms.

“We have to get out of here, Cali,” she said, her voice low and determined as she marched through the trees, away from the cottage. “That place is super dangerous.”

“Let me go! I’m going back!”

“You’re not going back,” she said. She wasn’t mad—she wasn’t even looking at me. Her eyes were on the path ahead of us as she dragged me along. “We barely got out of there. They’re too powerful. It’s not safe. There’s no way we can go back.”

I screamed, clawing at Artemis, ripping at her skin with my nails. I was out of my mind, desperate to get back. I didn’t care that Ava was a werewolf. I didn’t care that that man had made me shiver with fear, or that the woman with the golden arm was a witch. I didn’t even want to use my powers on them. I wanted to rip Ava to shreds with my bare hands. “Let go! Just let me go!”

Artemis set her jaw and kept walking.

I shouldn’t have been surprised. She was crazy strong. Somewhere in the back of my grief-addled brain, I remembered the first time I’d met her, when she’d captured me and Greyson by the geyser. She’d picked us both up like we were no more than sacks of potatoes.

“Don’t make me knock you out, Cali,” she said, sounding grim. She didn’t look any happier about this than I was. “I don’t want to, but I will if I have to.”

“You *have* to let me go,” I pleaded. “I *have* to get back there, Artemis! *Please!*”

She shook her head. “That witch was too powerful. I don’t know how Steinar held off those spells she was throwing, but we can’t go back. It’s too dangerous. We have no idea what we’d be facing there.”

*It’s done. Xavier is dead. I killed him.*

I could hear Ava’s words echoing in my head, over and over and over, the sound like a worm burrowing into my brain. I closed my eyes, letting my feet drag as Artemis pulled me along the trail. My thoughts went to the wolf I’d seen—Xavier’s wolf. Had that been a sign? Had the wolf been trying to warn me that Xavier was gone?

I thought of Ava, and the blood matting down her fur, then slicking her body when she took her human form—Xavier’s blood. It was just like the blood in the dream. The dream that must have been *more* than a dream. It was this curse—this damn curse. And it had already begun its bloody work.

A sob boiled up from somewhere deep within me. It was dark and painful and threatened to choke me. I couldn’t breathe past the pressure in my chest as tears filled my eyes.

“*Cali!*” Artemis gasped, coming to a sudden stop.

I opened my eyes, the tone of her voice setting off a bell in my head. My vision swam, but I tried to focus on Artemis’s face.

She was pointing to my neck. “The veins, Cali. They’re growing again.”

Now that she mentioned them, I could feel the pain. It stung my skin, pulling and constricting, but I just shook my head. “So? Why do I care about that anymore?” I rasped. My whole body felt heavy as stone.

But Artemis shook her head, like I was missing something important. “Cali, *think!* The veins are there because you haven’t been able to make a choice, right?”

I stared at her. “I guess.”

“So if they’re still there, then the curse is still active. If Xavier were dead, wouldn’t the choice have been made?”

My brain worked slowly through her logic. Then, desperate to cling to any hope, I nodded. “Yeah, maybe.” I wracked my brain. Lola had once said something about how a mate just *knows* when their mate dies. I thought hard, trying to remember if I’d gotten any kind of bad feeling, but I couldn’t think of anything. I thought about Xavier—I felt just as connected to him as ever. Maybe Artemis was right about the veins. I looked down at my chest, and—for the first time—was glad to see the veins swirling ominously.

“See?” Artemis said, sounding relieved. “You just have to think things through logically.” She started walking again, and I followed, under my own power, now. “Ava is a liar,” she continued. “We know that. She came back, covered in blood—which, sure, doesn’t look great—but why should we just *believe* what she said about Xavier?”

I thought about this. Ava *was* a liar, and that was another piece of hope to cling to, so I latched onto it. “You might be right. But I still think we need to go back.”

“Cali—”

“For Steinar,” I said. “I don’t think we should just leave him there to fend for himself.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Are you kidding me? Did you see him? I’m pretty sure he’s going to be fine.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but before I could say anything, I heard a loud crashing behind us and we and both spun around.

Steinar came hurtling through the trees toward us. He looked unruffled and was holding up the book, looking proud. “Got it.”

“Oh!” I said, my heart rising at the sight of it. I took a step toward him, reaching for it, but he held it higher, out of my reach.

“The book stays with me,” he said firmly. He tucked it under his arm. “So now we just need to go back to the house so I can get the journal, and then I can return everything to its rightful place in the library.”

Artemis nodded. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. We should head back.”

But I didn’t want to head back. And I was about to explain exactly why when I was hit by a wave of exhaustion so strong, I staggered. I reached out, grasping a tree, and struggled to stay on my feet. It was the magic use—it had been far more powerful than anything I’d ever conjured before, no doubt a result of my rage and confusion. But now, the adrenaline from the confrontation with Ava was draining away. I was tired now after the confrontation, but this felt like something else entirely.

Steinar caught me just before I hit the hard-packed forest floor. “Whoa,” he said quietly.

I blinked, and everything went black.

When I opened my eyes, I was moving, but not consciously. It took me a moment to piece it all together, but considering the pressure at my midsection and the steady jostling movement, it looked like I’d been slung over Steinar’s shoulder.

I could hear his voice, and Artemis’s answering words, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. My brain felt slow and sluggish, like I was trying to think through molasses. I tried to move, but everything felt too heavy—or maybe it was just that I was too weak. There was a dull ache in my chest, and the pain reverberated around my body with so much intensity I thought I might be sick.

So I closed my eyes again, utterly spent, and sucked in deep, even breaths. I tried to focus on Artemis and Steinar’s conversation.

“—never seen anything like that before,” Artemis was saying.

“Yeah,” Steinar said, and I could feel his shoulders shrug a little.

“I mean, that witch was super powerful. I could *feel* it. And that gold arm was seriously intimidating. How did her spells just not affect you at all?”

“I guess being made of stone has some benefits,” he said, sounding faintly proud. “It’s not always ideal, but I’ve never met a creature that’s been able to take me down.”

“That’s good,” Artemis said, sounding awed. She paused for a moment. “It’d really be useful to have someone like you around.”

Steinar cleared his throat, the sound like crunching gravel. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Artemis said. “Are you sure you have to go back to the library?”

“Well, I don’t really have much of a choice,” Steinar said slowly. “Once I’ve completed my task, I’ll be called back whether I want to go or not.”

“Oh,” Artemis said. Her voice sounded flat.

“Really? You *have* to go back?” I asked. It wasn’t fair that Steinar was trapped there, even if he did like to read.

We were all quiet for a moment.

Then, I felt Steinar stumble beneath me. His grip on me loosened, and I slipped a little on his shoulder. I opened my eyes, confused, and grasped on to him, but I couldn’t keep hold. I slid to the ground, landing hard. I looked up just in time to see him stagger, then collapse to the ground with a thunderous crash.

I looked at him, horrified, but he was out cold.

**Episode 826**

XAVIER

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” I muttered. Of all the people who could have stopped on that lonely road, it had to be a fucking vampire. Just my luck.

And me without my wolf. Which was *perfect*. If I’d had it, I’d have been able to smell this bloodsucker from a mile off—even *with* his collection of air fresheners.

The vampire eyed me, his expression curious. “I take it you’ve met vampires before,” he said, apparently clocking my lack of response to his fang reveal. He looked slightly disappointed.

“A few,” I said dryly. “I’m a werewolf, actually. Which you should know, but I guess it’s a little too pine fresh in here for you too, buddy.”

“Really?” he asked, looking genuinely confused. He leaned closer, sniffing the air. “And you’re not afraid of me?” he asked, looking crestfallen.

I shrugged. I could rip this guy a new one any day. “No.”

The vampire scowled. “Well, no matter. Either way, you’ll be an easy meal.” And before I could react, he slammed on the breaks, sending me lurching forward into the dashboard. But, when he lunged across the gearshift toward me, I was ready, and I opened the car door.

The rough, cracked asphalt came up to meet me and I rolled, absorbing the impact. Then I sprung to my feet and sprinted into the woods. I could hear the pounding of feet behind me, so I knew I had to act fast. I scanned the trees as I passed them, looking for a branch small enough that I could rip it from its trunk, but hefty enough to get the job done.

I’d just leapt over a small stream when I saw a partially downed tree with a perfectly sized branch, and I raced toward it. With a huge tug, I ripped it from the trunk. It splintered with a crack, and I grinned when I saw the dagger-sharp point it created. I spun around just in time to see the vampire bearing down on me. He had his teeth bared, and his eyes had turned blood red. What I wouldn’t give to be able to shift right now.

But I couldn’t think about that. I feinted left. He went left, then corrected and came for me. He reached for me, but I dodged, and he managed to grab only the sleeve of my shirt. He twisted it with a growl, and I felt his long, sharp nails ripping through the fabric as he towed me closer to him, spit foaming at the sides of his mouth. It was now or never, so I gripped the branch tightly and lunged, driving the branch into his chest with all my might. My aim was true and his grip on me loosened as his eyes went wide with surprise. The shock registered on his face for just a moment before—with a *pop*—he was gone, leaving nothing but a cloud of dust and smoke where he had just been.

I coughed and turned away. I fucking hated inhaling vampire dust, but relief was flooding through me. The vampire had been nothing special, but without my wolf, that fight could have gone either way. I pulled a splinter from the makeshift stake out of my palm and started back toward the road.

The car was still there, where the vampire had left it. The door was open and the engine was still running. The vampire hadn’t even bothered to take the keys. I found myself grinning. Maybe my luck was starting to turn after all.

I climbed in and, after I yanked the air fresheners down from the rearview mirror and tossed them into the back seat, I took off, accelerating as fast as the old car would go down the empty road. I rested my elbow in the open window and took a deep breath, letting myself enjoy the moment. The air was cool and clean in the woods, sharp with the smell of pine and Oregon in autumn. I’d staked a vampire, I was moving, and I had a plan.

The roar of the wind was loud in my ear, but I looked down when I felt my cellphone vibrate in my pocket. I pulled it out and looked at the caller ID. It was Cali. I stared at her name on the screen for a long moment, letting the pain spear through my heart. A part of me wished I could pick up—just to hear her voice. Just to hear her say my name. But I steeled myself. I knew I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t let myself get distracted by Cali right now. I’d told her I needed to find my wolf, and I wasn’t going to let anything distract me from doing just that. And it was hard as hell to focus on anything but her when she was around.

There was a sharp, tightening pain in my arm, and I looked down. The black veins were there, swirling and spreading. It was strange and weirdly hypnotic to watch them move on my skin, but it also made me feel slightly sick, so I looked away. It was a curse, and I could feel them moving—inching closer to my heart.

I turned off my phone and flipped on the radio. The vampire had a shit car, but decent musical taste, and the sound of CCR’s “Fortunate Son” blasted through the car’s shitty speakers. I turned the music up as loud as it would go, trying to drown out the thoughts in my head. Trying to keep myself from thinking of her.

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As I eased the vampire’s car into a spot on Alchar Drive, I scanned the quiet street for the shop Gabriel had mentioned. It was supposed to be here, but all I saw was warehouses and industrial-looking storefronts. No yoga studios. But, as I stepped out of the car and pushed the door shut, I saw it, sandwiched between a fashion wholesaler’s loading dock and an electrical outfitters storefront: *Food for the Soul Yoga and Tea.*

Give me a fucking break.

But I’d come this far, so I walked toward the shop and pushed the door open. Inside was dim, and the air was so thick with incense it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. When they did, I saw a small, cramped shop. The walls were hung with tapestries and the floor was covered with an assortment of shabby Persian rugs. There were wobbly bookcases in every corner filled with an assortment of ratty books and baskets of crystals, and from a side room with a closed door came the pulse of annoyingly jangly music being played too loudly.

The bell over the front door had announced my entrance and, after a moment, a guy with long hair pushed through the beaded curtain leading from the back room and stepped behind the counter.

He was a young guy, probably about my age, but he had the look of someone much older, like he’d been living pretty damn hard. He tented his fingers in front of his face and bowed his head. “Peace be with you on your journey today, man. What can I do for you?”

I worked hard not to roll my eyes. “I’m looking for Swift. Is he working today?”

Hippie grinned, showing off a set of astonishingly white, even teeth. “That’s me, man. At your service.”

I did a double take. *This* joker was Swift? *This* was who Gabriel had sent me all the way to Portland to talk to? This long-haired hippie white dude? I ground my teeth. I was going to *kill* Gabriel. What the hell had he been thinking? This had better not be one of his fucking pranks.

I took a deep, steadying breath. Prank or not, I was here, and I really didn’t have any other options. “Okay. I need some help with something.”

“You got it,” Swift said, flashing his smile at me. “We’ve got a full range of yoga classes, and you look like you could handle the silks. You look like you’ve got some flexibility—”

“I’m not here to take a fucking yoga class,” I snapped.

He raised his eyebrows. “All right. Though it might help with some of that stress, man.” He smiled again. “I do have some other *herbs* that might help with that, if that’s what you’re looking for—”

“It’s not,” I said shortly. “I need some help with something kind of sensitive…” I trailed off, not sure how to finish.

Swift’s expression grew a little wary. “Sensitive in what way, man?”

I shook my head. There was no use beating around the bush with this. “I need to get my wolf back,” I blurted out. “Gabriel sent me.”

Swift’s face darkened in an instant. His smile vanished, and he reached beneath the counter and pulled out a dagger. When he pointed it at me, it glinted in the dim light—silver.

“I don’t know what the fuck Gabriel told you about me,” he said, his voice low and menacing, “but I don’t do that shit anymore. And if you don’t get the hell out of here, I’ll kill you.”

**Episode 827**

VIOLET

“I cannot *believe* Tom just called them,” I raged, pacing the length of the small guest room. “Who even *is* the MIB? We don’t *really* know anything about these people! If they were so interested in Orla, why would he call them for *help?* What the actual *hell?* For all we know, they’re going to show up, listen to Tom raving for a minute, and pack us all off to the loony bin!”

Charlie watched me as I circumnavigated the room, but wisely kept his mouth shut.

“Can you even *believe* this?” I demanded, turning to him.

“Um,” Charlie said, his expression wary, “I don’t know. I guess I still don’t quite know what’s going on. Who are the MIB, exactly? Some kind of magical police or something?”

“That’s just the problem!” I said, throwing up my hands. “I don’t know either. And neither does Tom, or Orla. No one seems to know exactly who they are!”

“Yeah,” Charlie said slowly. “That doesn’t seem good.”

I shook my head. “I think Tom’s made a huge mistake here.”

“Do you?” Charlie asked.

“Trust me,” I said darkly. “It’s never a good idea to get the authorities involved in stuff they can’t possibly understand.”

“Like werewolf stuff?”

I looked at Charlie for a minute, wondering how much to tell him. I didn’t want to freak him out. “There’s more than just werewolves out there, Charlie. Let’s just say it’s for the best if the supernatural world just keeps to itself. Believe me. Involving the authorities *always* leads to trouble.”

Charlie nodded, and—despite my best efforts—looked freaked. “I believe you.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. I walked to the window and peered through the blinds at the snowy world outside. “This stupid blizzard has ruined all my plans.”

“What plans?” Charlie wondered.

“I wanted to get out of here,” I said, my eyes still out the window. “I wanted to get you to safety. We were supposed to be landing in Oregon right now. I was supposed to be introducing you to my pack. But instead, we’re here.” I turned away from the window and dropped onto the bed, crossing my arms across my chest. I was pouting—I knew it—but I didn’t care.

“Hey,” Charlie said, scooting closer to me. “It’s okay, Violet. We’re going to get this figured out.” He smiled when I shook my head. “We *will*. And we’re still going to do all of that—go to Oregon, meet the pack. It’s still going to happen.”

“I know, but it won’t be the same,” I muttered.

“Why not?”

There was another reason I was feeling sad, but I was a little embarrassed to admit it. “It’s my birthday tomorrow,” I mumbled.

“What?”

I took a deep breath, though my cheeks were burning. “My birthday is tomorrow. And I had this image in my mind that I’d have this big party at the pack house. The whole pack, celebrating together. But now…” I shook my head. “It doesn’t seem like any of that’s going to be possible.”

Charlie smoothed his hand down the length of my hair. “I’m sorry, Violet.”

“It just doesn’t seem right. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be at all,” I said, and I could feel the weight of my sadness start to grow heavier. “I’m eighteen tomorrow, Charlie. An adult, finally. But… There’s something I haven’t told you.” I took a deep breath. “My twin brother, Lilac, was killed. We were supposed to turn eighteen together. And instead of being with my family and my friends—my brother is dead, I’m away from my pack, and I’m being stalked by a crazed Rogue werewolf serial killer. Happy birthday to me,” I said, tears pricking my eyes.

“Violet, I’m sorry,” Charlie said soothingly, taking my hand in his. “I’m sorry, I had no idea. I’m really sorry about your brother.”

He pulled me into a hug and I wrapped my arms around him, squeezing. I let the tears fall. My heart hurt so much knowing this birthday was coming without Lilac here. I was almost grateful it’d snuck up on me the way it had.

After a moment, Charlie pulled back. “I know this isn’t the same, and I’m not trying to make it sound like… Like, I don’t know, that you shouldn’t be upset.” He paused, and I looked up into his golden eyes. He gave me a small smile. “You have me. You have your mate. Okay?”

My heart squeezed tight for a moment, then filled with so much joy and excitement, it felt like it was about to burst. He’d called me his *mate*. Before, he’d said maybe I was on to something about the mate thing, but now he was saying it so certainly. I suddenly couldn’t even remember why I’d just been sad.

Charlie smiled at the look on my face, then leaned down to brush a kiss across my lips.

I closed my eyes, letting the feeling of his touch melt my fear and sadness and stress away. I didn’t know how he did it. Just being with him—feeling him close to me—was enough to wipe my mind of all the anxiety I’d been feeling a moment before. The phenomenon was astonishing.

He kissed me again, then again. Then he paused, and I counted the seconds in my head. When I couldn’t stand it anymore, I grabbed fistfuls of his shirt and pulled him close, then kissed him again.

One of his hands threaded through my hair and the other went to my waist, holding me close and pressing me back to the bed. Everything about the way he kissed me—the way he touched me—felt so natural, so right. The kisses we’d shared before had been thrilling, but this was deeper, moving something fundamental within me. It was as though Charlie accepting our mate bond had unlocked something between us.

Then we were lying down and he was pressing against me. My heart beat so hard in my chest that I was sure he could feel it pounding against him—we were that close. But I wanted even more. I’d been missing this? *This*? His leg threaded between mine, pressing into me, and I gasped when I felt my body respond to the pressure.

“Are you okay?” Charlie asked, pulling back a little. His golden eyes were anxious as they roved across my face.

“I’m okay,” I breathed. I smiled into his beautiful face. “I want this, Charlie.”

He looked at me for a moment longer, then kissed me again, his tongue pushing past my lips, more insistently now. He was growing hungrier, and I was, too. I slipped my hand beneath his shirt and slid my hands up, drawing my fingernails slowly up his back.

I’d never done *anything* like this before, and when he moaned with pleasure, my face split into an embarrassed grin.

Charlie reached down, his fingers on the button of my jeans. “Violet?” he asked again, though his breath was starting to hitch.

I nodded. “I’m sure.” God, was I ever sure.

But just as he had unbuttoned my pants, the door flew open and Orla stormed into the room.

Charlie was off me and across the room so quickly I thought he had flown. I leapt to my feet, too, buttoning my jeans and straightening my shirt, trying my hardest not to look guilty, but Orla didn’t even look at us. She closed the door, her expression worried and distracted.

“You two need to go,” she said in a low voice.

“What?” I asked, my face going red. I glanced over at Charlie. Was she kicking us out for making out in the guest room? “Go where?”

“Go stay at Cali and Lola’s apartment,” she said, in that same quiet voice. “The MIB agents are on their way over now.”

“I know,” I said. “Tom called them.”

She nodded. “I love my husband, but there’s much he doesn’t understand about our world, and I’m not convinced those agents are here to help.” She looked at me, her face lined with worry. “I have a bad feeling about all of this.”

I bit my lip, feeling fear start to bloom in my chest. “Okay.”

“Cali asked me to watch out for you, Violet, and I’m not sure I can protect you from them.”

I opened my mouth to argue—surely this wasn’t true—but Orla shook her head.

“Don’t argue with me, Violet,” she said, her tone firm. “I’m responsible for your safety right now, and I can’t ensure it here.” She pulled a set of keys out of her pocket and pressed them into my palm. “Go to Cali and Lola’s apartment. You know where it is. Don’t call here. I’ll contact you when the coast is clear.”

I swallowed hard. Part of me wanted to argue, but another part of me heard the intensity in Orla’s voice and knew that she was truly worried. So I nodded. “Okay. We’ll go.” I moved to grab my jacket.

“Out the window,” she advised. “Down the trellis. You can go out the back gate.”

“I know,” I said, before I could stop myself. But Orla didn’t say anything. She looked too worried and scared for recriminations at the moment.

I went down first, and Charlie followed. I waited for him to drop into the soft snow beneath the window, and then we headed for the back gate.

“It’s freezing,” I murmured. “Let’s shift. It’ll be faster and warmer.”

Charlie nodded, but as we were about to do just that, we heard a voice that made us both freeze.

“And just where do you think you’re going?”

As one, Charlie and I turned to see two dark-suited agents standing at the back gate, glaring at us.

**Episode 828**

My head pounded as I struggled to rise onto my elbow, pine needles and brush jabbing into my arm. Steinar was lying in a crumpled heap on the ground, still as a statue. He looked more like a slab of granite than ever. I looked over at Artemis, who was crouched down, surveying Steinar, her expression baffled.

“What the hell?” she muttered to herself. She leaned forward, looking at him closely. “I can’t tell if he’s breathing.” She looked up at me. “Was he breathing before? I didn’t notice.”

I tried to process her question, but my brain was too slow and sluggish, and I just stared at her silently.

Artemis tapped his shoulder. “Steinar? Hey, Steinar, are you in there? Wake up!” She grasped his shoulder and tried to shake it with more force, but nothing happened. She couldn’t even move it. He was completely immobilized. She looked up at me. “*What* just happened?”

“I don’t know,” I finally said, though my speech sounded slow and slurred.

Artemis stared at me. “So what are we supposed to do?”

I blinked slowly. Then I sat up, and my eyes wandered down the giant’s form. My gaze locked on the book peeking out of the pocket of his pants. The spell book. “We take the book and go back to the pack house,” I said, forcing the words out, though my tongue felt thick and strange.

Artemis’s expression changed from confused to surprised. “What?” She looked down at Steinar. “And just leave him here?”

I shrugged mutely.

Artemis stared. “Are you being serious?”

“What?” I asked stupidly.

She frowned. “Are you okay, Cali? This isn’t like you at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“He just saved our lives. Like, a few times over. And now you want to just abandon him out here?” Artemis looked baffled.

I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to see the look in her eyes anymore. I was exhausted to the bone and on the verge of what felt like a complete emotional meltdown. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t reason, I couldn’t plan. It was all I could do to keep myself moving oxygen in and out of my lungs.

“What are we supposed to do?” I asked. “Xavier is—*missing*.” I wouldn’t let myself say *dead*. Saying it would make it real, and if it was real, I was *certain* I would come apart at the seams. “I need the journal, Lola needs the spell book. We can’t let Steinar take them. The pack needs to know what we saw out there.” I shook my head. “That guy we saw with Ava *had* to be Silas. Taking the book back to the pack house is the only thing we *can* do.”

“Cali—”

“What are we going to do?” I snapped, opening my eyes to glare at Artemis. “Drag a thousand-pound statue through the woods? You couldn’t even shake his shoulder, Artemis. How are you going to pick him up?”

Artemis didn’t answer; she just stared at me, her face lined with worry. “I’ve never seen you like this,” she said in a low voice. “As long as I’ve known you, you’ve always had this dumbass hero complex.”

“What does that mean?” I snapped again.

“You’re always trying to save everyone, whether they deserve it or not. And now this guy does nothing but *help us*, and you want to just leave him here?”

She was right. I knew she was right, but I was too exhausted to argue about it. All I wanted to do was close my eyes and lie back down and pretend like none of this was happening, but I gritted my teeth and struggled to my feet. I swayed but managed to say upright, and I stuck the spell book into my pocket.

“You do whatever you want, Artemis,” I said angrily. “If you want to stay here and watch a statue not breathe, go right ahead. I’m going back to warn the pack that a crazed killer is nearby.” And I turned on my heel, leaving a stunned Artemis staring after me.

I walked along the rough path, focusing on placing my feet carefully so I wouldn’t stumble. My head was still spinning and I wasn’t sure I’d be able to get back up if I fell down. When I hit a small clearing, I pulled my phone out of my pocket. No bars. Not even half a bar.

I had to get out of this goddamn forest. I had to call Xavier. I had to figure out what the hell was going on. The pressure around my heart mounted as I thought about him.

*It’s done. Xavier is dead. I killed him.*

It wasn’t true. It *couldn’t* be. Artemis was right. Ava was a liar, and this was just another one of her tricks. Xavier wasn’t dead. He was fine.

He was fine.

*Fine.*

I kept telling myself that, over and over. I had to. It was the only thing keeping me moving.

The ground beneath my feet began to incline and I leaned forward, taking deep breaths. It was taking a lot of out of me, but I moved faster, my heart racing, both from the altitude and the hope. I kept checking my phone, hoping that if I got high enough, I might get reception.

And then, just when my lungs felt like they were about to explode, a bar appeared at the top of my screen. I nearly cried at the sight of it.

Then I called Xavier’s number.

My heart beat a staccato rhythm as I waited. If he was okay, then he’d pick up, but if he didn’t pick up, it didn’t necessarily mean that he wasn’t okay. That he was dead. Of course it didn’t. People didn’t pick up the phone for millions of reasons. I listened hard, my hope rising with each ring. My whole body was tense, physically urging him to pick up—*pick up, pick up, PICK UP!*

*Hey, you’ve reached Xavier. You know what to do.*

The sound of his gravelly voice on the recorded message shattered something inside me. Or maybe it was already broken. My hand clutched the phone, but my knees weakened, and I sunk down to the rocky ground, tears streaming down my face.

“I need you,” I whispered into the phone. “Xavier. Please… *please*,” I sobbed. I clutched the phone until I heard the beep, signaling the end of the message, but didn’t look up until I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Artemis, and she was looking down at me, an uncharacteristically sympathetic expression on her face.

“You okay?” she asked softly.

I shook my head.

“I’m your sister, remember?” she said. “I promised. I’m here for you, Cali, and I’m not going to leave your side.” She looked up, squinting into the woods. “We’re not too far from the pack house. You’re going to make it.”

She reached down and pulled me easily to my feet. Artemis was built like me—small and slight—so it was easy to forget how strong she was. But she slipped her arm under my shoulder and I leaned heavily against her. She practically carried me as we started along the path.

The spell book was heavy under my arm, slipping down with every step. I had gotten it back, but—I couldn’t help but wonder—what did it matter? There was no guarantee that there was anything inside that was going to help me. My chest still felt tight as a drum, and I knew if I allowed myself to think too much about Xavier, I was going to fall apart. The idea that he might actually be dead was unbearable, and I shrank from the thought. It was what I’d been dreading this whole time—making a choice between Xavier and Greyson, or a choice being made for me. If Xavier *was* dead, then the choice had been made, but I didn’t feel any kind of resolution.

My head pounded so hard I leaned it against Artemis’s shoulder. Thinking Xavier might be gone didn’t make me want to choose him any more, and it didn’t make me want to rush to choose Greyson either. It didn’t give me any relief to think that my task might be less complicated—all I wanted to do was find out that Xavier was okay.

All I wanted to do was bury my head in his shoulder and let myself be wrapped up in his arms.

It was all so confusing, I could hardly breathe.

But, despite the desperate muddle, one thing was crystal clear: whichever mate I chose, I would always yearn for the other. I knew that now, in the depths of my soul. There would be no end to my heartbreak, and that was terrifying.

Artemis pushed through the overgrown brush and bushes at the edge of the woods, and onto the pack house property. We were on the far side of the lake, but I breathed a sigh of relief when the house came into view. I straightened a little, standing a little more on my own two feet, and Artemis and I started toward the house.

But we stopped, frozen in our tracks, when the witch with the golden arm stepped out in front of us.

She smiled at us, though her gaze was hard as steel. “Not so fast, Fae.”

**Episode 829**

I blinked sluggishly at the bright flash of gold in front of me, then followed it up to a shoulder.

The witch. Her metallic arm glinted in the sunlight, and my eyes slammed shut against the blinding rays. *Holy crap, lady. Have you ever heard of sleeves?*

Artemis grabbed my arm and pulled me close. “Get away from her, Cali. This witch is dangerous,” she reminded me.

Right. Dangerous. As if I could forget.

I slowly turned to look at the pack house. It was all the way across the lake—a distance that, before now, had never seemed quite so impossible to cross. If I screamed for help, would anyone even be able to hear me? Would anyone come to our rescue? Greyson might, if I was lucky, and if he happened to be listening at just the right time, and if our bond amplified my distress call somehow…

Yeah, the odds weren’t looking great. I slumped against Artemis, barely able to hold myself upright. I still felt completely shell shocked, weak, and drained. I didn’t know if I’d even be able to muster up enough of a breath to scream and put those terrible odds to the test.

I glanced back over at the witch, who was watching us with a mix of interest and malice. Even if I could call for help and someone heard it, would they get here in time to save us from being hexed? This witch was strong enough to take down Steinar. What kind of hope could Artemis and I have against power like that?

The witch took a step closer, and a smug smile tugged at her lips. “You know, I’ve never much cared for Fae. They’re always meddling in things that don’t concern them.”

I didn’t like the menace in her voice one bit. She looked like she wanted nothing more than to magic us into bugs and squish us under her feet. If she really did that, would I turn back into my regular body after she squished me? I imagined the carnage and dry heaved.

*Cali, pull yourself together!*

I drew in a breath as deeply as I could, and then I let out a scream.

Or, at least, I’d intended for it to sound like a scream. What it really sounded like was a dying frog. I clapped my hands over my mouth in horror. Oh my god. Had I made that terrible, embarrassing, horrifying noise?

Artemis gaped at me. “What are you doing?”

I just shook my head. My hands were still pinned over my mouth to keep any other horrifying noises from escaping.

The witch smirked. “You made me look weak in front of Silas, and for that, you must pay.”

My sister stepped protectively in front of me. I wasn’t sure if it was the mortifying froggy death croak or the general semi-lucid quality of my actions thus far, but it seemed that Artemis had decided she was the heavy hitter of the two of us right now. I couldn’t argue with that, even if I were at the top of my game.

“You know,” Artemis drawled. “The last time you tried to hurt us it didn’t work out so well for you—or your mighty Silas. So bring it on!”

Okay, maybe Artemis stepping up to the plate wasn’t the best idea after all. I was woozy and may or may not have been in possession of an amphibian in my throat, but even *I* knew that taunting Lady Golden Arm wasn’t the best idea.

“Artemis,” I said faintly.

The witch smiled. “Last time, there were three of you. It seems now I find you at a disadvantage. Where *is* your stone guardian? He certainly isn’t here to help you now.”

A twinge of guilt jolted through me. How could we have just left Steinar behind? Artemis had been right: it was out of character for me to just leave him, especially after all the times he’d protected us. I never should have left him. And the witch was right, too—we were outclassed here.

I forced my mouth to speak. “What is it you want?”

“I want to see two dead Fae,” the witch said with a smirk.

“I’d like to see you try.” Artemis held her hands out in front of her. “We don’t need a stone defender. We have Fae magic.” As if illustrating her point, Artemis sent a surge of energy through the clearing, shaking the ground.

The witch stumbled briefly, then regained her footing. “You think you’re so special, but you two are just a couple of little Fae girls playing make believe. But I’ve met your kind before, and there’s nothing better than watching them wilt and die like little flowers.”

Well this was getting out of hand. We still hadn’t seen her at her full power, so there was no telling what she was capable of. And honestly, I didn’t want to find out. If she really had dispatched other Fae that easily, though, we were in deep trouble. How could we make it out of this if the witch had no interest in bargaining with us?

I desperately reached out to Greyson with my mind, trying to link with him, to beg him to come save us. Yes, there was a giant-ass lake between us, but I had to do *something*. I squinted my eyes shut and focused on my mate.

*Greyson? Greyson, please! I need you!*

Nothing. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t make the connection. Was it because of the way I’d left him without telling him? Was it the curse? Or was the distance simply too far for our bond to cross?

I didn’t have time to figure it out, though. The witch was already beginning to chant some spell, raising her hands high.

I dug deep into my well of power, summoning every ounce of raw, untrained Fae strength I had. I lifted my shaking hands and tried to let loose a blast of energy—it wouldn’t take her out, but all we needed was enough of a head start to beat her to the other side of the lake.

But the more energy I tried to summon, the weaker I felt. My knees knocked together, and I let out a shuddering gasp as my hands fell to my sides.

Artemis didn’t hesitate. “I warned you, witch.” She let loose a powerful surge of energy—

—that washed right over the witch and did absolutely nothing. The witch smirked and brushed a stray leaf off of her dress. “Oh, you almost got me there.”

My jaw dropped. “What the hell?” How was that even possible? Artemis was one of the strongest Fae I’d ever met. Her power had shaken the earth not moments before. How could it not affect the witch at all?

Panic clawed up my throat. If Artemis couldn’t hit her…

Artemis tried again, summoning more energy this time, so much that the scent of ozone filled the clearing and chills ran down my spine. She released her power, sending it straight at the witch.

The results were the same.

The witch laughed. “Last time, you caught me unprepared. But don’t worry—I won’t ever make that mistake again.”

I blinked and staggered back. The witch must have created some kind of magic shield to ward off our energy blasts. And as long as she stood on the other side of that shield, we wouldn’t be able to touch her. And then Artemis would run out of power and we’d be sitting ducks.

What if we both tried to blast her with our magic? Would that be enough to overpower the shield?

The witch raised her hands and began chanting her spell again. With each new syllable that slid off her tongue, I felt my throat tightening more and more—until I could barely draw in enough air to breathe.

Just in front of me, Artemis opened her mouth as if to speak and then clutched at her throat in horror. What was happening? Was the witch using her powers to strangle us?

“I… I got this,” Artemis whispered hoarsely. “I’ll use mind control…”

I wheezed in a breath, still clutching my throat. “You’ve only used it… a couple times. Not safe. Should we… just fight?”

She shook her head. “We’ll never get to her… in time.”

Then Artemis turned to face the witch, her eyes narrowing on her new target. “You’re… not going to hurt us.” She croaked. Her breathing was so restricted, she didn’t even sound like herself anymore. “You’re going back… back to your house.”

A look of confusion crossed the witch’s face, and my heart leapt. For a split second, the vise around my throat eased enough for me to draw in a halfway decent breath.

But then Artemis fell to her knees, gasping for air just as hard as I was, and it was then that I knew the truth.

We were outmatched, and nobody was coming to save us.

Artemis and I were going to die.

**Episode 830**

Spots appeared in my vision as it got harder and harder to breathe. The air rushing into my lungs had decreased from a wheeze to whistle, and I collapsed to my knees. Suddenly the simple task of standing upright was too taxing for my body.

One hand dug into the grass as I clutched at my throat with the other. This was it. I was going to die here, across the lake from the pack house, rescue, and my mate. So close, yet far enough that there was no saving us. Not now.

I wished I could see Xavier and Greyson one last time. I’d never wanted to leave things like this, so unresolved.

Artemis’s hand gently rested on my shoulder. She was on her knees next to me, struggling to rise to her feet. I didn’t know how she had the strength to even try. Still, it was clear from the look in her eyes that she wasn’t giving up. Not yet.

She drew in a breath that whistled just as much as my own and, her voice barely audible over the sound of her body desperately trying to draw in more air, she said, “You must… stop. We’re… we’re your friends. Leave us… and go back h-home.”

Even through the strain in her voice, I could hear the intensity in her tone. She was fighting with every ounce of breath left in her body to compel this witch to stop. To do the only thing that could save our lives.

My fingers dug into the earth as my body protested the lack of oxygen. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and my vision was narrowing to a dark tunnel. I knew I was moments away from blacking out when the grip on my throat suddenly lessened, and I sucked in a huge gulp of air. Never before had it tasted so sweet.

Oxygen flooded my brain so quickly it felt like I was floating. A wild grin pulled at my lips, even as the world spun a little on its side. When my vision came back into focus, I saw the witch frowning at us. Not in displeasure, but… Oh god, was that confusion?

*Please, please,* please *let it be confusion. Leave us alone and go back to where you came from.*

The witch dropped her hands and looked around. I could read the expression on her face as clear as day. She’d forgotten what she was doing here. Artemis’s magic was working!

There was a long string of seconds where the witch looked around with that puzzled expression before she lifted her golden arm again. I tensed, but she just stared at her hand like it held the answers to her questions. Then she shook her head and finally met our eyes. Artemis and I both tensed.

“I bid you a safe journey,” the witch said.

Artemis and I both held our breath as the golden-armed witch slowly turned around and walked away. She disappeared between the trees, and we stayed frozen, waiting and watching for her sudden return.

Nothing.

We both let out a breath of relief at the same time, gasping for air and finally allowing our shell-shocked bodies to calm the eff down, now that Lady Golden Arm wasn’t about to hex us to death.

Artemis started to laugh. “It worked! Why am I surprised? I’m good at what I do. That witch is no match for me. Didn’t I tell you I had this under control?”

Slowly, I felt my strength returning and I climbed to my feet. “You saved us. Thank you. But try not to get too cocky, okay? If that witch comes back we might not be so lucky a second time.” I held out a hand to help her to her feet. Artemis stuck her tongue out at me, which seemed like an oddly human gesture coming from my Fae sister, but she accepted my help.

I picked up the fallen spell book off the ground and brushed it off. “We should get back to the pack house before your mind control trick wears off,” I said. “Who knows how long it’ll last on a witch like that? And you know Silas is going to absolutely lose his shit when he finds out we got away.”

Artemis nodded. “Plus we need to fill Greyson in on everything that’s happened.” She glanced at me quickly, as if checking to make sure I wasn’t moments away from falling to pieces. “I mean, he needs to know about Xavier…”

That made me stumble a step, but I quickly righted myself and we continued our journey back to the pack house.

In all the hubbub of getting Force choked by that witch, I’d almost forgotten about everything else we’d seen. About Ava killing Xavier on Silas’s orders. But… that couldn’t be true, right? Xavier couldn’t truly be dead. I would have felt something. I would have *known* if he really had been killed. Wouldn’t I?

I pulled my phone out of my pocket with my free hand and checked the display. Xavier still hadn’t responded. But that didn’t necessarily mean anything. People didn’t respond to calls and text messages all the time. It didn’t mean he was…

*No*. Xavier was alive. I knew it. And until I had solid, devastating proof, I’d keep believing and waiting for him to text me back.

Still, I couldn’t help the tears that slipped from my eyes whenever I allowed myself to imagine what that proof might look like, and how it could be any more damning than Ava showing up at Silas’s house covered in blood and declaring that she’d killed Xavier.

My chest gave a little hitch, and a half-smothered sob slipped through my lips. I clapped my hand over my mouth, but it was too late. Artemis had already noticed my tears. She wrapped an arm around me as we continued our way back to the pack house. I wanted nothing more than to curl into a ball and cry until all my tears dried up, but we didn’t have the luxury of taking our sweet time getting back.

“It’s okay, Cali,” she soothed. “We’ll be back at the house soon. Back to Greyson, right? There’s no time to feel sorry for yourself. We need to see what this spell book can do first.”

So much for comfort. A few more tears slipped out, and I did my best to stifle them as we hurried back.

“Ugh, this lake is so big,” Artemis groaned. “Why isn’t there a ferry to take us across? This human world may have its advantages, but the Fae world has lots of bridges and ferries.”

*Yeah, well, the Fae world also has an unlimited number of beasts hell bent on murdering everything in sight.* I sighed, ignoring Artemis’s increasingly dramatic complaints about “taking the long way around” and instead focusing on what we’d find at the pack house. Maybe Xavier had come back? God, I hoped so.

And how would Greyson react to me coming back after I’d run away? I could only assume he wasn’t thrilled that Artemis and I had run off. There were so many questions, and unfortunately there was only one way to find out the answers.

Finally, we made it back to the pack house. I barely resisted the urge to drop to my knees and kiss the grass in front of the house. No matter how angry Greyson might be for me leaving, it felt good to be back.

As we headed for the front door, Rishika noticed us first.

“Where have you been?” she demanded from her spot on the porch. Then she knocked loudly on the front door and called, “Cali’s back!”

I guess slinking back into the pack house without anyone noticing was out of the question.

The front door swung open and the pack rushed out.

“What the hell happened to you?” Lola demanded.

“You two look like you’ve been through a war,” Jay noted.

I barely paid them any attention. All I wanted was Greyson. To feel his protective arms around me.

And then I saw him coming out of the house. He moved silently through the people crowded around Artemis and me and came right up to me, his eyes locking onto mine.

A fresh wave of tears filled my eyes. “I’m sorry I left,” I whispered. “I—”

He cut me off. “Are you hurt?” He looked me up and down, searching for any lasting injury.

I shook my head and he pulled me into his arms. His scent enveloped me, and his arms locked me against him. For the first time since I’d left, I felt safe. I felt loved. I felt like maybe, just maybe, everything really would be okay.

I sighed and hugged him back, burying my face in his chest.

His head dipped down. “I was so worried about you, love,” he whispered. “Don’t ever do that again.”

Reluctantly, I pulled out of his embrace and showed him the book tucked under my arm. “I had to get this back.”

He blinked. “How did you—did you fight Ava for this?”

Emotion filled my throat. I couldn’t talk about confronting Silas and that golden-armed witch. Not yet. “It doesn't matter. We have the book now—maybe we can find a way to break the curse.”

I glanced around the group for Big Mac, hoping she was nearby and her witch battery was fully charged.

And then a voice thundered behind me. “I thought I made myself clear—the books are leaving with me.”

I spun around, tears flying from my eyes as a grin tugged at my lips.

Steinar had found his way back to us.

**Episode 831**

XAVIER

I eyed the dagger in the wannabe hippie’s hand. Yep, that sure looked like silver to me. This dude might be out for a quick buck, but he at least knew enough to make himself a genuine pain in my ass. I glowered at him with every ounce of fury I possessed.

If I made it out of here, I was going to kick the ever-loving shit out of Gabriel the next time I saw him. What kind of idiot would send me to this psychopath—who couldn’t even help me get my wolf back?

Even though I wanted nothing more than to break this guy’s neck and then track down Gabriel and give him the same treatment, I forced myself to take a deep, calming breath. I didn’t have my wolf anymore, so I was little more than an extra-juiced human. And as for Swift, I didn’t even know what his deal was. What kind of power he might have.

What I did know was that he’d threatened my life and was basically pointing a lethal weapon right at me, and Cali wasn’t anywhere nearby to save me if that silver knife broke skin. I couldn’t afford for this to get bloody, not if I had any other options.

I slowly lifted my hands up so he could see I didn’t have a weapon of my own. “Put the weapon down,” I said, my voice calm but firm. “I’m not here to fight with you, but I will if it comes to that.”

Swift hesitated, and I watched, standing perfectly still, as he adjusted and readjusted the knife in his hand. Was he nervous? Was that why his palms were sweaty? I might not have had my wolf at that moment, but judging by the way Swift couldn’t seem to keep a steady grip on that silver knife, maybe I wouldn’t actually need my wolf to beat him.

As the power dynamic in the room shifted more and more in my favor, I decided to try a different approach. “Listen, I came here for help. I’m not here to hurt you or anyone else here. Why not just chill, before this turns into something you’re going to regret?”

I hated playing this safe. Sure, Swift was pointing a source of lethal poison at me, but if I’d had my wolf I would have already ripped his throat out. Of course, if I’d had my wolf, I wouldn’t have come here in the first place, and it would have been Greyson’s throat I was ripping out. The thought sent a small wave of calm through me, and I dropped my hands down to my sides.

So what if Swift attacked me? Part of me wished he *would*, just so I could take that dagger and use it to shear off that stupid hair.

Still wary, Swift slowly lowered the dagger. “What exactly did Gabriel tell you?”

I let out a breath. The tension coiling in my frame relaxed just a bit, now that the silver dagger wasn’t being pointed at me. “Not much, other than that you can help me reclaim my wolf. If you can’t, just say it. You don't need to threaten me with that thing, and there’s no need for us to both waste our time.”

The man eyed the knife in his hand like it held the answer to whatever was on his mind. Finally, he set the blade on a nearby table and turned back to me. “I’d like to help you,” he said, “but as I said before, I don’t do that kind of thing anymore. Not after what happened last time.”

Vague much? That kind of lead-in was just begging for a follow-up question. “Last time?” I asked.

His expression shuttered. “I don’t like to talk about it. It nearly destroyed my reputation—you should have seen the Yelp reviews.”

I scoffed. “I don’t give a shit about your reputation. I need to get my wolf back, and the only reason I’m here is because Gabriel told me you could help me do that. Now tell me the truth: can you help me or not?”

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

I gritted my teeth. *Right. Because I haven’t thought this over at all. It definitely wouldn’t be a big deal or anything if I never saw my wolf again.* “I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t. Now answer the question—can you help me or not?”

With a resigned sigh, Swift walked to the front of the shop, flipped the “Open”sign to “Closed”, locked the door, and turned back to face me. “Follow me.”

He led me to a back room, and I was instantly hit by a nauseating mixture of competing scents—sandalwood and musk, cinnamon and citrus, pine and something floral, the scent of death, and… a werewolf? Everywhere—spread out across tables or hung on walls and tucked into bookcases—were crystals, strange rock figurines, pastoral tapestries, embroidered pillows, and blankets. It was like an occult shop had had a baby with a thrift shop.

“What did you say your name was?” Swift asked.

“Xavier. What is this place?”

The man gestured grandly around him. “This is the sanctuary, where the spiritual world becomes one with the physical world.”

I rolled my eyes. I was definitely going to kick Gabriel’s ass for putting me through this. Wherever he was, he was probably laughing his ass off right about now. The scent of another werewolf filled my nose again.

“Have you worked with other werewolves before?” I asked.

“I have a guide-patient obligation,” he said, his tone apologetic. “I can’t talk about such things without violating that sacred trust.”

My eyebrows lifted. “And what happened to the last werewolf you dealt with?”

Swift looked a little stricken, though I couldn’t tell if it was because of my question or my blatant disregard for his “patients’” confidentiality. He sighed. “The last I heard, he was wandering the planet looking for his soul. Tragic, really.”

What the hell did that even mean? “Could that happen to me?”

“Anything is possible,” Swift said. He started digging through an antique desk and brandished a slip of paper. “Which is why I need you to sign this waiver before we proceed.”

“Seriously? What, you think I’m gonna sue you or something?”

“I do not pretend to know what the future holds. I simply seek to protect my business, should our encounter not produce favorable results.”

I shook my head. “Unbelievable.”

“I would be more than happy to assist you in any way I can, Mr. Xavier,” Swift said. “After you sign the waiver.”

“Fine.” I yanked it out of his hand, took the pen he offered, and scrawled my signature. “Whatever.” It wasn’t like I had a whole lot of options, anyway. I needed my wolf back—to fight my father on Halloween, to challenge Greyson for his position as Alpha, and to reunite fully with Cali. If I couldn’t get the other half of myself back, I might as well wander the world.

“Wonderful.” Swift tucked the signed waiver into a drawer in the desk and then gestured to a stack of pillows and blankets set against the wall on top of a threadbare cot. “Make yourself comfortable. It’ll be just a moment while I prepare the elixir.”

I sat on the edge of the cot, completely ignoring the bedding, and watched as the shaman threw together a blend of herbs and liquids that I couldn’t identify. There was only one thing I knew for sure: it smelled absolutely godawful. Swift was not exactly building my faith in his abilities.

The man began mixing the elixir with a glass spoon. “First, you’ll drink this, and then I’ll guide you on your spiritual journey—one that will hopefully mend your heart and reunite you with your wolf.”

I blinked. How the hell did this guy know about my heartache over Cali? Was it possible that he wasn’t as phony as he looked?

Once he’d finished mixing the concoction, he poured the elixir into a small chalice and then turned to me. “Are you absolutely sure you’re ready to go on this journey?”

“Seriously?” I frowned. “I’ve already tried this sort of thing. It wasn’t anything special and it didn’t work.”

“It tends to work better with a guide than on your own.” He smiled. “You will go wherever your mind leads you. I will help guide you to your wolf, but I can’t guarantee that you will return with it—or that you will return at all.”

Well, those odds sounded *fantastic*. But Gabriel had recommended this guy. And if he wasn’t just jerking me around, then it was entirely possible this hippie guide had the tools to help me. And what was I so worried about, anyway? It wasn’t like I had anything to lose. I needed my wolf.

I held out my hand. “I’m sure.”

“Then let the journey begin.” Swift passed over the chalice. “Drink up.”

**Episode 832**

VIOLET

I stood ankle-deep in the snow outside the Hart house with Charlie at my side, facing down the two agents. They both looked both confused and wary to find two young people dressed in street clothes and standing outside in a snowstorm without any winter gear.

“I’m Agent Fernsby, and this is Agent Imamu,” the woman said, gesturing to the man at her side. “Where do you two think you’re going?”

I could only imagine how suspicious this looked. People didn’t take strolls in a snowstorm not wearing coats. I was such an idiot! We should have shifted before we’d left the house. Then maybe we would have been quick enough that the MIB wouldn’t have caught us.

Charlie squared his shoulders and took a half-step forward. “Who are you guys? Are you FBI or something?”

“MIB.” Agent Fernsby flashed her badge—too quickly for either of us to really see it, just like I’d seen in movies. “And who are you?”

“MIB?” Charlie echoed. We both still didn’t really know what the heck that meant. His head tipped to the side as he struggled to put the pieces together. “Are you guys cosplayers or something?”

“What are cosplayers?” Imamu asked.

Oh boy. This was getting weird way too quickly for my liking. “Aren’t you here to talk to Tom Hart?” I asked brightly, like I was just a nice girl who enjoyed being helpful and *not* a lying werewolf who desperately didn’t want to get dragged away by some creepy government organization and dissected by scientists.

Imamu nodded. “That’s right.”

“He’s waiting inside for you,” I said.

Fernsby and Imamu exchanged a look. “And why are you two out here in the snow like this?”

“Um, well, it’s just—sometimes,” Charlie stammered. He couldn’t seem to get beyond an introductory word or two, and I stepped in to save him from himself. To save us both, really.

“We don’t want our parents to know!” I blurted out, thinking fast. A long beat of silence followed as the agents and Charlie waited for me to continue, and I realized my cover story was going to require a bit more explanation. “This is my boyfriend. I’m kind of from the wrong side of the tracks, and our parents would never approve of us dating.” I gestured vaguely at Charlie. “His parents think I’m just a punk who’s going to break their son’s heart, and neither of our parents really understand how good we are together.”

“So you’re running away?” Imamu asked. “How old are you? Should you be in school right now?”

“We’re not running away!” I insisted, even though I was actively counting down the seconds until I could literally *run* away from both of these terrible people. “We just want to spend a little time together. That’s all.”

Fernsby’s eyebrows lifted over the edge of her sunglasses. Seriously though, what kind of supervillain wore sunglasses on a snowy day? “By… jumping out the window?” she asked. “Without coats?”

Oh god. I hadn’t realized they’d witnessed the jumping out the window part.

“We don’t want our coats!” Charlie insisted. “The cold air makes us feel alive. You guys aren’t from the Midwest, are you?”

On the outside, I did everything in my power to seem like a sweet, innocent—albeit kind of dumb—girl. Inwardly though, I was grinning. Charlie was a really quick study. Maybe we were going to pull this off after all.

Imamu turned to Fernsby. “What should we do about these two?”

The other agent shrugged. “Let ‘em go have their fun. I was young once, too.”

*Ha! Now* that *sounds impossible.* “You won’t tell our parents, will you?” I asked, allowing just a tiny dose of my very real fear to slip into my voice.

Fernsby smiled. “Your secret’s safe with me.” She started toward the house and then turned back. “Just don’t get frostbite.”

Relief almost knocked me off my feet as the agents continued their way up the path and knocked on the door. I was shaking with fear and adrenaline—and maybe just a teensy bit from the cold. Charlie was too. I took his hand and led him toward the nearby woods behind the house.

When we were just a few yards away from the forest, his body tensed, and I could tell he was about to shift.

“Not so close to the house!” I whisper-yelled. “Orla doesn’t trust those agents, and we shouldn’t either.”

We trudged through the snow into the wooded area behind the house, glancing back every so often to make sure we weren’t being followed. My footsteps felt awkward and slow and deafeningly loud compared to how they’d be if we could just shift and make a proper getaway.

“We should go to Cali and Lola’s place while we wait,” I said. “But I think it’s still pretty trashed from when the Rogue was there… What if he went back there? Do you think it’s a safe place for us?”

Charlie was quiet for a moment. “I know a place I’d like to show you. I found it the first time I shifted. We can hang out there for a while. No one will find us.”

My lips stretched into a smile. *Time alone with my mate in a secret place? Count me in!* I glanced back again to make sure we were no longer visible from the house—and that nobody was following our trail. “Okay, I think we’re good. Let’s go.”

We quickly stripped down, tucked our clothes into my backpack, and then shifted. I ran alongside Charlie as he led me through the woods, and suddenly I didn’t feel so clunky or loud or slow anymore. Our wolf forms were nearly silent as we sprinted through the forest, throwing up little puffs of snow with each footfall.

I wished I could do this all the time. Just spend time with Charlie without worrying about Rogues or MIB or anything else. I briefly considered what life in Oregon would look like with Charlie at my side. Would it be more carefree?

Last I’d checked, the Redwood pack was still facing all kinds of danger from Silas. Charlie and I probably wouldn’t be any better off there, though at least we’d have the strength of the pack behind us. How had my life gotten so complicated? Why couldn’t I just live like a normal teen for once?

Charlie slowed as we approached a snow-covered field with dried up corn stalks sticking up through the snow. At one end of the field stood an old, dark green barn. After glancing around to make sure there was nobody nearby, we shifted back and started getting dressed.

“What is this place?” I asked as I tugged my shirt over my head.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I found it when I shifted for the first time. I think it’s an old abandoned farmhouse, or a barn.” He gave me a shy smile. “I’ve never shown it to anyone before.”

I smiled again, despite myself. That meant he’d never taken Sandi here, and that made it very special.

As we slowly approached the barn, another question popped into my head. “Charlie, why didn’t you just take me to your dorm? Even if you didn’t want to stay there for long, you could have grabbed some of your things.”

He shook his head. “People would’ve asked too many questions. Who’s this girl? Why is she hanging out in my room so much? Why am I packing my bag and leaving in the middle of the day during a snowstorm? Plus…” He ducked his head a bit. “Well, I didn’t want to risk running into Sandi.”

“I understand.” Sandi was third on my list of people to be avoided, right after the Rogue and the MIB agents. If Charlie wanted to go out of his way to avoid her, I wasn’t going to stop him.

He pushed open the barn door and led me in. Then he shut the door behind us, latched it, and led me across the large, open space to an area with hay and a small wood-burning stove. “I think I found some matches here last time…” He dug around in the hay surrounding the stove. “Give me a minute, and I’ll have a nice, toasty fire for us.”

I smiled. “Sounds great.”

I sat back and watched as he built a fire, admiring his broad shoulders and strong hands, and the way his muscles flexed as he loaded some wooden logs into the stove.

Then he took a seat beside me and we watched the fire grow. A cold wind blew through the drafty old building, and a chill ran down my spine. Charlie slipped an arm around me, pulling me in against his warm body. I gasped at his touch. All those butterflies in my stomach were having a field day. I hoped he’d never let me go.

He was the first to break the silence. “This isn’t so bad. I could do this forever.”

“I wish we could, but I’m worried about those MIB agents. Tom is probably filling them in about the wolf that attacked him as we speak.”

“But isn’t that a good thing?” Charlie asked. “Maybe they can capture the guy?”

Reluctantly, I shook my head. “If they catch the Rogue, he might talk. And if he talks, they could realize that you’re a werewolf and me too.”

He frowned. “So what do we do?”

I kept my eyes locked on the fire. “We’ll have to catch him first,” I said slowly. “And then we’ll have to kill him.”

**Episode 833**

GREYSON

I stared at the rock hulk staggering on the grass behind Cali. *Not this granite asshole again.*

He looked a little worse for wear, not unlike Artemis and Cali. What the hell had happened to them? Cali clearly didn’t want to talk about it, but I couldn’t just gloss over her running off and presumably taking on Ava—a dangerous werewolf who was likely allied with my father. At minimum, she probably had pertinent information that could save lives come Halloween.

And then there was the whole part about Cali being my mate, and how deeply unacceptable I found the concept of her running off and putting herself in danger. Especially since I’d had to stay behind and look after the pack. It was such a *Cali* thing to do, but that didn’t mean I was okay with any of it.

Frankenstone stomped over to Cali, reaching for the book in her arms. Either he was also kind of pissed off by this whole thing, or he couldn’t read the room to notice how happy Cali was to see him. Either way, I wasn’t having any of this. My mate had put herself through hell—it was written all over her face—to get that damn book. This glorified librarian wasn’t taking it anywhere. At least not yet.

I moved smoothly in front of Cali before he could make contact. “Don’t you lay a rocky finger on her.”

“Steinar, *please*,” Cali begged. “Can you just let me have this one book? You have a whole library full of them. What’s one missing book?”

“Steinar” shook his head. “You know that’s not how Hypatia sees it—each book is like one of her children. And that book is not just *any* book.”

Lola pushed through the pack to stand with me, in front of Cali. “Forget it, Granite Boy. We need that book. It’s not going anywhere.” Her words carried a sharp edge, and I could see from her posture that she would shift at the slightest provocation. Just another reason why we needed that damn book.

I pulled in a deep breath. We needed to put a pin in this before things got out of control. I’d only just gotten Cali back after going out of my mind with worry about her safety. I wasn’t about to let this rockhead do anything to hurt her, and I knew Cali wouldn’t just back down and give up the book without a fight.

Plus, the entire pack was looking at me to do something.

“Move, Lola,” I ordered. I walked in front of both Lola and Cali, standing practically chest to chest with the stone behemoth. “And you, back off.”

Steinar shook his head. “I need that book.”

“If you insist…” I prepared myself to shift, almost literally between a rock and a hard place. I needed Steinar to back the hell off, but he was determined to get that damn book. Since reason wasn’t on our side tonight, it seemed like we’d have to settle this another way.

I prepared myself to shift and fight. *Yeah, he’s a cross between a goddamn mountain and the Incredible Hulk, but how does the saying go? The bigger they are, the harder they fall—*

Cali grabbed my arm. “Greyson, don’t. Steinar is only doing what he’s supposed to do.”

“So you *want* him to take the book?” I asked incredulously.

She shook her head. “I don’t want you to fight him. He saved Artemis and me from the golden-armed witch. We…” Her bottom lip quivered like she was struggling around the words. “We left him behind, back in the forest. We shouldn’t have.”

“Thank you,” he said with a nod.

She turned back to the stone man. “I’m glad you’re alive, Steinar, and really, I’m sorry we left you. We didn’t know what else to do.”

The gargoyle shrugged. “I would have been pretty impossible to move.”

I blinked, still trying to make sense of everything. Cali and Artemis had faced down a golden-armed witch?

Artemis leaned over, her eyes locked on mine. “It’s true. He saved us. He deserves our gratitude.”

Gratitude seemed like a little much, but that wasn’t the part that worried me. There was only one golden-armed witch that I knew of: Demeter, who was working with Silas. *What has Cali gotten involved in this time*? She always managed to find something…

“I get that,” Lola interrupted. “But we need that book. Look, Stiney—”

“Steinar,” the gargoyle corrected.

“Right. We do appreciate your help, but we can’t just—”

I cut Lola off with a look and turned back to the giant. “We’re not going to—”

The giant staggered suddenly, looking more and more like a building on the verge of tipping on its side, and I shoved the group back as Steinar fell to his knees. The ground rumbled when his body made contact with the grass.

Cali hurried to his side, ever one to throw herself in the opposite direction of safety. She still had the book tucked under her arm, too. Hopefully this wasn’t some ruse on the gargoyle’s part.

“Steinar, what’s wrong?” Cali asked.

“I… I’m still weak from the witch’s spell,” he explained, his voice low and pained. “I absorbed most of it, and it’s proving to have a delayed effect. I… I may be made of rock, but right now I feel like m-more of a… sandcastle. I need to lie down.”

*Okay*. So now the gigantic rock monster needed a nap? My mind was practically buzzing with unanswered questions. What had happened with Ava? With Demeter and Silas? Had Cali been hurt? How had they managed to get the book back? I needed to talk to Cali alone, to understand exactly what had happened, and what it meant for the future of the pack.

Cali turned to me. “Steinar isn’t a threat. We need to let him rest.”

Steinar slid down onto his stomach on the grass. “I have to return the book,” he said, his voice growing weaker with each syllable. “I can’t… go anywhere… without it.”

“Just rest now,” Cali said.

Steinar’s eyes slid shut and he drifted into unconsciousness, mumbling something about Hypatia before going very still.

Cali looked over at Artemis. “Do you think he’s okay?”

Artemis shrugged. “I… guess? He’s made of rock, so probably. I bet he just needs to sleep it off.”

Cali didn’t look even remotely comforted by this, but it was good enough for me. I gently took her arm and tugged her away from the sleeping giant. “Can I speak with you please? Alone?”

She nodded. “I promise to tell you everything, but I need to give the book to Big Mac.”

I glanced over at the slab of sleeping rock. “That can wait.”

After a bit more convincing, I managed to pull Cali away from the rest of the group and bring her up to my bedroom.

“Sit down,” I said softly, with just enough of an edge that she knew it wasn’t a request. I needed to be firm with her, to make it clear to her in no uncertain terms that she couldn’t go chasing after danger whenever she felt like it. I needed to be the Alpha that this situation required, and to hold her to the same rules that everyone else in the pack had to abide by.

But, per fucking usual, it wasn’t that easy. Cali was my mate. I’d been out of my mind with worry while she’d been gone, imagining one worst-case scenario after another, and now she was back and in front of me, looking so small and breakable and halfway to broken already that all I wanted to do was hold her.

She took a seat on the edge of my mattress. “Greyson, I’m so—”

I held a hand up to stop her. First, I needed to speak my piece. She could apologize after. “You shouldn’t have done that, Cali. I know you were only trying to help, but you were in a lot more danger than you realized. That witch you encountered? Her name is Demeter, and she’s working with Silas.”

She blinked slowly. “I didn’t know that was her name, but I did see Silas.”

She *what?* Emotion flooded through me so fast it made my head spin—anger, protectiveness, worry, dread, and deep, unending relief that she was still here, right in front of me.

“You saw Silas?” I demanded. “*Where*?”

Cali shivered. “He’s in a cabin. I’m not entirely sure where. I don’t know how far we walked—”

“Well, you’re going to need to retrace your steps,” I snapped, impatient to get more concrete details. “This is the first lead we’ve gotten on Silas’s whereabouts.”

“I-I don’t think I can—”

“Cali, I need you to remember everything about where this was,” I continued, my voice sharp, a pure Alpha demand. “Do you understand? Everything. Now start from the beginning. Which direction did you and Artemis go?”

Cali burst into tears. Her face twisted into a pained grimace, her chest heaved, and her hands clapped over her mouth just a moment too late to smother the sob that ripped out of her throat.

*Shit. Great work, Greyson. You’ve freaked out your mate and your best lead all in one shot.* I knelt in front of her and rubbed her thighs. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m sorry, love, I’m sorry. I know it’s been a hell of a—”

“Xavier’s dead,” she sobbed.

All the questions buzzing through my mind disappeared. Well, more like replaced with new ones. “What?”

“A-A-Ava,” Cali hiccuped. “She s-said sh-she killed him!”

Through her tears, she managed to piece together enough of a picture for me to understand what had happened. “She was covered in blood,” Cali said, tears running down her face in earnest. “And it was Xavier’s. I just know it.”

I reeled back.

“And he hasn’t been answering his phone!” Cali continued. “I k-kept telling myself that he couldn’t be dead. That I would *know* if he died. But Greyson, what if Ava wasn’t lying?” She dissolved into another round of tears and I wrapped her in my arms, allowing her to smother her sobs in the crook of my neck.

But I couldn’t wrap my head around it. How could I have let Xavier die after everything I’d done to protect him?

Cali continued to sob in my arms, absolutely heartbroken by this new reality, and another thought hit me. Did this mean she didn’t have to choose? If Xavier was dead, then the choice had been made for her—and I was the winner.

I smiled at the thought, even though I knew it was wrong—I shouldn’t have felt anything but despair over the loss of my brother. But the truth was, I was *relieved*.

And Cali was all mine.

Cali’s phone started to ring, and she yanked it out of her pocket with lightning speed. Her eyes went wide when they locked onto the display.

“It’s Xavier,” she breathed. “He’s alive!”

**Episode 834**

XAVIER

I held out the chalice in front of me, not even bothering to hide my grimace. The “elixir”, as Swift had called it, smelled like cinnamon and old socks. The chalice, a thick glass creation, also looked like it had *not* been washed between appointments.

*God, this looks so fucking disgusting…*

“Anytime now, Xavier.” Swift gave me a polite, if impatient, smile. “Bottoms up. I have another client in a few hours.”

Rather than wonder what the hell that meant—whether he expected this session to take several hours, or if he needed the time to implement some kind of half-assed cleaning system between appointments—I surveyed the elixir again and reconsidered Swift’s warning. That if this didn’t go the way I hoped, I might not return at all.

But my reality, bleak as it was, didn’t leave room for me to be wishy washy. If I couldn’t get my wolf back, not returning wouldn’t be a very big deal. Without my wolf, without that other piece of my soul, I wouldn’t want to come back from wherever the drink would take me, anyway. There would be no point.

Really, the only thing about this unhygienic experiment that bothered me was the possibility of never seeing Cali again. Not even one last time.

I put the chalice down.

“Hey, you’re still gonna have to pay for that, whether you drink it or not,” Swift objected.

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” I muttered as I pulled my phone out of my pocket. The display was blowing up with calls from Cali. What the hell was going in? Was she hurt? Had something happened at the pack house? I almost stowed my phone and hightailed it back to the pack house right then and there. Sure, I didn’t have my wolf, and I’d probably be more of a liability than an asset in a fight, but if Cali was hurt, if she needed help, then I’d gladly throw my weakest self in front of her. I’d do whatever it took to protect her. If I weren’t bound to my human form, I probably would have been halfway to the pack house already.

And then a new, darker possibility occurred to me.

Had she made her choice? I wasn’t sure which was worse—the thought of never reuniting with my wolf, or the thought of Cali choosing Greyson. I didn’t think I could live as my whole self without both of those things. My wolf was the other half of my soul, but Cali was my mate. My true mate. I couldn’t—I didn’t—want to live in a world where she didn’t choose me.

*Chill the fuck out, Xavier. You don’t know what’s going on. For all you know, her phone’s on the fritz, or she has some news about the curse, or she’s calling to see if you’ve found your wolf yet. Because she cares. Because she loves you too.*

I drew in a deep breath and clicked on the most recent voicemail. Instantly, Cali’s voice filled the phone, and I could tell she was crying. Her breath kept hitching, and she was sniffling and sobbing. Fear and fury hollowed out my chest. What the hell had happened? Who had hurt her?

“Xavier,” she whimpered. “Please tell me you’re not dead. Please, please. Why won’t you pick up?” Her voice broke and another set of sobs filled the phone. “Just text me if calling is too hard! You can’t just leave me on read, waiting to see if you’re alive or not!”

I paused the voicemail, my eyes wide. I felt shaken to my core and so, so confused. *She thinks I’m dead? Why? How?* I glanced at Swift, who was watching my voicemail saga play out with impatience etched into his face and posture.

“Can you get lost for a minute?” I asked. “I need to make a private call.”

The hippie rolled his eyes. “I don’t know if you realize this, but time is ticking, and—”

“Out!” I snarled.

He skittered out of the room, muttering obscenities under his breath, some of which sounded suspiciously like, “fucking Gabriel”.

*Fucking Gabriel, indeed.*

I immediately called Cali. Whatever was going on between us with Greyson and Ava and losing my wolf and all this *due destini* crap, I couldn’t just let her go on thinking I was dead. I needed to set the record straight—and find out why the hell she’d been convinced I was six feet under in the first place.

She answered on the first ring. “You’re alive!” she practically screamed into the phone, and I held the receiver away from my ear with a wince. Still, the emotion in her voice—desperation and relief and so much love—left me reeling, and it took everything I had not to hop on the first flight out of Portland.

*Remember what you came here for.*

“How are you? What’s wrong?” I asked, the questions tumbling out faster than she could answer them. “Why did you call so many times? I told you I was going to get my wolf back and that it might take a while. That doesn’t mean I’m dead. Why would you think that?”

Before she could respond, I heard another low voice in the background.

Greyson. Cali—for reasons I still didn’t understand—had thought I was dead, and had gone to Greyson. My teeth clenched together. What the hell had I been thinking, leaving her alone with him?

“It’s him,” I heard Cali say excitedly, but not to me. She had to be relaying the happy news to my brother. “He’s alive.”

There was a low murmuring and then her voice filled the phone again. “Xavier, where are you?”

“Who wants to know?” I asked, though I was fairly certain I already knew the answer. It hadn’t slipped my mind that she still hadn’t answered a single one of my questions, and that—compounded with her gathering intel for my brother while she was supposedly worried about my mortality—left a taste in my mouth that made me think Swift’s elixir couldn’t be so bad.

There was a long pause. “Greyson,” she finally said.

I sighed. “Do me a favor and don’t tell him I lost my wolf. Say anything you want, but not that.”

“Okay, but where are you?” she pressed.

If she wasn’t going to answer my questions, I wasn’t going to answer hers. “I’ll be back soon, Cali. Don’t worry.” I ended the call before she could reply, and my grip on my phone went white-knuckled.

It was all too easy to imagine Cali and Greyson together, discussing me and my whereabouts and generally invading my private business. God, I wished I had my wolf right now. I’ll kill Greyson without a single moment’s hesitation.

I put my phone back in my pocket and looked down at the chalice. It was time.

“Swift!” I called. “I’m ready.”

The hippie came back in and waved a crystal around. “First, allow me to clear the air of bad karma.”

I lifted an eyebrow. *Does this guy really believe even half of the crap he talks about?*

“I’m ready to do this,” I told him. “But if it doesn’t work, I’m not going to pay you.”

“Ah, that.” He set down his crystal. “Well, if you read the paperwork, you’ll see there is no money-back guarantee—only a partial credit minus a service fee.”

*Fucking con artist.* “Fine,” I growled. “But if you don’t shut up, I’m going to take you on a one-way trip to the graveyard. You’ll have earned it.”

The hippie swallowed nervously. “You need to drink from the chalice. Three sips.”

I raised the chalice, ignoring the putrid scent, and took the first sip. The liquid inside left a warm trail down my throat that made me gag, but I pushed through the discomfort. The second sip tingled, but was much more bearable. As I took the third sip, my mind traveled to Cali. Would I ever see her again? After everything we’d been through, all the good and bad memories we’d made together, was it even possible for us to come out of this together and happy?

I set the chalice down and waited, counting seconds until the waiting became unbearable. I glared accusingly at Swift. “Should something be happening?”

“Close your eyes,” he said. I followed his instructions, and—after listening to him shuffling around in the small space—some crappy new age music began to play.

I opened my eyes. “Is that really necessary?”

“Trust me,” he said simply. “Close your eyes and let the spirits guide you.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. And then, right in front of me, was a forest. It was so vivid. Not only could I see it, I could smell it.

My eyes snapped open in shock—and I realized I was no longer in Swift’s back room.

I was running through the woods… and someone was chasing me.

**Episode 835**

My heart pounded as I answered the phone. “He’s alive!” I screamed, unable to hold back my pure joy and relief.

Xavier was alive. Somehow, Ava hadn’t killed him. The thought of all that blood staining her skin—Xavier’s blood—still sent my insides into convulsions, but that horror was eased by the sound of his voice on the other end of the line. He was asking me questions, but my mind was too relieved to pay attention.

A huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders, and after spending the last several hours faced with the thought that he was dead, that one of my mates had been ripped away from me before I’d even had the opportunity to choose him, my body was practically buzzing with excitement.

*He’s alive, he’s alive, he’s alive.* My heart seemed to chant, celebrating alongside every other part of me.

A warm, heavy hand rested on my thigh. “Cali.”

I snapped out of my shock and relief—and realized Greyson was talking to me. Xavier had been talking, too, but now the other side of the line was quiet, like he was waiting for me to speak. But I didn’t remember what he’d said.

“Cali,” Greyson said again, his voice deep and urgent and slightly less gentle than it had been before. More the Alpha I knew he was trying to be for the sake of the pack and less the indulgent, sweet Greyson I always saw when we were alone together. “What’s Xavier doing? Where is he?”

I shook my head, holding on tightly to the phone. “I don’t know. He said he’ll be back soon.”

“That’s it?” Greyson asked.

My other mate, the one kneeling in front of me while I held that lifeline to Xavier, watched my face as if it held answers to his many, many questions. I knew he was at his wits’ end right now, trying to prepare the pack to face Silas, trying to keep me safe, trying to keep us alive and united long enough for the three of us—Xavier, Greyson, and myself—to finally face this *due destini* mess. He was doing his best, and I knew it and loved him and appreciated him for it, but I couldn’t tell him the truth.

Xavier had asked me not to tell Greyson about his missing wolf, and I knew how important a detail that was to withhold from Greyson when he was trying so hard to protect everyone from Silas. But I still couldn’t bring myself to break Xavier’s trust.

I shook my head, ignoring the twinge of guilt in my chest. “He didn’t say. He can be as mysterious as you, sometimes.”

His head cocked to the side. “But he really didn’t say anything about when he’s coming back?”

Something in his expression made warning flags pop up in my mind. “He didn’t say. Just that he’d be back soon.”

Greyson’s lips firmed into a thin line, but he didn’t say anything.

“Is something wrong?” I asked. It didn’t take a detective to see that Greyson was conflicted about Xavier coming back—or to understand why he might feel that way. Beyond the war with Silas, Xavier represented a threat to Greyson—to his role as Alpha, and to his claim as my mate. And no matter how things went down with Silas, that threat wasn’t going anywhere.

Greyson looked away. “Yeah… Yeah, I’ll say something is wrong.” His voice took on a sharp edge that I wasn’t used to hearing, and he looked back at me, his eyes narrowing. “You ran away again without saying anything. And don't tell me it’s okay, because it isn’t.”

“But I wasn’t alone,” I reminded him. “I was armed, and with Artemis. That makes two powerful Fae. I don’t think Silas or Demeter expected that.”

Xavier never hesitated to throw his weight around if I did something he didn’t like. Greyson, on the other hand, had always tried to help rather than stand in my way. I knew he was under a huge amount of stress, but I wasn’t about to let him start bossing me around and calling it “protection”.

Emotion flashed hot and wild in Greyson’s eyes, no doubt triggered by my use of his father’s name. He cleared his throat. “I’m not sure I love the idea of you on the front lines, but that’s beside the point. I was terrified for you, Cali. What if something had happened to you?”

The pain in his voice softened my resolve a little bit, and I reached for him, threading our fingers together. “I didn’t mean to upset you, and I promise I never just run off to make you worry. Not everything I do is about you, Greyson.” I stopped and grimaced. “Wait, that’s not what I mean…”

He touched my chin softly. “I know. But you have to know that I’m always going to be worried about you. I can’t help it, love. Do you have any idea how I would feel if…” His throat bobbed and he looked away.

“I had no choice. I had to get the book back.”

His eyes met mine again. “I could have helped you.”

“But you have the pack to look after. I didn’t want to distract you when you have so much going on here that requires your attention.”

“But if you had told me where you were going, if I had come with you,” he said, “we would know Silas’s exact location. We could have been planning an attack right now.”

“I know,” I said softly, trying to soothe the wild frenzy in his eyes. “And I promise I’ll talk to Artemis and we’ll try to retrace our steps. And maybe Steinar knows exactly where they were.” I squeezed his hand gently. “Greyson, I want you to know that I really didn’t mean to hurt you.”

If I was being honest, part of me was secretly thrilled to know that Greyson, this powerful Alpha, would do anything to protect me. He’d tear the world apart brick by brick if that was what was required. It was scary, but it was also… *intoxicating* to know that someone felt that way about me.

I glanced down at our entwined hands and gasped. His knuckles were swollen and split in some places, covered with bruises. “What happened to you?” I asked.

He sighed and pulled his hand back. “I got a little carried away.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that when I realized you were gone, I took it out on Nolan.” He rubbed his face. “I probably would have killed him if Joss hadn’t stopped me.”

I blinked at that, allowing the implications to sink in. The understanding of just how much I affected Greyson. How my absence, while well-intentioned, had driven him wild. I knew he’d killed before, but to kill someone because of me? That same thrill pulsed through me, alongside something I couldn't quite identify.

Greyson watched the emotions playing out on my face. “That’s how much you mean to me,” he finally said, as if he were reading my thoughts. “Which is why you should never do that again.”

I looked back down at his hands. It was so… strange, to see him so vulnerable. To see this raw, wild side of him. And despite how odd this all was, I couldn’t deny that I felt so much better when I was around him.

But maybe… Maybe that wasn’t all Greyson, either. Guilt nagged at my mind, and I couldn’t ignore it this time. Maybe part of this relief, this comfort, was due to the fact that I now knew Xavier was alive.

But maybe none of that mattered, anyway—where all of these feelings came from, or their exact origins. Maybe it was enough to just be happy to be here with Greyson, to feel his hand in mine, to stare into his eyes and savor this moment, when he was no longer a tough, unfeeling Alpha, but my vulnerable mate who loved me more than I ever could have hoped for.

“I can’t promise I won’t do something rash again,” I finally said, a smile tugging at my lips. “I think you know how unlikely that is. But I’ll try. Okay?”

His lips twitched. “Okay.”

I leaned in and brushed my lips over his in a sweet, comforting kiss, to show him how much he meant to me. But it didn’t take long for the kiss to deepen, for Greyson to pull me into his arms so I was kneeling on the floor in front of him. His fingers tangled in my hair, and his hot tongue slid over mine, making heat pool in my belly.

He nipped at my bottom lip and pulled me onto his bed, pressing me into his mattress and letting me feel every inch of his hard body against mine. Desire coiled tight inside me and I wound my legs around his hips, moving against him and showing him just how much I wanted him.

Greyson moaned against my lips, and then pulled away. “Wait,” he said, his eyes searching mine. “Is this because of Xavier?”

**Episode 836**

I paused, staring up at Greyson. My lips felt swollen, there was an unfulfilled ache deep in my core, and I had never been more confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Is all of this”—he gestured at the arrangement of our bodies with the hand that he wasn’t currently using to brace himself—“because you’re glad Xavier’s not dead?”

My brain froze, and I blinked. I knew the answer to Greyson’s question, and while it wasn’t a resounding *yes!*, it wasn’t exactly a no, either. But there was no way I was going to ruin this moment by admitting that.

“You really want to talk about Xavier now?” I purred, running my hands down his chest.

“No, but—”

I kissed a line down his jaw, and then nipped at his earlobe. “Because I don’t,” I whispered.

He shuddered, letting out a little moan that went straight to my lady parts, and I knew that this was my chance. I tilted his head up—taking one brief moment to admire his dark eyes and wide, lust-blown pupils—and kissed him hungrily before he could respond.

In no time at all, Greyson was pressing me back into the bed, his erection pressing in between my legs and his mouth hot on my neck as he kissed a trail down to my breasts. He broke away just long enough to pull my shirt over my head and unsnap my bra. I tossed both of them away while Greyson pulled off his shirt, and then he was kissing me again, picking up right where we’d left off.

His hands slid up my front, leaving a trail of heat in their wake. Greyson's lips pressed hungrily against mine as he guided my arms over my head. Then his hands gently cupped my breasts. I moaned, my hips rocking against his, as his fingertips dragged over my hardened nipples, sending sparks of pleasure straight to my core.

“Stay,” he whispered, low and commanding.

I bit my lip, holding as still as I could while he tugged off the rest of my clothes and then finished undressing. God, he was gorgeous. A work of art in motion.

When he came back to bed, Greyson's hands continued downward, and my hips lifted off the mattress when the pad of his finger brushed over that bundle of nerves. He repeated the action and I keened. Greyson eased my legs apart with a smirk, teasing my inner thighs with gentle caresses, and then I cried out, bucking my hips off the bed, when I felt his tongue dip inside me. He teased me with his tongue, licking a flat stripe up the length of my already soaking folds and then pulling away just before my release.

“Greyson!” I whined. I kind of wanted to smack the smug grin off his stupid face.

“All in good time.” He pressed a kiss to my abdomen, just below my navel. “Now turn around and get on your knees.”

If I hadn’t already been wet, Greyson’s low Alpha voice bossing me around would have done the trick. I wasted no time in flipping over and getting on my hands and knees, facing away from him, and he pulled me up until I was kneeling upright, my back against his chest.

His hands slid down to my hips, coaxing them outward, and he spread my legs a little further with his knee. Then his hips lined up with mine, and stars burst in my eyes as he filled me in one stroke.

I moaned, my head falling back onto his shoulder. Greyson pulled back, then thrust back in. Pleasure knocked around inside me, making my breath escape in whimpers, edging me the tiniest step closer to release each time. Then he began to rock into me, lifting me to straddle his hips for deeper access. I gripped his arm, mewling helplessly.

Something powerful was building in my core, tightening and coiling and ready to explode. I leaned forward with one hand fisting the sheets and another flat against the headboard, offering resistance to Greyson's unforgiving thrusts. Each exhale was a cry, each inhale was never enough. Oh god, I was so close—

"Yes, Cali," Greyson moaned, and I felt him turn to hot steel inside me. His fingers stroked that bundle of nerves as his tongue dragged behind my ear. "Come for me, love."

The pressure against my clit twisted my stomach, and with one ruthless thrust he broke me wide open. We were nothing but pleasure and sensation.

I collapsed gracelessly into the cool sheets, only vaguely aware of him moving around in the bedroom and the bathroom. The sound of water running filled the room, and I rolled onto my side to face him as he padded back into the room.

“Are you running a bath?” I asked.

He leaned in to kiss me, then took my hand and pulled me out of bed. “I’m not done with you yet.”

Four seconds earlier, I would have thought it would be impossible for me to want more sex after such a devastating release, but just like that I was ready to go again.

The tub was filling quickly, and the scent of eucalyptus filled the air. Had he actually used bath oils?

He sunk into the still-filling tub and pulled me in to straddle him. The large, wide tub was spacious enough for me to sink onto his hard cock, and I moaned at the sensation of being filled once again. Greyson and his amazing ideas. I’d have to remind myself to never doubt his creativity.

I rocked on him at my own pace, the rising water sloshing around us, and Greyson seemed content to let me take the lead this time—at least until he reached between us and the pad of his thumb slid over my clit.

“Greyson!” I moaned, swiveling my hips and rocking into him just a tiny bit harder.

He muttered expletives against my neck. “Fuck, love. You feel so amazing.”

With how sensitive I was from our first round, it took almost no time for my orgasm to plow into me. Greyson took longer this time, and nothing but the promise of more pleasure and his filthy words whispered in my ear could have kept me going.

“Yes, fuck, take it, Cali,” he moaned, gripping my hips and lifting me on and off him. “You’re so tight. So perfect. Come for me, love. One more time.”

By the time my mate finally thickened and erupted inside me, I was drunk with pleasure. I’d completely lost count of how many orgasms he’d given me, and how much bathwater had sloshed over the side of the tub.

Greyson kissed me deeply, then gently eased me off his lap and helped me turn around.

I leaned against him, my back against his chest, savoring the warm water as we basked in the afterglow. I was definitely going to feel that one later. The long ends of my hair floated on the surface of the water, and Greyson’s hands drew gentle shapes over my skin. Every so often his head dropped down, his lips pressing against my neck in a sweet kiss.

The sex had been absolutely mind-blowing. Honestly, it got better and better every time. Why had I waited so long for this? And if it continued to get even better, how the hell was I going to survive without losing my mind?

Greyson was quiet and contemplative behind me. Our afterglow was slipping away into silent comfort, and I could tell something was on his mind. It made sense, considering everything that was going on right now, but it didn’t seem right to leave him alone with his thoughts. I knew better than most that Greyson wasn’t a man accustomed to sharing a lot of his feelings. Hopefully he’d be willing to talk.

I craned my neck to look up at him. “What are you thinking about?” I asked, going for a roundabout approach.

He sighed and pressed another kiss into my neck. “It’s nothing, love. There’s just been a lot going on. I still haven’t had time to process all of it.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for starters, I recently found out that Mrs. Smith is my mother.”

“WHA—” My hands almost slipped as I grabbed the edge of the tub and frantically pulled myself up to a sitting position and whipped my head around. “*Mrs. Smith* is your *what*? How could you keep that from me?”

“Like I said, there’s been a lot going on.”

“And… How do you feel about that?” I asked tentatively, shifting on his lap so I could see his face better. I couldn’t imagine what it had been like for him to find out that not only did he have a mother, but that she was someone he’d known in an entirely different capacity for a long, long time.

He took a deep breath, his chest rising against my side, and then let it out. “Honestly, I’m not sure. I can’t bring myself to think of her as anything but Mrs. Smith. I could maybe work toward ‘Sabine’. The idea of ‘Mom’ is not something I’m really equipped to deal with.”

“Have you tried talking to her about it?”

He shook his head. “She wants to talk, and she’s even tried a couple of times, but I keep avoiding it.”

I frowned. “Why? If she told you she’s your mom, it's clear she’s open to talking about it.”

He was silent for a long string of seconds, searching for the right words, perhaps, before he finally spoke. “My whole life, I’ve always thought of my mother as a ghost. I always assumed she was dead, and that my memories of her were nothing but hopes, dreams, and vague thoughts. And I’d made peace with that.” He shrugged. “Honestly, I had. I could have spent the rest of my life thinking of my mother that way, but now she’s here, explaining how I was taken from her to be raised by a monster. And I keep asking myself—why didn’t she fight to get me back? And I wonder what kind of mother she is. How could she just give me up to live at the mercy of that man?”

His breath hitched, and my heart snapped in two. I cupped his face, gently running my thumb over his cheekbone. “Maybe you should give her a chance and find out for yourself?”

He turned his face so his lips pressed against my palm and then took my hand in his. “Maybe. When this is all over.”

I shook my head. “I can only imagine what it must have been like for you, growing up without a mom and with Silas as your father.”

“The one thing I have in common with Xavier and Colton is a visceral hatred of Silas,” he said. “It’s what binds us—even when we're at each other’s throats, we’ll always have that connection.”

That was so tragic—to be a family connected not by love, but by hate. And Silas wasn’t the only source of discord running through Greyson and Xavier’s troubled family. Would I be like Silas? Would I rip their family apart because I had to choose one brother over the other?

I looked down at our entwined hands and forced myself to ask the question that had been weighing on me for far too long. “What will happen if I choose Xavier over you?”

**Episode 837**

XAVIER

The footsteps thundered toward me and I put on a burst of speed, running as fast as I could. I didn’t know who—or what—was chasing me, but did I know, somewhere deep in my bones, that I could not let them catch up to me.

A voice echoed around me, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere, all at once. “Go with the flow,” the voice urged. “Follow your instincts.”

Lost in my race across the dreamscape, it took me a moment to recognize the voice. It was Swift. Just like that, incredulity settled in, and suddenly I didn’t care nearly as much about whatever spell this vision was trying to weave. My sprint slowed down to a jog.

So this was Swift’s master plan? *This* was the service he charged for, and how he guided his clients? By spouting some vague New Age-y bullshit and making them down some kind of hallucinogenic smoothie?

The footsteps behind me were getting louder, almost thundering. Despite the skepticism lacing through my every imagined stride and breath, I couldn’t help but instinctively pick up the pace. What the hell did Swift even mean? “Go with the flow”? Did that mean to keep running? And what about following my instincts? If I really *were* following my instincts, I’d open my eyes and tear Swift’s throat out. I’d turn around and face whatever was racing toward me.

But I couldn’t do either of those things—not until I got my wolf back. Which was the exact damn problem that I kept slamming into. Without my wolf, I wasn’t my whole self. My identity, my instincts, my abilities—they were all cut down to half measures, some of which didn’t even make sense. How could I fight without my wolf? How could I trust any of my instincts in this fallible, human form?

Swift hadn’t been kidding when he’d told me that I might not want to come out of this if I failed. I’d known that before I’d started, but faced with this dreamscape that was quickly turning into a nightmare, trapped in my helpless, broken body, I understood anew how impossible it would be for me to live any kind of real life without my wolf.

So I continued running, away from the open space I’d found myself in and toward the dark woods on the horizon. As I drew nearer, the trees began to vibrate with a low hum.

*Naturally. Because why would a dream forest ever just* stay *a dream forest?*

Was this going to be like when I’d eaten those stupid tubers? Or when Gabriel, Mikah, and I had been drugged? Was that all this was? Just a really bad trip? God, I hoped not. I could have done that without Swift’s useless guided meditation.

I should never have trusted Gabriel. He was reckless and selfish and didn’t know what he was talking about. And then next time I saw him, wolf or no wolf, I was going to fucking murder him.

Swift’s voice broke through my increasingly homicidal thoughts. “Face your fears…”

Fury hollowed out my chest. Face my fears? What an amazing and timeless piece of wisdom! I had definitely never heard any iteration of that phrase before!

My lungs were tight, begging for relief, and my muscles were beginning to cramp. I was so fucking tired of running, but no matter how hard I pushed myself, the forest didn’t get any closer.

Face my fears… How exactly was I supposed to do that, here and now in the middle of this con artist’s guided drug trip? I had plenty of fears, more than I’d ever admit to. I was afraid of Silas. I was afraid of losing Colton, of never getting my wolf back and remaining in this broken shell forever.

I was afraid of Cali choosing Greyson over me. Of losing my second chance at living happily ever after with my mate.

But what the hell was I supposed to do about any of that while I was stuck in here? When the only fear I had here and now was about to catch up to me?

The realization hit me, and I skidded to a stop.

*Face your fears*.

This hippie guy had better be right.

I turned to face whoever—or whatever—was chasing me. Taking a deep breath, I braced myself as the footsteps behind me began to slow.

Even before it appeared, I knew what it was. I could feel it with every fiber of my being, our severed connection humming between us like a living thing.

My wolf was back.

It appeared from behind a large tree. Its glowing yellow eyes were fixed on me, and despite the fact that this predator could have easily ripped me in half, it didn’t come any closer. It watched me cautiously, growling under its breath.

Did it even recognize me? Did it remember that the two of us had once shared a body? A soul? That it was half of what made up everything I was, and that I was its other half too?

I took one tentative step forward, and then another, slowly approaching the gigantic beast. “I see you,” I called, keeping my tone smooth and neutral, neither placating nor dominating. “Do you remember me?”

The wolf bared its teeth at me, and its growling took on a sharp edge.

I stopped. “I’m Xavier. You and I belong together. Don’t you remember?”

The wolf paused. I knew this was my opening, my chance, but I had no fucking clue what to do with it. How was I supposed to do this? I’d been chasing after my wolf for all this time, and now it was staring me in the face and expecting me to do… something.

*What do I do?*

I thought I’d kept the question to myself, but then I realized I must have said it out loud, because Swift’s voice drifted down to me.

“Embrace your inner child.”

Embrace my—I snarled, and it took every ounce of self-control I possessed to not tell him to fuck off and die.

*That’s not helpful! Doesn’t he understand what’s at stake? I’ll lose every-fucking-thing I’ve ever wanted if I fail. And no amount of mind shrinky bullshit will help me if I can’t get my wolf back.*

“Embrace your inner child,” Swift repeated.

Fuck this. I took another step toward the wolf, stomping in my fury, and its hackles rose. It growled again, louder than before.

I was fucking this up.

I froze and forced myself to take a breath, then blow it out. Then another. And then another, until the panic and anger had receded enough for me to think.

Swift had been right about facing my fears, so it stood to reason that he was also correct in this situation. *Okay, embrace my inner child. Maybe… Maybe that means I’m supposed to hug my wolf? Is that how this works?*

I met the wolf’s eyes again. “I’m coming over there,” I told it. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m not a threat. I just… I just want to be near you again. Okay?”

The wolf didn’t respond, but it didn’t growl at me either, so I took that as an invitation to approach. I slowly moved toward the wolf, so close that I could hear it breathing, feel its hot breath on my skin.

Feeling like an absolute asshole, I knelt in front of the wolf and opened my arms. The wolf let out a little growl. I paused, then leaned in and touched its fur. My wolf pounced on me and slammed me to the ground.

I struggled beneath it. My wolf was powerful and deadly. If it wanted to kill me, there was nothing I’d be able to do to stop it. Then, just as quickly as it had attacked, it reared up, let out a chilling howl, and bolted.

I leapt to my feet and chased after it. I’d worked too hard to get this close and fail—I wasn’t going to lose my wolf again. I put on a burst of speed, putting my mind, body, and soul into the chase. To my surprise, I found myself gaining on my wolf, and within seconds I was on its heels.

I leapt and tackled the wolf and we crashed to the ground, scuffling with each other, the wolf fighting to escape, to reject me once again, and me struggling to hold on. Fear and loss and desperation bubbled up inside me, and I caught two handfuls of dark fur, holding on tight.

“You belong to me!” I screamed, my voice raw and broken in a way I’d never heard it before. “You’re a part of me!”

Something hot and wet slid down my face in the struggle, and it took me a moment to realize it was my own tears. I was crying. Sobbing, really, as I held the thrashing wolf tight, trying desperately to pull its body against mine.

“*Please*!” I said, and the wolf let out a mournful howl.

So this was what it’d all come to. Xavier Evers, the should-have-been-Alpha of the Redwood pack. Begging for his own wolf to stay.

I managed to pin it to the ground and stared down into its eyes. We stared at each other for a long, tense moment, and then I knew what to do.

I leaned in and inhaled deeply, drawing the wolf back into my body. My arms and legs shook, and my heart pounded so hard I thought it might burst through my ribcage. But then that breath settled deep into my lungs and I collapsed on the ground, all alone.

No. Not alone. Because I knew the truth: my wolf was back.

And it was time to get Greyson.

I shifted.

**Episode 838**

GREYSON

I watched Cali’s face as I mulled over my answer to her question. Her skin was pink and flushed from both the heat of the bath and our fierce coupling, and her lips were swollen and inviting. I didn’t know how it was possible for every instance of our bodies moving together to be better than the last, but I had a feeling it had to do with how fucking perfect she was.

How I loved her in a way I’d never allowed myself to love anyone before.

Even though her question gutted me, and I knew that the truth of my own answer wasn’t one she would want to hear, I admired her for being brave enough to ask the question. To acknowledge the unspoken weight that was hanging over us and getting heavier with each passing day. I knew that, to her, the choice seemed impossible, and I didn’t envy her being forced to make it.

I also knew that Xavier planned to challenge me once he returned—for both Cali and the position of Alpha of the Redwood pack. I hated myself just a little bit for feeling this way, but I couldn’t help but think how much easier everything would have been if Xavier had truly died.

I gently tucked a wet section of hair behind Cali’s ear and met her eyes with a soft smile. “If you choose Xavier over me, then we would still be Greyson and Xavier,” I said simply, letting her parse that answer out for herself.

I wasn’t going to tell this beautiful girl who I loved with every inch of my being that it would break my heart to live without her. It was the truth, but it wasn’t what either one of us needed to hear or think about right now. There was plenty to worry about beyond Cali’s choice—a war was looming, just days away now. I didn’t want to think about what-ifs. I wanted to enjoy the gift I’d been given in the present: alone time with my mate.

My soft smile shifted into a feral grin, and I playfully grabbed Cali’s ankle and tugged it upward, sending her plummeting off of my lap and into the sudsy bathwater. She came back up spluttering and splashing. “Hey!”

She splashed a wave of water at me and I caught her wrists, pulling her in. She struggled against me, laughing and smiling and trying to evade my grasp until she was cradled tight and safe in my arms. Exactly where she should be.

Fuck Xavier and his challenge. Cali was mine.

I kissed her temple. “We already have plenty of things to think about right now, yeah?”

She hummed, but didn’t reply. I took that to mean she didn’t agree, but didn’t want to say it out loud. That was fine, for now. We didn’t have to dissect every aspect of what we were facing, and—right now, at least—we could agree to disagree.

Right now, I didn’t want to imagine her leaving my arms for even a second—much less some devastating scenario where she picked someone else to be her mate.

Cali’s stomach let out a low rumble, and she flashed me an embarrassed grin. “Guess that’s my cue.” She got out of the tub and fumbled around to grab a towel and wrap it around herself. I leaned back, crossing my arms behind my head, and enjoyed the show with a smirk.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she said, her cheeks bright pink.

“Like what?”

She arched her eyebrows. “You know how I mean.”

I didn’t reply. Yeah, I was checking her out, but it was also nice to just linger in the moment. The longer I could stay here in this little bubble of peace we’d created, the longer I would fight for it.

Cali secured the towel around her chest and headed to the door. She stopped, then turned to face me. “We’re going to have to face this soon. You know that, right?”

*Way to kill the mood, Cali.* I nodded reluctantly and felt the bliss slipping away. “Go get dressed.”

Once she left the bathroom, I dunked my head under the water and stayed there until my lungs began to burn in protest, hoping I could drown out all the inconvenient, heartbreaking thoughts taking up residence inside my head.

I took my sweet time getting dressed. All I wanted to do was linger with the memories Cali and I had just created, and maybe call her back upstairs and see if she wanted to create a few more. But I couldn’t. I didn’t have the luxury of acting like the pathetic, lovesick asshole I really was.

I still had a pack to lead, a war to fight, and, eventually, a challenge to face. And while I loved Cali in a way I used to believe was impossible—even though she was my mate and all I truly wanted at the end of the day was to spend the rest of my life with her—I had to push all that out of my mind and focus on the task at hand.

Easier said than done.

After I dressed and got some small measure of control over myself, I headed down to the basement for a little visit with our prisoner.

Nolan’s battered face was already healing, but he still looked uncannily like roadkill. “Are you here to finish what you started?” he asked. “You might as well, at this point. It won’t make any difference. Silas will still get us all.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m not here to hurt you. Not this time, at least. I want to understand. Why would you try to throw your lot in with Silas?”

He shrugged. “When I weighed the options, the scales tipped in Silas’s favor. He might be scary as shit and completely insane, but I’d rather have him on my side than against me.”

“You’re an idiot,” I muttered. “So you made a bargain with him. Do you really think he’s going to keep his word?”

“I don’t think you understand. I didn’t have a lot of options. He was threatening my sister, my pack. Like you, I look after my pack and try to do what’s best for them.”

“He’s using you, Nolan. He’s still going to kill you, and everyone in your pack, and your sister too. But I have an idea that may help.” I paused, taking in the battered and bruised Alpha in front of me. “I want you to go back to Silas and—are you listening?—*pretend* to work with him.”

Even though both of Nolan’s eyes were still swollen, they widened in shock. “You want me to spy on him?”

“You’re not as stupid as you look, meatball.”

“You know he’ll kill me if he finds out.”

“Yeah, probably. But I’ll kill you if you don’t try. Think about it. You have until tomorrow night to decide.”

I left him alone with his thoughts. Hopefully he’d see reason—and realize that he didn’t exactly have an abundance of options. I headed upstairs to the kitchen, hoping to find Cali. And there she was—talking to Mrs. Smith. They each had mugs of what looked like white chocolate mocha, and there was a conspicuous third mug waiting on the counter next to Cali’s.

*So that’s what she’s up to.*

Cali smiled and waved me over. “There you are! I thought the three of us could talk.”

I tensed. I wasn’t exactly in the mood to exchange pleasantries, and I didn’t want to let Cali down if Mrs. Smith and I didn’t come out of this conversation a happy and healthy mother/son duo. My life wasn’t *The Brady Bunch*.

I sat down at the counter and Cali’s smile widened as Mrs. Smith and I both sipped our mochas, studiously avoiding eye contact.

“Well isn’t this nice!” Cali said brightly.

I shrugged. At least the white chocolate mocha was good.

“You know, I recently found out that Artemis is my sister and all, so I definitely understand that being thrown in with a new family is hard,” Cali said, trying again.

I closed my eyes, not sure if I wanted to laugh or bolt. She was so damn cute for doing this for me, but this was easily the most awkward conversation I’d ever had with Mrs. Smith.

“Um, maybe it would help if you each answered a question about yourselves?” she suggested. “Something easy, like—” She stopped short and her eyes widened. “Oh my god!”

She grabbed Mrs. Smith’s hand, nearly knocking a cup of mocha all over me, and held up her hand so Mrs. Smith’s ruby ring shone in the light.

“Where did you get this?” Cali asked. She clearly didn’t know about the engagement.

Mrs. Smith beamed. “It’s from MacKenzie—we’re engaged!”

“Get out of here!” Cali’s smile brightened the whole room. “It’s so beautiful.”

Mrs. Smith nodded in excitement. “She even engraved it. Let me show you.” She tugged on the ring, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Is it stuck?” Cali asked, frowning.

Mrs. Smith tried again, harder his time, and shook her head. We watched as she tried a few more times. “No,” she said, looking bewildered. “It just won’t come off.”

**Episode 839**

JOSS

I shouldn’t have been doing it.

But Ravi’s *hands*…They were so big, so strong, so warm. And the effect I had on him was intoxicating. The growl I could pull out of him just by nibbling on his lower lip made me feel like the most desirable woman in the world. And I loved that about being with him.

But hooking up outside in this semi-hidden alcove by the lake was reckless, and we both knew it. We could have been spotted at any moment, but that only added to the excitement. The idea that it needed to be rushed, that we shouldn’t push our luck by taking our time…

I didn’t want to do anything to diminish my Luna cred, but the way Ravi’s skin felt against mine as he pushed me up against the rocks and kissed me all over my bare chest made it hard to worry about what the pack would think if they saw us.

After all, I deserved this. I deserved every second of how Ravi made me feel. Every brush of his lips against mine was the universe’s reward for putting up with the Redwood pack’s bullshit. And I was determined to get even.

So when Ravi knelt between my legs and stayed there until I saw stars, I closed my eyes and pretended we were somewhere else.

Afterward, we dipped our feet in the lake and I let myself lean on Ravi’s shoulder while I listened to him talk about our future.

“After we leave the pack,” Ravi said, clearly drunk on the idea, “we could go anywhere we wanted. Paris, Italy, New Zealand. We wouldn’t have to settle down in any one place. We could just explore and find out what we like and what we don’t.”

It was nice, picturing kissing Ravi on top of the Eiffel Tower, holding hands at the Trevi Fountain, or making out… somewhere important in New Zealand. Maybe somewhere they’d shot *The* *Lord of the Rings*? I don’t know. But I let myself enjoy the fantasy.

But it was just a fantasy. We weren’t mates. Could I spend my life with someone knowing that either of us could meet or true mate at any time, leaving the other alone?

“What would you do if I met my mate?” I asked him, lifting my head off his shoulder so I could get a good look at his face. “Like, say we’re traveling in Provence and we’re strolling through a vineyard. And there he is. And I see him. And it’s all fireworks and champagne bottles popping inside my heart or whatever.”

“Maybe you could keep me on the side,” Ravi joked, grinning. “I think I’d be a good mistress.”

I laughed, but something in the pit of my stomach told me to press him on this. Because it was a real possibility. And I really didn’t like the idea of either of us leaving the Redwood pack only to end up alone.

“But seriously,” I insisted. “How would you feel?”

Ravi furrowed his brow and got a faraway look in his eye. I could tell he was mulling it over, but it was a cursory thought. Not a serious one.

Ultimately, he shrugged and looked down at me, still smiling.

“I haven’t thought about it, you’re right,” he admitted. “But I don’t think that’s a problem. I have a good feeling about this. I think we should get through Halloween, and then we can run off together and see what happens.”

I nodded, letting it drop. I was starting to realize that Ravi was one of those people who didn’t think very far into the future. One of those “live in the moment” types. And that could be fun, but it also came with risks.

“Okay,” I said, pushing myself up off the ground and collecting my clothes. “We should probably head back to the pack house, though.”

“Sure you don’t want to take advantage of this spot a little longer?” Ravi asked me, waggling his eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes and let myself enjoy the way Ravi looked at me as I got dressed. I could tell he knew I wasn’t fully satisfied by his answer to my question, but he didn’t seem angry or worried or annoyed. He seemed… calm. Like he knew we’d figure it out.

I wish I had that kind of faith.

“Tempting,” I admitted. “But I still have a pack to run.”

And with that, I headed back toward the house.

Once I got inside, I heard a suspicious number of voices coming from the kitchen. Steeling myself for trouble, I headed that way and got ready to resolve whatever spat about oat milk was threatening to tear the pack apart.

But when I stopped in the doorway, I saw Cali tugging on Mrs. Smith’s finger. After a moment of pure confusion, I realized she was trying to pull off a ring with a familiar bright red stone. Greyson was watching Cali, bemused—which was actually the happiest I’d seen him in a long time.

“What exactly are we doing here?” I piped up.

“Can someone get some olive oil or something?” Cali asked, clearly not having heard me.

“Mrs. S—Sabine’s engagement ring is stuck,” Greyson explained with a smile. And while I was very relieved to see my Alpha so chipper, I still felt like I’d missed something.

“When did she get engaged?” I blurted out without thinking. As Luna, I was supposed to know what was going on under my roof. How could I not have heard about this?

“Big Mac popped the question,” Cali said, trying to twist the ring now.

“Makes sense.” I nodded. “Congratulations, Sabine.”

“Thank you.” Mrs. Smith gave me a harried smile. “Cali, dear—please stop pulling. It’s starting to hurt.”

I sighed. Cali was so accustomed to wasting her time and her efforts, and trying in vain to get this ring off was just another example. And one more reason for me to leave the pack. She’d probably feel right at home solving pack problems. How I’d ever let myself be fooled by Ava pretending to be her, I’d never know.

Only the real Cali could barrel into something that she was obviously going to fail at head first. Like this thing with her, Xavier, and Greyson. But Greyson, for his part, seemed fine with her being like this.

Maybe it was his way of blowing off steam. After all, I had Ravi for that. To each their own.

Cali ran back from the pantry with a fancy bottle of olive oil. She was about to pour it all over Mrs. Smith’s hand when she pulled away.

“Cali,” she said warningly. “Enough. I’m really not interested in you sautéing my hand. Plus I think that’s the expensive stuff.”

“It is,” I chimed in, remembering Ravi’s eyes when he’d seen the price tag at the grocery store. I’d mostly bought it to make him laugh. And because racking up Greyson’s credit card bill gave me a slightly vindictive kind of buzz.

“Sorry,” Cali mumbled, clearly disappointed. “I just wanted to see the inscription.”

Big Mac squeezed past me on her way into the kitchen. She made a beeline for Cali, inserting herself between the girl and her new fiancée.

“You’re not meant to read it,” she snapped. “It’s meant for me and Sabine. No one else.”

“So you glued the ring to her finger?” Cali demanded, seeming perplexed.

I rolled my yes. I doubted Big Mac would resort to glue.

“I put a spell on the ring so Sabine wouldn’t lose it,” Big Mac said. “Engagement rings don’t grow on trees.”

“Can’t you break the spell so we can see?” Cali asked, clearly trying to suppress the edge in her voice that made her sound like a whiny child.

“I already told you,” Big Mac replied tersely. “The inscription is private.”

“MacKenzie.” Mrs. Smith spoke softly, but her tone was sharp. “You put a spell on me without even telling me? Without *asking* me?”

“No.” Big Mac turned to face Mrs. Smith, tossing her blonde, silvery and hints-of-purple hair behind her. “I put it on the ring, not you.”

“Splitting hairs, aren’t we *darling*?” Mrs. Smith asked, clearly irked.

“You’re always losing your things,” Big Mac said, a little defensively.

“I am not!” Mrs. Smith shot back, angry. “And that’s not the point. Promise me, right now, that you won’t cast any other spells on me—or close to me—that I don’t know about.”

Big Mac shrugged, frowning. “Okay, I promise,” she said, then she swooped in and planted a kiss on Mrs. Smith’s forehead before taking off.

Mrs. Smith looked relieved, but I didn’t buy it.

Big Mac was a witch, and what witches *said* and what they *meant* could often be very different. So I followed Big Mac up the stairs to her room, hoping for a word.

“Something wrong, Joss?” Big Mac asked, without looking back. “Hope you aren’t having second thoughts about removing your Luna mark.”

I grabbed Big Mac by the wrist and pulled her into the powder room to our left. I shut the door as quickly and quietly as I could. I didn’t want anyone to hear us.

“Do you mind keeping your voice down?” I hissed. “That’s something I’d rather keep between us for now. But to answer your question, no. I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Good.” Big Mac nodded. “Because I consider that deal very sealed, and I don’t like it when people try to change terms after the fact.”

I paused. Was that a threat? A veiled one, but still. It wouldn’t have surprised me. Big Mac had always been feistier than she got credit for.

“So if it’s not that, then why are you stalking me?” Big Mac asked.

“I have a question about the cursed engagement ring you gave Mrs. Smith,” I said.

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms over her chest. She was petite and all, but I didn’t like when she gave me that look. “What about it?”

“Don’t play coy with me,” I told her. “We both know that was some bullshit. I was there. We both know what’s in that ring, which means that whatever you’re trying to cover up involves me. So I want to know—what are you really up to?”

**Episode 840**

VIOLET

I woke up, shivering from the cold air that was turning my nose and cheeks bright red. My eyes fluttered open and I saw that the wood stove had gone out, making the barn so cold I could see my breath.

But then I felt Charlie’s warm body shift against mine in his sleep, and I remembered it wasn’t all bad.

I felt a slow smile spread across my face as I let myself snuggle into Charlie’s arms under the blankets he’d found. I focused on the feel of his warm, strong arms around me. The peace that I felt, just listening to his heartbeat. I hadn’t realized how quiet everything else could get when you were with the right person.

For the first time, I had space to really pay attention to the now. And it felt good.

That was when I realized it was my birthday.

It was my birthday, and I was waking up in my mate’s arms because we’d fallen asleep cuddling. That was the best present I could have possibly imagined. But I couldn’t just lie here. I had to move around a bit.

I took Charlie’s hand in mine and held his arm up while I slid out of his grasp. I looked down at him, marveling at how long his eyelashes were. Then I placed his hand down on the floor as gently as I could and snuck outside.

The sun was rising, turning the horizon a golden orange against the white snow that blanketed everything. as I watched the sun make its way up into the sky, I couldn’t help but feel a swelling, rising feeling inside myself.

I’d made it.

I was eighteen years old. I was finally an adult.

Lilac had never gotten that chance.

I wound my arms around myself, giving myself the hug I wished I could get from my brother.

What kind of wild eighteenth birthday would we have had? Probably something with fireworks and loud music. Something Lilac would have filmed almost every second of on his stupid phone. That way, we could have watched it over and over. No matter how tough things got, Lilac had always made sure we remembered the good times.

Now I had to do that for both of us.

I found myself wondering if anyone from the pack would remember that today was our birthday. If I was honest with myself, I didn’t think they would. There was so much going on with Silas, Cali’s *due destini* stuff, and the fact that Colton and Maya were gone.

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard the barn door creak open behind me.

“Hey,” I heard Charlie call out softly, his voice fuzzy with sleep. “What’s up?”

I turned to see him. His hair was perfectly rumpled, and he was rubbing his arms to keep warm. The second we locked eyes, he ran over to me and swooped down to pick me up in a huge bear hug.

“Happy birthday!” he cheered, spinning me around. And then I was smiling again, because how could I not when I was around him?

“I’m sorry,” he murmured as he set me down. “I’d kind of hoped to make today a little more special. It would’ve been nice to set the bar a little higher than, you know, waking up in a barn.”

I laughed, wondering if it was possible to have a sweeter mate.

“Look, at least you remembered,” I told him, grinning as I looked up at him.

“Anything you want to do today to mark the occasion?” he asked, arms still around my waist.

I shrugged. “Not really,” I admitted. “I just… I wish Lilac were here to celebrate with us. We talked about this day a lot. You know, the stuff we would do. You’ll think this is crazy, but Lilac wanted to enter the pumpkin regatta. It’s this thing in Oregon where you hollow out a huge pumpkin and use it as a canoe.”

“Whoa,” Charlie said, eyes widening. “Sounds pretty fun.”

“I know.” I smiled at the thought of Lilac paddling a huge pumpkin boat. “I just wanted to take a long hike. Have a picnic by a waterfall, or somewhere else pretty.”

“I think both of those sound really nice.” Charlie pulled me closer to him, and I rested my head on his shoulder.

“Being with you is good enough for me, though,” I whispered, barely able to admit it. I still felt so shy. This thing with Charlie felt good, but it was so new. I didn’t want to screw it up by trying to make it move too fast.

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A little later, we decided it would be best to head back to Orla and Tom’s. We shifted and ran back, anxious to hear what had happened with the MIB agents. Luckily, I’d remembered to text Orla last night and say we were safe at Cali and Lola’s.

I felt a little bad for the small lie, but I told myself it was a necessary one. I didn’t want to worry Orla by explaining that her daughter’s apartment might not be safe. Plus, it had been nice to be in a new place with Charlie. A place that was just ours.

We shifted back in the woods near the Harts’ house and dressed hastily. As we walked up to the front door, Charlie took my hand, and his touch sent tingles radiating through my body.

Maybe this wasn’t the birthday I’d planned, but it was still more than I’d thought was possible, even a few days ago.

Charlie walked me to the front door and gave me the softest, sweetest kiss imaginable. It felt like I was breathing helium instead of air and I was going to float away any second when I was with him.

“I’ll text you later, okay?” he told me, his voice low and soft.

All I could do was nod.

“One way or another, I’m taking you out to celebrate,” he promised me. “Even if it’s just a white chocolate mocha at Mrs. Smith’s cafe. See you soon, birthday girl.”

“See you,” I murmured, unlocking the door and walking inside. I shut the door behind me and leaned against it for a second to savor the moment. I took a deep breath, and I could smell breakfast, which meant Tom was cooking.

I thought about slinking up to my room, but Tom must have heard me because he poked his head out of the kitchen.

“Hungry?” he asked.

I was starving. So when he beckoned me to the table, I couldn’t put up much of a fight.

“Hope you like birthday pancakes!” he told me, grinning as I sat down at the kitchen table.

Wow, I didn’t even remember telling them. Cali’s parents were unreal.

“How’s your shoulder?” I asked warily. Tom seemed to be in good spirits, but he’d been in a bad mood the last time we’d spoken.

“It smarts a bit,” he admitted. “But I can still flip a pancake. And I haven’t turned into a werewolf yet!”

I knew that last thing was meant to be a joke, but I could hear the nervousness in his voice.

“Happy birthday!” Orla cried as she walked into the kitchen.

“Thanks.” I smiled, even though I was nervous about what I had to ask next. “How did everything go with the MIB?”

Tom and Orla exchanged looks, and I held my breath.

“We only told them what we had to,” Tom said. “That I was attacked by a Rogue werewolf. That’s it.”

“We didn’t want to drag you and your friend into it,” Orla added.

“So we left you out of it,” Tom finished with a smile.

I sighed, relieved.

“The weather’s cleared up,” Orla pointed out. “Is another trip to the airport on the docket for today?

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“It might be best to lie low today and head out tomorrow,” Orla said.

“I agree,” Tom said, sliding a plate of delicious-smelling pancakes my way. “The MIB will hopefully take care of the… situation, and we won’t have any more issues.”

On paper, that sounded good. The Rogue was definitely not good to have around. But he was crafty… I just hoped Tom was right.

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Back in my room, I forced myself to take a shower. I knew that the closeness I felt with Charlie wouldn’t rinse off when I did it—even if I had this instinct to do everything I could to cling to the feeling of this morning.

When I lay down on the bed, thoughts of bashfully accepting the Harts’ birthday wishes flooded my mind. I had to admit, even if it was just to myself, I was feeling a bit down about not having plans. Plus, celebrating without Lilac felt… *unfair*.

So I told myself that I’d treat today like any other. Which meant focusing on the Rogue. Luckily, Tom had kept me and Charlie out of his talk with Fernsby and Imamu, but I still needed to deal with the Rogue before the MIB got to him.

That was why I’d decided to stay for the extra day—because I didn’t trust anyone else to take care of this. But… how exactly would *I* take care of it?

I drifted off to sleep, feeling surprisingly warm and safe in the Harts’ house. But I jolted awake when I got a text.

It was a “Happy Birthday” text from Colton, followed by a bunch of birthday emojis. A present, a slice of cake, and even a little wolf. I thanked him and wondered if I’d hear from Xavier. He must have given this phone’s number to him. It made me smile.

I considered texting him but decided not to. He still had time to remember.

When I looked at the time, I realized that it was actually later than I’d thought. And I had another text. From Charlie.

*Come outside.*

I felt my heart speed up. I wondered if he was waiting for me right now. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and was reasonably satisfied. I barreled down the stairs two at a time, and practically flew out the door.

I looked around, but there wasn’t anyone there. Before I could make sense of what was going on, someone grabbed my waist from behind and dragged me into the bushes.

**Episode 841**

“Knees up, everyone!” Rishika barked at us as we ran in place. I was gasping and panting, sweat pouring down my back, making my T-shirt stick to my skin. Meanwhile, Artemis was next to me, putting everyone to shame. Moving with an ease that genuinely made me want to strangle her.

“Now Partner A, attack!” Rishika cried out, and I felt a wave of dread wash over me. Artemis turned to face me, smirking. I opened my mouth to tell her that she didn’t have to look so happy about this, but before I could speak, she’d swept a leg under me and shoved me squarely in the chest, making me lose my balance completely. I flailed, trying to stay upright, but Artemis followed me to the ground, pinning me there.

“I want a different partner,” I groused, barely able to breathe with her pinning me.

“I don’t think the wolves would be any gentler,” Artemis pointed out.

“Yeah, but they might take less joy in kicking my ass,” I pointed out.

“Sorry.” Artemis shot me a sympathetic little frown. “I just really miss fighting and, no offense, you’re just really, really bad at it and I find that very funny.”

“Well, thanks for trying not to offend me,” I shot back sarcastically.

“Maybe you’d be better off just working on your Fae powers,” Artemis suggested, lowering her voice. “We can throw each other around all day, but if we’re facing an actual werewolf, our powers are the only advantage we have. So why not go all in on that?”

“I love that idea,” I wheezed as Artemis helped me to my feet. Anything to get my sister to stop throwing me around like a ragdoll.

“But we can’t just do it out in the open,” I reminded her. “Not everyone knows you’re”—I mouthed my last word—“*Fae*.”

“I know. And we can’t risk making any of the big strong wolves feel inadequate,” Artemis muttered, rolling her eyes.

I shot her a look. But Artemis threw her hands up in a defensive pose.

“Should we go down to the lake?” she asked, trying to appease me.

“Yeah.” I called over my shoulder to Rishika. “Hey, I think we’re gonna take a quick break.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Rishika answered, more sympathy in her voice than I was comfortable with. I wasn’t that bad a fighter! I’d held my own in several battles! I’d charged into the woods with a saw once! I’d killed a vampire with a jousting lance!

But as Artemis and I were making our way across the huge lawn over to the lake, Lola bounded over to us.

“Hey!” She waved, looking eager. “We want to start going through the spell book. Want to join?”

“I was planning on talking to Big Mac later about all that,” I admitted, itching to practice with Artemis. I was desperate to get a handle on my powers, to feel like I could actually protect myself rather than being a liability in every fight.

“Please, Cali,” Lola pressed, practically dancing with nervous energy. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep my shit together, and I could really use a friend. My wolf is freaking out. Did you know that I almost attacked Jay? What if I don’t get this under control and I accidentally hurt him? Or you? Or I screw things up for the pack before Halloween—”

“Hey, hey, hey.” I cut her off, sensing a panic spiral coming on. “It’s okay. We’re going to figure this out.”

“Lola.” Artemis put a hand on her shoulder, gravely serious. “If you get out of control, I’ll be ready for you. Don’t worry. I’ll have you knocked out before you can harm a hair on Cali’s head.”

Lola glared at Artemis. Clearly her attempt at being comforting had not worked.

“Why don’t you cool it on the blast-y hands, okay sparky?” Lola quipped, annoyed.

“Yeah,” I chimed in. “Stand down, okay? It’s not going to come to that.”

I hugged Lola tight, hoping I could calm her down. Smother any bad mood of hers on the horizon with some positivity. As much as I appreciated Artemis’s desire to be protective, I wished she knew how to go about it more tactfully. Antagonizing Lola further was not going to help anyone. The last thing we needed was Artemis goading Lola into losing her cool. But at this point, we were all so on edge, anyone could set her off. I wondered if Big Mac might be able to do something to calm Lola down. Some kind of chill-out potion. If such a thing even existed…

“Maybe we can ask Big Mac for some help keeping you calm in the meantime,” I suggested, letting Lola go so I could get a look at her expression. She seemed a bit calmer, but she was still tense with nerves.

“Witches can do all kinds of things,” Artemis pointed out, clearly trying to contribute without upsetting anyone. But it kind of just resulted in her sounding like a weird robot. Still, I appreciated the effort.

“So what are we waiting for?” Lola asked, plastering a smile onto her face like she hoped it would make me worry less. “Let’s go get the witch!”

But I was hesitant—I really wanted to work on my Fae powers. But going with Lola to help Big Mac out meant working toward a solution for the curse as well. And, more importantly, it meant I’d be supporting Lola and finding a way to help her. I couldn’t abandon her right now.

“Lead the way,” I told her with a grin, shooting Artemis a look that I hoped said “we’ll train later.”

We trudged back to the house, and I tried to enjoy the fresh air while I could. I was about to spend a bunch of time huddled over an old book with a cantankerous witch, my fish-out-of-water Fae sister, and a best friend who was crawling out of her skin with nerves.

I caught a glimpse of Steinar, still leaning against the house, resting. His forehead was pressed against the outside wall. His eyes followed us as we passed and I waved, not sure what else to do.

Once we got inside, I walked past Greyson, who was talking something through with Joss over coffee. He gave me a knowing smile—the seductive kind that told me he knew exactly what I liked, and that he was going to give it to me again the next time we were alone. My breath hitched and I almost melted like a popsicle in the sun, but instead I managed to just return his smile with one of my own.

It was probably way less sexy, but I did my best.

But before we could head upstairs to see Big Mac, I heard the heavy footsteps that could only belong to Steinar. He’d followed us inside. He was looking a little unsteady on his feet, but he was upright. That had to be an improvement.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“We’re going to take a look at the spell book,” I answered, figuring we owed him a little honesty. After all, he had saved Artemis and me from Demeter.

“It can’t leave the house,” he ordered as forcefully as he could. “I won’t allow it.”

Artemis groaned. “Come on, man,” she sighed. “Will you ever trust us?”

“No,” Steinar answered simply. “You’ve already allowed it to get stolen once after you stole it in the first place.”

“That was *one time!*” Artemis argued. “Two tops.”

“Then I suppose Hypatia would have only killed me *once* if I had returned empty-handed,” Steinar drawled sarcastically.

Not interested in hearing the rest of this argument, I hustled upstairs and into my room. I grabbed the book from under the mattress and hurried back. I didn’t want Artemis getting into a tussle with Steinar and tearing the kitchen to shreds. Joss was already pissed off at me enough, most of the time.

“Let me see it,” Lola whined, reaching for the book.

But I held it away from her under Steinar’s watchful gaze. I hoped that if it looked like I was being careful with it, he would calm down a little.

“We’re going straight to Big Mac,” I told her. “She’s the one who can actually do something with it.”

We walked into the living room and found her sitting with Mrs. Smith, who was reading and nursing a steaming mug. Big Mac’s arm was looped around Mrs. Smith and they appeared to be snuggling a bit. It was cute. They weren’t major PDA offenders, and one look too long and Big Mac would probably pop your head off with a flick of her wrist. She was private, I got that. But still, Mrs. Smith was so kind and wonderful. She deserved someone who treated her well.

Even if that meant Big Mac was becoming Greyson’s new step-mom.

I marched over to Big Mac and handed her the book.

“All right.” I steeled myself for a long conversation about magical logistics. “Do you think there’s anything in here that can help break the *due destini* curse, or that can help Lola cope while we wait for the horned moon?”

“I honestly don’t understand why this is so complicated,” Artemis piped up. “Isn’t a curse just a curse? You’re a witch. Can’t you just break it like you would any other curse?”

Big Mac shrugged, seemingly unbothered at all by Artemis’s directness. “It’s not that simple.”

Well, I mean, that wasn’t a *no*. And that filled me with more hope than I’d had in a while.

“But is it possible?” I asked, excitement mounting. “Do you think you can break the curse?”

**Episode 842**

AVA

My room in Silas’s cabin was furnished sparsely—there was just a bed, and a dresser to hold the few things I had. That and a mirror on the wall. I looked back at my own reflection as I sat on the bed, shoulders hunched.

I was still recovering from the effects of Cali’s Fae powers. I couldn’t believe that such a powerful force had come from that foolish little girl. We’d all been pretty stunned.

Silas in particular was still furious with me. He seemed to think I should have known that Cali could be a threat and warned him.

How could I possibly have known what she was capable of? I’d barely even spoken to the girl. Being disguised as her had given me a good idea of her place in the pack, of how everyone treated her. But it hadn’t told me that much about her. There was no way I could’ve known she had abilities like this.

But then again, Silas wasn’t always one to think logically.

And if he ever found out I’d faked Xavier’s death, I was probably not going to get a very logical response. There was no telling what he’d do to me.

And then there was Demeter. That golden-armed, sadistic witch. She was the one Silas should have been pissed at. She was the one who’d put that cursed bracelet on me, cursing me to look like Cali. It was her plan that had failed. I’d just been a pawn.

But even if Silas’s reasoning was unclear to me, there was one thing I knew for sure—the longer I stayed here, the more likely Silas was to punish me for failing him. And knowing him, that punishment would probably be death.

I wished Nolan were here. He was the only person on this earth who I could count on. The only one left who wanted to protect me. Everyone else had turned on me.

But he was in his own trouble. He’d been captured by the Redwood pack. But what could they possibly want him for? What information could he have for them? His plan to send me undercover had already failed.

If I escaped from here, would I be able to help him? I was just one person, after all. I couldn’t take on a whole pack by myself. But I’d managed to sneak in and steal that spell book. Maybe getting Nolan out wouldn’t be much harder.

Somewhere in the house I heard Silas walking. I knew that the even, deliberate steps were his. And just the thought of him being nearby sent a shiver down my spine.

He was my captor. If I tried to run, he would catch me and make me pay. But if I played along, maybe I could trick him into trusting me just enough. If he loosened my leash, I could run. It was the only path left to me.

And there was no time like the present to start laying the groundwork.

I walked out of my room, trying to keep calm even though my heart was threatening to beat out of my chest. I walked down the stairs to the kitchen, where I knew Silas and Demeter were talking in hushed tones. The second they saw me, they quieted down.

Clearly there wasn’t a lot of trust there.

My eyes were drawn to the large knife Silas had gripped in his hand. He smiled when he saw me, but it didn’t meet his eyes.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“I am, yeah,” I admitted, trying not to stare at the weapon in his hand.

“Then take a seat.” He beckoned me to join them at the kitchen table. “I saw you checking out my knife.”

Shit. Had I already ruined everything by being too suspicious? Too afraid? Had I accidentally revealed my hand?

“Oh, I—”

“Not to worry,” Silas assured me with another hollow smile. “Owning a good, sharp knife is important. You wouldn’t want a surgeon to use a dull scalpel, would you?”

I shook my head, cautious. Clearly Silas was building up to something, but I didn’t know what point he was trying to make. And I definitely didn’t like that the point seemed so knife-based.

“A dull knife makes a mess of things,” Silas said. “It’s never the right tool.”

Demeter said nothing, but her cold gaze was fixed on me. I shifted under it, trying to tell myself that I could do this. Because I had to.

“I’ll address the elephant in the room.” Silas broke the silence again. “Ava, did you know that Cali was Fae?”

“No,” I lied quickly and confidently. What choice did I have? “I had no idea.”

Their faces were unreadable, and I felt my whole body tense up with nerves. I felt the unbearable urge to make a case for my innocence.

“Maybe it would have been smart to do a bit of research before sending me off to impersonate her,” I went on, trying to point out how stacked the deck had been against me. I’d just come back from the dead and immediately been sent to impersonate a person I’d never met who was mated to *my* original mate who’d killed me.

But Demeter didn’t like my implication. She turned and glared at me. The menace in her gaze alone made me want to shrink back. But I knew I couldn’t. I had to hold my ground.

“Do *not* blame me for your ignorance,” she growled at me.

Silas raised a hand, silencing Demeter without looking. He kept his gaze trained on me, his expression looking like something right out of an after school special. *I’m not mad, I’m just disappointed.*

Well, I didn’t buy it.

“Ava.” Silas’s tone remained eerily paternal. “I didn’t invite you to this table to make accusations.”

And, despite my best efforts not to be affected, I felt embarrassed. Like I was a naughty child who’d pointed the finger instead of owning up to her own mistake.

“Then why *did* you invite me?” I asked, trying to keep my voice even. But my eyes kept wandering to the knife Silas was still gripping.

Silas turned to look at Demeter and they exchanged a look. Clearly they were keeping something from me. I tried to keep my expression neutral, knowing I couldn’t afford to give anything away, but the panic was starting to eat me from the inside out.

“The other Fae with Cali had mind control magic,” Demeter reminded Silas. “That’s a rare power. A strong one. If we can’t find a way to protect ourselves from it, Greyson and his followers might have an edge on us.”

Silas’s face twitched, like he was flinching at that painful truth. He gritted his teeth.

Demeter and I both held our breath as we waited to see how the anger would work its way out of him. Eventually, moving so quickly he almost blurred, he slammed the knife into the table. The blade was worked so deep into the wood, it looked like a sword trapped in a stone.

For just that second, I was able to pretend this was just a story. A fairytale. I was the princess, now awake from my long slumber looking to be reunited with my true love. I was just at the scary part of the story. The part before the end, where everything would resolve itself.

“You’re a witch,” Silas spat at Demeter, breaking me out of my reverie. “Why do you think I brought you here? Find something to protect us from it.”

I noted the tension between the two of them, and wondered if there was a way I could exploit it and use it to my benefit. Maybe Demeter and I could team up against Silas. Or I could get them to take each other out…

Almost like he’d read my mind, Silas pinned me with his gaze again, a cruel smile playing out on his lips.

“Perhaps I’ve had the solution all along,” he mused, eyes sparkling. “The orb has similar powers. Why not try that?”

Demeter nodded, her excitement palpable.

“But can we use it to control the Fae?” she asked.

“The orb’s potential is vast,” Silas reminded her. “When the time comes, we shall see.”

My skin crawled. Could Silas use this orb to control people’s minds? I didn’t like the idea of that power in his hands. He was manipulative and dangerous enough with only his own cunning.

“But in the meantime,” Silas said, staring at me intently. “What to do about you?”

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. My fate rested in the hands of a psychopath, and I didn’t see a way to wriggle out of his grip.

“I’d be all too happy to take care of her,” Demeter purred. I felt my blood run cold. That didn’t sound great.

“It would be a shame to waste a werewolf,” Silas pointed out, like he was talking about something as casual as what to make for dinner. “Especially one as… *pretty* as this.”

I shuddered, eyeing the knife. Could I rip it out of the table and stab him? And even if I could, would it do any good? Silas and I were both proof that death meant very little if you were persistent.

Silas followed my gaze to the knife.

“We need to be able to trust her,” Silas said. “Let’s try the orb’s powers out on her first.”

**Episode 843**

XAVIER

I raced through the woods. Each bound felt better than the last. Being in my wolf form again felt right. Easier than breathing. It felt natural.

As soon as I’d woken up at Swift’s place, I’d paid the guy and bolted. I’d driven that vampire’s car to an abandoned industrial park, wiped down all my prints, and left it there. I knew how to cover my tracks, and I didn’t want that one coming back to bite me in the ass. I had a feeling the vampire had taken that truck from his last victim.

But it hadn’t been easy to take the time to be practical like that. Because the second I’d gotten my wolf back, I’d been filled with the overwhelming urge to shift and run. Like I was doing now.

And it felt even better than I had hoped.

Having my wolf back was like having pieces of me return that I hadn’t even realized were missing. I felt strong and vibrant and… *alive*. Without my wolf, I’d been lost. I’d felt weak. Like a person I didn’t recognize. A person I’d never want to be.

I couldn’t imagine how humans felt every day, walking through the world so vulnerable. Never knowing what it felt like to be one with nature, like I was now.

And somehow, I had Gabriel to thank for this. I reminded myself that I needed to call him—even though I was still a little irked he’d sent me to a New Age douche like Swift, with his stupid hippie hair and his world music and his only buying organic coffee with his trust fund bullshit.

At least I’d never need him again. I vowed to myself then and there that I wouldn’t lose my wolf ever again. My wolf was *mine*. A piece of me that I had to stop banishing whenever I felt unworthy of its strength.

I enjoyed the sight of the trees whipping by as I sped up. The wind blew through my fur, keeping me cool. Now that I’d managed to get this piece of myself back, it was on to the next thing…

I’d promised Cali that after I got my wolf back, I’d prove to her that she was mine. That we were true mates, destined to spend our lives together. And once I’d convinced her of that, I’d deal with Greyson.

And I’d probably enjoy doing that, too.

When I reached a stream and took a second to cool my paws, I caught a whiff of something that gave me pause. The smell of another wolf. I stretched my senses, listening as hard as I could and trying to filter out the noises of the forest.

The sounds of the stream, birds chirping, wind rustling the leaves…

And that was when I heard it. Footsteps approaching me. They were slow and deliberate. A hunter’s steps. I felt myself stiffen.

I wasn’t about to be anyone’s prey.

I circled around, scanning the trees for movement. I saw a flicker of something to my left and turned to face it. I heard a growl, and suddenly I was being rushed.

I steeled myself for the collision. At this point, I was almost relishing it—my first fight since I’d gotten my wolf back. I was almost drunk on its return and the power I felt surging through me as a result.

But then the wolf barreling toward me stopped in its tracks.

It eyed me, seemingly perplexed.

A voice appeared in my head, through a mind link. *Silas told me you were supposed to be dead.*

*Sorry to disappoint,* I replied, coiling tight, ready to spring into action. If this wolf was working with Silas, they were fair game. And I was itching to fight again.

I felt powerful, untouchable.

*Looks like I won’t be disappointed for long,* the wolf replied, before leaping forward and slamming into me.

We crashed into the stream, a tangle of limbs. Water flooded my mouth and I had to concentrate to make sure I didn’t inhale a bunch of it and start to choke. I kicked out with my limbs and started to turn inward, toward my opponent who was weighing me down.

I opened my jaws wide and began to snap them open and shut, searching for something, anything, to bite down on. I let my claws rake down the other wolf’s torso, enjoying the sight of red blood staining its light fur.

The wolf jumped backward with a whine, clearly trying to get out of my grasp. But I’d tasted blood now, and I wasn’t about to end this fight unsatisfied.

I rolled over and found my footing. I saw the fear in my opponent’s eyes. He snarled at me, like he was trying to convince himself he was a big, bad predator and that I should run the other way. But I wasn’t scared. I was finally back where I belonged.

In a fight.

I put my head down and ran at him as fast as I could. I shoved him against a tree and heard him grunt as all the air left his lungs. I’d knocked the wind out of him. He slid down the trunk and onto the forest floor. He looked around, dazed, trying to focus.

*I’m not scared of you.* His voice appeared in my mind again, a half-hearted taunt.

But instead of listening, I pounced on him and bit down on his throat. I felt the blood fill my mouth and knew my aim had been perfect. I thrashed my head from side to side, tearing his throat out and spitting it onto the ground next to him.

*Maybe you should have been,* I thought to myself as I watched the light leave his eyes.

I stood there, my chest heaving as I caught my breath again. The reality of the fight hadn’t quite sunk in yet.

Based on what that wolf had said, Silas believed I was dead. I realized that I should do everything I could to maintain that advantage. I dug a hole for the wolf’s body, hoping that I could make it look like the wolf had just gone missing. And if not, maybe Silas and his wolves wouldn’t find the body and my scent until it was too late.

Once the hole was deep enough, I nosed the wolf into it and covered it as quickly as I could.

Silas thinking I was dead was a good thing. It gave me one advantage against my bastard of a father. And I intended to make sure that by the time he found out I was alive, it would be too late for him to do a damn thing about it.

Once I felt like the body had been sufficiently hidden, I began my run back to the pack house. I felt lighter with each step I took. I was going to see Cali. I was going to return at the height of my strength and prove myself to her.

When I reached the edge of the woods, I shifted. Then I inhaled deeply and found her scent. I found her out by the lake with Artemis. The heavy stones they had piled up all around them made me think they were practicing their powers.

I took a minute to admire Cali’s concentration face. The way she nibbled on her lower lip. The crease between her brows I longed to smooth out with a kiss.

I felt like I should surprise her. I wanted to see her laugh. To watch her eyes widen in surprise when she saw me.

*Cali.* I reached out to her through our mind link, and watched her stiffen at the sound of my voice in her head. *Come to the woods.*

I watched her face light up and a huge smile spread across her cheeks. She looked happy enough to burst.

“Artemis,” she chirped, but her sister cut her off. “Xavier is—”

“I know that look,” she grumbled, turning back toward the lake and continuing her practice. “See you after the ravishing.”

Cali was jogging toward the forest, her eyes lit up, when she spotted me through the trees and ran even faster, almost tripping over her feet.

I ran toward her, impatient. How was she still not in my arms?

And then finally, she was.

I scooped her up in a huge hug and spun her around. She laughed, and the sound of it made the weight of everything else fall off my shoulders.

“You came back,” she murmured into my neck, squeezing me tightly.

“I promised I would,” I reminded her, setting her down on her feet.

She looked at me, her eyes searching. “Did you find your wolf?” she asked, concerned but hopeful.

“We found each other,” I told her, and smiled when she sighed with relief.

“Good!” She cupped my face. “I was so worried.”

And while I hated to hear about her being in any kind of distress, the fact that she’d been worried about me felt incredible. She still cared.

“Big Mac is going over the spell book right now,” Cali told me. “She might be able to find a spell to break the curse.”

“And stop the veins?” I asked, wondering if it was too much to hope for.

“Yes.” Cali nodded eagerly. “Artemis pointed out that it *is* just a curse, and that maybe there’s a way to break it. So we’re trying.”

I wasn’t so sure. Nothing in our time together had ever been easy. And even if this was, it didn’t mean Cali wouldn’t have to make a choice eventually. So why not make it now?

But I spared both of us that fight. The only solution I wanted was one where Cali was all mine, and talking about anything else was pointless right now.

“That’s great,” I told her, reaching for her hands and pulling her to me.

And before either of us could talk, before another spell or curse or wolf could come between us, I crashed my lips against hers and kissed her as hard as I could.

**Episode 844**

Maybe I should have shown some more self-restraint.

But Xavier was back, and he was naked, and he'd found his wolf, and he was just so happy. And for a moment, all I cared about was enjoying the feeling of him pressed up against me. The eagerness with which he held me. The passion beneath his kiss.

And for a handful of heartbeats, I lost myself in him.

But then the doubt and the guilt started to trickle in, growing like vines and spreading like weeds.

Suddenly, I was wondering if I should really be doing this. After all, I had slept with Greyson yesterday, and now here I was, kissing Xavier. Needing him like I needed oxygen.

It was wrong, but it didn’t feel wrong. It felt natural, easy, and familiar. It felt right. And that was when I felt my chest tighten. Felt the prickling sensation of the veins spreading, like a warning.

*Stop doing this.*

Xavier must have felt my lips still against his because he pulled back, breaking our kiss and looking down at me, concerned. I blinked up at him, seeing nothing but love in his eyes. My first love. I wanted to relax into his touch, to forget about everything else.

But the moment was over.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, even though he probably knew exactly why I’d stopped.

“The curse,” I told him, dread creeping up my spine. “It’s not fair.”

“Baby, I know,” Xavier murmured, pulling me tight against him. Cradling me in his arms. I let myself go limp, resting my cheek against his bare chest. “I’m so sorry you’re hurting, but I promise that I’ll help you get through it. I’m back now and there’s nothing that can take me away from you. Nothing.”

He rocked me from side to side and the rest of the world went quiet, narrowed down to a pinpoint. Xavier and me. In the woods. Safe and together.

I was so happy to have him back. I hadn’t even realized that tears of relief were prickling in my eyes until now. I brought a hand to my cheek, running my fingertips through the wetness that had gathered there. And then I realized they weren’t just happy tears.

I was torn, and I would *be* torn until I made a choice. There was no way out of it, unless Big Mac found a way to break this damn curse. And I’d been in the supernatural world long enough to know that there were no guarantees.

“I’m so happy you’re back,” I told him, my words a little muffled against his chest. But given the way he squeezed me even tighter, I could tell he’d heard me.

“*But*,” I said, forcing myself to continue, even though I felt him tense against me. I knew I was disappointing him, and I hated to do it. But I hoped he’d understand. “For now, the kissing…”

I backed out of his arms, putting a few feet of distance between us. I knew I needed to put my money where my mouth was, so to speak.

“It has to stop,” I said. “I’m still working things out. And you should know that it’s not my choice to hurt you like this. It’s part of the *due destini* thing. I wish it wasn’t like this, but it is.”

Xavier didn’t say anything for a minute. I could see the hurt, the anger, the desire to run all over his face. But he didn’t move.

“So you’re still sleeping with Greyson?” he asked bluntly.

It was a fair question, but a loaded one. I knew lying would only hurt both of us more, but *why* did he want me to say it? But rather than press me further, Xavier took my hesitation as an opportunity to keep talking.

“I wish you weren’t,” he admitted, his posture relaxing a little. “Cali, I’m trying my best to understand this. To see it from your side and accept what’s happening. And I’ll support you and I’ll try to give you what you need, but you can’t expect me to like it. I have feelings about all this, and I can’t pretend I don’t.”

“I know.” I nodded, sniffling. I didn’t want to start crying. I wanted to get through this conversation like an adult. I didn’t want to always be the one who felt too much. “I just… I hate that I’ve put you in this position.”

A sob worked its way out of me, and I wrapped my arms around myself. Like if I hugged myself tight enough I could keep myself from crying.

“I know,” Xavier told me gently. His eyes were so kind. “But it’ll work out. And you’ll end up with me. I’ll see to it.”

I looked at him, a little unnerved by his confidence.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I just know,” Xavier replied, still open and easy. “I *know* it’s going to be the two of us. Have your fun with Greyson. Learn whatever you need to learn from being with him. But in the end, you will be mine, Caliana Hart.”

My stomach flipped at those last words, and I knew then that it was his certainty that was worrying me. But it was also making my heart pound. His confidence was one of the things I’d found fascinating about him when we’d first met. It had drawn me to him and repelled me at the same time. It made sense that its return would affect me.

Xavier, for his part, just smiled at me and started walking back to the house. Not knowing what else to do, I wandered over to Artemis, a little dazed.

She raised an eyebrow at me and I wondered if I was blushing from head to toe.

“Ready?” she asked. “Or will you be having another audience with an Evers brother?”

“I thought he might be dead, okay?” I squeaked.

But Artemis just shrugged. “Do whatever it is you have to do,” she told me, stifling a grin. “Or what*Evers.*”

Before I could ask who’d taught her about puns and threaten to kill them, Artemis moved on.

“We need to get back to training,” she pointed out. “Because, between you and me, you need a *lot* more work.”

“Fine.” I grinned, tightening my ponytail and doing a few stretches. “But you’d better watch out, because I’m about to bring it.”

“Bring what?” Artemis asked, confused. “Where?”

I sighed, looking at the sky and cursing my luck. I had to get a sister who didn’t understand a *single* *one* of my cultural references.

“It’s a figure of speech,” I said.

“Well let’s see just how good you are,” Artemis replied, cocky. “See that tree over there? Try to make it shake.”

I followed her gaze to the tree in question, a midsize white oak with a fair amount of low hanging branches.

“Easy,” I replied confidently. I’d been worried she was going to give me something hard to do.

I held out my hand and waited for the power to gather within me. I took a deep breath and tried to feel the magic gaining momentum within me. Once I felt the hum of energy, I snapped my eyes open and released it.

I could feel a tingle as the magic left my fingertips. I watched the tree start to shake, along with several trees around it. I whooped with delight. I’d done it!

“No,” Artemis said, sounding disappointed. “Just the tree. Not the entire forest. That tree. With the low branches.”

I looked at her, annoyed. Wasn’t it better to be able to do more?

“In order to really be able to use your power effectively,” Artemis said, “you have to be able to be selective. That way, you can use your powers on specific targets. You wouldn’t be satisfied with just being able to notch and loose an arrow—you want your aim to be true.”

I sighed. That made sense, but it was weird to be getting Mr. Miyagi-level wisdom from Artemis—the person I’d had to explain the concept of a toaster to, just that morning.

I took another breath, let the magic hum, snapped my eyes open, and focused on the tree. Just that tree. I tried to visualize it moving in my mind’s eye. Then I did what I’d done before, and tried letting the power loose.

It shook, and I leapt into the air with joy. A smaller tree nearby shook as well, so my aim wasn’t perfect, but it was an improvement.

“That’s much better!” Artemis called, clapping her hands in encouragement. “Now.” She pointed to a large rock on the shore of the lake. “Try moving that rock. And *just* that rock.”

I took the breath, gathered the power, looked at my target, and let it fly. The rock blasted a few feet back, skittering to a stop at the water’s edge.

I was beaming. I could do this!

“Not bad!” Artemis said. “Now the lake. Why don’t you try making some waves?”

Her eyes were alight. It felt like a friendly challenge. A test. It was nice not to feel like an invalid. I was powerful. I was a badass. I was a super cool Fae warrior, just like Artemis.

So I took my breath, the power already humming at my fingertips. I brought both my hands up, figuring this could use all the force I could muster. But just as I started to feel the surge building, a sea of ghosts rose from the water.

**Episode 845**

VIOLET

Another hand clamped down over my mouth and I screamed into it, but the sound was muffled. Was this the Rogue? Had he found me?

I was about to shift when I was suddenly hit by Charlie’s scent.

“Surprise,” he called out from behind me in a sing-song voice.

“Charlie!” I cried, wrenching myself out of his grasp. “Never do that again! I almost ripped your throat out!”

Charlie’s eyes widened, and I suddenly felt like I’d just kicked a puppy.

“I’m sorry!” he yelped. “I won’t do that again, I swear. But…” He grinned at me, pleased with himself. “As promised, I have a surprise for you.”

My anger evaporated instantly.

“A surprise?” I asked, brightening even more. “For me?”

“Some would even call it a birthday present,” Charlie replied, a twinkle in his eye.

“What is it?” I asked eagerly.

“And spoil the surprise?” Charlie crowed, deeply offended. “It’s like you don’t know me at all, birthday girl.”

My heart soared. I’d imagined having a boyfriend before, someone who would do special things for me, but I’d never pictured it like this. Even if he’d almost scared me to death, Charlie was more than I could have ever dreamed up.

He was more than everything, really.

Charlie took me by the hand and led me to a banged-up car that was probably older than I was.

“A friend lent it to me for the day,” Charlie said sheepishly. “It might not be a limo, but it’s the best I could do on short notice.”

“It’s perfect,” I told him, blown away that he would go to so much trouble.

He yanked my door open—he had to put a fair amount of muscle into it, the car really was old—and ushered me inside. I melted completely. No one had ever done that for me before. Treated me like a lady. I guess that made Charlie a gentleman.

“Your carriage awaits,” he joked, shutting the door behind me.

We drove for a while. Charlie found a halfway decent radio station, and it was nice to just look out the window and listen to music with him. He took us to a remote area near a lake. It was really pretty. The snow bounced off the melting snow, making everything kind of glowy.

He pulled off the main road and looked over at me, beaming.

“Close your eyes, birthday girl,” he ordered, faux-sternly. “And don’t you dare peek.”

I rolled my eyes at him and forced myself to do what he asked, even though the anticipation was killing me. Maybe people just didn’t plan surprises for me because I was really bad at waiting for them.

I felt the car come to a stop. My mind was reeling and my hands were shaking when I took off my seat belt. I couldn’t wait to find out what he was up to. I already felt so grateful. How would I ever make it up to him?

I heard my car door open. Charlie took my hand and led me outside. A swarm of butterflies had taken up residence in my stomach, and it felt like they would never leave. I didn’t want them to. Ever.

He walked me a short distance.

“Can I open my eyes, *please*?” I begged, the anticipation killing me.

“Fine, open ‘em!” Charlie said, laughing.

I opened my eyes and was dazzled by the sight of the sunlight gleaming off the lake. I blinked rapidly, trying to take it all in as my eyes adjusted. Because it wasn’t just the lake—there was something else to look at. A lot of… pumpkins?

“Uh… What is that?” I asked, pointing to a huge orange thing by the shore.

Charlie grabbed my hand and bounded over to it, tugging me along with him.

“My version of the pumpkin regatta,” he told me. “Custom made.”

It turned out, the orange thing was a huge, sculpted, pumpkin boat.

“I borrowed it from the drama department,” Charlie went on excitedly. “Okay, I stole it. But I have every intention of bringing it back *after* your inaugural run in it and *before* their production of *Cinderella*.”

But I just stared at it, feeling dazed. Like this wasn’t possible.

“And I’m supposed to…”

“Sail it around the lake!” Charlie finished my sentence enthusiastically, and I wondered if he’d had several coffees.

“Does it float?” I asked, eyeing it suspiciously.

“Not to worry!” Charlie chirped. “I tested it.”

He shoved it into the water and leapt inside, then he held out his hand and beamed at me.

“Shall we?” he asked. My very own Prince Charming.

I took an uncertain step toward him. And as I did, the pumpkin rocked. I tried to steady myself as I stepped in, holding onto Charlie’s arm for balance, but the makeshift boat lurched again and we both tumbled out of the pumpkin and splashed into the water. Charlie caught me and we stood in the waist-deep water, teeth chattering as we watched the capsized pumpkin boat slowly float away from us and sink into the lake.

I couldn’t help but let out a little laugh at the sight of the drowning pumpkin.

“I thought you tested it!” I blurted out.

“I did,” Charlie insisted. “I swear I did. I guess I didn’t account for our combined weight.”

We both watched it disappear, laughing and gaping at it with horrified fascination. It was a really sweet gesture, but it wasn’t quite the real thing.

I started shivering in earnest from the freezing cold water. Minnesota was no joke. There was still snow on the ground—what were we *doing* here?

“Shit.” Charlie wrapped his arms around me and led me out of the water. “I’m so, so sorry, Violet. I have hot cocoa in the car and tons of blankets. This was stupid. I never should have tried this when it was so cold outside. I’ll crank the heat in the car, but I’m not sure how good it’s going to be. This thing is so old.”

He held the door open for me and I turned to face him.

“Charlie.” I stopped him from babbling. “You did good. Really good. Don’t apologize, okay?”

Charlie smiled at me, and I felt my heart do a little backflip in my chest at the sight of it.

“Okay.” He nodded, bashful. “But get in, or you’re gonna become a birthday ice cube and we can’t have that.”

I snorted. He was goofy, but also unbelievably sweet. I settled into my seat and he shut the door behind me. It already felt good to be sheltered from the weather a little. I knew we’d both be just fine, especially once the heat got going.

Charlie hustled around the car and ducked inside himself. He rooted around in the back seat and grabbed a thick, warm-looking flannel blanket. He wrapped it around me and I relaxed into his touch. It felt so good to be taken care of, and he seemed to like doing it. So why shouldn’t I let him?

It just felt so good to let go and know that I’d be safe.

Arms wrapped around me, he pulled back to admire his work bundling me up. We were practically nose to nose. Charlie gave me another soft kiss, like the one he’d given me when he’d dropped me off at the Harts’. I liked those.

I liked feeling delicate in his arms. Feeling precious to him.

“Happy birthday,” he whispered against my lips, his nose nudging up against mine.

I leaned my forehead against his, almost dizzy with happiness. There was this feeling building up inside me that threatened to boil over. I was so happy, so excited, so full of… *feelings* for him. It was like I’d finally started to fly, and I got to take Charlie with me.

So I crashed my lips into his and kissed him with everything I had, because I didn’t know any other way to show him how glad I was that we were both here. How much I appreciated him trying to make this day special for me. How much I loved having him in my life.

But I was still so cold from the water, so my lower lip quivered when Charlie trapped it between his own.

“You should take your clothes off,” he told me, voice husky.

“I…” I wondered if it was possible to lose your voice entirely out of embarrassment.

Charlie’s eyes widened in panic, like he’d said the wrong thing. He cleared his throat.

“For warmth,” he clarified. “Trapping your wet clothes under the blanket with you… It’s no way to get warm.”

“Oh.” I laughed. “Right.”

I stripped off my soaked sweater and wriggled out of my jeans, placing them by the vents that were sputtering out warm air. I left my tank top on, and the thermal bike shorts Lola had loaned me to wear under everything because “Minnesota is too fucking cold.”

And even though I’d been naked in front of Charlie before, taking my clothes off in front of him like this felt… different. And if the way he was staring at my bare skin was any indication, it was different for him, too.

“Maybe we should get in the back seat,” I suggested, my voice barely over a whisper. “For warmth.”

Charlie nodded and we both dove into the back seat, laughing and blushing. Charlie pulled me onto his lap, my knees bracketing his hips. He pressed his lips against mine, and I tried to meet him with the exact same amount of force.

I mimicked what he did, still self-conscious about my lack of experience. But the way he groaned when I licked his lower lip felt encouraging to me.

When he kissed my neck, I couldn’t help but sigh with pleasure. I wasn’t shivering anymore. I felt warm, hot—on fire, actually.

He gripped my hips and pulled me flush against him. When I felt something hard between my legs, I gasped. Had that been there a second ago?

“Charlie, wait,” I said in a daze. “There’s something you should know… I’m a virgin!”

**Episode 846**

GREYSON

I had decided to tell Joss about my plan for Nolan. If the meatball accepted the terms of my deal—which I assumed he would, because he didn’t really have much of a choice—it could give us the inside track we needed on Silas.

And with Halloween so close, and Silas in possession of the orb and working with that witch, we needed any advantage we could get. If we wanted to survive, we had to act now and fast. But we couldn’t do that without a plan. Which meant I had to get Joss involved. She had a good head for strategy. And she was my Luna. And I knew I wasn’t necessarily her favorite person at the moment, but this was about the pack. Joss was good at putting the pack first.

Better at it than I was, sometimes.

God, I didn’t know what I’d do without her to help me run it.

I bounded downstairs to the kitchen. She usually wasn’t far from the coffee pot these days, and I was hoping to find her so we could talk. But once I got to the bottom of the stairs, I heard the click of the front door opening. I turned my head, wondering if Cali was coming in for a break from training. If so, maybe I could convince her to take a bubble bath to soothe her aching muscles.

But then I was hit with a scent that was distinctly Not Cali.

Xavier was back.

I felt myself tense up. The last time I’d seen my brother, he’d told me he was going to challenge me for the pack. Was that why he was here? To throw down the gauntlet again?

Xavier walked in, pulling on a pair of sweats he must have found out on the porch. We locked eyes, and the temperature in the room kicked up a few degrees. I held my tongue, waiting for him to speak.

After all, this was my house, and he was a guest.

Xavier must have realized what I was thinking, because he smirked at me. There was a cockiness to the expression I hadn’t seen in a while. Something in his posture seemed more confident than when I’d seen him last.

I wondered what had changed. Something to do with Cali? Or something else?

“Did you manage to kill Ava a second time or what?” I asked, breaking the silence even though I’d sworn that I wouldn’t. I felt a pressing need to figure him out. My instincts were telling me that there was something new about him that I couldn’t quite identify. A new edge.

“No.” Xavier shook his head. “I still plan to, though. But mostly, I wanted to see you and tell you that I meant what I said. I’m going to challenge you and become the Alpha this pack needs and deserves. One who puts the work in and builds something strong and safe.”

“You’re right,” I admitted, wondering if it would catch him off guard. “That is what the pack deserves. But I hope you can wait until after we deal with Silas.”

I wondered how Cali would feel about me stepping down. About letting Xavier take the reins. If I was going to get the girl, maybe she’d consider the pack a nice consolation prize for Xavier. Cali had a kind heart—leaving Xavier with a purpose might make her feel better about breaking his.

Xavier opened his mouth to respond, but then a scream cut through the air.

Cali’s scream.

Both of us raced outside without a thought. Out on the lawn, I saw Cali running toward us, Artemis close on her heels.

Her eyes were wide with panic and her arms pumped furiously at her sides as she ran. I wondered if she was hurt, or if it was the curse. But usually the veins spreading made her weak.

Right now, she was more than upright. She was moving as fast as I’d ever seen her move.

Then I looked behind her and saw the ghosts.

Again, without thinking, I shoved Xavier to the side and ran toward her, my arms spread open to grab her and shield her from what was chasing her. I could feel Xavier behind me, hear him panting as he ran.

I grabbed Cali by the shoulders and let my eyes rake over her, searching for signs of injury.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

But Cali just twisted in my arms to look over her shoulder. Back at the ghosts.

“I think I—” She took a huge gasping breath, clearly out of it from running so hard. “Did something—brought them here.”

“What did you do?” Xavier asked, placing a hand on her back. His voice was steady—he was trying to calm her.

But now wasn’t the time to be calm. Now was the time to protect her from whatever the fuck was chasing her down.

“I’m not sure,” Cali admitted, still winded. “We were practicing with our powers. Artemis was helping me. And then they just started coming out of the lake.”

“In the interest of full disclosure,” Artemis interrupted tersely, “I’m going to let you all know right now that I’m not a fan of ghosts.”

“Noted,” I barked, watching as they drew closer.

I recognized a few—Lilac, a few Rogues we’d killed over the last few weeks, Xavier’s mother, all of them pale and ethereal-looking. Not quite opaque, just the slightest bit see-through. And all staring at something beyond us.

“Mom,” Xavier called out, stepping forward. But Marlene moved right through him. It was like she hadn’t even noticed her son. She was moving toward something else.

All the ghosts moved through us. It felt cold, like wind cutting right through you. They left a stale smell and feeling on the air behind them.

But they were all heading in the same direction. Like they were being drawn somewhere.

Could it be to Silas? Could it have something to do with the orb? Was he using it to draw the dead to him?

The ghosts continued to trudge onward, moving silently past us.

Joss came up behind us from the house, white as a sheet as she watched the ghosts cross the lawn.

“What the hell?” she asked. “What do they want?”

“We don’t know,” I told her.

“I didn’t mean to bring them,” Cali told us in a rush. “It just happened. They just showed up.”

I could feel her shaking with fear and nerves and guilt. I wrapped my arms tighter around her, wanting her to know that she was safe. That I wouldn’t let anything happen to her. That I didn’t blame her for this.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Xavier clench his jaw as I held her. Just because he wasn’t tearing me off her, didn’t mean he was okay with the sight of us together. He was just learning to show some restraint. I wondered if that had anything to do with his newfound swagger.

“I doubt you had anything to do with this, Cali,” I heard Big Mac say from behind us. She walked out onto the porch and looked down at us owlishly. “This is dark magic. The kind that’s associated with the orb.”

She looked at me pointedly.

“So this *is* Silas’s work?” I asked, looking for clarification.

“Could be,” Big Mac admitted, nodding. Not for the first time, I wanted to press her for a less cryptic answer. But knowing her, it would’ve been useless. With Big Mac, you got what she gave you. Pressing her for more only ever pissed her off, and I wasn’t in the mood to lose an eye right now.

“They’re going into the woods,” Rishika pointed out, watching the last of them disappear into the trees. “Is there anything else they could be after in there?”

“Should we follow them?” Cali asked me. Her voice was still nervous, but her eyes were clear. She was still shaken, but she was pulling herself together and trying to be helpful. I marveled at her bravery.

She’d been born so small, so vulnerable, but she was always willing to do what she could to help. Her bravery came from a place of compassion, not anger or misplaced arrogance, and seeing it always made my heart ache.

“We can go after them,” Ravi piped up. “I can grab Sage and Zainab.”

“No.” I shook my head. “That could be giving Silas exactly what he wants.”

“Then why don’t we do what *we* want?” Xavier interjected.

I turned to look at him. With his chest puffed out and his eyes steely, he looked like a textbook Alpha. If he was trying to assert himself, he’d picked a good moment. Proposing an alternative some of the pack were already in favor of, in the middle of a pack crisis.

But I couldn’t afford to look rattled.

“We will,” I told just him, before turning to face the rest of the pack gathered out on the deck. “We will strike when the time is right.”

“But what are we waiting for?” Xavier asked, raising his voice so everyone could hear. “I think I have an idea for how to kill him.”

**Episode 847**

VIOLET

If kissing Charlie had felt hot, I now felt like I’d jumped into a literal fire. I could feel a blush rising in my cheeks, up the back of my neck, and across my chest. I was sure I was turning bright red. I considered leaping out the window and shifting and running away as fast as I possibly could.

I had actually just blurted out that I was a virgin. An answer to a question Charlie hadn't even *asked!*

It wasn’t something about myself that had ever really bothered me. I’d always figured that it would happen when it happened. That it had just never been the right place or time for me. I was always hoping the right person would come along… but they never had. And that had been totally fine with me. But now, I was face to face with Charlie—I was sitting on his lap!—and I was clamming up and acting like a total…

Virgin.

Charlie just gaped at me for what felt like an eternity.

“Umm” he started, but I cut him off.

“I’m sorry!” I squealed, covering my face with my hands. “Please forget that I even *said* that.”

“Violet, it’s—”

I cut him off again. “I know,” I assured him. “It’s not that big a deal. You just seem like you’re more experienced and I didn’t want you to feel let down when you found out I didn’t know exactly what I was doing. Yet, that is! If you can just give me a little time, I’m a really quick learner—”

“Violet!” Charlie barked, and finally I stopped talking.

Charlie smiled at me. A gentle, welcoming smile. He took my face in his hands, cupping my cheeks. Then he slowly leaned in, giving me ample time to pull away if I wasn’t ready. But I had no interest in stopping this.

He pressed his lips to mine and wound a hand into my hair, holding me close. I moved my lips against his, trying to mirror his movements. But after a while, I stopped copying him and just let myself melt into his kisses. I sighed against his lips, wanting him to know how good he felt. Unable to hide how much I wanted him.

He pulled back and fixed his eyes on mine. He looked… affected by me. Like he’d been at that party, after a beer or two. Like he was drunk on me?

“I want you to feel comfortable,” he told me. “Anything and everything will be happening at your pace, okay? As long as we’re together, I couldn’t care less about how experienced you are. Virginity is a stupid construct or whatever—I don’t remember the exact terms, I slept through a lot of my psych classes this semester. But I was a virgin once, too. Everyone is! Or they were. Like, if they want to be… Some people don’t want to have sex and that’s okay. Shit, this is getting away from me.”

He laughed, and so did I. This was awkward to talk about. Everything felt loaded, and I just didn’t want to lie about anything I’d done or, well, hadn’t done yet. But he didn’t seem to feel upset. Everything felt… safe. Right.

I leaned my head against his shoulder and tried to just enjoy how nice it felt to be with him. Admitting I wasn’t as experienced hadn’t ruined anything. Now that I knew he didn’t mind, I was actually starting to calm down.

“No one’s ever done something so special for my birthday,” I admitted, leaning back a little so I could look him in the eye. “Thank you.”

I leaned in to initiate another kiss, something I still felt a little awkward doing. My nose bumped into his and he laughed softly.

I felt a spark light inside me. I bristled a little at his laugh, even though I knew it wasn’t mean-spirited. But it felt like a challenge. A dare to make him the one lost in me.

So I grabbed him by the chin and lifted it so I could put my lips against his. I grabbed his hands and placed them on my hips, trying to let him know he could pull me close again. That I wanted him to.

Because I might not have been ready to have sex just yet, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want to try other things.

I started working on the buttons on his shirt, pulling them apart so I could take a look at the wide expanse of his chest. All of that lacrosse had paid off, because he looked *good*. Wow.

I ran my fingers over the smooth skin of his chest and felt him shudder underneath me. He must have liked the feeling of my fingertips across his skin. So I did it again, this time digging my fingernails in and scratching gently.

In response, Charlie pulled my lower lip between his teeth and bit down lightly. I moaned at the slight sting and reveled in the warmth that spread through my body—it was a tingling feeling, like when I had snuck that bottle of whiskey at some barbecue with Lilac.

Noticing that I liked that, Charlie started thumbing at the patch of exposed skin just above the waistband of my shorts. His rough, calloused fingers almost tickled. But more than that, they awoke this desire to be touched by him in as many places as possible.

I wished that we had a bed, that we were spread out and skin to skin under silky sheets. That there were candles and soft music. But I was with Charlie. That was more than enough.

As long as I could see him and feel him and smell him, I had everything I needed.

“Can I?” he murmured, his hand snaking up under my shirt. He dragged his fingertips along my ribcage. I giggled, feeling shy and ticklish, but I couldn’t deny that my nipples were hardening. They felt tight and constricted inside my bra.

I wanted to know what his hands would feel like on my breasts—something I’d never really seen the appeal of before.

“Please,” I whispered, my voice wrecked.

Charlie fumbled with my bra’s clasp. It took him a few seconds, and I averted my eyes as his cheeks turned pink.

“Tricky clasp,” he mumbled, and I couldn’t help but laugh. He was just too cute.

I reached back and unclasped it myself. I slid the straps over my shoulders and tossed my bra into the front seat. I looked down and saw my nipples poking through the fabric of my tank top.

Charlie licked his lips, his pupils blown wide. He looked at me like I was fascinating, perfect, enticing. He touched me gently over my shirt.

He traced my nipples with his fingertips, watching carefully as I shivered on top of him. His hips bucked up into mine, and I could tell it was involuntary, but I felt him throb between my thighs.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“No.” I shook my head. “I like it.”

THUD.

Both Charlie and I yelped in surprise.

“What the hell was that?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest, worried we’d been caught.

“I don’t know,” Charlie admitted, looking around wild-eyed. “But we should probably—”

“Yeah.” I nodded, fumbling with my clothes and trying to cover up while Charlie did the same. Thank god our clothes had had some time to dry off while we’d been in the back seat.

Once we were suitably dressed, I followed Charlie’s gaze to the car door nearest to us.

“Whatever this is, it can’t be good,” I told him, reaching for it. “Let’s just get it over with.”

“No way!” Charlie grabbed my wrist, stopping me. “This happens in basically every scary movie! The couple making out gets killed first! We have to be careful.”

Despite the impending doom Charlie was predicting, I couldn’t help but blush.

“So we’re a couple?” I asked. I knew we were mates, but we hadn’t really discussed a label for things. Being his girlfriend, calling him my boyfriend, it sounded so good. So official. But I didn’t want to push him. Especially after everything with Sandi.

“I mean…” Charlie averted his eyes sheepishly. “Aren’t we?”

I leaned in and kissed him, hoping that would answer his question.

“Okay,” I murmured against his lips. “I’m going to go check. We’re werewolves, remember? If this is a scary movie, we’re the thing to be scared of.”

“You’re too cute to be scary,” Charlie teased, brushing his fingers along my cheekbone and sending tingles rippling through me.

I took a deep breath, then opened the car door and hopped outside. I shivered at the cold, but my clothes were mostly dry from our dip in the lake. I looked around and saw a huge branch on top of our car.

That must have been the source of the thud.

“Your friend’s car might have a new dent,” I told Charlie regretfully.

“It’ll match all the others,” he joked.

I looked at the branch skeptically. It was a little windy out, but not *that* windy. But maybe I was just being overly suspicious, given everything that was going on.

I jumped back into the car and snuggled up to Charlie. He held me tight against his chest, and I let myself inhale his scent over and over again. It was comforting. Like walking into a house you used to hang out in as a kid.

“Just a branch,” I told him. “No hook-handed man or anything like that.”

But just as I leaned in to kiss him, there was an even bigger THUD. Charlie and I both cried out in surprise and turned to look at the hood of the car, where the sound had come from.

And that was when we saw Agent Fernsby. Dead.

**Episode 848**

AVA

I stared at the orb in Demeter’s hands. The ancient language she was mumbling in faded down to a low drone. I tried to focus on what was in front of me, but something was jumbling my thoughts.

I couldn’t calm down. I kept hopping from train of thought to train of thought. None of it was clear, everything was out of order. I knew I couldn’t let Silas gain control over me, but I didn’t know how to break free. And I was clearly running out of time.

I tried to focus on something I felt strongly about. On Nolan. On anything…

I couldn’t understand what Demeter was saying, but I could hear the frustration in her voice. Her brow was furrowed, her nostrils flared, and she was getting louder.

“What’s wrong?” Silas asked, fuming. “Why don’t you just do it?”

“The orb is not to be trifled with,” she answered in clipped tones, the voice of someone trying desperately not to lose their patience. “Its powers are difficult to tame. And, if they are used incorrectly, they could prove to be calamitous. So please, give me time.”

Silas growled, barely restraining himself. He was hunched over the kitchen table, gripping the chair in front of him so hard his knuckles were white.

“You’re supposed to be an ancient and powerful witch,” he spat through gritted teeth. “Why don’t you use some of that knowledge you were supposed to have acquired eons ago and get me some fucking results?”

Hearing that Silas wasn’t getting what he wanted gave me some hope. Maybe Demeter didn’t even know what she was doing. She had probably been forced to work for Silas, and had exaggerated her powers to sound useful. This whole thing had to be making her quite nervous.

Nervous, I could exploit.

Maybe I could trick them and use it to my advantage. But I’d have to be quick.

I sucked in a deep breath and let out an ear-piercing scream, a twisted sound of fear and agony that I hoped would send chills through anyone who heard it. I stumbled back from the table and knocked over my chair, tumbling to the ground.

“Leave me alone!” I cried, clutching my head and shaking it violently. I saw Silas lean forward, watching my agony with a kind of hunger that made me want to run far, far away. But that wasn’t an option.

“No, no, no, NO!” I cried, pretending to struggle and fight and beat off the pretend magic. “Please, I—”

I cut myself off with a huge gasp and went limp for a second. I felt their eyes on me, watching me carefully. I hoped neither of them knew what was supposed to happen next—that way, I could fake it well enough to be believed.

I let my eyes snap open, my face a mask of unfeeling casualness.

“So, lunch?” I asked, rising easily from the ground. If before I had been a shaky and weak mess, now I was strong. Almost lazy in my movements. I picked my chair up off the ground and sat back down in it, leaning back so I could take in Silas and Demeter’s stunned expressions.

“You want… lunch?” Silas asked, eyebrow raised.

“Yes,” I answered, trying to sound as flat and neutral as possible. To make it seem like I was done resisting, and that Demeter’s mind control had worked. “I’m hungry. Is there any food to chop up with that knife of yours?”

Silas looked to Demeter, wary.

“What’s going on?” he asked her, tone accusatory. “Did it work?”

Demeter grinned at me and I made sure not to preen at her obvious satisfaction. Not to get too cocky that I’d done it. This would still be hard to pull off, even if they believed me now.

“It appears so,” Demeter told Silas, smiling. “Wouldn’t you say?”

She stepped closer, examining me. I felt my heart start to race. I wanted to scream, to shake, to *run*, but I couldn’t give myself away. One false move and I’d be dead. So I focused on being still. On the silence. The lack of anything. I’d pretend to be their empty vessel. Let them fill me however they liked, until my moment presented itself.

If I could keep up the act long enough for them to let their guard down around me, then I’d have a chance at escaping this demon pit.

“I need proof,” Silas announced coldly, his eyes fixed on me. I didn’t like the sound of that. Why did I doubt that his poof was going to mean anything good for me?

He grabbed my hand. I almost withdrew it reflexively, but then I forced myself to move with him. To do what he willed. I had to appear obedient. I couldn’t look scared. He pressed my hand against the table. I tried to focus on the smooth feeling of the finished wood beneath my hand. On the grooves beneath my skin.

Silas grabbed the knife out of the table, like pulling Excalibur from the stone. But this didn’t feel like a fairytale anymore. It felt like something much darker. I watched the light glint off the blade and felt my stomach drop.

He tossed it in the air and it turned over and over until it landed in his hand, the blade caught between his fingers, leaving him unharmed. I would have been impressed if I hadn’t been trying to keep myself from throwing up.

He held it out to me, offering me the handle and watching my face carefully.

“Stab your hand,” he ordered, his voice pleasant and soothing, like he wasn’t asking me to hurt myself. Ordering me to do it.

I felt a scream start to crawl up my throat, but I knew I had to hold it in. I reached for the knife slowly. It felt like everything was happening at half-speed.

Could I do this? If I couldn’t, Silas was going to kill me. I had no doubts about that.

I supposed I could try and use it against him. Stab him in the gut and run. But it was steel, not silver. It wouldn’t kill him, it would just piss him off. And I didn’t need to make him any angrier than he already was.

I felt the cool handle in my grasp and lifted the knife into the air. Time was speeding up again. I didn’t have long to decide.

I tried to remind myself that I’d been through worse pain. The searing heat I’d felt when Xavier had torn my throat out flashed through my mind. Nothing could be worse than that.

I was a werewolf.

I would heal.

So I swallowed hard, and drove the blade into my hand.

I bit down on my lip to keep from screaming. The pain rippled outward from my hand, up my arm, all the way to my heart. My body wanted to curl in on itself.

I felt my blood run hot. Pumping, trying to keep me alive. Trying to get oxygen to my brain. Silas watched my eyes dart around. He took me in, waiting for me to falter.

But I didn’t.

I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

I refused.

Eventually, he leaned over me. His neck was so close, I was tempted to bite. To see his blood run red over the kitchen table.

But instead, he jerked the knife free and I stayed still.

“Clean up the blood,” he ordered Demeter.

I felt my pulse slow, and I started to relax. He had bought it.

“I think Ava here will make a fine recruit,” Silas mused to himself, then he met my eyes. “And I still have use for you yet.”

I felt something in my stomach twist. How would he use me? What would he make me do? And would it get harder than this?

“Hurry up,” Silas snapped at Demeter, who was still staring at my bleeding hand. “I need you to deal with an insolent business partner next.”

He turned on his heel and headed toward the back room. I felt myself relax even further. He was the real threat, and I was safe from him for now.

Demeter cursed under her breath. Then she cleaned up the blood with a flick of her wrist and followed after him.

I sat there, stunned. Staring at my hand as it healed. The pain was diminishing more with every second, but it still throbbed.

I did my best to remain as still as I could. I tried to keep my breaths soft so I could listen to Silas and Demeter talk. Any piece of information I could get from them would be invaluable. I’d have to use it all to my advantage if I wanted to make it out of here.

I rose from my seat slowly, careful to not make a sound. The door was only a few short steps away. If I could get out without being heard, I could shift and run away. It was a big if, but I didn’t have any other choice.

This might be the last chance I was going to get.

I padded toward the door one step at a time, then placed my hand on the handle and started to twist it slowly. The only sounds I could hear were the hammering of my heart, and the creaking floor as my weight shifted.

I froze. Would that be enough to give me away?

But Silas was still talking. So I pulled the door open and stepped outside. But before I could close the door behind me, I realized I was surrounded by ghosts. All staring at me, slack-jawed.

I opened my mouth to scream.

**Episode 849**

“What are we waiting for?” Xavier said sharply. “I think I have an idea for how to kill him.”

Before I could even process Xavier’s words, Greyson shook his head. “No.”

Greyson disagreeing with Xavier? Shocking.

“It’s way too dangerous,” Greyson added. “We don’t know how many people he has.”

“Hold up,” I said. “You didn’t even let Xavier tell us his idea.” Greyson scowled at me, but I kept talking. “And also, when we saw Silas, it was literally only him and Demeter and Ava.”

Xavier went rigid at the sound of Ava’s name. “She was there?”

I nodded. “She said she’d killed you.”

A weird look passed over Xavier’s face. What was that expression? I couldn’t quite place it, but I also didn’t fucking like it at all, because the idea of Xavier thinking of any other woman made jealousy poke my insides in a really annoying way. Perhaps I had no room to talk and was kind of a hypocrite, what with the whole Greyson situation, but still—I had the right to be jealous. *Always!*

“She lied,” Xavier breathed.

“Yes, Ava has a habit of lying,” Greyson scoffed, but Xavier shook his head.

“She lied to Silas about me being dead. To keep me alive,” he said.

I frowned. “Why would she do that?”

“I’m not sure,” Xavier said.

As I looked at him suspiciously, Xavier added, “Maybe lying about my death was a ploy to prevent Silas from killing her. He may have already killed her, for all we know.”

“If that’s the case, I won’t miss her,” Greyson said. Xavier glared at his brother, which was weird. Would *Xavier* miss her?

*You’re being paranoid, Cali!* I thought to myself. *Stop it!*

“Forget about Ava,” Rishika cut in. “I thought Xavier had a plan?”

“Well, if Ava is still alive, we might be able to persuade her to be a spy,” Xavier said.

Greyson peered at Xavier. “That’s what I want Nolan to do.”

I looked between the two, secretly admiring their beautiful faces but also their beautiful, smart minds. Their plans were so similar, which was surprising. But then again, maybe it wasn’t. They really were brothers, huh?

“Except now that Silas thinks I’m dead, I might have a better idea,” Xavier said. “But I’m going to need some help. Where’s Big Mac?”

“What does Big Mac have to do with it?” Greyson asked.

Xavier pointed in the direction the ghosts from the lake were heading. They were like a foggy army of people. Super creepy.

“If the ghosts are drawn toward the orb, and Silas thinks that I’m dead…” Xavier raised an eyebrow. “Why can’t I pretend to be a ghost? I could get close to Silas and once I’m close enough, I’ll be able to kill him.”

I tried to wrap my mind around this so-called *plan*.

“Wait.” I poked Xavier’s shoulder. “Pretend to be a ghost so you can kill Silas? On your own? That sounds really dangerous.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “I can take him, Cali.”

“But—”

Greyson cleared his throat. He glanced between us, and I felt a pang of guilt. I perhaps shouldn’t have allowed myself to be so overly worried about Xavier in front of Greyson, but I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t help any of this.

*We’re all fucked, aren’t we?* I thought, scowling.

“It’s a good idea,” Xavier said. “That’s why I need Big Mac—maybe she can use a spell to make me look like a ghost.”

“As much as I want to be a dick about this,” Greyson said, “Cali is right.”

I blinked at him. “I am?” Then I huffed. “I mean, of course I am!”

“It’s too risky, Xavier,” Greyson added. “You’d be too vulnerable.”

Warmth spread through me at the realization that, despite everything, Greyson did care about his brother. He could be objective, which made me want to fucking kiss him right then and there, which probably showed on my face, because Xavier’s next sentence came out in a growl.

“I’d only need a second—just long enough to rip his throat out.”

“Xavier,” Greyson said patiently. “You could be wrong about this. Silas can’t be alone. I doubt he’d take on the Redwood pack without a sizable force.”

Xavier glared at Greyson before taking in the small distance between his arm and mine. They were speaking and I was literally in the middle, forming a… triangle between us.

*Of course it would be a triangle*, I scoffed internally. *Of course!*

The tension between them was palpable as Xavier spoke. “You might be right about Silas having backup. In fact, I was attacked by one of his Rogues earlier.”

I choked. “*What?* And you didn’t think about telling us?” I patted Xavier down, checking for wounds. He seemed fine at least.

“I’m fine,” Xavier said, shrugging. “I killed him.”

The casual, flat way that Xavier said that made me pause. A shudder followed, because his reaction reminded me of Tony all over again. But I shouldn’t have been surprised—I knew better now. Werewolves had a dark side. Werewolves didn’t consider murder a reason for shame, just a means of survival.

And I had not one, but *two* of those literal bad boys as my mates. Great options, right?

At least the sex was spectacular. This was a horrible mess, and I didn’t see a way out of it that would leave all three of us unscathed, but at least I’d had some amazing times with both of them. Goodbye cruel world and all that bullshit, but thank you for letting me enjoy some of it while it lasted.

*Am I starting to lose my mind and using humor as a coping mechanism?* I wondered. *That might be a yes.*

“If Big Mac can perform a spell that will make you look like a ghost, your plan could work,” Greyson told Xavier. “But only if I go with you.”

Oh, great. So instead of worrying about one Evers brother, I’d have to worry about two. No offense to Colton, but these two were admittedly my favorite ones. Mainly because I was in love with them. And their father could easily kill them.

This was fine.

Totally *not* alarming.

“Well, how about we go talk to Big Mac first?” I asked. “Just to see if it’s possible before you two decide to go on a suicide mission.”

And then I wouldn’t even *have* mates to choose between.

Apparently there were worse things than the *due destini* curse.

As we all headed inside, I came up to Xavier, aware that Greyson was watching from a few feet away. Of course he was watching and stewing and irritated. I would’ve been doing the same thing in his position. But I couldn’t just leave Xavier alone—this whole thing was out of control. I inserted myself into his path. “Maybe you should forget your ghost plan and just stay back and fight with the whole pack. How about that?”

He smirked at me. “You’re worried about me, huh?”

“Obviously.” I felt my cheeks heat up. “You don’t have to prove how brave you are.”

Xavier’s smile faded as he glanced at a scowling Greyson, who was now brooding by the fireplace. “I’ll do what Greyson wants. He’s the Alpha.” Xavier paused. “For now.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

But before Xavier could respond, Big Mac walked into the living room and made a beeline for us. “What’s this about turning you into a ghost?” she asked Xavier.

*I know, right?* I thought. *What IS THIS madness?*

And if all that wasn’t enough, Joss came over as well, heading straight toward Greyson. “We need to make a decision about Nolan,” she said loudly.

Greyson nodded at Joss and stood up from his chair. He paused in front of us, peering at Xavier. “Don’t do anything stupid until I get back.”

Xavier arched an eyebrow. “I wouldn't dream of it.”

Greyson’s severe expression remained. He glanced between Xavier and me, at the small distance between us, at the way our arms brushed. My stomach dropped. Greyson’s intense gaze—his indignation—was as powerful as Xavier’s nearness.

This was such a fucking mess.

*Why do I have to choose only one?* I thought mournfully, my heart pounding. *Why can’t we all just get along?*

Okay, but that was very taboo and I had to be ashamed of myself.

*… Or did I?*

“Let’s go,” Greyson told Joss, and they headed toward the basement where Nolan was. I was staring at Greyson’s retreating back when Xavier took my hand, like he was demanding my attention.

“So?” Big Mac asked, staring at Xavier. “What did you have in mind?”

Xavier started explaining his plan, still unsubtly holding my hand, like he was afraid I’d run off after Greyson. But Big Mac interrupted him pretty quickly.

“Xavier,” she said. “If I use a cloaking spell to help you approach Silas, you won’t be able to shift until it’s lifted.”

**Episode 850**

AVA

My pulse thundered as I faced the ghosts.

They were transparent, airy. They looked powerful the way they approached the house, but I knew they must have been weak. So weak, because they were just… not alive. They were stuck in this nothingness of being.

I used to be like that.

I could feel the blood drum under my skin, like it was reassuring me that I wasn’t one of them. Not anymore. And I wasn’t planning on going back to being a ghost. At least not at Silas’s hands. I wouldn’t allow him the honor of killing me.

At this point, the only death I could accept would be from Xavier.

I had harmed him in so many ways—at least it would be fair for him to kill me.

I wouldn’t hold it against him.

I had no idea what to do with these ghosts, though—I strained to hear across the house, where Silas and Demeter had been talking earlier. Could he have heard me? The silence was so unnerving, I felt my stomach twitch. I needed to get away from this hell cabin, but the only path out was through the sea of ghosts.

They were the transparent ones, but I felt weak in front of them.

It was like my biggest, scariest fear was mocking me. It was like death was mocking me, real and as alive as it could be, in the face of those ghosts. I could shift—at least feel the power of the wolf inside of me as I dealt with them—but I didn’t think that would be a good idea. There was a chance that the noise of my shift would draw Silas out to come check on me.

I needed to put some distance between myself and the house before I could shift safely, so right now, I had no choice.

I had to walk through the ghosts.

I walked slowly, fighting not to touch any of them. The air outside had turned cold and still. It felt like I was walking into death itself. And if that wasn’t enough, every time I made eye contact or accidentally brushed against any of the puffs of translucent matter, waves of their memories hit me.

*A man screaming at a woman.*

*Two girls laughing.*

*A knife slicing into someone’s flesh.*

*Someone’s first day at high school.*

*A football game, a crowd roaring in triumph.*

*A day in court with the jury rising.*

One after the other, the images slammed into my mind’s eye, and I rushed to get away. I fought to avoid the ghosts’ dead stares and the reminders of their old lives.

But then I saw a face I recognized.

Marlene.

I gasped as I met the gaze of Xavier’s mother. I froze as she raised a hand, pointing an accusing finger at me. Her sharp eyes were different than all the other ghosts’. They were focused on me, utterly deadly as she hissed, “I warned you.”

I shuddered. The pain of everything I’d done made me feel sick. “I protected your son,” I said. “*Please*.”

I didn’t know what I was begging for. Was it her forgiveness? But for what in particular? For killing her? For disgustingly tricking both Xavier and his brother? For working with Silas? For not letting go of my brother Nolan, even though I’d known he would always be a bad influence on me?

I had so many things to apologize for, and I wasn’t even sure if my apology mattered.

“You don’t belong with the living,” Marlene breathed, her translucent hand still pointing at me like an arrow. And then I realized that perhaps my biggest error of all was one that was not even my own.

I was alive while Marlene was still dead.

I had no idea why this was my reality right now. I wasn’t even certain of Silas’s endgame, if just messing with Xavier was his number one priority. But being alive felt like a gift, if it meant that I could help Xavier.

“Xavier’s still in danger,” I whispered to Marlene. “Let me pass and I’ll do everything I can to keep him alive.”

Marlene’s ghostly eyes widened, some sort of realization dawning on her. And then I heard a sound behind me—the heavy noise of the cabin door opening, and then Silas’s booming voice. “What is going on here?”

I went rigid. Had he seen me?

Slowly, I turned back to face him, dreading the confrontation.

But even though I could see him, he didn’t seem to be able to pinpoint me. I was hidden by the sea of ghosts, obscuring me like a screen. Relieved slightly but still terrified, I turned to Marlene.

Was she going to expose me?

Was this the end, all over again?

But Marlene moved through me, her body becoming one with mine, and I was hit by a massive wave of memories.

Of her life before Xavier had killed me for her.

Of her life with the sadistic tyrant that was Silas.

Of her life as a ghost, a prisoner, trapped in mirrors that only allowed her to watch the lives of others.

I squeezed my eyes shut and held my breath, almost afraid that if I breathed in Marlene’s ghost, I would become just like her. But then Marlene floated away from me. Gasping, I looked around, realizing that more and more ghosts were appearing, a seemingly endless stream of death.

“I told you this would work, didn’t I?” Demeter said, joining Silas on the cabin porch. She was holding the orb, grinning. Evil incarnate. “The orb’s power has summoned the ghosts.”

“It’s much stronger than I expected,” Silas said with a sneer. “I wasn’t expecting so many of them. Let me see…” He grabbed the orb from Demeter’s hands.

In an instant, a surge of energy visibly coursed through him.

I watched, holding my breath as the orb began to glow, sending a pulsing light through Silas’s veins.

What the *hell* was going on?

Silas stepped off the porch, his whole body glowing for a moment before the power settled down. The air around him vibrated with energy, dark and horrifying. With a sinister smile on his face, he moved toward a ghost and raised the orb.

The ghost’s blank expression changed to one of absolute agony as a piercing scream broke the atmosphere around the cabin. The ghost started to disintegrate, its particles flowing into the orb slowly but steadily. The orb seemed to be sucking up the essence of the ghost’s existence.

I had covered my ears, but it was no use. I could hear the scream. I was shaking, felt sick, but suddenly, the piercing noise stopped.

I was fighting not to pant, not to offer any indication of being alive in the middle of this sea of the dead, but I still watched Silas. I couldn’t look away as he broke into a smile, then a laugh.

“Amazing!” he exclaimed, handing the orb back to Demeter. “Congratulations are in order.”

Demeter smiled back at him, clearly pleased. Silas inspected his arms, twisting his fists, his whole body seeming more powerful by the second. More menacing. And then he said, “If a mere ghost can give me this much strength, imagine what a werewolf will do.”

I covered my mouth to squash the gasp that came out.

“Be careful, Silas. Don’t let the orb consume you,” Demeter warned.

Silas offered yet another demented laugh. “I know what I’m doing.” He suddenly looked around. “Where's Ava? I’d like to test my increased power on her.”

I wasn’t about to stay here and die. Again.

It was now or never.

I moved as quickly and quietly as I could through the remaining ghosts and into the safety of the woods. With the memory of the haunting, shrieking ghost echoing in my head, I shifted and raced away. I didn’t dare look behind me.

I wanted to put as much distance between myself and Silas as possible. Once he realized that I’d tricked him, he would do anything to kill me. He would make it his goal, and I wouldn’t be able to take him on alone.

I needed to get to Nolan, my only ally—at least in theory. I had to get my brother out of the Redwood house, even though it would be a major risk. Even though there was a chance that I would have to face Xavier again. But maybe that would be a good thing—maybe I could still fix things with my mate. Marlene’s ghost had let me live because I’d told her I’d saved Xavier, so maybe there was still hope for us.

But even if there wasn’t, even if I was being delusional, I had to get Nolan out of the Redwood pack house alive. He was the only family I had.

As I approached Redwood territory, I stopped running and shifted back to human. I was going to have to sneak into the house, and it would be much easier to do that as a person.

While I moved forward, though, something changed in the forest.

I smelled another werewolf. Could it be one of Silas’s spies?

Afraid, I backed away. *Better to wait it out*. Before I could even finish that thought, though, I heard a sound behind me, and a second later—

*BOOM!*

A massive wolf slammed me to the ground.

**Episode 851**

VIOLET

I was shaking, unable to look away from the emotionless face of Agent Fernsby. The poor woman! She was definitely dead—the slashes in her neck made that very obvious. No matter how many times I saw an innocent person die, I’d never get used to it.

It still shocked me.

It still made me remember my sweet brother Lilac, and how wrong it was that he was gone now.

“What the *fuck?*” Charlie hissed, taking a step away from the body, like he was afraid that Fernsby would stand up and charge toward us, bloody and broken as she was.

*What a nightmare…*

“Charlie, calm down, it’s okay,” I muttered, squeezing his shoulder. I was lying. This was not okay in any way, shape, or form.

“This is a dead body, she’s—she’s *dead*,” Charlie spluttered. I looked up at him, at his scared eyes, reminding myself how new all this was for him. I remembered how Cali had been in the beginning, just totally stunned and freaked out over everything. But apart from being new to the supernatural world, Charlie was also new to being a werewolf.

My mate had no idea the kinds of things werewolves had to face on the daily.

“This has to be the work of the Rogue…” I trailed off, stepping toward Fernsby. I took a moment to close the woman’s eyes. She didn’t deserve this. Nobody deserved to die such a gruesome death. A lump formed in my throat as I stared at her.

Would Lilac’s memory ever stop hurting me?

“Look what we have here!” Piercing laughter and a shrill voice made me spin around.

It was the Rogue.

My heart pounding with fear and adrenaline, I instantly moved to stand beside Charlie, grabbing his hand. He was frozen, his eyes wide as he took in the monster.

“How nice of you two to drop by,” the Rogue snarled. There was blood dripping down his chin, and I instinctively put myself between him and Charlie. He might have looked human right now, but he was anything but.

I wasn’t about to lose Charlie too.

Not him.

Not my mate.

I’d rather die myself.

“Had to stick around, little girl?” the Rogue scoffed. “Are you two stalking me or something?”

I stared at him like he was insane, because he fucking *was*. I felt the crazy urge to laugh. This monster was out of his mind. “You’re the one who attacked us on the way to the fucking airport,” I snapped. “You’re the one who’s stalking us!”

Charlie gripped my shoulder, as if to steady me. As if to remind me that he had my back.

“Is that so?” The Rogue smiled devilishly. “It’s too bad you didn’t make it to the airport, huh?”

Seriously. What the fuck was this guy’s problem?

“We’re on our way *out* of Minnesota,” Charlie said sharply. “Leave us *alone*.”

“Really?” the Rogue sneered. “Do you really think I’d turn you and let you walk away? I *made* you what you are,” he spat, his eyes fixed on Charlie. “*You belong to me!*”

The Rogue’s growl echoed through the woods, making the space shudder. Charlie had turned to stone, his terror evident. But apart from horrified, I was also so goddamn pissed off! Who the *hell* did this son of a bitch think he was? I would never, *ever* let Charlie go without a fight! I would rather kill this monster with my own bare hands, and I would feel *zero* remorse about it.

“That’s my mate you’re talking about, you piece of shit!” I hissed, growling myself.

Charlie gasped behind me. He made a move to push me back, away from the Rogue, but my stance remained firm. I was protecting him.

I would protect my mate if it was the last thing I did.

“Relax, little girl. I don’t know what you told her,” the Rogue said, gesturing to Fernsby’s dead body, “but she thought she had it *all* figured out. And she was wrong.” He chuckled. “*Dead* wrong.”

My jaw clenched as the Rogue took a step forward. Charlie was behind me, and behind both of us, the car blocked the way. There was little space to run without shifting. I looked around, trying to figure out a way to escape.

“Killing a human is child’s play, you know,” the Rogue said coldly. He took another step closer to us, his eyes returning to Charlie. Greedy eyes. “But hunting another werewolf? Now, that is priceless.”

I froze, realizing the awful truth of what was happening here. Of why this Rogue behaved the way he did, creating werewolves right and left. He never meant for us to leave at all, because he was *toying* with us. He was toying with us as if we were his prey. He had been keeping us, Charlie, inside his hunting grounds.

This beast had been turning humans into werewolves just so he could hunt them for fucking *sport*.

A shudder ran down my spine at the sight of such evil.

But then I found myself more furious than ever.

*If we both shift*, *then we can kill him,* I said to Charlie through our mind link*.*

Charlie glanced at me. *It’s too dangerous.*

Before I could reply, Charlie stepped forward, planting himself between me and the Rogue. “Let Violet go. You can have me.”

My fear became rage in a second flat. I grabbed Charlie by the shoulder. I couldn’t let him do this! I *wouldn’t* let him do this.

“Shut up,” I snapped. “Don’t try to be a hero!”

Charlie stared at me, eyes wide. I’d never talked to him like this before. Hell, I never talked like this, period, but my anger was so immense that it made me feel like something other than myself.

Something far scarier.

“Let her go?” The Rogue laughed. “That would be way too easy.”

“You—” I was about to spit out a curse when the Rogue pulled a large revolver from behind his back. He leveled it at us, pointing at the chamber. “Silver bullets hurt like a bitch, you know.”

I fought not to choke at his words.

Xavier had been hurt by silver before, and he’d almost died.

Xavier, the most powerful werewolf I knew, had almost died because of silver, and now I was facing that same fate.

“What are you doing?” I asked the Rogue, my voice lowering.

“Well, didn’t I make it clear that I like a challenge?” he asked me, sneering. “And what's more challenging than hunting two werewolves at once?”

Charlie’s voice came out as a growl. “*NO!* Let her go!”

I grabbed Charlie’s shoulder to keep him back. *Stop challenging him!* I said through our mind link. *Those bullets can kill us!*

Charlie kept glaring at the Rogue, who smiled.

“I have a proposition for you kids,” he said mildly. “Either I kill both of you right here and now…” He raised an eyebrow. “Or we play a little game.”

“What game?” Charlie asked, gritting his teeth.

The Rogue’s blood-stained smile gleamed under the moonlight. “Like hide and seek. Only you hide, and I hunt you down and kill you both.”

Charlie’s cheek twitched. I kept holding on to his shoulder, my eyes fixed on the Rogue’s gun. He had us trapped.

We had no choice.

“So?” the Rogue said. “What’s it gonna be?”

“I can’t believe you really want to play a game here,” I said, my voice shaking with fear and never-ending fucking anger. It was futile, but I had to at least try to make this monster see reason. “Just let us go, and we can forget all about it. We won’t tell anyone, and we’re going away—you’ll never see us again, you—”

“Don’t you get it, little girl?” the Rogue barked. “It’s too late!” He pointed at Agent Fernsby. “You already told her, and who knows how many more MIB agents might be tracking me down at this very minute? Which would be a shame for me, because I have another werewolf in the works.” He smirked, wiping the grime off his face with his sleeve. “Someone a bit older, but he might prove to be fun in his own way.”

*Oh, no…*

He was talking about Tom.

*We have no choice*, I told Charlie. *We need to play his game. It’s our only shot. Those bullets will kill us.*

*Are you sure?* Charlie asked me. His mind’s voice was shaking.

*I’m certain*, I replied. *We have to play by his rules for now.*

Still, my anxiety was rising. Could we even get away from the Rogue? Could we even win his fucked up game? Would I lose my mate just when I’d finally found him?

*I trust you, Violet*, Charlie told me. *Let’s do this.*

With Charlie squeezing my hand, giving me strength, I stared at the Rogue. “We’ll play your game.”

The Rogue chuckled. “Of course you will.” He turned to Charlie, winking. “You picked a smart one. Pretty little thing, too.”

Charlie snarled, his wolf’s eyes flashing.

The Rogue laughed.

“I’ll give you kids a five-minute head start.” He glanced between us, his expression indulgent. He cocked the gun. “Starting *now*.”

*Now, Charlie!* I said.

I shifted before the Rogue could finish his sentence, and Charlie did too.

Together, we bolted into the woods.

**Episode 852**

“But if he can’t…” I cleared my throat, staring at Big Mac with wide eyes. “But if he can’t shift—” I faced Xavier, poking him in the chest. “You can’t face Silas if you can’t shift. He’d kill you!”

Xavier snorted. *Snorted*. Like this was no big deal.

*Do werewolves just have no self-preservation instincts? Zero?* I wondered.

“I’m not planning on facing Silas without a trick up my sleeve, Cali,” he told me. “I’ll hide a silver knife, or pull a Ryker and add silver to my nails.”

I blinked at him. Was this a joke? He really wanted Big Mac to put a cloaking spell on him so he could approach Silas and then just poke him with a silver dagger? Did he truly believe that killing his deadly father would be that easy?

Xavier’s severe expression suggested exactly that.

“Do you really need to do this?” I asked, frustrated.

Xavier stared at me. “I’m doing it so that you won’t have to worry about Silas ever again, Cali.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Right, that’s sweet and all, but I think we both know it’s bullshit. You’re not doing this just for me.”

Xavier sighed, shaking his head. “I’m doing it for myself and the pack as well, of course. To make Silas pay for every horrible thing he’s done.”

“But—”

“As much as I enjoy watching you two bicker,” Big Mac said, cutting me off, “I don’t have all day.” She eyed Xavier. “Do you want to do this or not?”

Xavier gave her a questioning look. “You can break the spell once I’m done using it, right?”

Big Mac glared at him. “Of course. You think I’m some novice witch?”

“Oh, *never*,” Xavier quipped. “It’s just that trusting you has always been… tricky.”

“I’m not tricking you into anything,” Big Mac said, Shaking her head at Xavier. “I want Silas gone too, and we need to deal with this sooner rather than later.”

She beckoned Xavier to follow her, but I blocked their way. “Wait,” I said sternly. “You can’t rush into this! Greyson did say not to do anything stupid, right?”

Xavier glared at me. “Greyson, huh?”

Oh, god. *Here we go again.*

I took a deep breath. “Yes, Xavier. Greyson. The Alpha with the fighting experience. The older guy around here. As great as your plan no doubt sounds in your head, it’s extremely risky and I don’t want to lose you, okay?” My chest started throbbing the moment I got the words out. “You need to think this through. If even one thing goes wrong…” I paused, my gut twisting at the mere possibility of anyone, *anything,* harming Xavier.

“Hey,” he said softly, wrapping his arms around me. “It’s okay.”

I sniffled. “It’s really fucking not, Xavier.”

He shook his head, kissing my forehead. “I promise I’ll think this through more. I’ll wait for now.”

“Just call me when you’re ready then, and stop wasting my time.” Big Mac walked away, grumbling to herself.

“You think she’s mad?” I asked Xavier.

“Isn’t she always?” He smirked, kissing my cheek. It felt so good to be held by him like this. He looked into my eyes, caressing my cheek. “I’ll keep processing the plan, but I’m also looking into silver nail polish in the meantime.”

Xavier walked away from me, and I realized that he was *not* going to let this go. A sense of dread hit me. My mate was a brave, beautiful, and stubborn werewolf, but I was even more stubborn, so there was no way I was gonna watch him execute this suicide mission.

I looked outside, in the direction Xavier had vanished, and saw Artemis lounging on the front porch like she had literally no cares in the world. Determined, I marched toward her.

“If Xavier's going to take on Silas, then I’m going to have his back,” I told her seriously.

Artemis raised an eyebrow, looking up at me. “Hello to you, too.”

“I’m serious, Artemis. We were in the middle of training when the ghosts interrupted,” I told her. “I need to learn how to master my Fae powers, and the sooner it happens, the better.”

“You mean—”

“Right now,” I said. “Let’s start training, right now.”

Artemis blinked. “Uh, that isn’t going to happen quite so easily, you know.”

“I’ll train day and night,” I declared.

Artemis squinted at me. “You’re not very smart, are you?”

I gasped. “Excuse me?”

“You’d die to save Xavier, wouldn’t you?” Artemis asked me, wrinkling her nose. “I mean he’s cute and all, but still.”

“He’s my mate,” I told Artemis, punching out every word. “Of course I’d die for him.”

“Right.” Artemis gave me a squinty, condescending smile. “You mean he’s *one* of your mates.”

Were older sisters always this annoying? Like, was that a fucking thing in general? Because Artemis was ANNOYING.

“Anyway, I still think it’s stupid,” she said mildly. “No man, werewolf or not, is worth dying over.”

I eyed her carefully. “Do you really think that, or is this about something else?”

Her expression was blank, but I saw her cheek twitch. “What else could it be about?”

“That you’re worried about me?” I rolled my eyes, but there was also obvious hope in my tone.

Artemis shrugged. “Well, we *are* family. So yeah, I guess.”

It was impossible to get Artemis to acknowledge that she actually cared about me, so I would take what little I could get from her. “Are you going to help me train, then?”

Artemis sighed. “*Fine*.”

When we got to the lake, I turned to face her. “You’re not going to make me summon a bunch of ghosts again, right? Because that was weird, in a super creepy way.”

“That wasn’t because of you or me, Cali,” she said, rolling her eyes. “And your waves weren’t very good earlier, actually, so you’d better work on that.”

Older sisters. SO ANNOYING.

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I was tired but excited when I got back to my room. My Fae magic skills were getting better—even Artemis had given me an unwilling high five. However, when it came to fighting skills, Artemis was on a level all her own. It had been like gym class all over again for me—my whole body was bruised and sore. I wasn’t going to give up, though. I was pretty sure I’d never be a superhero, but hopefully between Artemis and Rishika, I’d learn enough to be able to kick a few butts.

Smiling to myself a little, I took off my sweaty clothes. I was down to my panties, getting ready to get into the shower, when there was knock on the door. Before I could cover up, Xavier walked in.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey!” I squeaked. I wasn’t sure why I panicked—it wasn’t like he hadn’t seen me naked time and time again—but I made a totally graceless move to put my T-shirt back on. It got tangled in my hair, of course, and at the same time I fumbled and tripped against the bed. Xavier’s deep chuckle was suddenly close to me. Way too close. He helped me put the shirt back on, getting my head through the hole and all. He smiled when we faced each other.

“You’re always getting into trouble, aren’t you?”

“You just surprised me, that’s all,” I mumbled, flustered.

Still smiling, all soft and sexy and shockingly not grumpy at all, he pulled me close. His body was pressed against mine, his arms wrapped around me. “Trouble is a sexy look on you,” he whispered, brushing his nose against mine before kissing my cheek, then the corner of my mouth. My breath hitched. He held me tighter, nuzzling my neck. “You smell so fucking good,” he whispered.

His breath made gooseflesh break out across my skin.

“I’m…” I was struggling to speak. His nearness made me feel hot, a little dizzy. The way he pressed himself against me made it difficult to concentrate on anything else but him. “I’m sweaty from practice, and I—”

He cut me off with a kiss. It was deep and hard, one of his hands grabbing me by the back of my neck, the other reaching for my ass, because subtlety had never been his style. He squeezed and grabbed and pushed me against the wall. His breath came out heavy against my lips as he muttered, “I want you.”

I could only nod as he tore the T-shirt off me and pulled me toward the bed. He laid me down, dragging my underwear off with one sharp movement. But when I made a move to pull him down on top of me, he sat back on his knees and watched me. He was fully clothed, and I was naked.

The way he looked at me made me shiver.

As I lay before him, he stared at my face, at my breasts, and then… lower.

“Spread for me, tiger” he muttered gruffly.

Swallowing thickly, I spread my legs.

He slid his hand down my thigh, making my whole body tremble. I grabbed onto the sheet as he said, “Touch yourself.”

My face was on fire from embarrassment, but I didn’t dare say no. I didn’t *want* to say no. I just wanted him to keep looking at me like that—like he was about to break because of me.

It was intoxicating.

“That’s my beautiful girl,” he muttered when I reached between my thighs, rubbing in circles. I was wet and shaking, and he clearly couldn’t get enough of the sight. “You’re so fucking sexy,” he said. My breath hitched when he unbuckled his belt. I spread my legs further to invite him closer, pulling him in by the T-shirt at the same time.

“Stop *teasing*,” I said, my voice low but demanding.

He laughed, so gleeful, so in control—until I wrapped my thighs around his waist, arching upward. He groaned then, clearly done playing the moment he felt how ready I was. His mouth landed on mine, his hard-on rubbing up against me—

The door barged open and fucking Colton—*COLTON?*—with his huge-ass grin appeared in the doorway. “Was this a bad time?”

**Episode 853**

VIOLET

I had never run so fast in my life.

The sounds of the forest had died down, the animals sensing predators nearby. The air was cold against my fur. Charlie’s wolf was right next to mine, keeping up with ease as he looked around. We were both trying to find somewhere to hide from the Rogue and his silver gun.

I had seen what those bullets could do, and I refused to let this be the end for us.

*We’ll get through this*, I told Charlie through our mind link. *I know we will.*

His wolf huffed in acknowledgement, even though I was certain that he could sense my worry. This Rogue reminded me of Ryker, of Adra, of werewolves who were unhinged and had no empathy, who wanted to kill just for the hell of it.

*I’m not going to let this guy get you*, Charlie told me. *I might be new at this, but I won’t go down without a fight.*

There was a lump in my throat. *Oh, Charlie…*

*We’re connected*, Charlie continued. *I know that, Violet, I understand now what this connection between mates means. I’m never letting you go.*

My heart soared at his confession. He was so sweet, so perfect. I wished we were somewhere safe, somewhere I could thank him, where I could hug him and kiss him.

I wanted to kiss him so badly.

*We’ll do just that after we’re done with that bastard*, Charlie said.

I realized I’d communicated that last thought of mine by accident, but I didn’t feel shy about it. It was the truth, and we were going through a real life horror movie right now. The least I could do was tell my mate the truth.

I ran even faster, determined to lose the Rogue, to save both of us. How many minutes had it been? Was it five? Was the Rogue chasing us already? That son of a bitch was out of control, and I couldn’t trust a word that came out of his mouth.

If we were going to defeat the Rogue, we needed a plan.

*Think, Violet, think…*

What if we split up? I could try to take out the Rogue myself, and maybe that would give Charlie time to escape. I couldn’t possibly let my Charlie fight the Rogue, anyway; he may have been an athlete, but he was a newbie werewolf. He had no idea how terrifying fighting for your life could be. He had no idea what it would mean to take another life.

I had to do this. I had to save him.

*What—what’s wrong?* Charlie asked, the moment I stopped running.

*You need to keep going*, I said. *I’m better equipped to handle the Rogue.*

Charlie’s wolf snapped his teeth. *No fucking way!*

*Listen to me, please*, I said*. If you really are my mate, you'll do what I say and keep running.*

*I can’t leave you,* Charlie said, adamant*. Exactly* because *I’m your mate! What will I do without you?*

His intensity and care made my heart race. It wasn’t just adrenaline and fear. It was the closeness between us, which only made me stronger. I would never let Charlie find the same horrible death as my brother.

*I promise I will figure it out*, I told him. *I can take care of the Rogue. I’ll do it somehow—I have a lot more experience at this. You have to trust me. Go to the barn and wait for me.*

Charlie shook his head, but then I heard a noise behind me. Leaves crackling.

*Go, Charlie. NOW!* I snarled at his wolf. He flinched.

I felt guilty the moment I did it, but it was for the best. Looking anguished, Charlie took one last look at me and then he started running. I watched him go before turning around. There was nobody there. Taking a deep breath, with a plan in mind, I started running back toward the car. If nothing else, I would have the element of surprise on my side—the Rogue wouldn’t expect me to double back on him. I would need to use all the moves and fighting methods that Xavier had ever taught me.

My mind still with Charlie, hoping so hard to see him again, I ran past a dense group of leaves when I saw him.

The Rogue had shifted.

He was not surprised to see me, so I no longer had that advantage.

*Tsk, tsk*, the Rogue said. *I’m so disappointed in you*. *You’re more experienced than your little crush—I thought you’d be more challenging.*

I growled at him. It felt disgusting having him in my head like this with all of us shifted. *You haven’t seen anything yet.*

*What do you think you can do?* the Rogue said. *You’re just a girl.*

I snarled. *And you’re just a dick!*

I lunged toward him, using my back legs to propel myself into his chest—just like Xavier had taught me. The wolf was surprised by the force of the hit, and we fell to the ground, snapping and snarling at each other. I aimed for his jugular, raking my nails across his belly and downward, where Xavier said wolves were vulnerable.

My rage was so intense, so out of control, that I didn’t even feel it when he nipped at my shoulder, his teeth sinking in before I bit at his leg. The pain didn’t register, because my menace was stronger. My need to tear this monster into pieces was overwhelming, and his blood in my claws and jaws felt like victory. Lilac had been killed by someone exactly like this beast, and now they wanted to take Charlie away from me too.

That just wasn’t going to happen.

*This is my fight!* I thought on a loop, but just as I thought that I had the upper hand, the Rogue’s claws dug deep into the nape of my neck. The pain was too great to ignore, the spot too vulnerable. I yelped, shaking as he shoved me against a tree.

My whole body slammed against the trunk, my head pounding.

*Oh, no… No!*

My mind was dazed, breath coming slow. Something was wrong.

Had I lost? I couldn’t lose.

*Time to finish you off, little girl*, the Rogue said with a howl.

Before I could move, a flash of fur and teeth broke through the air.

*Charlie!*

Charlie’s wolf slammed against the Rogue, knocking him down like he was nothing but a bag of bones. The element of surprise was on Charlie’s side, and his power and speed were unrivalled. His teeth sunk into the Rogue’s throat, so deep that the beast whined, yelping.

A moment later, everything was silent.

Eyes wide, Charlie looked between the Rogue’s gaping neck wound and me. He let out a huff, as if shocked by what he’d just done, then stumbled backward before shifting back to human.

His face was dipped in blood.

“Charlie!” I shifted back to human too and rushed toward him. My shoulder and neck still ached from the fight, but it was nothing compared to the agony I felt seeing sweet Charlie like this.

He stared at the dead Rogue, shivering. “I just killed him. I’m a killer…”

Tears were streaming down my cheeks. “You did it for me,” I said, trembling as I hugged him, as I kissed his face. “He was about to kill me, and you saved me. He got what he deserved.”

“But…”

“One of the things you have to remember is that werewolves dispense justice differently than humans,” I said, wiping my eyes. “Do you get that?”

Slowly, Charlie nodded.

I couldn’t believe it.

My beautiful, amazing mate had saved me.

“No one would ever blame you,” I whispered, kissing his cheek. “But I didn’t even want to put you in this position in the first place. I knew killing someone would be too much for you. Why did you come back? You should’ve run away!”

“I couldn’t do it.” The color was returning to Charlie’s cheeks. He wrapped his arms around me. “I could never leave you. No matter what you say, no matter the risk, I would never leave you.” His eyes stared deeply into mine. His hand shaking, he pushed the bloodied hair from my forehead and whispered, “You’re the one for me. You’re my mate.”

I couldn’t stop myself from kissing him. It was a soft kiss, but so important to me, so beautiful that I shivered at our connection. He wiped my tears, sniffling. “What do we do now? Hide the body, or—”

“Let the coyotes feast on him,” I said sharply.

Charlie paused, blinking at me in shock. “When did you become such a badass?”

“When that bastard threatened my mate,” I said.

Charlie kissed my lips again, holding me tight. It was the best thing I’d ever felt.

Dizzy with relief, we headed back to the car. But then Charlie said, “What should we do about Agent Fernsby, though?”

My positive mood dampened. “I don’t know. Fernsby was a federal agent.”

“Maybe we can make an anonymous call?” Charlie asked.

I was mulling over Charlie’s suggestion when the car came into view.

We both went rigid.

Fernsby’s body was gone.

“What the hell?” I muttered.

But then a voice pierced the quiet. “FREEZE!”

Agent Imamu leapt forward, his gun aimed straight at us.

**Episode 854**

XAVIER

“*Colton?*” both Cali and I said at the same time.

I was both pissed off and surprised to see my brother. What was he *doing* here?

“Surprise!” Colton exclaimed, jumping onto the bed next to my naked mate. “I’m back!”

Cali squealed, fighting to cover herself with a sheet as Colton waggled his eyebrows at her. “Did you miss me?”

I facepalmed. Cali shoved Colton’s shoulder. “Colton, I’m fucking NAKED!”

“I don’t know why you’re still hung up over that. Literally everyone I know spends most of their time naked,” Colton told her casually. “Great boobs, by the way. But what’s up with the veins?”

I’d had enough of this bullshit, so I shoved my fucking annoying twin off the bed. Falling to the ground with a thump, Colton started laughing. Dick.

“Dude!” he said, grinning. “Be nice, you haven’t seen me in a while!”

As Cali grumbled something about irritating Peeping Tom werewolves, I reached out and grabbed Colton’s hand, pulling him up from the floor. “Your timing sucks, but I’m happy to see you.” I meant that. With everything that was about to go down, Colton’s support was crucial.

“Aww!” Colton snickered, dragging me into a bear hug. “You love me.” He turned to Cali, who was still fighting to wrap herself in a sheet. Even her clumsiness was hot. “Cali,” Colton told her. “Did you know that Xavier loves me?”

“You are the worst,” Cali declared.

Colton winked. “You love me too, admit it.”

Cali rolled her eyes. “Speaking of people who hate to love you and love to hate you, how’s Maya?”

“Eh,” Colton said, shrugging. “She’s still a pain in the ass, but what can you do?”

I eyed Colton’s calm expression. “Why are you back, though? Did something happen?”

“I just needed some space,” Colton replied with another shrug. “Next thing I knew, I ended up here.”

I squeezed his shoulder. “Your timing is great, though. We found Silas.”

Colton stared at me, wide-eyed. “Wait, for real?”

“Yeah.”

His expression darkened. “This is a good thing, then. You’re going to need my help. Like you always need my help.”

I scoffed.

“What have you been doing?” Cali asked Colton.

“Not much,” he replied. “Had a run-in with a cult, but other than that, same old same old.”

Colton seemed way too cool and casual about everything. Especially Maya. Cali and I exchanged a look.

*Do you buy this?* Cali asked through our mind link.

*Not for a second*, I replied. *But we’ve got other shit to worry about right now.*

Cali gave a slight nod before speaking again. “Well, you two will have to excuse me. I was about to take a shower.” She wrapped the sheet tighter around herself as she wobbled toward the bathroom, her toga-like ensemble a little too much to deal with.

When she closed the door behind her, Colton turned to me with a smirk. “It’s hilarious how she’s still embarrassed by all this. How many times have I walked in on you guys? Ten? A hundred?”

I glared at him. He really shouldn’t have been having fun with this, because I sure as fuck wasn’t. “It’s a lot of times. And it always sucks. Try knocking and waiting before you come in.”

Colton raised his eyebrows. “That’s not my style.”

I couldn’t help but smile, shaking my head. As obnoxious as Colton was, it felt good to have him back. “How long did you plan on staying?” I asked. “Shouldn’t you be buying baby clothes and building a crib right about now?”

Colton let out a weird little laugh. “You fell for that text? Do you really think I’d get Maya pregnant? How dumb do you think I am?”

“Very,” I deadpanned.

He rolled his eyes. “Whatever. I’m nobody’s dad.”

I could tell that Colton was lying, though whether it was to me or himself or both, I wasn’t sure. But I was certain that he was working through something right now. Cali would want to unpack this and spend hours talking about his reaction, but that wasn’t my style. I decided to play along for now.

“But if you did father a child with Maya, how do you think you’d feel about it? Like, on a scale of one to ten?” I asked.

He snorted. “Ten being good? Probably in the negative numbers.” He stared at me then. “Face it—we Evers aren’t exactly parental material. Bad role models.”

I shook my head. “That’s bullshit. Play rough all you want and deal with whatever denial you’ve got going, but I’m pretty sure you’d be okay as a dad.”

Colton huffed. “Just *okay?* Thanks for the vote of confidence, asshole.”

Cali poked her head out of her bathroom, frowning. “Why are you two still here? I want to get dressed.”

Colton smirked. “What’s stopping you?”

Cali huffed, but before she could tell him off, I grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out of the room. “Let’s give Cali some space.”

Cali shot me a grateful look before we left, mouthing, “*Love you*.”

I felt a twinge in my stomach at her soft expression and hid a smile, pulling a protesting Colton in the hallway all the while.

“You need to go with the flow, Cali!” Colton called over his shoulder. “Don’t be ashamed of your body, it’s beautiful!”

“She just doesn’t want *you* to see it, dipshit,” I snapped, herding him downstairs.

He frowned. “Why wouldn’t she? I love boobs.”

I smacked him over the back of the head, because the man was fucking impossible. He laughed as we went down the stairs.

“Have you seen Greyson yet?” I asked, changing the subject.

“No. I’m trying to avoid him, actually. Why? Is something going on?”

“We’re moving in on Silas,” I said.

Colton paused at the bottom of the stairs, staring at me. “Where has that asshole been hiding?”

“Nearby. I’ve seen him, Colton,” I said. “It’s him.”

“Shit, that’s—*seriously?*” Colton seemed excited, but also freaked out. “Tell me how and where! You mean to tell me I’ve been driving through fucking *Idaho* and he was in Oregon the entire time?”

I gave him a quick run-down.

“We have an edge on Silas now, too,” I added, near the end. “He thinks I’m dead.”

Colton stared at me, blinking slowly. “I have so many fucking questions.”

“I know, but we don’t have time for that. We’re making a plan. We’re moving on him. Soon. Tonight, even.”

Colton seemed shocked. “Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

He grinned. “Well, sign me up.”

I hadn’t expected anything less from him.

As we passed by the living room, Colton caught Greyson’s eye. His expression blank, Greyson walked up to us.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” he told Colton. “You’d think I would’ve smelled you coming in. How did you do that?”

Colton leveled him with a look. “Is this a good or a bad surprise for you?”

Greyson eyed him for a moment. “Good. We need all the fighters we can get.”

Colton’s shoulders relaxed.

“I filled Colton in about Silas,” I told Greyson. “He wants to help.”

Greyson nodded, just as Artemis passed by. “Who’s this?” she asked, eyebrows scrunched up as she stared at Colton.

“Colton Evers. The hottest of all the Evers brothers, obviously,” Colton told Artemis with a smirk, shaking her hand. “And who might you be?”

Artemis looked unimpressed. “I’m Cali’s sister. How many of you are there?”

“Enough to defeat Silas,” Greyson replied.

“That’s the right answer,” I said.

As Artemis squinted at all three of us, Colton looked at Greyson and me. “Since when do you two play nice?”

Greyson scoffed as I said, “Sometimes we have to.”

Colton pointed at Greyson. “I’ll have to give it to you for being so gracious in defeat.”

“In… *what?*” Greyson scowled, confused as he stared at Colton.

Before I could tell him to shut the fuck up, Colton said, “I chose Cali well when I found her on that website. Well, when I orchestrated the entire thing with Lola.” He slapped my back. “Guess she made her choice. She was about to bone Xavier when I interrupted them, so—”

“Cali hasn’t chosen.” Greyson’s voice was cold. His face too. I could tell that he was trying to rein in his fury, and I actually couldn’t blame him.

The idea of Cali fucking *him* made me want to snap his neck.

“No, she hasn’t chosen,” Artemis commented.

Now Colton looked really confused. “But she was about to…” He looked at me. “So is she fucking both of you at the same time, or—”

“We’re not talking about this right now,” I snapped, starting to feel aggravated. Colton pretended to zip his mouth, finally getting the memo.

“Bottom line,” Greyson said, “Cali hasn’t chosen yet, and she can… She can take as much time as she needs.” He looked like he’d just eaten something sour, and for once, I could relate. I still wanted to kill him, but I had to admit that I knew exactly what he was going through.

This was fucked all over.

“But she can’t, though,” Artemis said with a grimace.

“What are you saying?” Greyson’s tone was impatient.

“Cali *can’t* take all the time she needs to decide,” Artemis explained. “If she doesn’t choose before Halloween, you’ll all be dead.”

Both Greyson and I froze. “Wait…” I choked out. “*What?*”

**Episode 855**

AVA

The wolf was light grey with white spots, growling as it stood over me. It had my body trapped on the ground. Its teeth were massive, snapping at me as I fought to keep it from tearing my throat out. Hot spit fell on my cheek, burning my skin, and I finally managed to take a breath and shift to defend myself. The rush of the shift was as intense as ever, but this time it was magnified. My wolf was shaking, growling at the enemy. It wasn’t an unknown one.

Rishika snarled at me in recognition.

My shift had made her jump back, same as the kick I threw at her ribs. We circled each other for a moment.

*You should never have come here*, Rishika said in a hiss.

*Believe me*, I replied, *it wasn’t my first choice.*

I had barely gathered my bearings before she charged at me. Rishika was strong—a powerful wolf and an excellent fighter—but I could hold my own. I had learned how to fight sneakily, and I clawed unashamedly at her ears and eyes, where she was most vulnerable, ignoring the piercing pain of her shoving me face-up on the ground again and stomping on my stomach.

I howled in pain and slammed my paw into the side of her head. The impact distracted Rishika, and I got the opportunity to attack. I aimed for her neck, ready to immobilize her, but she slipped away. I still managed to nip at her collarbone, though, and blood burst against my tongue. It was enough to distract her, and I managed to get back on all fours.

Before she could recover, I pounced straight at her. I had no choice but to fight with her—she would kill me if she got the chance, and I needed to get to my brother ASAP. I needed to get both him and myself out of this situation alive. As we lunged at each other, rolling on the ground, with Rishika’s claws dragging across every piece of flesh she could find and me staying on the defensive, howling with pain, I realized one thing: there was no goddamn way for me to win this thing without playing dirty.

No wonder Rishika and Xavier were in charge of training the Redwoods.

When she pinned me on the ground again, panting down at me with a snarl, her eyes full of rage, I used my claws to scratch the earth and send a large chunk of dirt directly into her eyes.

Playing dirty, literally.

Rishika’s shock lasted for a beat too long, and I used that time to slam her down with all the force I could muster, aiming for the rock behind her. Her skull made a cracking sound when it collided with the solid mass and, after a moment of struggle, she passed out.

*Finally.*

I didn’t know how long I had until she regained consciousness. Seconds? Minutes?

My instinct to kill was defused as I realized that killing her wouldn’t be in my best interests. I didn’t need any more reasons for Xavier and Greyson to hate me. Also, I remembered Rishika from when I’d been pretending to be Cali—apart from a great warrior, she was a nice person. I’d done a lot of bad shit in my lifetime, and adding one more murder to my conscience wasn’t what I needed right now.

Letting her live didn’t mean that I wasn’t going to get the hell away from her, though.

I looked down at my wounds. The claw marks hurt like a bitch, but the wound in my shoulder was the worst. Still, it should heal quickly enough. I rushed away from Rishika, who was still thankfully knocked out, and headed toward the pack house.

It was counterproductive, but I had no other choice.

I wasn’t going back to Silas, and I wasn’t about to let Nolan die in that basement.

I looked around as I ran, staying alert. There were probably other Redwoods patrolling, so I needed to be careful. I paused to sniff the air when I heard footsteps.

“Rish?” Sage called. “Where did you go?”

Sage was in human form. An easy target, but I was injured, and again—I couldn’t harm anyone if I wanted a shot at Xavier’s forgiveness. I moved away quickly, worried that Sage would pick up my scent. If that happened, Nolan could be lost forever, if he wasn’t already.

I wondered how my Alpha brother had allowed himself to get caught in the first place. Not very Alpha of him. Greyson at least *acted* like an Alpha. Well, for the most part—he had a major soft spot when it came to Cali. Nolan had no soft spots in theory, and he’d still let himself get caught.

I always seemed to have to clean up his messes.

With that bitter thought rolling through my head, I reached the Redwood pack house. I slowed down, pausing to listen. There was nobody around. Shifting back to human, I snuck up to the cellar door at the back of the estate.

Nolan’s scent was all over the scene.

I pressed my ear against the door for a moment, just to make sure nobody was in there with Nolan. I could only hear his steady breathing—at least he was alive. I snapped the lock with my hands and slipped inside, making sure not to make a sound.

Moving cautiously in case there was some sort of booby trap in place, I headed downstairs. My eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness. The stench of my brother’s blood was nauseating. The most shocking part, though, was the fact that it was just *his* scent. It was as if the Redwoods had never harmed anyone else down here.

When I found Nolan, I gasped.

He was chained to a chair, no doubt with silver, and horribly hurt. He had old crusted blood on his face as he stared at me. His eyes were wide, his voice breathless when he spoke.

“It’s you, Ava…” he breathed, choking. “I sensed you, and I—I thought it was a trick…”

“I’m real,” I said quickly, fighting down the emotion that threatened to overwhelm me. Seeing him like this made me ache. He seemed to have healed, but he still looked beaten down, and I wondered who had done this. Greyson? Or had it been Xavier, as revenge for the things that Nolan had done to him?

There was a small voice in my head that was reminding me of all the travesties that Nolan had committed over the years. But he was still my brother.

“I’m real,” I repeated, “and I’m going to get you out of here.”

“You’re risking your life, being here,” Nolan whispered.

“I don’t care,” I said, approaching him slowly. “You’re the only family I have.”

He smiled bitterly. “Some family. I’ve fucked us over more times than I can count.”

I didn’t comment on his words. “How do I get these off?” I asked. They were silver, so I didn’t want to touch them. “If I shift back and try to bite through them, the silver could poison me. Did they have a key?”

Nolan nodded. “I heard one of the Redwoods say that there’s a set of keys on the other side of the door. The one that leads into the house.”

“Okay,” I said, exhaling sharply. I needed to be quick about this—I didn’t know how much time I had before Sage discovered Rishika.

“Ava?” Nolan said, just as I was about to walk out.

I turned to face him.

“Be careful. And thank you.”

I didn’t know what the hell to say. You’re welcome? I forgive you for all the bullshit you’ve put me through? I’m sorry we’re both such fucked up messes?

In the end, I said nothing. I just nodded and headed out. I climbed up the stairs as fast as possible, determined to get this done. I heard a conversation somewhere behind the door, but I couldn’t leave now. I needed that key.

The voices were a distance away, though, so this was a risk I could take. Maybe I was nuts, but I didn’t have a lot of options here. Swallowing thickly, I slowly turned the knob and cracked open the door. I peeked out, and there was nobody there.

Taking a quiet, steadying breath, I was reaching for the set of keys right by the door when all the air was knocked out of me.

A hand grabbed my wrist.

Groaning, I jerked back, losing my balance and tumbling down the stairs. I hit the ground and jumped up, ready to fight for my life.

Greyson, Colton, and Xavier were coming down the stairs straight toward me.

All three of them together were the most terrifying thing I’d ever seen.

Perhaps even more terrifying than Silas.

The Evers brothers weren’t speaking, and that was what scared me the most.

“Leave my sister alone!” Nolan shouted.

Panting, I looked at Greyson, at the fury in his face. I looked at Colton, at his sharp eyes.

And then I stared at Xavier’s unreadable expression.

“Ava,” he growled out, taking a step forward.

Would he help me… or would he kill me?

**Episode 856**

VIOLET

“FREEZE!” Agent Imamu yelled at us.

Instinctively, Charlie and I put our hands up. I wasn’t sure if Imamu’s gun had silver bullets in it, but I didn’t want to scare him or attack him anyway. We were in deep enough shit already, and the man hadn’t done anything wrong.

His eyes were bloodshot, like he’d been crying. His partner’s killing had to have affected him. He still had traces of wetness on his cheeks. He pointed his gun at both of us. “Don’t move, or I will shoot you both.”

“We didn’t—” Charlie started, but Imamu cut him off.

“Is that blood on you?” he demanded.

Charlie and I looked at each other. We were covered in blood. Some of it was our own, and the rest was the dead Rogue’s. Swallowing roughly, I turned to Imamu and noticed the body bag by his feet. Fernsby was partially covered, and I realized how horrible this had to look for both Charlie and me.

“This is not what it looks like,” I said, shaking. “We didn’t kill Agent Fernsby—we would never! She never harmed or threatened us, so we wouldn’t even have had a reason to kill her.”

Charlie nodded vehemently. “It was that Rogue, the one that Mr. Hart told you about. He killed her, and then he came—he came after us,” he stammered.

Imamu panted, staring between the two of us.

“Please,” I begged. “We’re telling the truth.”

Imamu pressed his lips together. After a long pause, he shook his head, cursing before he started to lower his gun. I let out a relieved breath, instantly feeling less afraid.

I didn’t want to hurt this man. I didn’t want his blood on my or Charlie’s hands.

That would be so wrong.

“Where’s the Rogue now?” Imamu asked us. His expression was severe, haunted. *Broken*.

“We can take you to him,” I replied.

Imamu gave us a look, eyes narrowed. “But you said you were being chased.”

I paused. “It was self-defense, and we—we took care of it.” I swallowed. “For Fernsby, too. We did it for her. She didn’t deserve a death like that.”

Sniffing, Imamu fully lowered the gun.

I let out an exhale of relief.

“That Rogue was a fucking maniac,” Imamu said, his voice cracking. “We were in pursuit of him. We were so close and one moment Melanie was there, and the next she was gone… She truly didn’t deserve this.”

I nodded as both Charlie and I lowered our hands.

Charlie glanced at me, exhaling sharply. I could feel our shared relief, the connection between us vibrating.

“Take me to the Rogue,” Imamu said, and we followed his order.

We led him back into the woods, but as we were getting closer to the spot, he stopped us. “Wait.”

Both Charlie and I turned to face him. He looked somewhere between devastated and exhausted. I couldn’t blame the poor man.

“I’ll find the Rogue myself,” Imamu said. “You two should probably get the hell away from here.”

I blinked at him, shocked. “You mean…”

“This place will be swarming with agents soon. There’s going to be a lot of questions, many of which none of us will be comfortable answering,” he said. “I don’t think I can protect you.”

Charlie looked at me with wide eyes. His surprise mirrored my own.

“You’re going to just… let us go?” I asked.

Imamu looked away, pressing his thumbs into his eyes. “That Rogue killed my partner. And in law enforcement, your partner means everything. I would have killed the Rogue myself, no questions asked. You kids just saved me the trouble, and I’m sorry you had to.”

Charlie stared at the agent silently. I could practically hear his heart racing.

“I don’t want you two to get caught up in this,” Imamu said. “You should leave before it’s too late.”

I couldn’t believe our good luck. Or, in a way, I could—I had heard the stories about partners giving their lives for each other, and perhaps these two had been something more than law enforcement partners anyhow. But whatever its character, the link between them had been deep. I was sure of it.

“You don’t care that we killed someone?” Charlie asked in a shaky tone.

“I’ve been with MIB for a while,” Imamu said seriously. “I know that supernaturals—werewolves—have their own laws. Their own code of honor. This is mine.”

How did he know what we were? Charlie looked away, and I could feel his guilt lingering. Turning to Imamu, I whispered, “Thank you.”

“Go to back to your pack,” Imamu said. “You need the rest of them. You’re safer in numbers—that’s just how things work. Stay out of trouble, and keep this between us. Do we have an understanding?”

Charlie and I exchanged a glance and then faced the agent again. We nodded at the same time, and I still couldn’t believe our luck. It was amazing. I watched as Imamu reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his card.

“In case you ever need me,” he said, glancing between us. “And I hope you don’t.”

“Thank you,” I said again. My hands were trembling as I took the card.

“Now, beat it,” Imamu said gruffly, wiping a tear from his eye before heading toward the Rogue’s body. Charlie and I were about to sprint the hell away from there when Imamu spoke up again. “And for god’s sake, put something on. There are some clothes in my car.”

\*\*\*\*

A few hours later, Charlie and I were on a plane heading to Oregon. I was exhausted. We had reached Cali’s house and explained everything to Tom and Orla after showering the blood off. Tom had forced us to eat something before leaving, even though neither of us had an appetite. After everything with the Rogue, Imamu, and then saying goodbye to Tom and Orla, all I wanted to do was close my eyes and pretend most of what had happened was a bad dream.

Except for the part where I was with Charlie.

He looked so cute in the MIB jacket we’d found in Imamu’s car. Mine was too large on me, but I didn’t care. We had kept the jackets as a token, to remind us of Imamu’s generosity and kindness.

Somehow, my mate and I had survived.

And maybe we had a friend in Imamu. Which, who knew, could end up being useful someday.

“Hey,” Charlie whispered. He took my hand, leaning his head against my own. “What are you thinking?”

For a moment, I couldn’t think of anything. Just his closeness. Nothing else mattered.

“You,” I murmured. “Just you.”

Charlie squeezed my hand, swallowing audibly. “I’m so glad I’m here with you, Violet. You’re the most important thing to me.”

I looked up at him, breathing slowly. “Me too.”

He leaned forward, brushing his nose against mine. My heart felt like it was about to burst. Was this what fate was all about? Was this how the universe had balanced out Lilac’s loss? By helping me find Charlie?

I missed my brother every day, and I planned to fight for Charlie and his safety every day for the rest of my life. My mate was worth fighting for—everything about him was amazing to me. I had never felt like this before in my entire life.

I wished Charlie could’ve met Lilac.

I wondered what Xavier would think of Charlie, though. I hoped they got along. Xavier wasn’t known for being the easiest person to be friends with, what with his occasional grumpiness and gruffness, but I couldn’t imagine him hating Charlie. I couldn’t imagine anyone ever hating Charlie.

I’d tried to call Xavier before we’d boarded the plane, but I hadn’t been able to reach him. Lola and Cali hadn’t responded to my texts, either. I hoped that nothing bad was going on back home. But then again, how possible was that with Silas on the loose? Last I’d heard, the pack hadn’t destroyed him yet.

My heart started pounding as I slowly realized the gravity of what I was leading Charlie into.

“Something wrong?” he asked, frowning.

“No,” I lied. I couldn’t say anything. Not right now, with all these people around.

“Are you sure? Your heart just started racing,” Charlie told me cautiously. “Should I be worried?”

I shook my head. “I’m okay.”

That wasn’t a lie, at least. As long as Charlie was with me, I would be okay. Smiling softly, he kissed the top of my head. His voice was low and sleepy when he spoke. “What’s it like in Oregon?”

“It’s…” I paused. “Rainy. But very nice. Green.”

I was well aware that I was talking to him about the freaking flora instead of the potential danger. Imamu had told us to go back to our pack, but… If Silas was still threatening the pack, were we any safer here?

**Episode 857**

GREYSON

Shoving Xavier to the side, I stood over Ava, glaring down at her. She looked so scared, so fucking innocent, like a nice girl who’d never hurt a fly. But I knew all too well the viper that she was.

I wanted to *break* her.

I wanted to kill her for what she’d done, for using me, for tricking me, for almost ruining my first time with Cali and my relationship with her.

“Good to see you came here to die,” I said.

She gasped.

I glanced at Nolan. “It’ll be fun to slit both your throats,” I said. I saw no reason not to do it after all they’d done. And since I was planning on going after Silas directly, Nolan’s further usefulness was questionable.

“Wait wait *wait* a second here!” Colton, the genius, piped up. “What the *fuck* is *Ava* doing here? How is she even here for us to kill?” He turned to Ava, eyes wide. “Are you a ghost?” He let out a choked noise. “A fucking *zombie?*”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Xavier snapped at Colton, before I could.

“I came out of a mirror,” Ava told Colton quietly. “And I’m as real as you are.”

Colton frowned again, still confused. “A *mirror*? I’m sorry what the fucking *fuck* is going on?”

“Please explain this to our brother before I kill him,” I told Xavier, who nodded seriously. I was glad to see that we could communicate on at least one issue.

“Big Mac was hiding from Silas in a mirror, and Mikah was able to find her,” Xavier told Colton. “He was also able to see the Fae portal at the Chop Shop. What Ava’s saying could easily be true.”

Colton glanced between all four of us, looking like he was ready to lose his shit. And then he did. “So you’re saying it’s possible that Ava”—he pointed at the harpy—“just fucking walked out of a mirror after you literally *tore her throat out?*”

Xavier pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m not saying we shouldn't send her back to where she came from.”

Before Colton could reply, Ava spoke up. Her voice had lost its earlier meekness. Now it was loud. Sharp. “I let you live, Xavier. I’m the reason Silas thinks you’re dead. And if he finds out I betrayed him, he’ll kill me. I did this…” She paused. “For you.”

Xavier didn’t say anything. Why wasn’t he calling her out? This was fucking *rich.*

“You’re a threat, Ava,” I declared, before Xavier could speak. “You do nothing but lie and trick and manipulate. You’ve fucked us over—literally and figuratively—more times than I can count, so why the hell should we believe a word that comes out of your mouth?”

“Yeah, you psycho, you killed our *mother*,” Colton barked. Then he looked confused again. “Wait, did she do something else to you guys after coming back as a hot mirror ghost?”

“I’ll tell you later; shut the hell up.” Xavier said to Colton as Ava stared at me.

“I understand how you feel, Greyson. But if you let my brother go, I can help you,” she said. “I can help you all—I just escaped from Silas.”

“Ava,” Nolan said sharply. “Don’t do this.”

She ignored him. “Well?”

I scoffed. “I don’t think you’re in any position to bargain.”

“Hold up,” Xavier said, peering at Ava. “How can you help?”

Ava swallowed roughly, her full attention on Xavier. “I’ll tell you what I know, but only if you promise you won’t hurt us. Only if you let us go.”

“You do realize that if you’re lying, I can hunt you down and kill you all the same, right?” I asked her.

She nodded curtly.

At least were on the same fucking page.

I nodded at Colton and Xavier. “Bring Nolan upstairs.”

“Ava, no!” Nolan said. “I can’t let you—”

“Let me handle this,” she told him in a hiss. “Let me fix what you did.”

Nolan fell silent.

Colton squinted at Xavier as he headed toward Nolan to grab him. “Hey, since when do we follow Greyson’s orders?”

I scoffed, heading upstairs. Let Xavier deal with both his ex and his twin. I’d had enough for the moment.

As I entered the main house, I saw Cali pass by the living room and head outside. I was struck by the sight of her for a second, by her presence, before I remembered what Artemis had said. If Cali didn’t choose by Halloween, we’d all die.

If that was true, then *why* hadn’t Cali told me?

After all we’d been through, after all the secrets and dumb bullshit—most of it my fault—I had expected her to keep our communication open. I had expected not to fall back into the same fucked mistakes. I was about to follow her outside when I stopped myself.

When I realized that this was exactly what Joss was talking about.

I had Alpha business to attend to, and here I was, obsessing over Cali again.

I reined in the need to follow her, controlling myself. I loved Cali, but I had to deal with the threat. For the pack’s sake, and for Cali’s as well.

Taking a deep breath, I leaned against the fireplace as Colton and Xavier brought Ava and Nolan upstairs. They shoved them down onto the couch, and I glared at them both.

“So?” I demanded. “Tell me what you know about Silas.”

Ava, shaking, started talking about ghosts, and the orb, and Silas with the orb, and the orb sucking up a ghost. It sounded like a horror story, not reality.

Colton was left blinking. “That’s some *seriously* weird shit.”

“The orb helps Silas absorb power,” Ava added. “The witch warned him to use it carefully, but I don’t think Silas will be cautious. He’s going to use it for all it’s worth.”

It dawned on me how dangerous and deadly this could be. If Silas gained more power to kill, it would be a bloodbath.

“This was what Tefirna warned Big Mac and Mrs. Smith about,” I said slowly.

“Oh yeah,” Colton chirped. “She did say that.”

I shot Colton a look and noticed him sitting there, clearly proud of himself and his random additions to the conversation. Meanwhile, Xavier looked at the ground, brooding like he always seemed to be.

I wondered how he felt about Ava. But then again, I didn’t give a fuck.

If needed, I’d kill her anyway.

“What else happened?” I asked Ava.

“They were experimenting with mind control,” she said.

I felt my jaw clench. I hadn’t expected that. “And?” I asked.

“It wasn’t working,” Ava said quietly. “I was able to trick them into thinking it worked, but if they actually find out how to do it…”

I looked around the room. My chest felt heavy all of a sudden. “Then Silas would turn us all against each other.”

Nobody spoke for a second. Not even Colton. Xavier looked at the ground, still.

“If this information you’re telling us is the truth, it makes one thing clear,” I said. “We have to act now, before it’s too late.”

The front door burst open and Sage walked in. Rishika was leaning on her, holding her bloody head. “She did this!” Rishika snarled, pointing at Ava before she lunged.

Reflexively, I grabbed Rishika, pulling her back from a cowering Ava. “Nobody lays a hand on her,” I ordered.

Rishika gasped. “That fucking bitch was about to—”

“I only did it to save my brother!” Ava said. “I could have killed you, but I didn’t. I never wanted to harm you.”

Rishika watched Ava with narrowed eyes, her chest heaving. “Why should I believe you?”

I shook my head. “We don’t have the time to debate this. Ava stays alive. For now. She will pay for all she’s done in due time. Meanwhile, you two”—I pointed at Rishika and Sage—“get ahold of Mace.”

Rishika and Sage left, but not before glaring at Ava one last time.

“What are we going to do with them now?” Xavier asked me seriously, gesturing at Ava and Nolan.

“You asked me to join you once before,” Nolan spoke up. “Why not now?”

I scoffed. “You betrayed me.”

“I was going to take your deal to spy on Silas for you,” Nolan said. He put a hand on Ava’s shoulder. “My sister has shown me that I need to start rethinking things. Silas could destroy all of us. I don’t want that for my pack.”

Was that *guilt* in Nolan’s tone?

He continued. “The Samara pack will help you kill Silas.” He held out his hand. “Deal?”

I paused, glancing at my brothers. They stayed there, stoic. Waiting. I assumed they’d wreck havoc after they saw my decision and disagreed with it, but neither of them said anything when I shook hands with Nolan.

“Deal.” I looked at Colton and Xavier. “Keep an eye on these two,” I said, jerking my head toward Ava and Nolan. “I’ll be back with details.”

I headed outside, ready to clear my head and plot.

And also to find Cali. Finding Cali, making sure she was safe out here, would be my reward for playing Alpha.

This was so messed up.

I spotted her walking by the lake. My emotions were a twisted ball inside me, a jumble of anger and hurt and longing. Always longing for her. Blocking her way, I demanded, “When were you going to tell me that the curse could kill us, Cali?”

**Episode 858**

I was pacing by the lake, breathing slowly in and out. It was strange seeing all three Evers brothers together for the first time in a while.

At least they weren’t tearing each other apart.

If nothing else, Silas’s return had brought them closer. It was the only positive thing about this mess of a situation. I’d thought about talking to Colton more, asking about Maya, but my chest had been bothering me. I needed to get some air, away from the pack.

I breathed steadily, but the pain wouldn’t subside.

*Why won’t it go away?* I thought bitterly. *Or just chill for a bit?*

Pressing my lips together, I pulled my shirt back and peeked at my chest. The black veins were acting up, spreading. My anxiety kept spreading as well. Were the veins reminding me of the choice I was supposed to make? Was it because I’d been about to hook up with Xavier before Colton had interrupted? Try as I might, I couldn’t get that out of my head.

Being with Xavier, kissing him, wanting him…

I felt my cheeks heat up at the memory of when we’d been together, earlier. How he’d looked at me in that hungry, greedy way—that way of his that felt like he wouldn’t ever be able to get enough of me. His gaze had been so intense, moving across my body while he told me to touch myself, that it sent chills down my spine even now.

I felt flushed, almost feverish at the thought of us together, of him telling me to show him how much I needed him. If I’d thought getting away from the house, from Xavier, would help me cool off, I was wrong. I bit my lip, my hands shaking as I folded them together before wrapping my arms around myself, as if to contain my need to be held right now. To be touched, to be kissed, to be wanted.

To be *needed*.

The cool breeze that surrounded the lake did nothing to cool me down, either. If anything, I was burning up with an increasingly insatiable desire. But not like I was sick. More like I wanted to do exactly what Xavier had asked for earlier—go back to my room and touch myself. Or maybe I had to do the second thing that guys said they did when they were horny—take a cold shower. A second one, since I’d already had one while Xavier and Colton had talked. Or perhaps I should just take a dip in the freezing lake?

*This is enough horny nonsense, Cali!* I scolded myself. Seriously, this was getting out of control. Since when had I become so… lecherous? Could I blame the curse? Probably not, but I was going to do it anyway. I wasn’t about to take responsibility for being wound up.

*I should cut the bullshit and head back to the house*, I told myself. Whatever was making me feel like this would pass. The veins were still spreading, throbbing in time with my body, but I had to ignore them. I had to go back to the house anyway—people would come looking for me sooner or later.

Taking a deep breath, I turned around, only to be faced with Greyson.

He was walking toward me, and my breath caught.

He was naked, his perfect, muscled body illuminated in the moonlight. The sight was so overwhelming that my heart started racing all over again, the black veins swelling against my chest, spreading in a way that felt as real as my desire for Greyson.

My body was shaking, and the heat of my skin became one with the heat Greyson emanated when he reached me. I was almost transfixed by him. He was speaking—what was he saying? I wasn’t hearing anything he was saying. His gorgeous lips were moving, his brow severe and furrowed, and that only made me want him more.

“… Cali?” he was saying, standing before me. “Did you hear me? What’s wrong?”

But as he reached out to touch my arm, I shook my head to clear it, and something shifted in my vision. Nearly panting, I looked down at Greyson. He was no longer naked. Had I been hallucinating? Had the veins done that?

“Were you saying something?” I asked, shaking my head.

“I was,” he said slowly. “But, Cali… Are you… Are you feeling okay?”

*Something’s seriously fucking wrong here*, I thought. But I still couldn’t stop myself from gravitating toward Greyson like a moth to a flame.

“You’re dressed,” I blurted suddenly.

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t I be?”

“No,” I said hoarsely, my hands opening and closing into fists as I held myself back. I stopped myself from getting any closer, because I knew I’d grab Greyson and kiss him otherwise. Fighting to control myself, I stayed just a foot away from him, my pulse thudding so hard I could feel it deep inside my body.

“I shouldn’t be dressed?” Greyson asked, looking confused now.

In a trembling tone and without any goddamn filter, I said, “No, you should—you should be completely naked.”

Greyson looked at me funny. “Cali. You’re acting a little strange. Are you okay?”

“How can I not be strange?” I asked, still shaking. Still holding myself back. “It’s a strange time.”

“I understand why you’re stressed, love,” Greyson murmured, closing the distance between us. My heartbeat soared, but I stayed rigid when he cupped my chin, scared of how I’d react to his proximity. “But I just want you to know that I’ll do everything I can to protect you.”

It was too much. His tender touch, the want and affection in his eyes, the raw need that his body radiated… I could no longer fight the feeling that started from my chest and spread all over me.

“I want you,” I whispered. “*Now*.”

Greyson’s lips parted and his gaze fell to my lips.

The aching longing made me snap and grab him, just like I wanted to. I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him into a kiss, devouring his mouth while gluing myself to him. I was delighted when I felt him shudder against me. I moaned when I felt his hardness, when I felt his tongue brush against mine, his grip tight around my waist, rubbing me up against him. It felt so perfect, so unique, but then…

It wasn’t.

Because I was suddenly hit by a flash of kissing Xavier.

*NO!* I thought, stumbling back.

This was messed up. This was disgusting, horrible of me, and the wave of guilt that hit me made me feel lightheaded in all bad ways. There were some lines that I shouldn’t cross. Whatever was left of them.

*What the FUCK, self?* I thought. *Why did you just think of Xavier?*

“What, what is it?” Greyson asked me, breathing harshly. “Are the veins hurting? What’s wrong?”

I felt like breaking down crying. “I shouldn’t—I shouldn’t be doing this. I’m sorry, Greyson,” I said, shaking my head. I took a step back away from him, but he grabbed my wrist, pulling me right the fuck back.

“You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell is going on with you,” Greyson demanded. Suddenly, the feeling overtook me again: I wanted him even more.

*This is sick,* I thought. *This isn’t fair to either of them!*

“I just kissed Xavier before.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

The pause that followed was heavy. Heavy on my shoulders, as heavy as Greyson’s sharp, heated gaze on me. His quick breathing had slowed, and his agonized worry from earlier vanished, replaced by that same lust—only tenfold, and dripping with power.

In that moment, when Greyson stared at me, he looked so powerful that I felt my knees go weak. “I will erase his every touch,” he said sharply and dragged me close, his body crushing mine. “Do you understand that, Cali?” He looked into my eyes, his voice coming out harsh.

The heat from earlier had intensified, turning into an inferno. I wasn’t sure where it had come from, but Greyson and I were both burning up with it. I was barely standing, barely able to think. I was barely able to breathe as I spoke. “Do you think… Is it because of the *due destini*?”

Greyson’s laugh was short and sharp. It almost sounded mocking, daring, like he was challenging the curse to come at him, because he could deal with it anyway.

“Right now, I don’t give a fuck,” he said.

He pulled me in and kissed me again, gripping me tightly while his mouth worked against mine. Groaning, I pressed against him, needing more, and he pulled me up to wrap my legs around him. I clung onto him and kissed up his neck, biting and nibbling, rubbing myself against him. He cursed under his breath, shivering, and carried me to a secluded area, further into the woods. A place where we wouldn’t be visible from the house.

When he laid me on the ground, his kisses turned deeper—still intense, yet somehow gentler.

But that wasn’t what the burning feeling inside me desired.

That wasn’t what I needed.

I wanted my Alpha. *Now*.

**Episode 859**

GREYSON

The fire in Cali’s eyes was burning bright and clear and, looking into it, I knew exactly what she wanted. I pushed her against the ground and into the grass. I leaned down, crushing my lips against hers. I was as hungry for her as she was for me, and I let myself consume her.

Somewhere in the back of my lust-addled brain, I could still hear her telling me that she’d just been with Xavier. And my question about the curse was still rattling around in my head. But I didn’t care. Everything was uncertain right now—Silas was on the move, coming for me and the pack; I was making deals with enemies who’d already betrayed me; the battle was about to start, and I could die tomorrow… So—right now, with Cali’s mouth on mine, with the softness of her body pressed into me, with her heat radiating into the cold night—I didn’t give a shit where she’d just been. And I’d meant what I said—I’d make her forget.

My hands went down and grasped the hem of her shirt. She leaned her head back, murmuring my name as I pulled it roughly over her head. I cupped her breasts in my hands, feeling their weight. I looked down at her tits in my large hands and I knew that possessing her right now wasn’t a desire—it was a *need*. I could feel the pull of it deep within me. I dropped my head, running my teeth over the tiny rosebud nipples, and heard her gasp.

“Oh god,” she muttered, grasping at me, reaching for my belt.

“You wait until I tell you,” I growled, slapping her hands away.

She drew her hands back, her expression one of surprise, but her cheeks grew pink with pleasure. “Yes,” she whispered, her eyes were growing hazy. “I’ll be good.”

“That’s more like it.”

*Mine*. I reached for the button of her jeans and yanked them roughly off.

*Mine*. I slipped my hands into her panties and put a finger to the seam of her sex, where she was hot and slick, ready for me.

*Mine*. I yanked off my shirt, then reached down one-handed to unbutton my pants.

“Grey… son,” she breathed, her eyes squeezed shut. “I need you. Now. *Please*.”

I covered her mouth, kissing hard, possessing her. “Yeah?” I growled. “Where?”

She bit into her swollen bottom lip. “Inside me.”

Then I gave her a wolfish grin, because—as it happened—I wanted the very same thing. I grasped her panties and ripped them off, letting the shreds of lace fall to the ground. “I’m going to fucking bury myself in you, love.” And, before she could respond, I did just that.

Her cry of pleasure rang in my ears and she wrapped her legs around me as I drove into her. I tucked my hands under her ass and pressed in even further into the ground.

Her hands were on my back, her nails scraping down my flesh as she gasped my name. “Yes, Greyson,” she said, panting. “Grey…”

She closed her eyes gasping, cutting my name off.

“Open your eyes,” I snarled. “Watch me fuck you, Cali.”

She opened her eyes again, surprised, but her breath came even faster as her eyes traveled down, finding the source of our joining, and she moaned. She started to shiver, coming apart.

“Greyson,” she panted. “Oh my god…”

My name was a prayer in her mouth and she started to shake, shattering, screaming my name, feeling like liquid in my arms. Her voice bounced around the trees, and I could feel myself starting to lose control.

“Cali,” I murmured, leaning closer, biting her shoulder. She tightened around me, clenching my cock inside her in a way that sent me over the edge. I gripped her hard, digging my fingers into her flesh, and pulsed inside of her. Claiming her.

*Mine.*

I slowed to a stop and, after a few harsh breaths, pulled away.

“Love?” I asked. I had lost myself at the end there. I looked her over quickly, making sure I hadn’t bitten too hard.

But she just nodded, her eyes still wide and bright. “I’m perfect,” she hummed, her voice low and sultry.

The sound of it made something in me thrum, but I shook my head. That couldn’t be what she wanted. I moved back another step and looked around, sniffing the air. There were no patrols nearby. We’d been fast, so no one could have noticed we were gone. Which was for the best.

I looked around. Our clothes lay strewn around in a wide circle. I started to go for my jeans, lying in a crumpled heap at the base of a pine tree.

But I stopped when I felt Cali grasp my wrist.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked, her eyes dark.

“What?”

She shook her head and tightened her grip on me, towing me back to her. “Weren’t we just… getting started?” And she slipped a hand around the back of my neck and pulled me down, crushing her mouth to mine.

I had never seen Cali this hungry, this aggressive, and I pulled back, surprised. “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?” she purred, slipping her hands around my waist, pulling me closer so our bodies slid against each other.

I frowned. “Is this because of the curse?” I wondered out loud. I looked around the dark trees. “Or the battle?”

A shadow passed across her eyes, but she shook her head, like she was trying to rid herself of the thought. “All I know is that I put this off for too long, Greyson.” Her hands slid up my back, her fingers soft and teasing on my skin. “When I think of all the times we could have been together, I just hate myself for wasting time.”

“Cali,” I rumbled, pulling her close.

For a moment, her eyes grew bright with unshed tears. “I don’t know what tomorrow will bring, Greyson. None of us do.” She shook her head. “I can’t live with any more regrets. I don’t want to waste any more time.”

And she yanked me down, her kisses hot and insistent. They were so achingly hungry that I forgot I’d just made this woman orgasm so powerfully that she’d screamed; I forgot that I’d finished so hard I still wasn’t breathing right. Kissing Cali always felt like the first time, and when she pulled me back down to the soft, mossy forest floor, I let her—eagerly.

This time was slower—I took my time, allowing myself to explore Cali’s body, to run my hands across the planes of her, to let my fingers probe deep. She watched me, her eyes wide and wondering, gasping when I touched her most sensitive places.

When neither of us could wait another moment, I rolled and pulled her on top of me. She shut her eyes and her breath came in small, uneven bursts as she rode me, hard. She was being so tentative now, shy almost.

“No,” I growled, grabbing her hips and yanking her against me. “I want you to *fuck me*.”

“Y-yes,” she said, shaking her head, insensible as a second orgasm rolled through her.

I grasped her breasts, hard, and she peaked again, throwing her head back, grinding against me until I came, shuddering, pulsing into her hot, slick core.

“Shit, love,” I said. “That was amazing.”

Cali smiled and kissed me again. I ran my hands up her back, breathing the scent of her in. *Mine*.

“We’d better go,” I said between kisses. “Before a patrol finds us.”

Cali nodded even though I could see it in her eyes that she wanted to stay for round three as much as I did. With one last, lingering kiss, I pulled Cali to her feet, then we got dressed and headed back to the pack house.

Halfway up the lawn, I pulled her to a stop. “Wait.”

She looked up at me. “What’s wrong?”

I looked down at her beautiful face for a long moment, then pulled a pine needle from her hair and tucked a stray lock behind her ear. “I’m sorry, Cali.”

She frowned. “Huh? For what?’

I shook my head. “I never would have chosen this life for you.”

Realization dawned in her dark eyes. “I didn’t have a choice. None of us did. Our fates were set by *due destini*.”

“That might be so,” I said with a sigh, “but I can still protect you from some things.”

“Greyson, you’re scaring me,” she said.

“I don’t want you anywhere near the battle, Cali.”

“What?”

“Silas won’t go down easily,” I said grimly. I glanced up at the house. “They think they know what’s coming, but they don’t. This could be worse than the Pack Wars. Much worse.”

“I’ve been training, Greyson. Even Artemis thinks my magic has improved—”

“Cali—”

“I’m not just going to stand by helplessly,” she said angrily.

And she wouldn’t. I knew that. I stared at her face, her cheeks flushed and her eyes flashing as she glared up at me. I let my eyes range over that face, trying to imprint it in my memory. I hadn’t seen her coming. I’d never imagined I would meet someone like her, someone who could make me feel the way she did.

Her brows furrowed under my scrutiny. “What?”

I smiled. I couldn’t help it.

“I love you,” I told her. I couldn’t help that either.

Cali’s eyes grew wide and she opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. Instead, she reached up and pulled me down, pressing her lips to mine.

I was tired and my body was spent, but her kiss stirred something inside me. There was something about the way the swell of her bottom lip fitted just perfectly against mine that made me realize every other kiss I’d had before hers had been wrong. But, as we kissed, I realized I could feel the warm wetness of tears on her cheeks. My heart ached for her and, when we broke apart, I looked down at her and brushed away the tears with my thumb.

I loved this woman. With my entire being. Which made what I had to say next so difficult.

“When the time comes to choose, Cali, choose Xavier.”

**Episode 860**

I stared up at Greyson. I must have misheard. “What did you say?” I asked.

Greyson’s expression was grim. “If this curse is killing you, Cali, then you should choose Xavier.”

“What are you talking about—”

“Think about it. It’s the only way to make sure you don’t end up sacrificing yourself to this thing,” Greyson said. I saw pain flash across his eyes—so deep it made my breath catch—but then his expression hardened. “I couldn’t live with myself if you died because you couldn’t choose between us.”

I shook my head. “That’s not—”

“I know you, Cali,” he said firmly. “You would rather die than see either one of us hurt. You’ve probably already tried to figure out a way where *you’re* the only one who gets hurt.”

I bit my lip but didn’t say anything. He was right, but I wasn’t about to tell him that.

He shook his head. “You’re too compassionate.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t see that as a big flaw, Greyson—”

“It’s one of the reasons I didn’t choose you as my Luna, Cali. I wanted you, but I couldn’t do that to you.”

This stopped me, and I stared at him. “You didn’t choose me because I *care* about people?” I asked incredulously. “Because I’m too *nice?*”

Greyson’s jaw worked. “You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand?” I asked. A cold wind rose and, shivering, I crossed my arms over my chest. “Explain it to me.”

Greyson reached for me, but he stopped himself and his hands fell to his side. He looked miserable. “I love everything that makes you the person you are, Cali, and I wouldn’t want you to change anything. But being a Luna requires the ability to act dispassionately. To push your feelings aside and make some seriously tough choices.” He shook his head. “I didn’t want that for you. Not yet, anyway.”

“Not *yet*?” I frowned. “What does that mean? *When* do you want that for me?”

He shook his head but didn’t answer.

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

Greyson looked at me for a moment, then away, up at the lighted pack house. “Things got… *complicated*, when we learned about *due destini*.”

I thought about this for a moment. “Does this have anything to do with Xavier?”

Greyson looked back at me, his mouth a hard line. “Even if Xavier weren’t in the picture, I wouldn’t have chosen you to be my Luna, Cali. It would have been selfish.”

My mind was spinning. I was having a hard time following Greyson’s thinking. “I don’t understand. Why would it have been selfish?”

“Because of Silas!” Greyson exploded. “It would have exposed you to that monster. Like a target, branded on your forehead.” He shook his head. “I wasn’t going to let that happen.”

“So,” I said slowly, starting to piece it all together, “you drew a target on Joss, instead?”

Looking suddenly tired, Greyson passed a hand over his eyes.

I thought about Joss. She and I hadn’t had the best start, and would probably never be best friends, but I had come to see her for who she really was, and I respected the hell out of her. There was nothing she wouldn’t do for the pack. She saw the big picture in ways that I didn’t think even Greyson did, sometimes. I shook my head. “That doesn’t seem fair to Joss.”

“Joss is a werewolf,” Greyson said wearily. “She wanted to be a Luna. She knew what it meant, and she knew what she was in for.”

I could sense some hesitation in his voice. He wasn’t saying everything. “*And?*” I prodded.

His jaw worked. “*And* she’s just fundamentally better able to protect herself. She’ll fare better when it comes time to face Silas.”

My anger flashed. “I’m *not* helpless, Greyson. I’m Fae. I have powers.”

“All the more reason to keep you out of the way, Cali. Silas knows you’re Fae, now. He’s going to come after you first.”

“So let him!” I shouted angrily. “I’ll blast him. I’ll be glad to get a shot in—”

“I’ve already told you,” Greyson growled, sounding angry now. “You’re not going anywhere near him, or the battle. It’s too dangerous.”

I stared up at him, seesawing between emotions. I was furious that he was trying to protect me like I was a child, but also moved by his concern. How had we gone from having sex to *this*? I could see the struggle in his eyes. He was worried—*terrified*—of what was coming, but he had meant what he said. He loved me, and I knew he just wanted to keep me safe.

Biting back both an angry diatribe and the desire to kiss him again, I turned back toward the house. I was going to need to think about this for a while. But Greyson stopped me again.

“Promise me,” he said, grasping my hand, “that when all hell breaks loose, you’ll stay away. Cali. Promise me.”

“I can’t promise that,” I said, annoyed. “How can you expect me to just stay in my room with my hands pressed over my ears? This pack is my family, too.” I pulled my hand from his grasp and pushed past him, heading for the house.

Steinar was lying on the grass near the front porch, and I slowed for a moment to see how he was doing. There was a loud, rumbling sound that rose and fell, and I looked around, trying to locate the source. It sounded almost like—

Wait. Was Steinar *snoring*?

I had no idea that gargoyles could make a sound like that.

I shook my head and stomped up the steps and into the house. Anger still coursed through me, so when Artemis waved me into the living room, I glared at her.

“Where have you been?” she asked, ignoring my stormy expression. “You haven’t been practicing your magic without me, have you? Because given your skill level, that would *not* be a good idea.”

I was not in the mood for Artemis’s attitude at the moment. “I went for a walk. Is that allowed?” I snapped.

Artemis frowned. “What’s your problem?”

I closed my eyes with a sigh. I was angry, but it had nothing to do with Artemis. All she was trying to do was help me, and it wasn’t fair to take out my frustration on her. “I’m sorry,” I said, looking at her. “I just had a talk with Greyson. He wants me to stay away from the fight with Silas. He tried to make me promise I wouldn’t go anywhere near it, actually.”

“*What*?” Artemis asked, clearly surprised.

“I know. And it especially sucks because we’ve been working so hard, and you said yourself that I’m getting better at controlling my powers. I mean”—I gestured vaguely around—“it’s not like I’d be a liability out there. I could help them.”

Artemis perched on the arm of the sofa. “No, you’re right. You’re Fae, and Fae are natural warriors. Even in non-Fae wars, armies are always desperate to have Fae on their side. Having one of us on your side can tip the scales in a battle like this.” She shook her head, a disgusted look on her face. “You could save all these stupid wolves. He’s an idiot not to see that.”

“I know,” I grumbled.

“Did he give you a reason?” Artemis asked.

Heat rushed to my face. “He said he loved me,” I muttered, nearly under my breath.

Artemis blinked at me. “What did you say?”

I cleared my throat and tried to speak more clearly, but my face still burned. “He said he loved me.”

“*Greyson* said that?” Artemis asked, clearly shocked.

“Yeah.”

“*Out loud?*” she asked incredulously.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes.”

She sat back, her eyes wide as dinner plates. “Whoa. That’s *huge*.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, suddenly uncomfortable with the whole conversation. “Anyway, I’m going to go get something to drink.”

I turned, leaving a shocked Artemis looking after me, and headed into the kitchen. I poured a glass of water and drank it gratefully. The kitchen was dark, and I walked to the wide glass doors that led to the back porch. I looked out onto the wide lawn, my eyes unfocused, thinking over everything that had just happened, and was about to happen. Greyson was right about one thing: things were definitely complicated.

But my gaze sharpened when I saw two figures standing in the yard. They were near a copse of trees, shrouded in darkness. They looked familiar, but it was too dark to make out who they were.

They were standing very close together, having what looked like a very intimate conversation.

Then I gasped. I knew who they were—Xavier and Ava. My stomach clenched as I watched Xavier lean closer as he spoke to her. But… *was* he just speaking to her?’

The glass in my hand slipped from my grasp and hit the floor, shattering into a million pieces. My throat was dry and my mind reeled as I peered out the window at the shadowed figures.

Wait, was Xavier *kissing* her?

**Episode 861**

XAVIER

The night was cold and dark, and I leaned close to Ava, whose face was half-shrouded in shadows.

“Let me make something clear,” I started, my voice low and full of menace. “You can say whatever you want, but if you make one move that I don’t like, I’ll kill you. I’ve done it once, and I’ll do it again.”

Ava looked up at me, her dark eyes unafraid. “Is that the thanks I get for saving your life? Threats?”

I looked at her for a moment, trying to read the expression in her eyes. “Why *did* you save me?” I finally asked. It was the question that had been circling in my mind since that moment in the woods, and my curiosity finally got the best of me. “You’ve got to have an angle here. Did you do it to protect yourself?”

Ava laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding. If anything, lying to Silas puts me in greater danger.” She narrowed her eyes. “But you already knew that.”

She was right—I did know that. I shook my head, frustrated. “Then why did you do it? I don’t understand. What’s your game here?”

She sighed, sounding tired, and some of the anger left her eyes. “Our history will always be there, Xavier. This gulf between us. There’s nothing I can do about that. But no matter what has happened between us, we’re still mates. I might have made mistakes in the past—”

“Like murdering my mother?” I snarled, taking a threatening step toward her. “Or looking like Cali?”

“Silas did that to me,” she shot back, without retreating. She shook her head. “When I’d come back through the mirror… My memories were scattered. Some things were clearer than others. He took advantage of it. When I finally realized that it was Silas, I knew I couldn’t be there anymore.” Her eyes shone bright. “You may not believe me, Xavier, but I am truly sorry about your mother.”

I looked away, a knot of tension in my belly so large it was making me feel sick.

“I don’t know if she’s forgiven me,” Ava went on, “but she did help me escape from Silas so that I could come here. So that I could help you.”

Stunned, I looked back at her. “What are you talking about? You saw my mother?”

Ava nodded. “She was one of the ghosts I saw at Silas’s cabin.” Her face went a little pale in the darkness. “She was angry when she saw first saw me, and she could have exposed me, but instead she sent me to you.”

My heart was beating hard as my eyes ranged over her face, looking for a clue—something to tell me if she was lying. When my eyes met hers, our gazes locked for a long moment, and I *knew*. Maybe it was because we were mates, maybe it was something else, but I sensed I could trust her. It was a connection I felt deep in my soul—and one I couldn’t deny, even if I could never forgive her.

“I saved you,” Ava said slowly. “We’re even now. Don’t expect anything else.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So is this a truce?”

“Call it whatever you want,” she said, her voice low. “We both want Silas dead. At the very least, we’re fighting on the same side.”

Letting this settle in, I glanced back toward the house. Silhouetted in the glass door of the kitchen, I saw Cali, looking out at us. My heart leapt. *She was back*. I raised my hand, motioning for her to come out to me, but she turned away and walked out of the room. I stared after her for a moment, wondering what that could have been about.

“Let’s go,” I said, heading back toward the house. I wanted to talk to Cali, and Ava followed me up the lawn.

“Well, well, well.”

We both turned to see Colton striding across the dry grass. He’d come around the side of the house from the front and was walking toward us, a twisted smile on his face.

“Colton,” I said warily.

He stopped and glanced between us for a moment. “I’ll tell you, it’s weird as hell to see you two together. Weird as fuck. But kind of like old times.” He shrugged and gestured casually toward Ava. “You know, back before you murdered our mother.”

The color drained from Ava’s face.

“Colton,” I growled.

Colton ignored me. “I have to admit, I’m a little disappointed. I was expecting the two of you to have some kind of epic battle royale if you were ever to meet again. Not that I was *expecting* you to meet again, not after Xavier ripped out your throat and everything—” Ava put her hand to her throat, where I could see the raised scars on her flesh. Colton smiled. “But instead it’s all moonlit strolls for the two of you, huh?”

“I’m tired,” Ava said softly. She brushed past Colton and headed up to the house.

Colton turned to me, but I shook my head.

“I don’t have the time for your bullshit, man. I have to talk to Cali.”

“Do you?” Colton said. His smirk seemed to be stretched a little tight. “Couldn’t help but notice she and Greyson were gone a while.”

I glared at him. “Yeah, man, I’m well aware.” And I was, but I sure as hell didn’t like thinking about it. Especially considering the way Cali had practically run away when she’d seen me from the kitchen. “You know, you don’t *actually* have to rub it in, man. It’s not a requirement.”

Colton made a hissing noise. “Tender spot, huh?”

I smacked the back of his head. “Mind your own goddamn business.”

Colton chuckled as he rubbed his head, and I wanted to hit him again. He hadn’t been here. He hadn’t seen the veins. He had no idea what kind of strain Cali had been under.

I glanced up at the back door, where Ava was standing. She looked back at me before she opened it and disappeared inside.

“I have no idea how you can even stand to be near her,” Colton said without a trace of a smile as he followed my gaze. “I’d have killed her first and asked questions later.”

“That’s not an option right now, so back off, okay?” I snapped.

“She killed our mom, so no,” Colton said, crossing his arms across his chest.

“I saw her.”

Colton looked at me. “Who?”

“Mom.” I swallowed. “I saw her ghost.”

Colton’s eyes widened. “You shouldn’t say shit like that, bro. Are you on drugs or something?”

I shook my head. “It’s the fucking orb. Now that Silas has it, a lot of weird shit’s been happening.”

Colton frowned. “So how come you got to see her and I didn’t?”

Classic Colton. I managed not to roll my eyes. “She said something to me. ‘Remember the Titans.’ Any idea what she meant?”

Colton’s frown deepened. “Like the movie? Mom hated football.”

“Not the movie. It had to do with how to defeat Silas. Do you have any idea what she might have meant?”

Colton shook his head. “If she meant the classic movie, I might be able to help you out. Anything else is out of my wheelhouse, bro.”

“Hey!” Jay jogged over, Lola on his heels. “Is this a welcome home party?” He threw an arm around Colton. “It’s good to see you, man.”

“You, too,” Colton said, smiling. He leaned over to kiss Lola on the cheek. “Hey, Lola. You’re brainy—know anything about Titans?”

“The football movie?” Jay asked.

“This has nothing to do with football,” I groaned. “Let’s pretend that movie never came out.”

Jay and Colton both looked at me, horrified. But before they could say anything, Lola cut in.

“Wait, the old story?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Are there stories about Titans?”

“Yeah,” Lola said. “They’re—oh, shit, *whatchamacallits*…”

“Very specific,” Colton said, nodding sarcastically.

Lola rolled her eyes and pulled out her phone. “No, they were, like these…” She started typing furiously. “The *gods*! The Greek gods.”

Colton and I exchanged a glance. “Gods?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Lola said, her eyes on her phone. “Here!” she said triumphantly, and held out her phone. “The Titans, the Greek gods.”

Colton and I leaned in, looking at the rough pencil sketches of a terrifyingly angry giant that was eating handfuls of smaller people.

Colton looked up at Lola. “So what the fuck does this mean?”

Lola frowned. “What is this for?”

“We’re writing a composition for freshman English,” Colton said scathingly. “What the hell does it matter—”

“Some story about the Titans might be the key to defeating Silas,” I said, speaking over Colton.

Lola’s eyes grew wide. “Whoa. Okay.” She looked back at her phone and read quietly for a moment. “Well, there was this one guy—”

“Specific,” Colton nodded.

“Kronos,” Lola went on. “That’s him,” she said, pointing at the angry giant in the illustration. “He ate his children for power.”

My heart thudded. “He *ate* his children?”

Colton looked at me, his eyes wide. “Wait, is our father going to *eat us*?”

**Episode 862**

I shut the door to my room, my head spinning. I felt so strange. So elated, but so crestfallen. Greyson had just told me he loved me—for the first time—and then, practically in the same breath, he’d also told me to choose Xavier.

And then I see Xavier *making out with Ava on the lawn?*

I sat down on the edge of my bed, breathing hard. Maybe I was overreacting. Maybe I hadn’t seen what I thought I’d seen. It was dark. They’d been shadowed. Maybe they weren’t making out.

On the other hand, Ava *had* been Xavier’s mate—his firstmate—and maybe she still was.

My breathing was starting to hitch, like I was about to cry, and I reflexively put my hand to my chest. It hurt, and I could feel the black veins throbbing under my hand.

Rationally, I knew what I should do: I should confront Xavier. Tell him what I saw. Demand an explanation. Or… I should at least ask him about it.

I bit my lip, thinking. Maybe I was being ridiculous. After all, I *had* just been with Greyson—a couple of times. I tried to imagine how Xavier would react if he knew about that. I shuddered at the thought. It was probably not a great idea to bring it up.

But… it had almost felt like I couldn’t help it. I’d known it was risky, being with either of them in his environment, but when I’d seen Greyson walking toward me, it had been like I couldn’t *think* for wanting him. It had been *beyond* wanting him. I’d *needed* him. I’d felt almost *possessed* by the urge to be with him.

The veins in my chest gave a throb so painful I gasped. It was the stupid curse. That was what this felt like. Like the curse was digging deep inside me, pulling on my emotions, forcing me to choose. Being with Greyson had felt out of my control, like I couldn’t have resisted, even if I’d wanted to.

Not that I’d wanted to resist. It was always amazing, being with him. But I didn’t like the idea that the curse was controlling me—that it was messing with me and playing with my desires. Making me want more. Being with Greyson—or Xavier, for that matter—was exciting and satisfying, but it didn’t answer any questions. It didn’t help me figure anything out. If anything, it only made things more difficult as I grew closer and closer to both of them.

My throat was starting to close up, like it always did when I was about to cry, and I dropped my head into my hands. If Greyson was so concerned about me sacrificing myself instead of making a choice, why hadn’t he told me to choose him, instead of Xavier? He said he loved me, but how could he say that and then not fight to have me choose him?

I took a deep, shuddering breath and looked up. I needed to talk to someone about this. Someone who wasn’t Greyson or Xavier. Someone who could help me.

I needed to talk to Lola.

Standing, I started for the door. I hadn’t seen her for a while, so I thought I’d start with her room, but I stopped when I heard talking in the yard.

My stomach clenched.

*Ugh*. Was Xavier still out there with Ava?

But it sounded like more than two voices. I crept to my window and peeked around my curtain. Xavier was out there, with Colton, Jay, and Lola. Ava was nowhere to be seen (*thank god*), so I hurried downstairs to join them.

“—and what I’m saying is that it’s got a bad rap, but if you’re in a bad situation, I just don’t see how it’s that big a deal. Meat is meat, right? Whether it’s cow or human,” Colton was saying.

“You’re sick, man,” Jay said, looking a little green.

Xavier looked at me as I approached and smiled, but I turned away from him, looking at Lola as she shook her head thoughtfully.

“I think I’m on Colton’s side on this one, Jay,” she said. “Look at the Donner Party. I mean, they would have died if they hadn’t eaten their teammates. And it’s not like they killed them. They were already dead. They died in the plane crash. They just harvested their meat—”

“Okay, okay,” Jay said, looking like he was going to be sick. “I think we get the idea, Lola.”

“Um, what’s going on?” I asked, looking between them. “You’re not all planning another barbecue are you?”

Jay pressed his lips together, like he was trying to stop himself from barfing.

Lola rolled her eyes. “If everyone would stop interrupting me, I could explain what I’m talking about.”

“Fine,” Xavier said, looking tense, “go ahead. But stick to the relevant stuff, okay?”

I looked at Lola, totally baffled, and tried to ignore Xavier, who kept stealing glances at me, trying to catch my eye.

“Okay,” Lola said, taking a deep breath. “So back in the olden days, there was this guy named Kronos, and he was a Greek god, but like, the OG. The father of the rest of them. And he ate his kids—”

“Ew,” I said, wrinkling my nose. The name was familiar—Cassandra had mentioned Kronos before in her journal.

“I know,” Lola said, nodding. “He was a sick fucker. But his wife was a total badass. She was sick of it, and she was going to have another baby and was like, *he’s not getting this one!* So she gave him a rock instead, which is horrible for digestion.” Lola pointed to Colton and Xavier. “They’re the rocks.”

“Lola,” Xavier growled.

“What?” I asked, baffled. Cassandra had neglected to mention any of *this*.

“Shh!” Lola hissed, “I’m not done. So Kronos’s wife hides her baby away and he grows up to be Zeus. You know, the sexy one with the lightning bolts in the Disney movie? Anyway, Zeus ends up killing his father and saves the rest of his siblings who were eaten.”

I stared at her. “Wait, he saves them? How did they not die? I thought Kronos ate them?”

“They survived because they’re gods, Cali. Duh,” Lola said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“So they were just chilling in his stomach the whole time?” Colton looked extremely impressed. “Super gross.”

Lola shrugged. “Yeah, but then they all banded together and defeated Kronos and like, threw him into hell, so… worth it.”

I shook my head, trying to wrap my head around all of this. “How is this story relevant to Silas?”

Xavier raised his eyebrows. “My mother warned me that my brothers and I needed to remember this story. That it’ll help us defeat Silas.”

Colton looked like he was doing some hard thinking. “So are we supposed to give Silas a bunch of rocks?”

Xavier looked at him for a moment, then shook his head in disgust. “I should have asked Mom if you’re really my twin. How the hell did I get all the brain cells? No, dumbass. She was telling us to join forces—all three of us—to defeat Silas. Just like the gods did with Kronos.”

“Okay,” Colton said slowly. “But isn’t it a bit more than that?”

“What do you mean?” Xavier asked.

“What did Ava say? About the orb? Didn’t she say our dear old dad was using it to suck up the ghosts? Which is totally fine and not the least bit creepy, by the way. Proud as hell to have that guy for a father, in case anyone’s wondering—”

“Get to the point, Colton,” Xavier snarled.

Colton’s eyes flashed. “The point *is*, what if that’s what he means to do to us? He’s not going to eat us, but he *is* going to use the orb to try to suck us up or absorb us or our life force or whatever batshit thing he’s trying to do.”

Everyone stared at Colton, wide-eyed, as the horror of his idea settled in. I shivered in the cold night. What Colton was suggesting sounded terrifying. What was that going to mean for the Evers brothers, if Silas was coming after them?

What was that going to mean for Xavier? For Greyson? And for my relationship with each of them?

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to get warm, but I felt cold from the inside out.

Xavier looked at Colton, and even in the dark I could that he was thinking hard about what Colton had said. The expression on his face was grim. “Well,” he started, “that is a possibility. But it doesn’t change anything.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Colton asked, looking thunderstruck. “What do you mean it doesn’t change anything? If our father wants to try to absorb our souls—”

“It doesn’t change what we have to do,” Xavier said firmly. “We have to stop him. Plain and simple. Because if we don’t—and if we don’t do it now—Silas will become the most powerful, dangerous Alpha in the world.”

**Episode 863**

VIOLET

When the Uber pulled to a stop on the gravel road in front of the pack house, my heart was beating so hard I could practically hear it thumping in my chest.

“Here?” the driver asked, craning his neck to look down the long drive at the massive house in the distance.

I was brimming with excitement—but also nervous as hell. I had never brought anyone to meet the pack. I’d never even *thought* about it. I hadn’t thought I’d ever be in this position—especially not so young. But, as I looked over at Charlie, it just felt so right.

“Yeah, here is good. Thanks,” I said to the driver as I pushed the door open.

As we climbed out of the car and slung our backpacks onto our shoulders, Charlie reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. The warmth of his hand around mine calmed my heart a little and filled me with strength. I took a deep breath and looked up at the pack house. It had somehow grown in the time I’d been gone—or maybe that was just the intimidation factor.

Behind us, the Uber sped away, and I grinned at Charlie. “You ready?”

He looked up at the house. “So this is it? The pack house?”

“Yep. This is where the Redwood pack all live. Kind of like one big family.”

Charlie smiled. “That sounds nice.”

“Yeah, it is.” I thought about it for a minute. “Until someone steals your face wash or eats the last of your yogurt or dumps your laundry out of the dryer without telling you.”

Charlie chuckled. “Okay, so more like a dorm?”

“I guess so,” I said, grinning. “Like the one you just left.”

Charlie pulled me close. “Not exactly like that one. Here, I get to be with you,” he said, and pressed a kiss to my temple.

The butterflies in my stomach took flight again, but I tugged his hand as I started up the walk toward the door. “Come on.”

“Should I be expecting anything?” Charlie said, looking warily at the house.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I mean, I’m the new guy. I was in college. I saw what they did to the frat pledges. Are they going to haze me? Make me run around at midnight in my underwear? Give me the third degree about you?” His face flushed. “About us… being together?”

I felt my own cheeks heat up. After all we’d been through to get here, it was nice to hear him say those words. Charlie was my mate *and* my boyfriend. Not everyone was so lucky. I squeezed his hand, reassuring him like he always reassured me. “I’ve never seen them make anyone run around the house in their underwear, but if anyone give you trouble, they’ll have to deal with me,” I promised.

As we drew closer to the house, I squinted at a stone figure resting next to the porch.

“Is that a gargoyle?” Charlie asked, looking in the same direction.

“I guess it is,” I said, baffled. “Where the hell did that come from? Who decided we needed a gargoyle around here? It wasn’t there when I left.”

Charlie shrugged. “Maybe it’s for Halloween. A decoration. To make things spooky.”

“Trust me, we don’t need decorations to make things spooky for Halloween,” I said, feeling suddenly nervous. I looked at the squat stone statue. “And since when does the pack do Halloween decorations?” I walked closer, peering at it. “It’s actually kinda cute, when you get a closer look.”

“Only *kinda* cute?”

I jumped back with a gasp, right into Charlie, who was also looking pretty freaked out.

“Did that thing just talk?” he asked, pointing a shaky finger at the statue.

“I-I think so,” I stammered, staring at the gargoyle, who had turned to look at us. “Um, hello? Can you talk?”

“Hello,” the statue said pleasantly. He gave a small bow from the waist. “I’m Steinar, and of course I can talk.” He laughed lightly. It sounded like tumbling rocks. “It’s not like I’m made of stone.”

Charlie and I stared at the gargoyle, who was clearly made of stone.

“Okay,” Steinar admitted. “I *am* made of stone, but it’s actually granite. And anyway, I can still talk.”

“Um, so is this a normal werewolf thing?” Charlie asked, speaking to me out of the corner of his mouth. “Talking gargoyles?”

I shook my head. “Not normal. I’ve never even seen one before.” I looked right at the statue. “So… um… What are you doing here?”

The gargoyle cleared his throat with a sound like crunching gravel. “I am here on a mission. I am here to collect certain misappropriated texts that were stolen from the Obaltarion.”

Charlie and I looked at each other, then back at the gargoyle. “The what?” I asked.

Steinar rolled his granite eyes. “It’s a library,” he said, sounding faintly annoyed that we were so dense. “It’s *the* library, in fact. And the books were taken out without even a library card.” He shook his stone head. “But that’s not important right now. You two shouldn’t be out here. You should get yourselves inside. It’s late, and it’s not safe out here.”

I stared at Steinar, surprised. Was this statue trying to boss me around? I opened my mouth to tell him to mind his own stone business when a voice from behind me made me freeze.

“*STOP!*”

Charlie and I spun around to find Sage standing in front of us, glaring. But, seeing me, her face broke into a smile. “*Violet?* Oh my god, where have you been, girl?!” She turned to Charlie, narrowing her eyes. “And who’s this?”

Charlie took a step closer to me. “I’m Charlie, Violet’s mate.”

I tried not to grin like a loon as my heart flip-flopped in my chest. “It’s true.”

Sage did the smallest of double takes at this, but gave her head a little shake. “Okay, you two better get inside.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, hearing the tense edge to her voice.

“Um…” Sage glanced around the dark lawn nervously. “We’re kind of on high alert at the moment. It’ll be better if we talk inside.”

As Charlie and I walked up the porch steps, my stomach tightened nervously. I’d had my reservations about bringing Charlie here, wondering if it was safe. Minnesota hadn’t seemed safe—not with that crazed Rogue on the loose—and I’d wanted to bring him back here, but… I glanced over my shoulder and watched Sage’s gaze darting to the shadowy corners of the property. I just hoped bringing Charlie here hadn’t been a mistake.

As I steered Charlie onto the wraparound porch and into the house, Steinar called after us from the lawn. “It was nice meeting you! We’ll speak again soon!”

I shook my head, ignoring him, and stepped into the house with Charlie.

He was looking around the massive space, his eyes wide with wonder. “Whoa,” he whispered, clearly blown away. “It’s huge, Violet.”

“I know.”

“It looked massive from the outside, but somehow it seems even bigger from inside,” he said, his voice still low.

“It’s a little overwhelming at first, but I promise you’ll get used to it.” I stifled a yawn. “I’ll give you a tour in the morning, but I’m wrecked. Can we just get some sleep?”

“Sure,” Charlie murmured, his eyes still on the vaulted ceilings.

I was leading him up the stairs when a voice made me stop in my tracks.

“Violet!”

I turned to see Xavier standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Xavier!” I said. I was glad to see him, but somewhat flustered by the glare he was leveling at Charlie.

He tipped his chin toward Charlie. “Who the hell is this?”

“This is Charlie,” I said. My face flushed. “My mate.”

Surprise flashed across Xavier’s eyes, and he started up the stairs. “So, you’re mates?” he asked, stopping on the stair just below us. His expression was *not* welcoming.

But I nodded, beaming with happiness because I just couldn’t help it. This was a big moment. Xavier was like family to me. “Yep. We just got here from the airport. We’re super tired so we’re going to go to bed.” I turned back up the stairs.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” Xavier asked, stopping me.

I turned, confused. “I told you, we’re tired. We just got off a plane. We’re going to bed.”

“Not so fast,” Xavier growled. His eyes darkened as he looked at Charlie, who was doing his best to meet Xavier’s intimidating gaze.

“What?” I asked. I watched, confused, as Xavier gave Charlie a long, cool once-over.

Xavier shook his head. “You can’t just bring an unknown werewolf into the pack house, Violet.”

“But he’s my—”

“Even if he is your mate,” Xavier said, speaking over me, “you can’t just bring a stranger into the house without having him submit to the council.”

I stared at him, certain I’d misheard. “*What?*”

**Episode 864**

When I walked back into the brightly lit pack house, my head was spinning like a top. I hardly knew what to think, after hearing all that weird talk about Kronos and the gods and Silas and Cassandra and the orb. Added to the questions buzzing through my brain about Xavier and Ava and what exactly I’d seen them doing in the yard, I was anxious to talk to Xavier. *Alone*.

I looked around. Pack members were scattered throughout the kitchen and den—Jay and Lola were joining Sage over a carton of ice cream at the counter, and Joss and Ravi were lounging on a couch in the living room, but I didn’t see Xavier anywhere.

Then I heard his voice from the stairs and hurried toward it. He was talking to a couple of people wearing backpacks, and I stopped when I saw that it was Violet and—

“Oh my god, is that *Charlie*?” I exclaimed. I took the stairs two at a time and reached for Violet, pulling her into a hug. “Hey, you’re back! I’m so glad to see you! And Charlie! What are you doing here?”

But neither Violet nor Charlie smiled back at me. They were both looking down at Xavier, and their expressions were worried.

“What’s going on?” I asked, glancing between the three of them.

“Xavier was just telling us that Charlie has to appear before the council.”

“What?” I asked, shocked. “Why?”

“Because he’s my mate,” Violet said. She looked tired and miserable and like she was about to cry.

“The *werewolf council?* Why?” I was baffled.

“Because it’s the rule,” Xavier said firmly. “For when a werewolf brings a mate into the pack.”

I fixed Xavier with an icy stare. “That doesn’t make any sense. *I* didn’t have to appear before any council.”

Charlie shook his head as he shifted his backpack higher on his shoulder. “It’s fine. I’ll appear before this council. Whatever you want me to do.” He looked down at Violet and gave her hand a squeeze. “It’s really no big deal. Whatever I have to do to be with her.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed and his stern look flickered, then his face cracked into a grin and he chuckled. “I got you pretty good, didn’t I?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

Violet stared at him. “You were *kidding*? Xavier!”

Xavier nodded, still chuckling.

“Oh my god,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. I gave Xavier a shove that sent him stumbling down a stair, still laughing. “So juvenile.”

He recovered himself and extended his hand to Charlie. “Welcome to the Redwood pack, man. Charlie, right? You be nice,” he said, and when he nodded toward Violet, I was fairly sure the dangerous flicker in his eye wasn’t a joke.

Charlie nodded, smiling nervously. “You got it.”

Violet grabbed Charlie’s arm and pulled him upstairs. “We’re going to bed. I’ll talk to guys later.”

“It’s nice to have you back, Violet,” Xavier called after her.

Violet had a soft spot for Xavier, so even after all of that, she turned and gave him a smile, then disappeared into the dark hallway with Charlie.

Suddenly, I could feel Xavier’s eyes on me. I knew it was ridiculous—I’d known him too long to feel nervous around him—but I did. I didn’t look over, just started up the stairs to my own room.

“You know I was just messing with them, right?” Xavier said, following me upstairs.

“What?” I asked. “Oh, yeah, I guess. It doesn’t matter.” My head had started to spin again, and I felt like I needed to sit down somewhere.

“What’s wrong?” Xavier asked.

“Nothing,” I said quickly.

“Why are you mad at me?” he asked, grabbing hold of my arm and pulling me to a stop.

“I’m not,” I lied.

He didn’t buy it. “You’re such a bad liar, Cali.”

“I’m not mad,” I protested, but he cut me off.

“I can tell,” he said firmly. “I know you.” He tightened his grip on my elbow and tugged me into his room, shutting the door behind us. He looked at me, his eyes like searchlights in the dim room, lit only by the moonlight shining through the wide windows. “Talk to me.”

I pressed my lips together.

He blew a frustrated breath out of his nose. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

*What’s wrong? What’s* wrong*? Everything’s wrong!* I wanted to shout. *Nothing* was going right! Greyson had just told me he loved me, then told me to stay out of the fight that would define the Redwood pack for generations to come—and just as I was coming into my Fae powers.

Oh, *and* I’d probably seen Xavier making out with Ava, just after Greyson had told me to choose Xavier.

I dropped my head and rubbed my tired eyes. Every day, I was reaching a better understanding of the choice Cassandra had been forced to make. I had searched and searched, but there was just no easy way out of this dilemma.

*You there?*

“I’m here,” I said out loud. I didn’t have the energy—or the heart—to mind link with him right now. “It’s just too complicated. I don’t know what to think anymore.”

Xavier frowned. “There’s nothing to think about. There’s no decision to be made. We’re mates, Cali.”

I looked up, boldly meeting his gaze. “And what about Ava?”

He sighed, sounding weary. “What about her?”

My heart pounded. “Why’d you kiss her?”

Xavier’s eyes went wide with shock. “*What?*”

I swallowed hard and forced myself to go on. “I saw you. A while ago. Out on the lawn.”

Xavier stared at me, clearly astonished. “I didn’t *kiss* her, Cali. We were talking. *Tensely*. If anything, I wanted to strangle her, not kiss her.”

“So why didn’t you?” I shot back.

Xavier’s jaw tightened. “She’s going to fight alongside us, against Silas. She’s on our side for this fight.”

The words stung like a slap. Greyson had just told me not to fight, to stay away, to let the werewolves handle it. Werewolves like Greyson and Xavier—and Ava. Jealousy bubbled up inside me, filling my heart with its bitterness. “I’m on your side, too.”

Xavier’s brows drew down in confusion. “I know that,” he said quietly. He flicked on the light next to his bed and reached for me. “Cali, what’s going on?”

I pulled away before he could touch me and stormed across the room. “So why is it okay for Ava to fight—to be on your side—but not me?”

Xavier kept looking confused. “What are you talking about? Who said you couldn’t fight?”

“Greyson,” I blurted out, before I could stop myself. “He told me—he *ordered* me—not to.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed. “Greyson’s a fucking idiot.”

I was frustrated with myself for tattling and making Greyson out to be some kind of dictator. I was mad, but I scrambled to defend him. “He’s worried. He’s just trying to protect me—”

“And I get that,” Xavier snapped. “The last thing I want is you getting hurt. But you’re Fae, Cali. Hell, you took on Demeter.” He shook his head, a grudging smile playing on his lips. “And it doesn’t even matter. You won’t listen to either of us anyway, will you?”

I looked at him for a moment, then shrugged.

“You’re always your own person, Cali. And I love you for that.” He smiled at me, his blue eyes filled with a warmth I rarely saw, but that never failed to send shivers up my spine.

I stared at him, momentarily speechless. It was amazing that he could still affect me like this, even after all this time. Then, with a deep breath, I blinked and looked away. “It’s getting late,” I murmured, walking toward the door. “I’m tired. I should be getting to bed.”

Xavier caught my hand before I reached the door and spun me around to face him. My heart skipped a few beats as he looked into my eyes, his gaze intense. “I will *always* believe in you, Caliana Hart. No matter what Greyson—or anyone else—says.” He reached up, tracing the black veins on my neck with a gentle finger. “Curse or no curse, you’re my mate, Cali.”

The look in his eyes drew me in, the strength of his hand on my shoulder—even the scent of him, vanilla and iron and sandalwood. But… I squeezed my eyes shut. I just kept *seeing* him and Ava together. Heads bent together, leaning close, enveloped in shadows. I believed the explanation he’d given me, but I just couldn’t shake how strange it had felt to see them together.

“I get that, Xavier. Mates are forever.” I met his eyes. “But Ava is also your mate. So what happens when this is all over?”

Xavier was looking at me like I’d hit him. He took a step back. “What do you mean? When *what’s* all over?”

“The fight with Silas. If we win…” I took a deep breath. “If I choose you over Greyson, am I going to spend my life worried that I’m your second choice?”

**Episode 865**

Xavier closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and took a step closer to me. “Listen to me, Cali. I am *not* experiencing *due destini* with Ava. Our mate bond was broken—or ended—when she died.” He shook his head, looking suddenly desperate. “Don’t you see? Can’t you understand that this isn’t about choice? This is about *fate*. The fate that brought you to me, all the way from fucking Minnesota. How else could that have happened?”

“I don’t know,” I said shakily.

Xavier’s blue eyes were steady on me. “When this is over and Silas is good and dead, this torment you feel will be over, and we’ll be together.”

He spoke with such certainty—like it was the easiest thing in the world—that I nearly believed him. But it was impossible to think it through. I was overwhelmed, my head a cacophony of thoughts.

I leaned my forehead against his rock-hard chest. “I’m tired of thinking about it,” I murmured.

He stroked his hand gently through my hair. “Then let’s not think about it,” he said, his voice low.

I smiled, wishing it were that easy to turn off the thoughts racing through my brain.

“Stay with me tonight, Cali,” he whispered, leaning close to me, his breath tickling my ear.

There was a pull inside me, drawing me closer to him. I wanted to stay, but—I thought back to Greyson, out in the woods. I had *just* been with him. I could still feel him, I could still smell his scent on me. Surely Xavier could, too. My whole body was a tumult of indecision. I wanted nothing more than to crawl into Xavier’s bed and tuck myself into his arms, but… was that the *right* thing to do? The *fair* thing? For all of us?

Tears pricked and I looked down, not wanting Xavier to see me cry, but he hooked a finger beneath my chin and lifted it, looking me in the eyes.

“Cali, whatever’s making you hesitate—I don’t care about it. We don’t have to be together if you don’t want to. We can just sleep.”

Just listening to his voice made my whole body thrum. I shook my head. “I don’t even know if that’s possible with you,” I said, with the ghost of a smile.

He smiled and wiped a tear off my cheek. “I have to go into battle tomorrow, and I want you next to me tonight.” He looked into my eyes, searching for an answer. “Can you give me that?”

My breath caught and I nodded. “I’ll give you anything you want.”

Xavier leaned in and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

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I screwed my eyes shut as someone near me screamed. The sound was low and animalistic—filled with agony—but it was quickly cut off. Silenced. Another cry followed it, followed by a triumphant whoop. Then a snarl and a piteous moan.

The battle had begun.

I forced my eyes open and looked around. Silas was there, standing on the porch of the pack house, just has he had stood on the step of his own cabin, and he held the orb in his hands. Demeter stood next to him, her golden arm shining in the sun. Silas was looking around hungrily, and his gaze focused on Jay. He turned toward the young fighter and breathed in, drawing the life out of him. Jay fought back, but it was no use. Whatever force gave him life was being pulled out by the combined power of Silas and the orb, and—finally—Jay dropped to the ground, dead, his unseeing eyes open to the sky.

What was I *doing?* Why was I just standing here? Off to the side? I had to help! I had to stop Silas! I had to use my powers! I rushed forward, into the fray, but as I drew closer, I slowed, eventually coming to a stop. I pushed forward, trying to draw closer, but my body wouldn’t move forward. I was a hundred yards away from the porch. I needed to be closer if I wanted to stand any chance against Silas and Demeter, so *why* couldn’t I move forward?

I swung around as I heard a cry to my left. Rishika dropped to her knees, an arrow in her chest. Blood bloomed from the wound as she looked at the arrow, which glinted silver in the sunlight.

“*Rishika!*” I cried. I tried to go to her, but I couldn’t move. My feet were immobilized. I could barely lift my hands. It felt like I’d been cast in cement.

There were swishes through the air and Joss went down next, one arrow in her chest, one in her neck. Sage dropped, then Ravi. My heart was pounding. My chest hurt so badly, like a massive hand was crushing it. I looked down—the veins were spreading, swirling across my skin, covering my body, until there was no more skin, only the throbbing black veins.

A high, cruel laugh pierced the air and I looked up. Silas was still on the porch, but the orb was nowhere to be seen. Now, he held Xavier and Greyson in each hand. They were both limp and lifeless, and I watched in horror as Silas tore them to pieces. Blood was everywhere—a fountain of blood. Silas was covered in it—his hands, his face, his mouth. He dropped their mangled bodies to the ground, where Colton already lay, dead and mutilated.

I stared in horrified shock. I opened my mouth and a sob from the depths of my soul fought its way through my body, clawing its way out, desperate to make itself heard. But when it reached my mouth, it was no longer a sob, but a scream—a piercing, haunting, ripping *wail* of a scream that tore through my throat like a living thing.

I sat bolt upright, screaming and crying and clawing at the sheets.

“Cali!”

Xavier’s arms were around me, holding me tight, keeping my arms from thrashing, but I kept kicking and crying until the sound of his voice broke through the terror of the dream.

“Cali, Cali. Shh, you’re okay, Cali, I’m here.”

Breath heaving, my body quieted, and I sat for a moment, trying to remember where I was. I was in Xavier’s bed, and he was here with me. He was alive. The battle hadn’t started yet.

“Hey,” Xavier said, taking my chin in his hand. “You’re okay. Look at me.”

I looked into his eyes, which were worried but steady, and sucked in a breath, trying to calm my racing heart. I glanced beyond Xavier’s shoulder and saw the orange hint of dawn on the horizon through the window. “It was a nightmare,” I finally managed to say.

“I can see that,” he said, with a faint smile. “I’ve been trying to wake you up. You were thrashing around. You even mind linked with me.” He pulled me into his arms and we lay down. “Tell me about it.”

I told him about the dream, haltingly, terror shivering through my body as I described it.

He cradled me closer. “It was only a dream. You’re safe.” He pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “Are you going to be okay?”

I nodded, then reached up, kissing him back. “Thank you.” He was achingly sweet, giving me just what he thought I needed, and I loved him for it. But I thought back to the dream. It *had* just been a dream, but the danger he was going to face today was real, and—if something did happen, if he did die today—I didn’t want to regret anything.

He pulled me closer for a moment, then eased me away. “It’s early still. You should get some more sleep.”

But I didn’t want any more sleep. I wanted Xavier. I grabbed his arms and pulled him close. “Kiss me,” I whispered.

He looked surprised for a moment, but dropped his head to comply. I opened my mouth the second his lips touched mine, hungry for him. The overpowering hunger I had felt toward Greyson the day before was now directed at Xavier, and I knew—I just *knew*—that if he didn’t take me right here and right now, the whole world was going to explode.

My chest was painfully tight—the veins were back, but I wasn’t surprised. They were part of this.

Xavier’s kiss was soft at first, but I half-pulled him on top of me, half-slid under him. I *needed* him. I needed to feel his full weight on me, crushing me into the mattress. I needed the pressure of him, reminding me that he was real. His hands went to my waist and beneath my shirt, sliding up my skin, and I shivered at the feel of it.

But then he stopped, suddenly, and stood up.

“What are you doing?” I asked hazily. I pushed myself up on my forearms and watched, baffled, as he grabbed hold of his dresser and heaved it across the room, pulling it in front of the door.

He turned to me and pushed his hair out of his face. “A little more insurance so Colton doesn’t interrupt.” His face broke into a wicked grin as he pulled off his shirt and strode back to the bed. “Now. Where were we?”

**Episode 866**

XAVIER

Cali’s eyes widened as I climbed onto the bed. I thought back to when I’d first met her, when she’d been that inexperienced girl with a fire in her I just couldn’t ignore. Some things had changed, but she still had that fire, and I still couldn’t get her out of my mind.

She wanted this *now*—I could see it in her eyes—but I was going to make her wait for it. I touched her foot, sliding my hand softly over her delicate skin.

“Xavier,” she panted. “*Please*.”

I smiled. “You can start pleading now, Cali, but I’m going to make you so fucking desperate for me that you’re going to be begging to suck me off by the time I’m done with you.”

The pupils in her eyes dilated and her breath started to grow ragged. My whole body felt alive with energy. Cali and I had been through the ringer, but our sexual chemistry still brought me to my knees.

My eyes strayed up her body, taking in the line of her leg, the curve of her hip. Her shirt had ridden up and I could see her stomach, flat and smooth. Her porcelain skin was stark against the black veins that swirled on top.

I swallowed. This curse was killing her. She *had* to make her decision soon. And this could be… I hated to think of it, but I couldn’t get it out of my brain… this could be our last time, if she didn’t choose me.

And if I didn’t die today.

Fuck. She had been right. There *was* a lot to think about.

Maybe it would be better if I just didn’t think. The best way to do that would be to just lose myself in her. I leaned down and kissed Cali through her jeans, right at the seam of her sex.

“Take ‘em off,” I growled. “Now.”

Her hands fumbled with the button.

“Faster,” I snarled.

She yanked her jeans off and threw them off the bed. She wasn’t wearing any underwear, and she reached for the sheet to cover herself.

“What are you doing?” I snapped. I moved forward until I hovered over her. “You listen to me, Caliana Hart. I tell you what to do, and you listen—you got me?”

Her breath was ragged, and she nodded. “Yeah.”

I sat back. “Take off your shirt.”

She reached for the hem.

“Slowly,” I commanded.

Her dark eyes were on mine as she inched it up, slowly. *Agonizingly* slowly.

I smiled, hunger coursing through me. “You’re trying to tease me, Cali.” I grabbed her shirt with both hands and ripped it open, revealing her breasts. “Don’t try to keep me from what’s mine.”

She arched beneath me, her breasts lush and the nipples tight. “Xavier,” she begged. “Touch me.”

I looked at her for a moment, then at the button of my jeans. “*Earn it*,” I growled.

Her face flushed and she leapt up, practically pouncing on me. She fumbled with the button of my jeans and pulled them off, flinging them away, then she pushed me back, taking my cock into her hands.

“Do you like that?” she asked. Her confidence was almost enough to send me over the edge.

My whole body reacted as she tightened her grip around me. “*Fuck*,” I hissed, dropping my head back onto my pillow. Excited by my reaction, she increased her speed, and I saw stars.

“Is that a yes?” she asked.

“Yes.” *Fuck yes.*

How did she do that with her hand? How did she make me feel so grounded and like I was fucking floating in space all at the same time?

“Enough,” I grabbed her shoulders and pushed her back, flipping her over.

She shook her head, her eyes desperate. “But weren’t you enjoying it?”

I shoved her knees apart, opening her up to me. “Yes, too much,” I said. “But I want to fuck you so hard you won’t be able to remember your own name.”

Cali’s lips parted with a small gasp. Then she nodded, opening her knees even wider. “Please,” she said, and I buried myself inside her slick core.

I was a match and she was a dry kindling, and at the first touch she burst into flame. She cried out and wrapped her arms around my neck, digging her fingernails into my back. “Oh, my god, Xavier!” She rocked hard and needy, bucking against me as wave after wave of orgasm broke over her.

“Open your eyes,” I commanded, my own voice going rough. “Watch me come inside you.”

Her breath heaving, she opened her eyes and we locked gazes. I pumped into her so hard the headboard banged against the wall and Cali’s breath started to speed up again. I lifted her knee and she started to moan.

“Xavier.” She shook her head. “It’s too much. It feels so good.” She still grasped the headboard and bore down into me, gasping again.

Fireworks had started going off in my brain. I held on as long as I could, but when Cali climaxed again and her core tightened around me, I couldn’t wait another moment. The world shattered around me as I grasped onto her, holding her like a lifeline. I couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think as wave after wave of ecstasy rolled through me.

When I could finally breathe again, I looked down at Cali, who was smiling up at me.

I rolled off her and pressed an exhausted kiss to her lips. She kissed me back, then slipped out of bed and headed for the bathroom. I was half-asleep when she slid back in, and we drifted off together as the sun rose.

Whatever happened in the coming battle, I knew I could face it with no regrets.

But I also knew I was going to do whatever I had to do to get her back in my arms again.

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When we stepped out of my room and into the hall, the sun was well up. Artemis was coming out of her room, and she grinned as she passed us.

“Busy morning?” she asked Cali.

I watched her, suddenly curious. “Do you talk to her about us?” I asked, when Artemis had disappeared down the stairs.

“What?” Cali asked, not meeting my eyes. “Don’t be crazy.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” I pointed out.

“And I’m not going to,” Cali said. She still wasn’t looking directly at me “Anything I might or might not have discussed with Artemis is between me and Artemis.”

I grinned down at Cali, noticing the blush rising on her cheeks. “Well, from that smug look on your face, I can only guess that you’ve told her exactly how awesome I am in bed.”

Cali rolled her eyes and smacked my arm. “Shut up,” she said, but she was smiling.

And I smiled back. I couldn’t help it. Her smile was brighter than the morning sun, and I wished I could pull her back into my room and spend the day looking at it. But I knew what lay ahead, and a weight settled onto my shoulders.

I grasped Cali’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “Let’s head downstairs.”

Everyone was gathered in the sunlit kitchen and, as I walked in, my gaze locked with Ava’s for a brief moment. Her dark eyes were hauntingly familiar, but I looked away as Cali walked into the kitchen behind me. I turned away from Ava to look around at the pack, who were clustered around the large kitchen table and at the stools around the counter, remains of half-eaten breakfasts strewn around. They were talking and laughing, but there was an edge to every smile, and every laugh sounded metallic with tension.

It might have looked strange to an outsider, knowing what we were about to face, but I wasn’t surprised. It was always that way before a battle—that urge to laugh, to distract, to not think about what was coming.

Colton came into the kitchen and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “What the hell, man? I tried to borrow some socks this morning, but you’d blocked the door. What’s up with that?”

I shrugged his hand off. “Hey, a man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.”

Colton looked confused for a moment, then looked between Cali and me, realization dawning in his eyes. “*Oh*,” he said, smirking. He gave me a giant wink. “Got it.”

I smacked the back of his head.

Greyson looked over at us as Colton cracked up again, and I couldn’t help but see how tired he looked.

“Nice of you to join us,” he said, his voice like gravel.

“What’s up with you?” I asked. “You been up all night?”

“I got enough sleep,” he said shortly. His gaze flicked to Cali, then to our joined hands, then back to me. “Did you?”

I smirked, feeling more than a little smug. “I got some.”

Cali dropped my hand and stepped between us. “What’s the plan?” she asked. “How are we defeating Silas?”

**Episode 867**

VIOLET

The sun was shining into my room when I opened my eyes, and Charlie was warm behind me. I closed my eyes again, hoping to fall back to sleep, but I just couldn’t. There was something that was stopping me from relaxing, like an itch in my brain. I opened my eyes and looked up.

Then I screamed.

Lola was standing over me, smiling.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked, sitting up, my heart beating a mile a minute.

Next to me, Charlie thrashed around and sat up, looking around, baffled. “Whatsgoingon?” he mumbled.

“Nothing,” I assured him. “It’s just Lola, being a weirdo. What are you doing here?”

Her smiled widened. “Did you two finally do it?”

“What’s happening?” Charlie asked, still thankfully out of it. At least he hadn’t heard Lola’s humiliating question.

“We were just sleeping,” I said, my face flushing hot. “Nothing happened.”

“That’s a bummer,” Lola said, looking disappointed.

“Why are you in here?” I demanded.

“Well, apart from checking on your progress,” Lola said with a wink, “Greyson’s having a big meeting downstairs and he wants everyone there.”

I frowned. “Meeting about what?” I asked. “Is something going on?”

“He doesn’t really keep me in the loop about these kinds of things,” Lola said, “but it has something to do with Silas. But you have time for a quickie before it starts,” she added with a grin.

“Go away,” I groaned. “We’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Okay,” Lola sang, making an A-OK gesture with her right hand. Then she used her left pointer finger to penetrate the circle of her right.

“Get out!”

“What’s Silas?” Charlie said, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

Ugh. That was a big conversation, and one I didn’t want to start *right* after we’d woken up. “Let’s get up and get breakfast, I’ll explain later. We didn’t even eat last night. You must be starving.”

I moved to get out of bed, but Charlie put his hand on my arm, stopping me.

“I didn’t get a chance to thank you last night for bringing me here.” He shook his head. “I was so glad to get away from all that trouble with the Rogue. That was so creepy. And now I’m here, with you, in this house full of werewolves just like me.” He grinned. “It kind of feels like I was meant to be here. It feels safe.”

I chewed a corner of my lip. I had to tell him. “Yeah… About that, Charlie…”

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Ten minutes later, Charlie was staring at me, dumbfounded. His mouth was open, and his face was frozen in a look of horrified shock.

“Are you okay?” I asked nervously. “Was that just way too much, way too soon?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t even blink.

“Are you going to say anything?” I asked desperately. “*Ever?*”

Finally Charlie shook his head. “I’m not sure what to say,” he said slowly. “I mean, it’s not like I came here expecting everything to be perfect, but… a *werewolf war?*”

“I know,” I agonized. “I mean, I knew about it, but… it’s kind of a hard thing to bring up. And I didn’t just want to spring it on you, but I definitely should have told you about it before we left Minnesota. I can see that now. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Charlie said. He swallowed hard. “It’s okay. I just need a second to process this. It’s kind of a lot.”

“Are you mad at me?” I asked tentatively.

“What?” Charlie looked up quickly. “No! I’m not mad at you, Violet! I couldn’t be mad at you. It’s not possible.”

“Come on,” I said, smiling. “It’s *possible*.”

But Charlie just shook his head. “If it weren’t for you, I would have been killed by that Rogue weeks ago. He would have hunted me down, just like he was planning. I owe you my life, Violet.”

His golden eyes were so full of love when he looked at me that my body felt like it had been turned to liquid. But I shook my head. “You don’t owe me anything, Charlie. I don’t want you to feel that way. What this pack is about to face is unlike anything we’ve ever faced before, even in the Pack Wars. You don’t have to be a part of this. No one would think any less of you if you just walked away. No one.” I felt a stab of pain in my heart, but I forced out the last words. “Including me.”

“But I *want* to belong to a pack,” Charlie said, his eyes glinting golden in the morning sunlight. “I want to belong to *your* pack, Violet. Wherever you are, that’s where I want to be.”

My heart soared, but I took his hand. “You don’t have to be a part of this. I want you to know that. Nothing’s going to happen until Halloween, so there’s no pressure to decide right now.”

Charlie smiled. “Okay,” he agreed. He pressed a kiss to my lips. “Then I won’t worry about it right now.”

“Good,” I said, speaking against his lips.

“Right now,” he said, leaning back, “I want to meet the rest of your pack.”

“Great,” I said, hopping up. “They’re waiting.”

“Can I take a quick shower first?” Charlie said, darting a glance toward my bathroom. “I really want to make a good impression.”

My thoughts went to Charlie, naked in the shower. And how much I wanted to see that. The thought hit me out of nowhere. What an impression *that* would make.

Charlie paused at the bathroom door and turned to me, smirking.

“What?” I tried to act casual as if I hadn’t just imagined his abs dripping in water.

*Thank you*, came his voice in my head. *And by the way, you’re blushing.*

Holy shit. Had I accidentally mind linked my dirty thoughts to him?

I dropped onto the bed face first and pulled the sheet over my head.

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Charlie shook his hair out of his eyes. “Do I look okay?” he asked for the third time.

I let my eyes travel over his dark, slim jeans and grey T-shirt. “You look great.”

He tugged at his shirt nervously and looked like he was about to ask me another question when Colton rounded a corner, practically running into us.

“Whoa,” Colton said, taking a step back. He looked at me, then Charlie, and his eyes grew wide. “What’s going on here? Who’s the boy-toy?”

I blushed and was opening my mouth to introduce Charlie when Cali came out of the kitchen.

“Violet! There you are. I’ve been looking for you. Can I talk to you?” She grabbed my hand and pulled me into the living room.

I looked back at Charlie, who was looking after me with a scared, *don’t-leave-me-with-this-guy* look on his handsome face.

“So,” I heard Colton say. “What’d you say your name was?”

In the empty living room, Cali let go of my hand and turned to face me. “Violet, listen, I wanted to talk to you about what I said back in Minnesota.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. Truth be told, I wasn’t exactly sure what she was talking about. It felt like a lot had happened in the last few days.

“I wanted to apologize for how dismissive I was when you asked me about mates.” Cali shook her head. “I was confused and pretty unhappy—I was in a bad place. I just had a lot going on, and I kind of projected that onto you. I shouldn’t have doubted you. You know your own heart, and it was crazy of me to assume that I knew it better than you.”

Warmth flooded through me. “Thank you,” I managed to say. I hadn’t realized how much it had hurt to have Cali dismiss my feelings about Charlie until just now—almost like I’d pressed the pain of it down. But hearing her apologize and tell me that she believed in me felt really, *really* good. “All is forgiven,” I said, smiling.

Cali laughed and threw her arms around me. I hugged her back, grateful for my Redwood pack family.

We pulled apart and looked over at Charlie, who was still being grilled by Colton.

“He *is* a cutie,” Cali said.

“I know,” I said, blushing.

“Does he know what he’s getting himself into, joining… all this?” she asked, an edge to her voice.

My stomach twisted. “I told him this morning. He was pretty shocked, but he took it okay. As well as I could have hoped.”

“What did he say?” Cali asked.

“I told him to think about it. He doesn’t have to decide until Halloween, so he’s got some time.”

Charlie extracted himself from Colton and walked over as Cali turned to me, her expression suddenly dark.

“No, Violet—you haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?” I asked, fighting the urge to cover my ears.

Cali’s face was pale. “The attack is happening tonight.”

**Episode 868**

GREYSON

Joss rubbed her hand across her forehead. She looked like hell. I hadn’t slept all night, and neither had she. We’d been up strategizing and developing our plan of attack. I’d been bouncing ideas off her for hours—hell, I’d even asked Nolan for his input. I’d been over my battle plan a thousand times—I could see it in my head when I closed my eyes, like illustrated football plays.

“And Mace?” I asked, pacing the dried grass in front of the back porch, my voice rough as sandpaper.

Joss nodded, brushing a stray leaf off the porch step next to her. “Talked to him. The Blue Bloods should be on their way.”

“And the Samaras?”

“Nolan said his pack was coming,” Joss assured me.

I looked at her, noting the dark circles under her eyes. She was tired, but still knife-sharp. She had been the right choice for Luna—I’d never doubted that—but as I looked at her, I thought about what I’d told Cali. About how I’d chosen Joss as a way to protect Cali. Joss was giving everything for this pack, and she deserved to know the truth.

“Joss,” I started. “You know I chose you because I thought you’d make the best Luna for the Redwood pack. You’re a born leader. But there were other factors, too.” I swallowed hard. “I knew whoever I chose was going to have to face a lot of danger. Silas was always going to come after the Luna of this pack—make it a special point to kill her, if he could—just because I’d chosen her, and I thought about that, too. That’s part of the reason I didn’t—”

“Stop, Greyson,” Joss said, holding up her hand. She shook her head. “I understand the risks. I understood them when I stepped into the circle at the Lupo Finale. And I understand they’re why you didn’t choose Cali.”

I raised my eyebrows, shocked. “You do?”

She shook her head. “Don’t bother feeling guilty about it. There’s no need. I knew what I was getting into.”

I looked at her for a moment. “Thank you, Joss.”

She nodded, then looked over her shoulder at the house. “It’s time,” she said crisply, and stood.

I took a deep breath and walked into the house.

“Thanks for coming, everyone.” The pack was gathered in the den. I looked around as I walked in, taking a deep breath. “This is it. No one’s looking forward to this, but it’s crucial that we finish this. For good. And I need to make sure we’re going in on the same page.” My gaze drifted to Cali, who was sitting on the couch next to Xavier. Their hands were clasped together, and even with a quick glance I could sense an increased closeness between them. I didn’t like it, but right now, all I really cared about was keeping her safe.

I glanced over at Joss, who nodded.

I cleared my throat. “Tonight, we’re going to be facing the Redwood pack’s most lethal enemy: Silas.” I paused as a murmur went through the pack, like the rustle of leaves through a stand of trees. “You all know we’ve been on high alert since we heard of his return. Extra patrols, tighter boundaries, no one out alone.” I looked around at the newer, younger faces in the pack. “Some of you might be wondering why we’ve taken such extreme measures to defend ourselves against just one person.”

A few heads nodded, but some of the older members of the pack shook their heads, their expressions genuinely scared.

“Silas was the instigator of the Pack Wars of two years ago. He belongs to no pack. He’s loyal to no one except himself. He sows chaos wherever he goes. His only goal is to ravage and kill.” I watched people’s eyes go wide, but I wasn’t going to sugarcoat this. They had to know what we were going up against. “Silas is a murderer. He doesn’t care who you are or where you come from or what you’ve done. The only thing he cares about is whether getting rid of you can benefit him.”

“And why are we getting involved?” Ravi asked, speaking up. He looked around for support. “This seems like a suicide mission.”

I leveled a stare at Ravi that made him shrink back slightly in his chair. “Because if we don’t kill him now, he’s going to hunt us down and kill every last one of us. Including you.” There was an audible intake of breath in the room, and I looked around. ‘It’s not my goal to scare any of you, but I’m sure as hell not going to lie about what Silas is.”

The room was still, and I could feel the pack’s eyes on me.

“I’m your Alpha,” I said, my voice filling the room, echoing up to the lofted ceilings. “I’m calling on the entire Redwood pack as well as our allies—the Blue Bloods and the Samaras—to fight against Silas. This is no ordinary fight; it’s a fight for our survival.” I began pacing the perimeter of the room, outlining the plan Joss and I had been working on all night. “Listen closely. I’m going to lure Silas out by asking for a one-on-one battle—”

“There’s no way,” Colton broke in.

“I know,” I growled. “Either Silas will refuse outright, or he’ll find some way to cheat. There’s no way he’d fight me—any of us,” I added, eyeing Colton and Xavier, “one-on-one, but it’s worth putting out there. He wants to kill us—especially the three of us—so we’re the key targets. The chance of getting a shot at one of us might be too much to pass up.”

Colton shot a glance at Xavier, but Xavier just nodded grimly.

“As I lure Silas out, Colton, you’ll be with the rest of the pack, ready and waiting for Silas to break from the one-on-one with me.”

Colton nodded. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

Big Mac stood from where she’d been sitting on the arm of the couch. She held a bottle in her hand, and gave it a little shake. “I’ve brewed this potion, which will make Xavier appear to be a ghost. He’ll be able to move among the real ghosts and surprise Silas.” She glared at Xavier. “Remember, you won’t be able to shift until the spell is removed.”

Xavier’s jaw worked, but he nodded. He looked over at me and I raised my eyebrows. We both knew what was at stake, and for once, he and I were on the same page. It was strange, after all this time, to finally feel connected to my brother. That connection was small and circumstance-dependent, but it was there.

I turned back to the room at large. “Xavier is our key in all this. Thanks to Ava, Silas thinks he’s dead. It’ll be up to Colton and me to get close to Silas, but it’ll be Xavier’s appearance that will catch him off guard. Then we will have a small window of time for Big Mac to remove the spell and allow Xavier to subdue him.” I looked up. “That’s when we’ll rip his heart out.”

The room was quiet as a church.

I looked around. “Any questions?

Colton raised his hand.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “Yeah?”

“You said we’ll only have a limited amount of time after Xavier’s spell is lifted. What, exactly, will happen if we fail to subdue Silas in that time?”

I blinked. “Then we fail.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the color drain from Cali’s face.

Colton narrowed his eyes. “So you’re saying we have just the one chance to kill the bastard?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. If what Ava is telling us is true—if Silas is using the orb to absorb the power of the ghosts—then we have no idea how powerful he is. We can’t fight him like a regular enemy.”

“Fuck,” Colton said, running a hand through his hair.

“We have one thing on our side,” Joss cut in, speaking over Colton, “and that’s the element of surprise. But if we fail—”

“We’re dead. I got it, thanks,” Colton said sarcastically.

“There’s more,” Xavier said. “Silas is using the orb to consume the ghosts of those who have fallen, so there’s a chance he might be intending to do the same to all of us.”

I nodded. “We’re stronger together.” I looked around at the pack. “I know this obstacle seems insurmountable, but I also know that we can defeat Silas. We’ve beaten insurmountable odds before. We’ve defeated Ryker. We’ve defeated witches. We’ve defeated ghosts. This pack defeated the Manus Cruentae.” I could feel my voice growing stronger, filling with power as it filled the room. “We have fought alongside each other like warriors, and I, for one, will not *stop* fighting until every single person in this pack is safe. I know we can do it. As long as we stand united against Silas, I know we can stand victorious. If there’s one pack that can do this, it’s us.” I looked at Colton, then at Xavier. “Who’s with me?”

**Episode 869**

I stared at Greyson in awe. *Oh my god,* I thought. *That was the most powerful speech I’ve ever heard.*

I honestly hadn’t known he’d had that kind of call to arms inside of him. Greyson was powerful and driven and passionate, and while I knew he was the leader of the pack, he had never radiated “Alpha” more than in this moment.

And all I wanted to do was rush up to him, throw my arms around him, and kiss him. In this moment, he was everything I wanted in a mate—*all* I wanted. This strong, brave, compassionate Alpha, who had risked everything for me more times than I could count.

Smiling, I looked around the room, taking in the pack members’ reactions to Greyson’s speech. Everyone seemed to be just as in awe as I was—even Xavier.

*Oh, Xavier*.

An ache rattled its way through my chest, and I looked away from my other mate. Could I really choose Greyson over him? Xavier, who had brought me into this world of werewolves and magic in the first place? Who had protected me and loved me long before Greyson and I had ever connected? Who had fought tooth and nail to find me in the Fae world and bring me home safely? His love for me ran deep, too.

How could I possibly choose? I grimaced. *And how the hell am I this close to Halloween without having chosen one of them? Without even having narrowed things down?* If anything, I felt further away from a choice than I’d ever been. Even with Ava in the mix, even trying my hand at being with both of them, at sleeping with both of them—the choice still felt impossible.

While my spirits dampened a bit, everyone around me still looked keyed up and ready to fight. The air was thrumming with collective excitement and determined energy. This, I realized, was what a unified pack looked like. And now that Xavier and Greyson were setting aside their differences to face Silas and the impending war, this collection of long-time Redwood members and former Rogues had finally bonded into a cohesive unit.

One that, I could only hope, would survive what today brought. Still, our chances had never seemed better. For the first time in a long time, the future of the Redwood pack looked bright. I mean, with all these strong werewolves surrounding us—many of whom had been trained by Rishika and Xavier—we had to stand a real chance, right?

Maybe this wouldn’t be a bloodbath.

Maybe everything would work out and all these people clustered around me would come back, safe and sound and ready to live their lives without the threat of Silas hanging over them.

“Take this time to prepare yourselves.” Greyson stopped for a moment, and I watched his throat bob with emotion. His eyes shifted over to me briefly before looking over the gathered pack. “Hold your loved ones close, and say anything you need to say to them. Put your affairs in order so you can go into battle focused and ready to give everything, if necessary. Because after tonight, you might not get another chance.”

Just like that, my throat felt tight, and I blinked away the emotion pricking at my eyes. My affairs couldn’t have been further from orderly, but there wasn’t any conversation I could have that would fix my problems. Greyson knew I loved him, and Xavier did too. And they both knew that I hadn’t made a choice yet. That hadn’t changed, so what else was I supposed to say?

On that more somber note, the pack began to break apart into smaller groups. *I guess it’s time for those preparations.*

I noticed Big Mac pull Lola aside, and I moved closer. Big Mac was whispering to Lola, and judging by the look on my best friend’s face, she was saying something important. Big Mac’s expression was serious, and there was an urgency to the way she whispered to Lola, who looked more upset by whatever the witch was telling her than she’d been when Greyson had told her to put her affairs in order.

I crept a little closer and overheard Big Mac’s words. “You’ve already used too much.”

This sent off warning bells in my head, and I used it as an opportunity to insert myself into the conversation. “Used too much *what*?” I asked, popping up next to Lola.

My friend frowned and rolled her eyes. “Not that it’s any of your business, but this witch is refusing to give me any more potion.”

“Really?” I asked, turning to Big Mac for confirmation.

The witch gave me a stony stare.

“Come on, Cali. You know better than anyone how much I’ve needed that potion lately. And I’ll need more if I’m going to fight tonight,” Lola insisted. “Now tell Big Mac she’s being ridiculous!”

“I…” The words stuck to the tip of my tongue. Honestly, I didn’t think Big Mac was being ridiculous at all. If anything, it was a refreshing change of pace to see someone putting down some boundaries where Lola’s behavior was concerned.

My best friend had felt distant lately, and I often wondered if I really knew her all that well. Plus, Lola had been keeping secrets—she’d been fighting with Jay, and having those uncontrolled shifting episodes…

She hadn’t been acting like herself.

Lola had seemed like a runaway train for a long time now, despite Jay’s and my efforts to get her under control. Maybe Big Mac could finally slow her down enough for the rest of us to help her get back on track.

“Maybe Big Mac is right,” I hedged. “The potion isn’t a cure-all. If she says you’ve already used too much, then maybe you should cut back. For your own safety.”

Lola looked aghast. “What the hell, Cali? I need the potion now more than ever if I want to help the pack.”

Big Mac shook her head. “Not this time. You’ve had too much already. I can’t give you more. We have no idea how you’ll react if you’re hopped up on too much magic.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. I just wanted the Lola I knew and loved to come back. I wanted my best friend back.

Lola opened her mouth to argue, but Big Mac held up a hand. “Enough, Lola. We’re done here.” She strode off before my friend could argue any further.

I gently took Lola’s arm. “You can contribute to the fight in other ways,” I tried.

Greyson had told me to put my affairs in order, and I might not be able to solve this impossible *due destini* problem, but I could at least try to get my friend back.

Lola yanked her arm out of my grip. “Thanks for nothing!” she snapped. “I love to see that my best friend always has my back—not!”

“I’m *trying* to have your back!” I insisted. Why didn’t she see that I was trying to protect her? “Of course I always want what’s best for you—”

“Forget it.” Lola stalked off, earning a couple of side-eyes from a few of the other pack members.

My face heated with frustration. We were going to war tonight! Why couldn’t Lola put aside her petty issues for just one night?

A new thought hit me. *What if Lola dies tonight? What if this is how things end between us? I can’t let that happen!*

I looked wildly around the room for my friend, but she was nowhere to be found. Oh god. And it wasn’t just Lola. Any of us could die tonight.I looked around at the few pack members still clustered together in the room, and then around the house itself. The thought of any of them dying was unbearable, but the possibility of all of us making it out of this safe and sound… Suddenly, it seemed just as impossible as choosing between Xavier and Greyson.

That spawned a new fear. Silas would no doubt be targeting Xavier and Greyson the most—what if one of them died? Horror and grief wrapped tight around me, threatening to crush me in their grip, and for a moment I wondered how a premature death would affect the *due destini* curse. Would it resolve on its own? And if so, could I simply be happy with either of them, knowing that the other had been killed?

Pain flooded my chest. I could barely even think about the possibility, and I knew there was no scenario in which I’d be happy with one of them if the other was gone. The pain of that loss would be too unbearable for me to move on from.

Fear froze me in place, and I fought against the emotion threatening to smother me. I would have to do everything in my power to protect them both.

A scream ripped through the room, coming from outside, and dread coiled tight in my stomach. Had the battle already begun?

**Episode 870**

JOSS

The front of the house and the porch was bursting with commotion—squeals and screams and the sounds of bodies colliding. Instantly, I was in motion, only dimly aware of Greyson following behind me, rushing toward the commotion and ready to shift at the slightest provocation—

But then I stopped short just outside the front door.

It wasn’t a fight. It was Mace, bursting in along with a few more enthusiastic members of the Blue Blood pack.

A Blue Blood that I’d never met before let out a joyful squeal and pulled Sage into her arms. This was a reunion, not a bloodbath. That cold trickle of dread running down my spine turned to relief. Beyond Mace, the entire Blue Blood pack was spread out over the lawn, more than doubling our numbers of full-grown, vicious werewolves ready to fight Silas.

Emotion caught in my throat. “You came,” I said. “You’re all here.”

Mace nodded and gave me a grim smile. “It’s not every day you get a chance to fight the devil himself.”

Greyson moved past me to shake Mace’s hand. “Thank you for upholding your part of the alliance.”

Mace shook his hand and inclined his head slightly, then met Greyson’s eyes. His expression wasn’t as soft as it had been with me. This was a respectful, if distant, acknowledgment between two Alphas setting aside their differences. “When this is all said and done, nobody will be able to say that the Blue Blood pack didn’t maintain its honor.”

It was Greyson’s turn to give the other Alpha a stiff nod. “Well, you and your pack are welcome here. Make yourselves comfortable. We move tonight.”

The other pack members continued spilling in around us. Shaggy and Pip greeted Mrs. Smith, though they were careful to keep their distance from Big Mac. A Blue Blood member that Pip introduced as James gave me a deep bow of respect.

“It is a pleasure to be fighting alongside you, Luna of the Redwood pack,” he intoned.

A smile tugged at my lips, and Pip rolled her eyes. “Yeah, he’s a little dramatic.”

“If he fights half as well as he bows, we’re going to get along fine,” I assured them both.

I glanced around to see Violet, front and center in the pre-battle camaraderie.

“This is Bea,” Violet said as she introduced her mate to a Blue Blood pack member, a girl who didn’t look much older than Violet herself. “She’s from another pack. Bea, this is Charlie. My mate.”

Mate? I couldn’t help my smile.

Charlie held out his hand to shake Bea’s. “So there are a lot of packs out there, then?”

Violet frowned slightly. “Not as many as there used to be.” Her expression brightened. “Which is why it’s so wonderful when we do all see each other.”

“I just wish we were meeting under better circumstances,” Bea said.

*Understatement*, I thought. Even with the joyful reunions taking place all around us, it was all too easy to see that everyone’s minds were on the battle ahead. It was amazing to have their support, but as I looked into all those faces—Blue Blood and Redwood alike—I couldn’t help wondering how many of them would still be here with us come daybreak.

I cleared my throat and forced a polite smile onto my face. “Come on,” I said to a cluster of Blue Bloods who were waiting for the grand tour. Greyson and Mace had already retreated, no doubt so Greyson could fill the Alpha in on our plan. “I’ll show you around.”

After getting everyone settled, I found myself lingering upstairs, just outside Ravi’s room. We were about to go to war, and there was no telling who, if any of us, would survive the night to come. And whether or not I planned to remain the Redwood Luna after all of this was said and done, I was committed to seeing this fight through.

But Greyson had told me to put my affairs in order, and now that the other pack members and our guests were settled, I still had one last loose end to tie up.

I knocked on Ravi’s door and then poked my head in. “Hey, can we talk?”

He smiled and patted the spot on his mattress next to him. “Of course.”

While all I wanted to do was throw myself at him and curl up in his embrace, I forced myself to stay calm and approach him slowly before sinking down next to him on the bed. “Are you ready?” I asked.

Ravi nodded. “Greyson’s plan is smart. I think we’ve got a real shot here—or at least as good a shot as we’re going to get.” He brushed a strand of hair away from my face and then let his fingers linger, slowly tracing my jaw. “Are you still with me on *our* plan? Are you really willing to give up the pack? You’ve been such an amazing Luna, and woman, and—”

I pressed a finger against his lips. “Yes, I’m still with you. I’m proud of what I’ve achieved with the Redwood pack, but I know my future isn’t here.”

The truth was, Greyson had chosen me for this very purpose—to be the Luna who led the pack in his absence and remained a strong leader during times of crisis. But once this crisis passed, I knew my role would come to an end, too. There had been a time when that thought would have sent me spiraling, but now I was at peace with it.

Because I wanted more for myself. I wanted a future brighter than simply being Greyson’s Luna. And I believed that I could find that brighter future with Ravi, far away from the Redwood pack and Silas and everything else.

*Ravi may not be my mate, but he’s the perfect partner for me—steady and reliable, not to mention absurdly hot and absolutely amazing in bed. What more could a girl ask for?*

Honestly, now that I had this with Ravi, I was almost glad that I didn’t have a mate. After seeing how weak Xavier and Greyson were around Cali, I’d realized that having a mate was a liability I was happy to avoid.

Ravi stroked my cheekbone, gently pulling me out of my thoughts, and I smiled.

“I want to be with you,” I said. “Only you.”

Keeping a hand on my jaw, he leaned in and kissed me. With his lips moving against mine, I suddenly forgot all the worries that had been weighing me down. God, I loved how easily he made the rest of the world fade away. He was exactly what I needed—now and always.

In no time at all, our clothes were peeled off and tossed away, and I immediately pushed him back into the mattress and wrapped my mouth around his cock.

Ravi moaned my name, his fingers sinking into my hair like he was looking for something to ground him. He didn’t push me, didn’t do anything but hold on as my mouth took him to new heights. I pulled away with an audible pop and kissed him deeply.

“Now it’s my turn.” He grinned, then tugged me up, up, up, until I was straddling his face.

“Are you—ah!” I gasped when his mouth made contact with my heated core. I was already wet and ready for him, but I wasn’t going to complain if he wanted to give me some extra attention. I sighed and rolled my hips in time with the tongue lapping at my folds, sinking my fingers into his hair.

Greyson had told me to get my affairs in order, and that was exactly what I was doing—spending what might be my last free moments with the man who made me feel amazing, wanted, and cherished.

My release slammed into me, and I called out his name in broken syllables as I rode out my pleasure on his tongue. He licked me through it, slow and gentle, until the last crackles of my orgasm subsided, and then I carefully slid down his body to straddle his lap.

I licked the taste of myself out of his mouth and rolled my hips over him, dragging my wet heat over his hard cock again and again before sinking onto his length. God, he felt so good. How was it better every time we were together?

His hands anchored on my hips, guiding me into a fast, hard rhythm that left both of us breathless. I bucked my hips, meeting him thrust for thrust, then he leaned up and caught my nipple in his mouth and I came apart with a cry, my muscles clamping down on him.

Ravi’s eyes rolled back. “Fuck!” Then I felt him spill himself inside me.

I collapsed onto his chest with trembling limbs, savoring the rise and fall of his chest against mine, and the way our combined scents wrapped around us.

I peered up at him with a silly grin. “If this is what I’ve got to look forward to…”

The words died in my throat. Ravi was looking down at me with an expression that made my stomach lurch.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. I’d never seen him look so serious before. “Is it the battle?”

He shook his head and then reached out to touch my cheek, his expression softening slightly. “I love you, Joss.”

My mouth went dry. Not once in my life had a romantic partner said those three little words to me. Coming from Ravi, they were the sweetest thing I’d ever heard, but…

Did I love him back?

**Episode 871**

XAVIER

I stood on the porch, watching the Redwood and Blue Blood werewolves mixing and chatting. Even with the palpable tension in the air, there was none of the usual posturing that I so often saw between members of different packs. Everyone seemed happy to be together, reuniting—even if the reason we were all together was less than ideal.

A small smile tugged at my lips as I watched Sage speak animatedly with a couple of Blue Bloods. Everyone had made huge leaps and strides in their training over the past few days, and I was beyond proud of them. Everyone had really given everything they had to prepare for this battle, and because of that we might actually have a chance at defeating Silas—and maybe they wouldn’t have to give everything to keep him from winning.

I caught a glimpse of Colton and Jay, standing over on the lawn away from the rest of the group, and moved to join them. I smirked to myself. *I can’t believe how happy I am to have Colton here. This time last year I would have given an arm and a leg for my obnoxious twin to leave me the hell alone. Who would have thought I’d come to enjoy having that little asshole around? Maybe distance does make the heart grow fonder.*

Colton and Jay nodded in greeting as I joined them.

I guess I had Maya to thank for this new-found peace between myself and my twin. Speaking of…

“Colton, have you talked to Maya about everything that’s going on?” I asked.

He held up a hand. “I’m not talking about Maya right now, dude.”

Normally I would have pushed the issue, but the flat tone in his voice told me how well that would go if I tried. “*Okay*, then.” I turned to the other werewolf. “Jay, how’s Lola doing? It looked like she got into a bit of an argument with Big Mac earlier—”

“Don’t ask.” Jay shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about it right now. Things with Lola have been… complicated, lately. With the spell,” he quickly added. I couldn’t quite bring myself to believe him. Based on what Cali had told me, there was more amiss with Lola than complications arising from the upcoming spell.

“So, Xavier,” Colton asked in a sing-song voice. “How’s Cali, hmm? Things going fairytale-perfect for you two now?”

My mouth snapped shut. I considered a response, and then a few choice words because my brother had made his point crystal clear. “I don’t want to talk about it,” I finally admitted.

There was a tense moment between the three of us, and then Colton snorted. That broke the silent tension, and Jay and I started laughing as well.

Colton smirked. “Clearly we’ve all got our affairs in order.”

Jay let out a sigh. “Having a mate is never easy… And I should go find mine. I’ll see you two later.” He crossed the lawn and headed back to the house, leaving Colton and me alone.

*Having a mate isn’t easy? Talk about an understatement of epic proportions.* The mythology around being mated, even with how relatively common it was among werewolves, told a story of a couple living happily ever after, their troubles resolved now that they’d found their perfect match.

Those stories never talked about what happened after happily ever after.

The easy silence turned cold and tense with Jay gone, and Colton’s eyes narrowed on mine. “Seriously, bro, what is going on with Cali? Is she sleeping with Greyson?”

I bristled, a low growl echoing in my chest. *Why the fuck would that be his business?*

He held his hands up. “Hey, I’m not trying to start anything, but everyone in the pack knows that something’s going on with you three. All I’m saying is, it can’t be easy.”

*Another fucking understatement*. I sighed. “Couldn’t be harder, actually. I know that she’s my mate, Colton. I know it in my bones, but this *due destini* shit…”

I blew out a ragged breath. How could I make my brother understand what it was like to watch your mate struggle to choose you? To *know* that she was sleeping with someone else? That she loved someone else, but she loved you too, and that all three of you were caught together in a toxic triangle?

“I can’t explain it,” I continued, “but I know that Cali needs to figure this out on her own. It drives me insane, not being able to act, but I can’t push her. If I put my foot down, I could lose her forever, and that’s just not an option. But I know that in the end, she’ll realize she’s meant to be with me. I just need to let her figure that out for herself.”

There was a beat as my words sunk in, and then Colton nodded and put his hand on my shoulder. “You’ve changed. I never would have thought that you had this kind of maturity in you.”

I blinked. *Wow, he’s not going to be a dick about this?* Relief and affection rushed through me, so fast I felt my throat tighten. I cleared my throat. “I’m glad you’re here.”

He grinned. “You can admit it—you missed me. You were lost without me.”

*Way to ruin the moment*. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

Colton headed off toward the house to say hello to some Blue Blood pack members he knew, and I caught a glimpse of Violet sitting on the porch. A smile tugged at my lips as I moved to join her.

“Hey,” I said, taking a seat on the step next to her. “Where’s Charlie?”

She blushed a little bit. “Upstairs in my room. I think he wanted a bit of peace.”

“Hard to find around here,” I conceded. “Still, I’m glad to have you back.”

“I’m happy to be back,” she said. “Minnesota was… a lot.”

“I can tell. You look so different. I was really worried about you, you know. You were so miserable for so long after losing Lilac—I was beginning to think we’d lost a part of you, too. But now…” I reached out and squeezed her hand. “It looks like you’re finally coming back to life.”

She squeezed back before letting my hand go. “I can’t believe what it’s like to have a mate. It’s like I was missing this piece my whole life and I didn’t even know it. And now that I have it…” She grinned. “Charlie’s perfect. He’s absolutely perfect. The connection I feel with him… I never thought I’d feel like a whole person again after Lilac was murdered, but finding Charlie has changed everything, given me a new reason to live.” Her smile dimmed a little. “I just hope that I made the right decision to bring him back now, right before a battle.”

It was impossible not to smile along with Violet while she described her bond with Charlie. It was exactly how I felt about Cali—like she was the missing piece I’d never known I needed. And now I didn’t know how to live without her.

“I’ll keep an eye on Charlie,” I promised Violet. “I’ll make sure he’s okay.”

The door swung open, smacking hard against the wall, and Ava stepped out onto the porch. I felt my shoulders draw up with fresh tension.

“Xavier.” She sighed in relief. “I’ve been looking for you. We need to talk.”

“I don’t think so.” I turned back to Violet, determined to freeze this bitch out until she left me alone, but the girl was already rising to her feet, looking wildly between us.

“I’m gonna go find Charlie,” she mumbled, and disappeared into the house.

I hung my head with a sigh. *Thanks a ton, Violet*.

Ava took Violet’s spot on the stairs. “Greyson said we should get our affairs in order, and I want to take care of ours.”

“*Ours*?” I echoed with a bitter laugh. “We don’t have affairs anymore.”

“But—”

“Listen, I’m glad you’re working on our side, but that doesn’t mean I trust you. Not by a long shot. I don’t have anything else to say to you.”

Tears filled her eyes, and her lower lip started to tremble. Years ago, that look would have reduced me to putty at her feet, and I would have moved the sun and the earth to try to bring a smile to her face again.

But we weren’t those people anymore. We hadn’t been those people in a long, long time.

“Ever since I came back, things have been so confusing for me.” Ava sniffled. “The dead aren’t supposed to come back. Not like this, and it’s made things more difficult. And since there’s a chance we could both die tonight, I need you to know that I’m truly sorry for killing your mother.” She took a deep breath and it was shaky on the exhale. “I wish, more than anything, that I had never done it. I never meant to do it—it happened in the heat of the moment—but if I could take it back, I would.”

The sincerity in her voice felt so real that it hit me in the gut. I wished more than anything that it was possible to have my mother back—so many things would have been different. But they weren’t. And we couldn’t go back.

I shook my head, my lips firming. “You can’t take it back.”

“Please, Xavier,” she begged. “I was torn between my pack and my mate. Can’t you understand that?”

“No.”

She scoffed. “You can’t understand that, but you can understand Cali being torn between you and your brother?”

The sound of Cali’s name in Ava’s mouth had my hackles raising, and I leaned forward with a snarl. “You don’t get to talk about Cali. *Ever.* She’s my mate. She has two mates. You couldn’t possibly understand.”

A few tears escaped Ava’s eyes, slipping down her cheeks. “Xavier, *you* have two mates! I’m standing in front of you, I’m not dead, and our mate connection didn’t die when I did.”

I backed away from her in disgust. “You’re not my mate. And you never will be again.”

**Episode 872**

If it were actually possible to pace a hole into the floor, over the course of the last hour I would have broken through three floors and ended up pacing in the basement.

But of course I didn’t have the power to pace a hole in the floor—not that I wanted it. As far as powers went, that one would have been pretty stupid. But it would’ve been nice to actually feel like I could *do* something. Anything.

I groaned and spun back around to continue my frantic pacing. *Is this how zoo animals feel? Alone and helpless and frustrated because they can’t do a damn thing to help the pack on the eve of the scariest and most deadly battle they’ve ever—*

*Take a breath, Cali. You’re no use to anyone if you pass out.*

I slumped down on my bed and lay back to stare at the ceiling. The room wasn’t all that big, and I was a little dizzy from all the spinning and pacing.

Once the world righted itself, I stayed in my bed, mulling over ways to be useful. I wished I had more Fae training. Artemis was so powerful—surely I could be too, with training and practice.

I sat up quickly. *Artemis. I’ll go see Artemis and see if we can fit in one last impromptu training session before the big battle. There’s gotta be enough time for her to teach me something useful.*

My first stop was her bedroom, but she wasn’t there. Weird. Since she was trying to stay on the DL concerning her Fae heritage, she didn’t mix with the werewolves all that much. So where had she gone?

I searched the whole house for her and even looked outside before admitting defeat. Wherever Artemis had gone, she clearly hadn’t wanted to be found. *Hopefully she comes back in time for the battle,* I thought as I trudged back up the stairs to my bedroom. *It would be just like her to—*

I stopped short, staring through my open bedroom door at none other than Artemis, elusive Fae sister, who was sitting on my bed and flipping through Cassandra’s journal.

“Where have you been?” I asked.

She looked up from the book. “Oh, hey.”

“I was looking all over for you!”

“Here I am.” She shrugged.

“But I—” I stopped myself. More and more, I was realizing that an important part of having a sister—especially an unflappable Fae half-sister who had *not* been socialized properly—was learning to pick your battles. I sighed and nodded at the journal. “Did you find anything useful?”

Artemis shook her hand and tossed the journal back onto the bed. “How could I possibly find anything in there? It’s written in like, gibberish. Her handwriting is unbearable.”

I blinked. “I mean, it’s not gibberish. It’s just weird, old timey language.”

“Old timey language? Seriously?” She jabbed the book with her finger. “It gave me a total headache to even try.”

I stalked over to my bed, grabbed the journal, and held it open in front of the two of us as I read a passage. “*The orchids were in bloom the night Symeon invited me to dance beneath the full moon*—”

“No, stop her words, stop it. How are you reading that?” Artemis demanded. “Are you just making this up?”

I stared at my sister’s face, then down at the very legible words written in the journal, then back up at Artemis. Maybe they didn’t teach cursive in the Fae world.

But she looked completely serious, and just as confused as I felt. I took another nice, calming, totally normal and not about to lose my shit kind of breath, and then patiently pointed at the words on the page. “You sure you didn’t find anything?”

She leaned forward, squinting, then shook her head. “That’s a big nope, Cali,” she said. “Have *you* been able to read anything that might help you with the *due destini*? Miss I-can-read-this-handwriting?”

I shook my head with a sigh. “I’ve read this journal cover to cover and mostly it’s just angsty pining about Symeon and Arion—and believe me, I don’t need any more information about *that* problem.” I closed the book, looking down at the cover and tapping my fingers on the edge, trying to recall any seemingly unimportant tidbit that I’d forgotten.

“There was this one weird thing,” I hedged. “Cassandra talked about the Titans, too, and then yesterday Colton and Lola and Xavier were all talking about Kronos and how he ate his children. You’d missed it.”

“Yeah, I’m avoiding that Colton guy. He wiggles his eyebrows too much,” Artemis said.

I frowned and forced myself to meet Artemis’s eyes. “Before yesterday though, I’d never even heard about that story before, and then all of a sudden it pops up in both the *due destini* journal *and* in relation to Silas?”

I knew how crazy it sounded, and I was hesitant to openly admit the suspicion that had been taking root in my mind.

Fortunately, Artemis didn’t have the same hang-ups I did. “That can’t be a coincidence,” she said, giving voice to my thoughts.

“I think so too, but I don’t understand what it could possibly mean. The Titans, *due destini*, Silas—somehow it all seems connected, but how?”

My sister shrugged and then collapsed backward onto my bed. “None of this makes any sense to me. That headache is coming back. Strong.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. All of this was so confusing, and with the battle coming up it wasn’t like I had the time or headspace to figure this out. All I could do right now was try to get my affairs in order, like Greyson had said.

Speaking of…

“We should call Mom,” I suggested suddenly. I’d been thinking of my “affairs” as being limited to Xavier and Greyson, but I was lucky enough to have a family who loved me. I couldn’t forget about them, or take them for granted. What if something happened to me during the battle? How would they cope with that news?

Guilt churned in my stomach.

Artemis agreed, and I plopped down onto the bed next to her and called Mom using FaceTime.

“Oh, we’re in that small box!” Artemis said in awe, pointing at the screen.

I just shook my head. It never ceased to amaze me how Artemis could have spent her whole life in a world with *actual magic* and still be in awe of a smartphone.

My mom’s face popped up on the screen, and my heart gave a little twist.

“It’s my girls!” Mom grinned, clearly delighted to be getting a call from us. If anything, the guilt only worsened at her joy. She had no idea what could be coming.

“Hi, Mom!” I managed, while Artemis shouted, “Hello, Mother! Can you see our faces in the box?”

R.I.P., my eardrums.

Mom winced at Artemis’s volume and, after quickly explaining how FaceTime worked and that there really was no need to shout, we were finally able to chat.

“How are you girls doing all the way out there in Oregon?” Mom asked. “Has it been raining all the time? You wouldn’t believe the snowstorm we had here the other day!”

“Is that Cali?” I heard my dad ask, and then he loomed into the picture, his forehead blocking out most of the screen.

“Your father does not understand FaceTime,” Artemis noted.

“He can hear you,” I muttered. “Dad, can you back up a bit please?”

“Oh, sure, sweetie.” He backed up so that both he and Mom were in the shot, and it was then that I noticed the large bandage peeking out from underneath his T-shirt.

“Dad, what’s that on your shoulder?” I asked.

“Oh, this?” He waved me off. “It’s not a big deal. I was bitten by a werewolf.”

The nonchalance—and dare I say, *pride*—in his expression only kept the horror at bay temporarily.

“WHAT?” I shrieked. “You were bitten by a werewolf? And you didn’t think to *tell me?*”

My mind raced with all the terrifying possibilities. What if the bite got infected? Was he going to need a rabies shot? Wait—was he going to turn into a werewolf?!

And then my fear gave way to a darker emotion. Would my dad get to be a werewolf while I was still stuck as a human? I’d wanted to be changed for so long, and both Greyson and Xavier had agreed to turn me at various times. Did their offer still stand?

But then again, as always, the shit had hit the fan and my transformation had been shoved onto the backburner.

And now we knew I was half-Fae. But still, I’d always wanted to feel more like part of the pack. Officially. Was that even still possible?

“I’m totally fine,” my dad continued. “And don’t worry—there’s no way I’m going to turn.”

The rest of the conversation passed in a blur. Between the shocking revelation that my dad had been bitten by a werewolf and the very real possibility that this was the last time I would ever talk to my parents, I struggled to pay attention to anything anyone said, and I ended the call feeling pensive and lost.

“What’s wrong?” Artemis asked. “You weren’t as bubbly as usual. Are you worried about the battle?”

I shook my head and leaned back on my bed. “It’s not that. I’m just thinking about the next full moon. And I can’t believe my dad is turning into a werewolf before me. Do you know how long I’ve been waiting for Xavier or Greyson to turn me?”

She snorted. “Funny. Like that’s even possible.”

I sat bolt upright. “What? What are you talking about?”

“You’re Fae, Cali. You can’t ever be turned into a werewolf.”

**Episode 873**

VIOLET

Jay was saying something to me, trying to introduce me to some werewolves he knew from the Blue Blood pack, but I could barely pay him any attention. A ton of us were crammed into the living room together, catching up and meeting each other and squeezing in some much-needed mindless socializing before the battle started. My mind had been on Charlie since I’d spoken with Xavier out on the porch earlier.

I couldn’t stop thinking about what Xavier had said about keeping an eye out for Charlie. It was so, so kind of him to offer to do that for my mate, to try to comfort me when he had just as much reason to be afraid—and probably even more to lose than I did.

I knew Xavier had meant what he’d said, but even so, he was obviously going to have his hands full. A huge piece of our plan hinged on keeping him front and center to lure out Silas. It was a good plan, and I honestly believed it was going to work, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t require all of Xavier’s focus. Where in all the magic and subterfuge was there room for protecting my newly changed mate?

*If Xavier can’t protect Charlie, then I’ll have to.* I would keep Charlie safe, no matter what. There were simply no other options. I’d already lost everyone I loved—until Charlie had come along. My mate. The other half of my soul. The person who’d brought me back to life. I’d just barely found him, and we’d only just escaped the clutches of that horrifying Rogue. I couldn’t lose him now, when we’d hardly had any time together, when we both still had our whole lives ahead of us. It was unthinkable.

I still couldn’t quite believe that the battle was here already. It felt like it had been hanging over our heads for so long, but now it was actually happening—almost too soon. In some ways, it was almost a relief to get it over with. Once this was in the rearview mirror, I could finally move on with my life. With Charlie.

But what if the life I was planning to move on to was no longer an option once the battle was over? I couldn’t help but think back to Greyson’s speech, to his advice that we all get our affairs in order. Clearly, none of us were safe, no matter how good the plan was. We could still lose pack members. I could lose friends. Hell, I could die just as easily as anyone else in the pack.

The thought made my belly twist like I’d just passed the apex of a roller coaster and was now plunging down, down, down.

*But I’m so young! I* just *turned eighteen! There’s still so much I haven’t done! So much I want to do with Charlie…*

There was one thing in particular, in fact. One thing that it wasn’t too late to experience.

“Excuse me,” I mumbled to Jay and rushed up to my bedroom, where I knew Charlie had retreated earlier to rest a bit before the fight tonight.

I pushed through the door to my bedroom, and a laugh slipped out of my throat.

Charlie was not resting.

Charlie was shirtless on my bedroom floor, doing pushups.

*How can something be so hot and so funny at the exact same time?*

He leapt up the second I entered the room, a wide grin tugging at his cheeks. “Violet, being a werewolf is the best!” he cried. “I just did 100 hundred pushups! One HUNDRED! I’ve been playing lacrosse my entire life and training hard, but this is a whole new level!” He flexed his arms then laughed giddily.

I just stared at him, drinking in the sight of his shirtless, sweaty body. *A whole new level is right.*

Finally tearing my eyes off of his body, I approached him. “I’m glad you’re excited, but are you sure you’re taking the battle seriously enough? It’s going to be dangerous. You could get hurt.”

He shrugged. “I think it’ll actually be pretty cool. I mean, we fought that Rogue right? We handled him easily enough. And with all these other werewolves fighting alongside us, what is there to worry about?”

I blinked, aghast. How could he be so nonchalant about this? “It’s not going to be *cool*, Charlie. This isn’t a video game. People will die, and they’ll stay dead.”

The smile slipped away. “You’re right. I’m sorry. You’ll stay close to me, right? I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I’ll be right by your side,” I assured him, resting a hand on his chest. “But if there’s anything you want to do beforehand, like call your parents, now’s the time.”

“I’m good. I already called my parents. I’m all set, and I’m exactly where I want to be.” He moved closer and touched my cheek, smiling softly. “With exactly the person I want to be with.”

His words sent my insides into convulsions. I swallowed, trying to gather up the courage to bring up what I’d come upstairs to do. “Um, that’s good. Because I’ve been thinking… Maybe I could—I mean, *we*. Maybe we could—” I stopped myself and took a deep, calming breath. *Come on, Violet. You can do this. This is your mate you’re talking to. Just tell him what you want!* “Maybe we could just enjoy the moment for a little while,” I said, trying to add just the right amount of flirtation to my voice.

Charlie blinked. “Like how?”

“Like… this.” I shoved him back onto my bed—just a little too hard. He lay spread-eagle across the mattress. “Oops, sorry.” I quickly climbed onto the mattress and straddled his legs.

“Whoa!” He laughed. “What’s up with you?”

It took me another long moment to find my words. “We don’t know what’s going to happen tonight. So I want to spend every second I can with you.” I leaned in and brushed my lips against his, allowing him a taste and a moment of space to process what I’d just said. He twined his fingers into my hair, deepening the kiss.

God, he was the most perfect person I’d ever known. The kindest, the most handsome. I couldn’t stop thinking about what it would be like to finally be with him—*really* be with him. I pressed myself against him and nipped his bottom lip.

His deep groan reverberated through my whole body, centering between my legs, and then he rolled us over so I was pressed against the mattress beneath him. He kissed a trail down my neck, his hand slipping underneath the hem of my shirt, his fingertips brushing my bare stomach.

I tensed at the sensation, and he stopped. “Is this okay?”

“Yes.” I smiled up at him deviously before kissing across his collarbone and biting the top of his shoulder playfully.

His eyes clouded over with desire. The sight made my thighs clench. Was this finally happening?

Charlie ran his hand up my side, his thumb brushing the side of my breast. I gasped, instinctively pressing my hips against his in response. How was that simple, glancing touch enough to make my head spin?

Then his hand dragged down my side, holding me in place while his thumb drew circles over my hip bone. The touch sent a shot of heat straight to my core, and I moaned, dragging my fingernails over his back.

“*Charlie*.” I tugged at his belt, but he drew my hands away, pinning them on either side of my head.

*Ugh, come on!* I groaned in frustration, and he lavished attention on my neck, sucking on my pulse point. God, I’d never felt so needy in my entire life. This was it. Now was the time. I needed to be with my mate.

I sat up and he backed off a bit. I broke away from his mouth just long enough to yank my shirt over my head and toss it on the floor. His eyes drank in the sight of me, bare from the waist up except my plain white bra. He’d seen me naked countless times, but this felt different, somehow. More charged. Like he was really seeing me.

And he really, really liked what he saw.

He kissed me hard, pushing me back against the mattress. When my hands landed on his belt once more, he didn’t fight it, and the rest of our clothes came off in a rush. Charlie positioned himself between my thighs as he kissed a hot line up my throat.

He pulled away and looked into my eyes. “Are you sure?”

I swallowed thickly but nodded. “I’m sure—”

Then my bedroom door swung open and slammed against the wall, and I swear to god my soul almost left my body.

“Violet!” Colton called. “I brought you a present!”

“Colton, what the *hell?*” I screamed, gathering the sheets around myself while Charlie did the same.

Colton either didn’t realize what he’d walked into or he didn’t care, because he approached the bed, smiling with pride and holding out… Was that a snow globe?

“It’s from Idaho!” he said cheerily, taking a seat on the edge of the mattress nearest me.

“Um, thanks.” I accepted the snow globe with a grimace and glanced at a very confused-slash-angry-slash-hopefully-still-horny Charlie.

Colton must have finally noticed the pheromones in the air, because he turned to Charlie with a blank expression. “It was good to meet you, Charlie.”

“Um, thanks, Colton,” Charlie said uneasily.

“I hope you know what a good pack family Violet has,” Colton continued. “It would be a shame if you ever did anything to hurt her.”

“Oh my god.” I covered my beet-red face with my hands. One thing about pack life I’d forgotten to warn Charlie about was that it came with an endless supply of overprotective big brothers.

I felt the mattress lift when Colton stood up and ruffled my hair. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” he called and then—thank god—left the room, closing the door behind him.

*Moment ruined*.

It was silent for a moment before I risked peeking at Charlie between my fingers. His lips twitched once, and then we both burst out laughing.

Charlie gently pried my hands away from my face and kissed my swollen lips. “Next time, okay?”

“Next time,” I agreed. We settled down to snuggle, and I tried to allow myself to sink into the moment of peace.

Still, I couldn’t shake the fear that after this battle there would be no next time. Could I lose Charlie tonight?

**Episode 874**

GREYSON

I paced back and forth in my bedroom, glancing at the window every so often to track the sun’s progress across the sky. Restlessness itched and buzzed beneath my skin, not allowing me a moment’s peace.

*I almost wish things would just get started. Let’s get this over with.*

I hated the waiting, hated acting like everything was fine like so many other people downstairs. Everything had never been further from fine, yet all I could do right now was wait. I had checked and double-checked the plan a thousand times now. I’d met with Mace and Joss and Xavier and Big Mac. I’d even done my absolute damnedest to rally the troops.

And now there was nothing left for me to do—except wait.

Since our entire plan hinged on secrecy and the element of surprise, we needed to wait to act until we had the cover of nightfall.

I irritably glanced out the window again and continued my pacing. What I *wished* I could do was go to Cali and make things right with her, but of course I couldn’t do that. Not right now. Still, I couldn’t help but think of last time I’d slept with her, how fucking amazing she’d felt, the sounds she’d made—Christ, I wished I could have her just one more time…

I shook myself. *Cool down. It’s gonna be a long night, and the last thing you want is to be distracted by your dick when you should be worried about Silas*.

Then I froze, realizing belatedly that there was still one person out there I needed to make amends with in case the worst happened: my mother. Sabine.

I left my bedroom and hurried downstairs, all too aware of the dying light shining in through the windows. Moments earlier, I’d wished the day could go by faster. Now I was worried that I’d wasted it before I could make peace with my mother.

I found her in the kitchen.

“Can we talk?” I asked, somewhat breathlessly.

Sabine smiled, and I recognized the emotion flashing in her eyes. Hope. “Of course we can, Greyson.”

I took a seat at the kitchen island and she slipped into the seat next to mine. “I’m happy to see you,” she admitted. “I was hoping you and I would get a chance to connect before the fight.”

“You were?” I asked. For some reason, it had never occurred to me that she might have wanted us to speak too.

She nodded. “I’m so proud of the way you’ve prepared the pack. Your plan is fantastic and I truly believe it will work.” She cautiously reached over and took my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

I was surprised to see her so happy and optimistic, considering who and what we were about to face. The idea of a battle against Silas had to be dragging out some old demons for her. It was for me. The fading sunlight filtering in through the kitchen window hit her engagement ring and sent sparkling reflections against the walls and ceiling.

Maybe things were different for her, now that she had so much to hope for.

“Congratulations again on the engagement,” I said. “Big Mac—MacKenzie is kind of intense, but it’s clear you make each other happy.”

Sabine beamed at me then glanced down at her ring. “I really am so happy… She was always the one, you know? Somehow despite everything between us, we were brought together.” She smiled. “Even though I can’t get the damn thing off. Ever.” She frowned a bit at this last part, then laughed. “Not that I’d ever want to take it off, anyway, I suppose. Do you know what makes me the happiest of all, Greyson?”

“What is it?”

She looked back up at me, her eyes flashing with steely determination. “The thought of finally being free of Silas.”

I squeezed her hand back. “You and me both.” Out of everyone in the Redwood pack, and any of the other packs, Sabine and I probably wanted to see Silas dead more than anyone else. The things he’d taken from us, the way he’d hurt us…

“Be careful, Greyson,” she said softly. “No matter what, you need to keep your wits about you. I care about the whole pack; they’re like family to me. But I care about you most of all.”

Emotion clogged my throat, and for a moment I couldn’t speak. I nodded instead, and gave her a small smile. “I’ve got this.”

She held her arms out with a questioning glance, and I didn’t hesitate before I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her tightly.

When she pulled away, wiping at her eyes, she said, “When all this is over, I’m hoping we’ll have the time and space to get to know each other better.”

It took me another long string of seconds to find my voice. Finally, I cleared the emotion from my throat. “I would like that.”

I left Sabine in the kitchen and slowly made my way through the house. While part of me just wanted to go hole up in my room again—or go find Cali and get lost in her until it was time for the battle to begin—I forced myself to look through each open door, to look into the faces of everyone waiting and bracing for the oncoming storm. This was my pack, and those who weren’t had still come here out of respect for an alliance that I had created.

I was responsible for everyone here—all of these lives, any and all of which could be snuffed out before dawn. When I’d taken on the role of Alpha, I’d known it would be hard. But I hadn’t known it would be like this. I hadn’t known how much it would take from me, the cost of bearing so much power and responsibility.

I would keep all of these people safe, no matter the cost.

Movement out of the corner of my eye snagged my attention, and I noticed Rishika out in the yard, practicing a few last moves. I pushed through the front door and walked out into the yard to talk to her.

“The lessons are over, you know,” I called as I approached. “You should get some rest while you can.”

She shook her head. “Practicing is the only thing keeping me from marching into those woods and throwing us into battle.”

“Ah. Well, I hear practice makes perfect. So, maybe a little more wouldn’t hurt.”

Her lips twitched, and then her expression turned serious. “I think the pack is ready,” she said. “We’ve all made a lot of improvement since we started training, but don’t worry. I’m going to have my eye on you the whole fight. We need to protect the Alpha.”

I held up a hand. “No. Protect the others, not me. If the choice comes down to me or anyone else, you are always to pick the others. Do you understand?”

Rishika shook her head. “You can’t be serious. We need *you*. You’re our leader—”

“I’m the Alpha here, Rishika, and this is a direct order. You *must* protect the others at all costs. *Do you understand?*” I knew that Rishika would fight for me, but that she was loyal to the others. I needed her to think of them before me.

“I understand,” she said reluctantly. I could tell she wasn’t at all happy about this turn of events, but I wasn’t about to relent. “And I think I *will* go get some rest.”

She walked away, her posture stiff, and I watched her go inside. It was then that I noticed Sage and Zainab cuddled up together on the porch, no doubt taking in a few final close moments before the battle. I took in a deep breath, desperate for some air. The weight of my responsibilities was threatening to crush me. I’d done what I could to create an effective plan and to put on an optimistic front, but I knew better than anyone that where Silas was concerned, anything was possible. This fight wasn’t won, not by a long shot, and the thought of losing any of my pack members…

Their deaths would haunt me forever.

I was glad that Sabine had told me I’d done a good job of preparing the pack as the Alpha, but I still wasn’t so sure I was the right man for the job. I’d been so distracted lately with all of the Cali drama that I hadn’t been prioritizing the pack—Joss had said as much to me directly, and she wasn’t wrong.

Was I really cut out for this? I had never actually wanted to be Alpha. I’d only taken on the role to protect my family—and Cali—from exactly this. From Silas. Once the looming threat was resolved, if we survived, did I want to continue as Alpha? Was it in the pack’s best interest for me to keep leading them?

Ever since Xavier had challenged me, I couldn’t shake the thought that the best thing I could do for the Redwood pack was step down and allow someone else to look after them.

As if my thoughts had conjured him, Xavier stepped out of the house and onto the porch. I headed over to speak with him. It turned out there was one last affair I needed to set in order before the battle could begin.

Xavier eyed me warily as I approached him. “What do you want?”

“I want you to know that everything I’ve done, I’ve done for our family.”

My brother crossed his arms with a snort. “Right. Running after Cali to the Fae world was definitely for us.”

*You did the exact same thing, you giant asshole*, I wanted to say. Instead I took a deep breath and then let it out. “Listen, I never meant for any of this to happen. Being mated to Cali wasn’t something I chose, any more than you did.”

He hesitated, and I wondered for a moment if he knew that I was right. Would he finally relent? Could we finally make amends, even while Cali stood between us?

“All right,” he finally said. “Then how about you choose to do the right thing and step aside?”

The kneejerk fury that rushed through me almost knocked me off my feet. *God, my brother is such an entitled prick. Why would he think that he deserves Cali more than me?*

I almost told Xavier the truth—that I had told Cali to pick him—but I decided to keep that one close to my chest for now. Instead, I said, “There’s one more thing I’d like to make clear before the battle starts.”

“And what’s that?” Xavier huffed.

“If I die during this fight, I want you to take over as Alpha.”

**Episode 875**

I stared at Artemis, reeling at the bombshell she’d just dropped on me. “What do you mean I can’t ever be a werewolf?” I demanded.

I couldn’t believe it. This had to be a bad dream brought on by the stress of facing down Silas, and the impending *due destini* deadline, and every other reason my life was a shitshow right now. It made more sense than the alternative, actually, because not only was it almost impossible to believe my dad had been bitten by a werewolf, the simple concept of not being able to be turned into a werewolf by Xavier or Greyson—just like I’d wanted for *months* now—was a mind fuck of epic proportions.

“You’re Fae, Cali,” Artemis reiterated, as if I didn’t already know that inconvenient little detail. “A Fae cannot be turned into a werewolf. It’s impossible.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but nothing came out but a sad little croak. “You’re telling me that after all this time I’ve been waiting and wanting to be turned, it never would have worked in the first place?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes, that is exactly what I’m telling you.”

“What the fuck?” I cried, slumping back onto my bed despondently. “How did I not know this? Why has nobody ever bothered to tell me? ‘Oh, hey, Cali, because you’re actually a super special but generally wimpy half-Fae, you’re permanently disqualified from turning into anything else’?”

The look on Artemis’s face told me she was convinced I had lost my mind. “What’s the big deal here? I get that your mates are werewolves—and there’s no helping that—but you’re Fae, Cali. Why would you want to be a lesser being when you’re already at the top of the food chain?”

I sat back up and my jaw dropped. “*Lesser being?*” I repeated.

“Yeah.” She said it like it was the most commonplace thing a world—a truth universally acknowledged. “I mean, some of these guys are nice and all, but c’mon, they're dog people.”

“Oh my *god!*” I cried, backing up to put some space between me and my apparently very prejudiced sister. “Artemis, that is species-ist! You can’t say that stuff! Please don’t tell me you actually believe any of that garbage.”

She shrugged. “Haven’t you ever heard that oil and vinegar don’t mix? Our type have never gotten along with them, and you know that. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that they’re all bad—most of these guys at the house have been perfectly nice to me. But being Fae? There’s no comparison, Cali.”

“No.” I shook my head almost violently. “No, that’s where you’re wrong. Because apparently you and I don’t have the same type. Maybe we never have. *My* type is all about dog people—and they’re more like bears than dogs, anyway. They’re amazing, and now I know I’ll never be one of them!”

I slumped back onto the bed. All my hopes and dreams for the future were gone. Hell, they’d never even been real in the first place. What did this mean in terms of the pack? I had always felt like an outsider, and now… Now, I would always be one.

“Hey.” Xavier appeared in the doorway, a strange expression on his face. “Can we talk?”

Artemis glanced between the two of us and shimmied off the bed. “I think I’m gonna go… work on my bow and arrow real quick.” And then she hurried out of the room, leaving me alone with Xavier and the bomb she’d just dropped on me.

I sat up, eyeing my mate. He was watching me with an expression I couldn’t quite place. There was definitely some weird energy going on. “What’s up?” I asked.

He stared at me for a long beat before answering, “I just wanted to check on how you’re doing before the battle. I know you’ve never experienced anything like this before, and I wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“Thanks, I guess.” I sighed. “And for the record, I *was* doing fine, but Artemis just helpfully informed me that Fae can never become werewolves.” As soon as the words slipped out of my mouth, I wished I could draw them back in. “That doesn’t change how you feel about me, does it? Knowing I can never be a proper Luna for you?”

Xavier immediately rushed over and took a seat on the edge of the mattress. “No, not at all. I was against changing you for a really long time, remember? You’re perfect to me just the way you are.”

“But now I’ll never be a true part of the pack,” I whimpered.

“Cali, you’re my mate. You’ll always be a true part of the pack,” he assured me.

The relief was so immediate. It was exactly what I needed to hear.

Before I really knew what I was doing, I’d crawled into his lap and was kissing him. He kissed me back with abandon, his hands pressing against my cheekbones like he was trying to sear the imprint of his mouth onto mine. I didn’t care. I just wanted to be with him, to feel him.

If I was going to die today, at least I’d have this one last moment with Xavier to cherish.

Xavier deepened the kiss, and I sucked on the tip of his tongue. With a moan, he reached for my shirt to pull it off, and I lifted my arms to help him along. He drank me in, his eyes wild and dark with desire, and his lips already swollen from our desperate kisses.

"Gorgeous," he breathed.

His hands were still anchored on my hips, drawing maddening circles just above the waistband of my jeans. I reached one hand down, my fingers entwining with his, and slowly brought his hand up to cup my breast through my bra. We both moaned as my hard nipple brushed against his palm. It was all the encouragement he needed.

He shifted his weight, pressing me into the mattress. My legs immediately wrapped around his hips. Something hard and thick pressed against my inner thigh, separated only by a few layers. I canted my hips up against his, desperate for some friction. He rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, then dipped his head down to take the hardened bud into his mouth. I writhed beneath him, moaning at his touch.

Xavier backed off long enough for us both to remove the rest of our clothes, and then he redoubled his efforts, his mouth wrapping around my nipple as fingertips lightly stroked my wet folds.

“Xavier,” I moaned, grinding myself against his hand. “Please.”

He eased two fingers into my heat, and groaned. “God, Cali, you’re so wet for me.”

A keening noise escaped my mouth, and Xavier sealed his lips over mine, the thrusting of his tongue moving in sync with his fingers. It felt like we’d only just begun, but already I could feel pleasure blossoming in my base. His thumb drew firm circles on my clit, and his fingers crooked against that sweet spot of nerves that he knew so well.

I exploded around him with a cry, my walls clenching around his fingers as I rode out my release.

When my body calmed, he pulled his fingers out of my soaking heat and his eyes locked with mine as he sucked my essence off of his fingers. A shudder went all the way down to my toes.

Jesus, why was that so goddamn *hot*?

I sat up, leaning forward to kiss him, but his hand pressed against my clavicle, his fingers brushing against the base of my throat.

Immediately, I yielded to that gentle pressure and allowed him to push me back against the mattress. It was only then that he leaned down to kiss me, his tongue caressing mine as a reward for my compliance, allowing me to taste myself on his tongue.

I broke away from his mouth with a whine. "Please, Xavier.” I couldn’t remember ever feeling so desperate, wanting him as badly as I did in this moment.

He draped my legs over his shoulders, his hands splaying over my ass as he lined himself up with my heat. As wet as I was, it was still a tight fit to accommodate him. I let out a mewl of satisfaction and shifted my hips, seeking both further stimulation and a release from the unyielding pressure. His thumb found my clit again, giving me another dose of pleasure to make my eyes shut.

Xavier moaned when his hips finally lay flush against mine, and for a moment we stared at each other, love and desperation and fear and lust a palpable thing between us. I tried not to think about how this might be our last time together.

I wiggled my hips. “Xavier, I need you.”

With a growl, he pulled almost all the way out before thrusting ruthlessly back in. I moaned, arching my hips to meet his thrusts, repeating his name like my favorite prayer.

"One more," he moaned. "Give me one more."

His fingers found my clit, again rubbing circles, and my whole body clenched up. “Oh god, oh god—”

The bedroom door swung open. “Cali, we’re—Oh, shit!”

I lurched upright, my forehead smacking into Xavier’s chin so hard that stars burst in my vision.

“Ouch!” I grabbed my head.

“What the fuck?” I heard Xavier snarl.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry!” A frantic voice called.

I pried my eyes open to see who had so rudely interrupted my time with Xavier. I was going to murder Colton for real this time.

But when I saw who it was, I gasped. “Astrid?! Torin?!”

**Episode 876**

Astrid and Torin were in my room.

ASTRID AND TORIN WERE IN MY ROOM!

There was a long moment of shocked silence where my brain sputtered and then froze completely, trying desperately to understand how it was possible that my two Fae friends—who I had assumed I would never see again—were standing in the doorway to my bedroom, matching shocked expressions on their faces—

Because they had just interrupted Xavier and me having sex—in fact, they’d spoiled a pretty pivotal moment, all things considered.

I peeled my eyes away from Astrid and Torin, and then looked up at Xavier, who was rubbing his jaw—which had come out the victor against my skull—and then looked down at where we were still connected…

“Shit!” I cried, the same moment Xavier snarled, “Fuck,” and somewhere near the door I thought I heard a meek Fae voice whisper, “My bad.”

From there, I was caught in a confusing tangle of limbs and curse words as Xavier and I separated and I tried to yank the blanket over us for some semblance of modesty. For some unknown and probably mortifying reason, Astrid and Torin chose to remain in my bedroom, the door still wide open for the whole pack to see, while Xavier and I made ourselves somewhat decent beneath the sheets.

Torin, of course, was the first one to break the ice. “Wow, sorry about that.” He winked. “What happened to Greyson?”

Next to me, Xavier let out a low snarl. I couldn’t blame him. He didn’t like being reminded of my bond with Greyson on a *good* day, and he certainly didn’t seem to appreciate his brother being brought up when he’d been so rudely interrupted and—my eyes darted down to his lap for confirmation—yep, he had *not* been able to finish yet.

A headache was beginning to bloom where my skull had lost the fight against Xavier’s chin. I patted Xavier’s thigh absently and chose to ignore Torin’s question altogether.

“Sorry, oh my god! What are you two doing here?” I asked. “And *how* are you here? How did you find the pack house?” I couldn’t make sense of it. Was I dreaming again? All things considered I was happy to see them.

“Honestly, we don’t really know why we’re here,” Torin said, looking to Astrid who nodded. “One moment we were back in the Fae world, and the next we saw a wisp that led us to a mirror in a tavern. The wisp told us that you needed our help. Then it disappeared into the mirror.”

Astrid nodded. “We followed, and then here we were—in your hallway.”

Torin eyed me and Xavier, his smile widening. “But for the record, from where I’m standing, you don’t appear to need much help at all.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. What the hell was I supposed to say to *that?*

Torin waved cheerfully at Xavier. “It’s good to see you again, Xavier!”

Xavier just stared at them, and I had a feeling that if I hadn’t been there he would have already ripped their throats out. Of course, if I hadn’t been there, there would have been nothing for them to interrupt in the first place.

“Well…” Astrid said, with what looked like a very forced smile. “It looks like you’ve made your choice at least. That’s good!”

Xavier went ever more tense beside me.

“Is Greyson still around?” Astrid asked innocently. “I wouldn’t mind a chance to say hi again.”

I pulled the sheet up around me a bit more, if only so my hands would have something to do. “It’s complicated, but actually we really *could* use your help,” I confessed. “There’s a battle coming, and we could use all the help we can get.”

After filling Astrid and Torin in on everything that had been going on, and putting on some clothes—not in that order—I brought the two Fae to reunite with Artemis.

She gasped. “How did you two get here?”

As they filled her in on their short and simple journey—seriously though, why couldn’t a wisp have given *me* an enchanted mirror journey to grab a moon buttercup and bring it home to Mom?—we were joined by Greyson, Joss, and Xavier.

Xavier didn’t so much as nod in greeting, probably still upset at being interrupted, but Joss and Greyson greeted the newcomers. Torin, for his part, was overjoyed to see Greyson again.

“Greyson!” Torin barreled toward the Alpha and threw his arms around him. “You don’t know how much I’ve missed that handsome face of yours.” He drew back to smile at Greyson. “But here we are, together again in a real-life werewolf pack house. No one back home is going to believe me!” He looked around and his smile dimmed. “Just looks like a regular house… Huh.”

At this, Joss gave me a look that very politely said, *Please explain your weird friend’s behavior, you stupid bitch*, and I muffled a laugh behind my hand.

Greyson gave Torin a pained smile and an awkward pat on the shoulder and then asked, “Are you two willing to join us in the battle? Having two extra Fae could be a real benefit.”

Torin pressed a closed fist over his heart and bowed. “I’ll go wherever you lead.”

Astrid shrugged. “We’re here to help. Count us in.”

“Really?!” I clapped my hands. “Thank you guys! You know, Astrid is amazing at creating glamours. Maybe we could use that for something?”

Greyson shrugged, considering it. “That’s right. Astrid, do you think you could make Xavier look like a ghost—maybe that would be less risky than a witch’s spell?”

She blinked, then looked at Xavier and shook her head with a frown. “Maybe? It might be difficult to hold the glamour and fight simultaneously. It could drop too soon if we really get our hands full, or, well...”

“If something happens to her,” Torin finished.

“In that case, we’d better not risk it,” Greyson conceded. “But I’m sure you two will come in handy. Thank you for coming to our aid. I know that you don’t need to be helping a pack you hardly know, and it means a lot to me that you’re here.”

“There is nowhere we’d rather be.” Torin grinned.

“Actually, there are a lot of places I’d rather be than getting ready to fight in a werewolf war,”

Astrid clarified, “but I’m happy to help.”

Greyson nodded, then turned back to Joss and Xavier. “Torin’s a healer. We’ll want to keep him protected so that he can protect us when the time comes.”

Rishika came in and stopped short, doing a double-take at the strangers.

“Hello!” Torin said brightly.

“Hi,” she mumbled, then directed her gaze at Greyson. “The Samara pack has arrived.”

Before Greyson could respond, Nolan barreled in behind her, eyeing Torin and Astrid. “Who the hell are they?” he asked Greyson.

“I’m Torin, and this is Astrid,” he answered. “We’re Fae like Cali and Artemis, and we’re here to help!” He gestured to Artemis and me, and my stomach twisted.

Shit. Our Fae heritage was supposed to be a secret. Not that it was a huge secret—Silas and Demeter both knew. I gulped.

Werewolves and Fae didn’t have the best history, and Artemis and I had thought it best to keep public knowledge about ourselves to a minimum. We’d even been careful about not practicing our magic too close to the house to avoid suspicion. Greyson had wanted to protect us from any kind of retaliation that might arise if the pack found out the truth. There had been no telling whether they’d be afraid of us and push back.

And now, with just a few words and a bright smile, Torin had undone all of our hard work.

And he didn’t even realize what he’d done!

“Are you a werewolf too?” Torin asked, sizing Nolan up. “You look more… seasoned than the others.”

Suddenly, it seemed like all the pack members clustered around were eyeing the other Fae and myself. It made sense; most of them had never seen Fae before, and many of them hadn’t known the truth about me and Artemis.

Still, I felt a new tension tugging between my shoulder blades as one of the Samara pack members piped up. “How do we know you’re really here to help?”

And then the questions flooded in.

“Are you on Silas’s side?”

“Why have you lied to us for so long?”

“What kind of magic can you do?”

Nolan eyed me with I didn’t particularly like. The expression on his face sent chills down my spine.

Greyson held his hands up. “Everyone, settle down! Yes, Cali and Artemis are Fae, but that doesn’t change anything.”

Sage gasped. “You knew?”

His eyes narrowed at her. “I’m the Alpha—of course I knew. It changes nothing. They are part of this pack, and they are under pack protection.”

“Interesting,” Nolan mused.

“And what’s so interesting?” Greyson growled.

The other man shrugged. “Just werewolves and Fae, fighting side by side. It’ll just be good to have more power on our side, won’t it?”

I knew better than to trust him, especially with privileged information like this. What exactly did he mean by *our* side?

The others kept talking, arguing about whether or not they could trust any Fae, asking how this changed the plan, and shooting out endless questions about being Fae. I ignored it all and glanced out the window.

The sun had slipped beneath the horizon, and a surge of panicked energy pulsed through me.

Greyson followed my eyes to the window, then turned to the group. “We’re all here now, and we’re all ready.” He clapped his hands. “Enough talking. It’s time.”

I swallowed roughly. Was I ready for this?

**Episode 877**

GREYSON

The time had finally come to face my father.

I moved through the woods in my wolf form, leading the combined forces of the Samara, Blue Blood, and Redwood packs—along with the notable additions of Big Mac and the Fae—toward Silas’s home. Since the plan hinged on us being able to lure Silas out, the rest of the group hung back far enough that I could neither see nor hear them creeping through the forest. We needed the element of surprise to gain the upper hand against my father, and so even though my stomach was in knots, I crept forward alone.

Still, I knew they were there, and the comfort it brought me to know that I wasn’t alone in this fight was enormous. I drew in slow, deep breaths, trying like hell to remain calm. We had a good, solid plan, and I knew it inside and out. But that didn’t stop me from thinking about all the ways things could go wrong. What if Silas didn’t believe that Xavier really was a ghost? What if Nolan or Ava betrayed us?

What if we stumbled across a sentry at the wrong time and lost the element of surprise? What if all of these preparations—attacking now to gain the element of surprise, all the hours that Xavier and Rishika had spent training the Redwood pack, all of the additional fighters we’d gained through our alliance with the Blue Blood and Samara packs, and even the added strength and power of Cali and the other Fae—still weren’t enough to beat my father and Demeter? I still hated the idea of Cali joining, but I’d made some amount of peace with the fact that I couldn’t stop her.

So many lives were hanging in the balance now, and not just those of the Redwood pack. The sense of responsibility for those people, for being the one to bring them into this fight, to put them in Silas and Demeter’s crosshairs, weighed me down so much, it was a feat of strength to put one foot in front of the other.

As long as these people remained safe, I couldn’t give two shits about the likelihood that I’d die tonight. Xavier would be the leader the Redwood pack deserved, and Cali’s choice wouldn’t be so impossible anymore. If I was cut down in this battle, then so be it. It was the thought of my pack members—of innocent werewolves who had been pulled into this fight as part of an alliance—being killed that made my blood run cold.

Still, I forced myself to keep putting one foot in front of the other and head toward my fate. At the very least, I was glad to finally be here, to finally face my father and put to rest this threat we’d all been bracing for far too long.

After tonight, everything would be different. After tonight, everything would be decided, and we would no longer be stuck in limbo. After tonight, I would finally have the opportunity to ask myself who I was when I wasn’t struggling under the weight of Silas’s shadow.

I could barely wrap my mind around the concept of a Greyson who didn’t live haunted by his father, waiting and tensing for a new threat to appear, forever plotting and scheming, knowing that if he let his guard down for even one moment and allowed himself to truly be happy, that Silas would come in and wreck everything without a second thought.

*Maybe once this is over I can finally figure out things with Cali…*

I immediately pushed the thought aside. It was too intoxicating, too sweet, too *comforting* a thought to focus on now. I couldn’t afford to be distracted by thoughts of my mate at a time like this, no matter how much I wanted to be. We had a plan and she had a very specific, very safe role in it. All I could do was focus on my role and trust Cali enough to let her focus on hers.

If we survived tonight, there would be time enough to worry about everything else.

Something glinted in the moonlight, and I crept forward to inspect it. A silver bear trap—not unlike the one that had almost killed Xavier.

*We must be getting close*.

I grabbed a stick in my mouth and tossed it in the trap to activate it, and then carefully threw the whole contraption away from the path, hopefully out of the way of anyone following behind me. The last thing we needed was for someone to get silver poisoning before the battle had even begun.

A rustling sound up ahead made my ears prick up, and I froze, pausing to sniff the air. It was a wolf, but not one I recognized.

*Must be one of Silas’s Rogues*.

I drew in a deep breath, tensing for a fight and pushing every other thought to the back of my mind as I darted through the forest, chasing the scent. I moved as quickly and stealthily as possible, keeping an eye out for any more traps along the way.

The Rogue was further away—and closer to Silas’s home—than I had anticipated, and when I finally burst through a particularly dense patch of forest and pounced on the Rogue, I was relieved to see I’d caught him unaware.

I slammed into the Rogue, knocking him to the ground and snapping my teeth at his throat.

He managed to jerk out of the way at the last second and scramble back to his feet. He let out a low snarl, backing up to put some distance between us before I lunged at him again. He was huge, much bigger than me, but he was clearly intimidated, perhaps even shaken, by having been caught unaware.

The element of surprise was working—and I intended to take advantage of it.

I raced forward and lunged at the Rogue before he could take any more time to recover. He backed up but hit one of the many densely packed trees in the clearing, and I tackled him against the trunk. He jerked beneath me, causing my teeth to just miss the mark so that instead of hitting his throat, I took a bite out of his shoulder.

Blood, fur, and flesh filled my mouth, and I had about two seconds to readjust my attack before the Rogue’s large, powerful legs kicked me back across the clearing. I skidded across the ground and collided with a particularly large and dense bush. The branches caught in my fur as I leapt to my feet, slowing me down just enough to give the Rogue an advantage.

He leapt at me this time, his eyes wild and his snout pulled back in a snarl. His powerful paws shoved me back against the bush, almost knocking the wind out of me. It was ridiculous to try to fight him in such close quarters, especially when he seemed to be taking up more than half of the space all on his own.

He snapped at me, and I felt his canines skimming over my chest, just short of doing real, devastating damage. I kicked at him wildly. I couldn’t let him pin me, or this would be all over. He was too big and powerful for me to overwhelm through sheer strength.

My claws caught him across his face, dragging into at least one of his eyes, and he stumbled back with a pained cry.

I didn’t give him time to recover. I lunged to my feet and pounced, taking advantage of my speed and the fact that he seemed to be unable to see out of his left eye. That was the side I attacked. My teeth sunk into the junction of his neck and shoulder, and I snapped my head back with all my strength.

The Rogue’s dying wail made my hair stand on end, but I didn’t let up until his body had gone limp and the scent of his blood saturated the air around us. I tossed the body to the side, breathing heavily. I’d be sore tomorrow from the way he’d thrown me around, but otherwise I was unhurt.

*Not too bad for a warm-up,* I thought to myself. *Especially considering what’s to come. I’m sure Big Guy isn’t the only sentry Silas has in place.*

I glanced down at the dead Rogue and an idea popped into my head. Yes, there would definitely be more Rogues…

Grimacing a bit, I rolled on the dead Rogue’s corpse, trying to cover myself in his scent. I was already drenched down one side in his blood. Hopefully that would be enough to cover my scent and continue to ensure the element of surprise.

After I was done using the body for morbid perfume, I dragged it under that dense bush he’d thrown me against and then pulled the branches over the body to make sure it was fully hidden.

One thing nobody ever told you about war? It was *gross*.

I mind linked with Joss. *Keep a close eye out as you head forward—there are Rogues and silver traps scattered around.*

*We knew to expect patrols,* she responded in that cool and collected Luna voice.

*Still, be incredibly careful moving forward. We’ve crossed into Silas’s territory, so who knows what tricks he has up his sleeve.*

*Got it. The coast has been clear so far—almost too clear.* I could hear the trepidation in her voice. *Everyone is on edge.*

*Be careful*, I said again. *I’m moving in.*

I cut off my link with her and tensed, ready to break into a run. I was close; I could feel it.

Suddenly, a bloodcurdling scream echoed through the forest, coming from behind me—where the rest of the group was still moving forward.

**Episode 878**

Riding into battle on Xavier’s back, I felt like a warrior queen coming back to her kingdom after a long time away. I imagined myself in leather armor with a long fur cape billowing out behind me, a sword raised high in the air as I rode into battle.

*Onward, my gorgeous wolf steed, and we will away to vanquish the evil from this land!*

Cassandra’s journal had given me a few cool new turns of phrase. I imagined myself riding in on Xavier’s back, using my Fae power to knock that golden-armed witch on her ass, then striking Silas down with my silver sword—

Xavier’s voice slipped into my mind. *It doesn’t seem safe to be riding a werewolf into battle and waving around a silver sword. What if you miss and accidentally poison your “gorgeous steed”?*

Heat rushed into my cheeks. *Hey, get your own battle fantasy and stop backseat driving in mine.*

*Oh I have plenty of fantasies that involve you riding me—just not on a battlefield.*

I rolled my eyes. *You know what? Let’s just focus on what’s ahead of us. Don’t want you getting distracted.*

He didn’t respond, but he let out a chuff and I could feel his amusement through our bond. I ran my fingers through his fur absently in response.

Elaborate battle fantasies or not, it felt good to be back here, running with the pack. It had been too long since I’d felt like I was part of this group. I glanced around at the small army Greyson had assembled.

A month ago, if anyone had asked me how many werewolves Greyson would be able to commit to this fight, I never in a million years would have imagined this many of them—certainly not any recruits from any of the other packs or a small group of Fae. I didn’t want to jinx us, or get too far ahead of myself, but suddenly winning this fight felt like it was actually possible. We were following the plan, and Greyson had gone on ahead to get things moving with Silas. And there were so many of us here, willing and ready to fight. What kind of chance could Silas truly stand against all of us?

The group was tense and quiet as we marched onward, and I kept looking around the forest, watching for any sort of threat or attack. What would we run into first? Rogue wolves? Or maybe some crazy spells? Or perhaps some good old-fashioned silver traps like the one that had almost killed Xavier?

I knew the silence couldn’t last for long, but I was relieved that we hadn’t run into anyone yet—

“*No!*” A piercing scream echoed through the forest to my left, shattering the silence and seeming to go on forever. It was Torin.

He was mounted on Rishika’s back and pointing at the three massive Rogues that had just burst out of the forest directly in front of her.

“Stay back, you mangy dogs!” Torin shrieked, tugging on Rishika’s fur like she was a horse he was trying to guide into a getaway. She knocked him off of her back and leapt forward to fight.

Immediately, Joss veered over to join the fight, flanked by Colton, and I instinctively slid off of Xavier’s back to let him join the fray. The trio of Rogues was frozen in place, clearly shocked at the numbers we’d brought into their territory. For a moment it looked like one of them was going to turn tail and run away, but then they doubled down to fight—just as Xavier, Joss, Colton, and Rishika were upon them.

Their lethal forms blurred through the darkness. There was a muffled sound of wolves scuffling, and then I saw Xavier pounce on the largest of the Rogues and tear its throat out in one practiced movement. Beside him, Colton, Joss, and Rishika finished off the other two Rogues in a similar manner. The whole scuffle was over in a matter of seconds, almost before it had really gotten started. None of the Redwood wolves seemed to be hurt, or even roughed up.

I knew exactly how deadly Xavier could be, but seeing it up close again was a reminder of just how powerful he was. I smiled at him as he turned back toward me. I was proud to have such a fierce, strong mate. There weren’t many creatures out there—werewolf or not—who posed a threat to Xavier. I tried not to think about how Silas and Demeter were both on the shortlist of enemies that actually could hurt Xavier if they tried.

Xavier moved back to me, but he stopped when he saw Torin and quickly shifted back to his human form. Torin’s jaw dropped, and he looked Xavier up and down without a hint of shame.

“You are amazing,” Torin gushed.

“And you need to keep your mouth shut,” Xavier hissed. “If you need to scream, try to keep it on the inside, okay? Remember, we’re actually trying to surprise them.”

Torin’s face fell. “Oh. You’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll do better.”

“Please do!” Xavier shifted back to his wolf form and stalked over to me. I gave Torin an apologetic look before climbing onto Xavier’s back. And then we kept moving.

I mind linked with Xavier. *Someone should tell Greyson what happened here. He probably heard Torin’s screeching. He’s gonna be worried.*

*I think everyone in the state heard Torin’s screeching*, he growled. *But don’t worry. I already filled Greyson in.* Even mentally, his tone was short, and I got the sense that talking to him about Greyson was still a sensitive subject. *Are you doing okay?* Xavier asked.

I dragged my fingers soothingly through the fur on the back of his neck. *Don’t worry about me. I’m not the one who’s headed straight into danger, I’ll be on the outskirts. I need you to stay focused, to stay safe. Just follow the plan and don’t worry about anything else.*

*You don’t need to worry about me. I’ll be fine. It’s a good plan, and there aren’t many fighters out there I can’t overcome if push comes to shove. And after all this*… He trailed off.

*After all* what? *What were you going to say?*

*Nothing*.

We moved forward in silence, looking ahead for any threats and waiting for Greyson to give us the signal. I hated that he was out there all alone. If we’d already run into that trio of Rogues, who knew what he’d had to deal with—all by himself? To say nothing of the silver trap Xavier had been caught in, not long ago. These woods were full of danger.

I almost reached out to Greyson to make sure he was okay, but I stopped myself. I didn’t want to distract him from his role as Alpha. I was worried about him, but I couldn’t be selfish right now.

Instead, I tried to comfort myself. *Greyson is strong—just as strong as Xavier—and capable. Remember when he dead-lifted that troll? He can handle anything that’s thrown at him, and he’s going to be just fine.*

Still, I couldn’t help but worry about him. I didn’t love the idea of him dealing with all of this on his own—I hadn’t liked it when the plan had first been introduced, and I certainly didn’t like it now that the danger was very real and potentially lurking behind every tree.

*If anything happens to him—*

*Cali, enough!* I told myself. *Focus! If you spend the whole night just worrying about Greyson and Xavier, you won’t be any help to anyone.*

The group continued forward until Joss stopped suddenly. Everyone else stopped with her. She shifted back to her human form, and the group crowded around her.

“We’re close now,” she explained. “We all need to stick together and”—she glared pointedly at Torin—“you must all stay absolutely silent. If we lose the element of surprise, this could all go sideways, fast. We have to be prepared for whatever they throw at us, so everyone keep your heads.”

My heart began to race. This was it. This was really happening. And despite all the time we’d spent planning and preparing for this very thing, it still didn’t feel real to me. If someone had told me last year that I would be here in the woods with three packs of werewolves and a handful of magical beings (myself included), preparing to head into battle against the father of my lovers—*my lovers,* plural—who had been draining ghosts for power, I would have told them they were insane.

But here I was, and everything was about to be incredibly, horribly real. I steeled myself as we slowly crept closer, until Joss told us all to get down.

She pointed ahead, and I felt my stomach lurch as I took in the lawn of the house. It was all too easy to remember what it had been like to confront Silas and Demeter, and that same sense of foreboding set in now.

And then something happened that made my stomach lurch even harder—Greyson walked across the lawn in his human form, striding confidently. A chill went down my spine when he stopped in front of the house.

This was it.

Greyson opened his mouth, and yelled out, “FATHER!”

**Episode 879**

GREYSON

I stood in my human form outside of Silas’s house, no more than ten feet away from the front door. This was it. It was time to face my father.

*Finally*.

After fighting that Rogue, I’d spent the rest of my journey through Silas’s territory on edge and wary of coming across any other Rogues or, worse, being ambushed by Silas and his fighters and spending the rest of the night on the defensive, fighting not to defeat Silas once and for all, but simply to survive to see the sunrise. To fight another day.

I worried about the group behind me, my mind running increasingly darker scenarios of everything that could befall them while I was so far ahead, unable to help. The fact that Joss hadn’t reached out to call for help was only a small comfort when I knew we all stood on a knife’s edge. One misstep, and lives would be lost. All of our preparations would have been for nothing.

With the dead Rogue’s scent all over me, it wasn’t terribly difficult to slip past the few sentries I came across on my way to the house, alerting Joss to their locations along the way, and now that I was finally here, finally about to face my father, I couldn’t find a single ounce of fear or worry inside of me. A quiet, deadly calm had settled over me.

I was here now, for better or worse. I’d spent years preparing myself, putting all of these pieces in motion. I’d spent weeks preparing the Redwood pack and creating alliances so that we could finally face my father and put him down. Everything had been building to this moment, this night, for so long that all I could feel was steady relief to finally be facing the man who had haunted both my dreams and waking hours for years.

I was ready. *We* were ready. And there was no turning back now.

The house was eerily still, as if it was holding its breath just as much as I was. Even the woods surrounding the house had gone completely silent.

I glanced around, scented the air, and listened intently for any sign of an approaching sentry or my father. Nothing. No new scents. No intruders. No sounds. There was no birdsong, no rustling of the wind through the trees, no nocturnal insects buzzing and chirping their way to daybreak.

It felt, for one tense moment, like the world had frozen around me. I blew out a breath and peeled my eyes away from the forest and looked back at the house. There was a flash of something in one of the upstairs windows, and I thought that I had perhaps seen a white face pressed up against the glass, but as quickly as it had appeared, it was gone.

The silence and unnerving stillness continued.

*All right then. If he’s not coming out on his own, I’ll just have to give him a reason to come out.*

“FATHER!” I shouted again. In the silence, my voice seemed to echo through the whole damn forest. “You wanted this! I’m here. Now come out and face me like a man!”

I held out my arms and turned in a slow circle, showing him that I was alone and ready to face his challenge.

Only, instead of my father’s deep, smug voice, I was met with silence. I paused.

*Wait, is he not even home right now?*

That would be just our luck—orchestrating this whole complex plan to take down my father only to launch an attack on his home when he wasn’t even around. Was it possible that he’d moved operations at the last minute?

I didn’t like to think about that possibility. Because if that were the case, the timing couldn’t be a coincidence. If Silas knew to change locations now of all times, then it was because someone had tipped him off.

But then a creaking noise broke through the silence, and the front door cracked open. I drew in a deep breath and braced myself, ready to face whatever Silas might throw at me.

The door swung open and my father appeared in the doorway, his arms crossed. He looked unimpressed to see me standing in his yard, bellowing at him for a showdown. For a moment my breath caught. His eyes met mine, and I tried to ignore the chill that ran down my spine from his cold, dead stare. It was the same look he would give me as a child.

“Go home, boy,” he growled.

I shook my head. “And wait until Halloween? Today was a much better fit for my schedule, so…”

Silas took a hesitant step out onto the porch and glanced around the yard suspiciously, no doubt waiting for the rest of the group to jump out and try to stab him. My father wasn’t stupid, and that was one of the reasons why he was so damn hard to kill.

Fortunately, the forest surrounding the house was as still and silent as ever. The packs were sticking to the plan and keeping a low profile. Good.

Unless they weren’t even out there, and no backup would be coming. I shook the thought away. No, everyone was simply following the plan. And now it was time for me to do the same.

My father’s gaze flicked back to me, and even after all these years there was still something in those dead, cold eyes that made me want to run and hide. I steeled myself and met his stare.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, son?” Silas asked, like this was just a polite midnight meeting between a father and son. Not the calm before the storm.

His voice made my hackles raise, and it took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to surge forward and try to rip my father’s throat out now, not to say “screw the plan” and chase after the revenge I deserved after all those years of living at his mercy.

“Not so chatty now, huh?” Silas mused. “I don’t imagine you’re here for a friendly catch-up, are you, Greyson?”

When I didn’t answer, Silas chuckled and shook his head. “I don’t have time for this now.”

“You never did, did you?” I burst out. I hadn’t planned to give him the satisfaction of hearing me speak on anything but my own terms, but I couldn’t help myself. My hatred for him and all my bitterness went so deep, all I wanted to do now that I was in spitting distance of my father was lash out.

But Silas just laughed, completely unconcerned with my hatred. “Is that contempt I sense, son?”

“You don’t get to call me son!” I snarled.

He snorted and rolled his eyes. “Fair enough. You always were immensely weak and pathetic.” He peered around the lawn again. “So where are the others hidden, Greyson? I know you’d never dare to come alone. You don’t have the balls for it.”

If my glare had had the power to hurt him, he would have been reduced to cinders. “It’s just me. I’m here to end this. You and me.”

Silas laughed again. “Do you really think you’re in a position to beat me? Allow me to make things perfectly clear—you’re no match for me. In any way. You never have been. I know you aren’t alone, and I’m not falling for such a juvenile plan. I expected more from you.”

My stomach dropped at his words, but years of hiding my true feelings around this man and so many others had prepared me for this moment. If I was shocked or disappointed that he wasn’t going to fall into our trap so easily, I didn’t show it, and I didn’t miss a beat. “No one is going to do anything unless I order them to. And I’m not going to, because I intend to take you on alone—to do this the honorable way. Alpha to Alpha. There’s no need to bring anyone else into this.”

There was a long beat as my father stared at me, weighing my words and considering his next move. Finally, he sighed and looked at me almost sadly. “I’ll never understand how my sons turned out this way. You were a disappointment then and you’re a disappointment now. I suppose some things never change.” He continued to eye me. “I did have high hopes for you, you know. There has always been something about you… You had more promise than your brothers ever did.”

Silas inched forward, moving away from the doorway and out onto the porch. I tensed. Was this it?

But he stopped again. “It’s not too late for you to make the right choice,” he said quietly. “It’s what you always wanted, isn’t it? In your deepest, darkest of hearts? To work together. We’d be unstoppable.” His eyes bored into mine as he spoke, and I stayed quiet, not wanting to stop him from edging further out onto the porch.

I pretended to consider his proposition, and then a strange sense of possibility washed over me. All that hate dried up, and suddenly my father’s offer sounded so logical. Silas and me… Suddenly, it seemed like a heady proposition. Silas was the strongest werewolf I’d ever known, and if we joined forces…

Silas stepped out onto the porch and slowly approached me. He held out his hand. “Join me, son.”

I stared at my father, unable to tear my eyes away, unable to do anything but say, “Yes.”

**Episode 880**

XAVIER

I crouched in the bushes, my jaw slack with disbelief as I watched the whole scene play out. What the fuck? This was not part of the plan! Had something gone terribly wrong that we couldn’t see, or—more likely—was that bastard Greyson betraying us?

“Well done, Greyson,” I snarled under my breath. “You really had us fooled.”

Cali crouched in the bushes at my side. “Something’s wrong,” she whispered. “I don’t know what…”

“I know exactly what’s wrong,” I hissed. “We trusted the wrong person.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “No, that can’t be it.”

“Well then how else do we explain this?” I asked.

On my other side, I was dimly aware of Big Mac muttering something, but I couldn’t focus on her. My brain was frozen on the image of Greyson taking Silas’s hand and agreeing to join him. After everything we’d been through to get to this point, was he really going to join forces with Silas? Or had that been his plan all along?

Suddenly, all of our meetings to put this plan into action, to end Silas once and for all, took on new meaning. He’d been fooling us all along, pulling us into his master plan to reunite the packs and then bring us to Silas like lambs to the slaughter.

“Fucking bastard,” I growled.

“Greyson…” Cali breathed, her expression wild and terrified, like she couldn’t understand what was happening either. I knew she couldn’t bring herself to believe that her beloved *Greyson* would betray us like this.

The fury in me doubled as I thought not only of how Greyson was betraying our pack and all the others he’d banded together in our supposed fight against our father, but of how he’d somehow convinced Cali to love him along the way. Wasn’t it bad enough to betray everyone we knew—including his own mother? Did he have to jerk my mate around too?

I would be the first to admit that I’d never fully trusted Greyson, but by this point I’d given up on the thought that Greyson could be working with our father. But this must have been his plan all along.

I thought back to just a few hours earlier, before we’d launched our assault, when Greyson had told me that if he died in battle, I should take up the mantle of Alpha. I’d been so shocked and… begrudgingly *honored*, that he thought me worthy of the title. Now I realized it had all been a mind game for his own sick amusement.

That was the Greyson I knew.

I rose slightly, still crouched down, but mere seconds away from launching myself into the yard to tear both my brother and my father limb from limb. I tensed, ready to shift, but Big Mac grabbed my arm and yanked me back down.

“We stick to the plan!” she hissed.

Fury was almost blinding me at this point, on the verge of boiling over at the next person who pissed me off—whether they were Greyson and Silas or not. I shook her off with a low snarl, ready to tell her to back the fuck off and let me take care of this threat once and for all, but she grabbed me again, pulling me down closer so she wouldn’t have to raise her voice any further.

“This house is wrapped in powerful witchcraft,” she explained. “You can’t just go running in without a plan. Get too close and you might get caught in the enchantment.”

On her other side, Mrs. Smith gasped quietly. “That must be what happened to Greyson, why he’s diverting from the plan. He has to be under some kind of spell.” She looked back at the eerie moment of father/son bonding on the porch. “He would *never* join with Silas. Not of his own free will.”

Cali’s eyes lit up, and I could see she was clutching onto this lifeline with everything she had. “Of course. That must be what happened to him. So what do we do now?”

I scoffed and shook my head. They were all being delusional, practically bending the world around them to suit this narrative of Greyson *not* being the villain. But I knew better. “To hell with the plan. I’m going in there.”

Joss, showing impeccable timing as always and clearly close enough to our conversation to understand what was going on, shifted back to her human form and crouched down with us. “Absolutely not.” It was a testament to her power as Luna that she could make a whisper sound so formidable. “We stick to the Alpha’s plan.”

Even as she said it, I could tell Joss was rattled by this abrupt diversion from what we’d expected. I respected Joss a lot; she was a great Luna—much better than I’d ever thought she’d be. But I couldn’t just pretend that everything hadn’t just gone to hell right in front of us. We needed to act, now, before there was any collateral damage.

“If Greyson tells Silas the plan, it won’t work anyway,” I pressed. “And then where does that leave us?”

Cali gasped. “He would never do that!”

I resisted the urge to snap at her and wondered how many times she’d gone above and beyond to give *me* the benefit of the doubt, like she was so desperate to do for Greyson.

“Cali’s right,” Joss said, though her voice lacked conviction. I could see that it wouldn’t take much more effort on my part to convince her, especially once I reminded her exactly how much was at stake if Greyson blew our plan any further.

Big Mac spoke up, looking around at each of us. “Even if Greyson wanted to tell Silas the plan, he couldn’t.”

We all stared at her in confusion.

“What do you mean?” Joss asked.

“Once I realized both what he was doing and how heavily warded the house was, I put a spell on him to prevent him from talking about the plan,” she said. “In fact, I’ve just put it on all of you.”

Joss’s eyes narrowed on the witch. “You *what?* You didn’t ask us about that!”

Big Mac shrugged. “So sue me for not trusting Nolan. And we had no idea what Silas would try—what if he’d managed to take someone hostage on the way? Our plan is the best shot we have. If it’s compromised, then we might as well turn tail and get the fuck out of here before things get any more out of control.”

The Luna nodded. “In that case, I think we should proceed. Tactically, the pack knows the plan inside and out. We need to stick to it, or this could all go to hell.” She looked at me. “I know you’ve got your own history with Silas—and Greyson, too. But following the plan is our only chance at this point, Xavier.”

I gritted my teeth. I hated being married to this plan when things were already going off the rails, but I knew Joss was right. The pack was prepared for this play, and it was too late to switch gears now.

Artemis popped up into our little squad circle and gave me a dirty look. “Plus, you’ve still got plenty of strong fighters.”

I just rolled my eyes and looked back at the yard. Greyson and Silas were still on the porch, and our father was circling him slowly, sizing him up and whispering something I couldn’t quite make out.

My lip curled. *I should have taken out my good-for-nothing brother when I had a chance. Everything would be so much easier without that bastard.*

I felt a soft weight on my arm and realized Cali had reached out to touch me. She looked up at me, her eyes pleading. “I know Greyson wouldn’t turn on us, Xavier. We know Silas has all kinds of tricks—he’s obviously pulling something on Greyson here.”

I looked away. “I’m not so sure. Greyson is darker than you think. I know he’s taken great pains to hide that side of himself from you, but trust me—it’s there.” I looked over at Colton for confirmation. “Right, Colton? You know just as well as I do what he’s capable of.”

Colton shook his head. “I do know. But I still think the plan is our best chance.” He glanced back out at the yard—where our father was completely focused on Greyson—then back at the group. “Look, Xavier. Silas is completely distracted, just like we wanted.”

“That’s true,” I grudgingly admitted. Silas was definitely not paying any attention to his surroundings.

“Everyone, get to your places,” Joss ordered. “It’s time to go.”

Big Mac reached into the bag at her side and pulled out a potion, holding it out to me. “Ready?”

I hesitated, but then Cali leaned into me and whispered, “Xavier, please.”

I grabbed the bottle, sending one last murderous glance at my half-brother, and then uncorked it as Joss, Colton, and the others moved back to their positions in the pack.

It was just me, Cali, and Big Mac now, and I met Big Mac’s solemn stare before downing the potion in one go.

It was like I’d swallowed a gallon of ice-cold water. Chills ran down my spine, pain flared through my bones—a cold-heat that made me feel like my body was melting—and I heard Cali gasp quietly next to me.

I glanced down at myself and froze. I’d known what was coming, but it was still jarring to look through my own body and see the forest floor.

“Go, now,” Big Mac whispered urgently, her eyes on the house, where ghosts were streaming out of the open front door—exactly as we’d predicted.

“Be careful, Xavier,” Cali whispered.

I gave her one last long look before I stepped out into the clearing to join the ranks of the ghosts.

**Episode 881**

My heart was banging against my ribs like a caged animal as I watched Xavier walk out into the open, moving slowly and smoothly like Big Mac had taught him to imitate the natural way the ghosts moved. He couldn’t move too quickly, or he’d draw attention to himself, but as long as he was coming from a different direction than the rest of the ghosts, he stuck out like a sore thumb. I watched, frozen and more stressed out than I’d been at any other point in my life, begging any greater power that could hear me to just let Xavier make it to the ghosts so he could blend in.

Still, even with Xavier getting closer and closer to relative safety, Greyson was still there, standing *right* in front of Silas and so vulnerable it sent my insides into convulsions. It was too much, seeing both of my mates out in the open with such a dangerous man.

Xavier, at least, was playing his role and had made it into the stream of ghosts and was blending in effortlessly, certainly staying below Silas’s radar. Greyson, on the other hand, had to be under some kind of spell, and that was *not* part of the plan.

I didn’t buy for a single second that Greyson was capable of betraying the pack he cared about so deeply, but that was shallow comfort when it meant that something had gone terribly, horribly wrong.

I wanted nothing more than to remain tucked behind a bush, watching and personally making sure that no harm came to Greyson. I’d charge out and fight Silas myself, with every bit of my untrained Fae power, if it came to it. But I couldn’t do that. The plan was already in motion, and if I didn’t get out of the way and back to my post with the rest of the Fae, I would either end up as some Rogue’s midnight snack or an easy target for Demeter, who would absolutely seek to eliminate all of the Fae if she found out we were here—she’d said as much the last time we’d crossed paths with her.

Still, I couldn’t just leave Greyson alone and helpless with his monster of a father.

Wolves from our side of the battle began rushing forward, and Artemis grabbed my arm. “Come on, Cali, we need to get to our posts.”

I froze, my eyes still locked on Greyson. He hadn’t moved. It didn’t seem like he was even reacting to anything Silas was saying to him. What was going on?

My body lurched back as Artemis began dragging me toward our posts, several yards back from the house.

“Artemis, wait!” I groaned. “I can’t just leave him like that.”

“Well, you’re going to have to.”

I tried to dig my heels in. “Please, I can help him!”

Artemis yanked me around so that we were nose to nose. “Yes, you *can* help him. And you’re going to—by sticking to the plan and staying away from the main portion of the fight.”

“But—”

“Nope.” She held a finger up to my lips. “Greyson is stronger than anyone I’ve ever met, and Xavier’s tough too. They’re going to be all right. And believe me, I do not want to be on the receiving end of that power if, at the end of this, *you* aren’t all right. Stick to the plan, keep yourself safe. Now come on—we’ve got a battle to fight.”

Torin and Astrid were already there, tucked into a thick cluster of bushes and shrubs, and Astrid wasted no time weaving a glamour around us so we were invisible from the outside, blending right into the tree line. This far back, the chances of a Rogue stumbling across us by accident were slim, but Artemis and I could still use ranged attacks from this distance. Astrid’s glamours could also reach the main battlefield—the yard outside the house—and anyone who needed to be healed by Torin would be far enough away to avoid further injury while Torin worked his magic.

It was a great plan—the perfect way to utilize our specific skill sets that weren’t quite compatible with all the wolves snarling and lunging at each other.

If we weren’t caught anyway.

Except it was still too far away from Greyson and Xavier for my comfort. Rogues had begun pouring out of Silas’s house, and sentries from the outskirts of the territory were rushing in from every direction. It was absolute chaos.

And I was standing several yards away, protected by a glamour, watching as wolves I knew and loved clashed with terrifying Rogues. Back when Greyson had created this plan, it had seemed like the most logical use for someone like me. I had never anticipated how utterly terrifying and awful it would be to watch from the outside.

I craned my neck, trying to keep Xavier and Greyson in my sightline. Artemis stood up and nudged me. “It’s go time.”

She held out her hands, sending a crackling bolt of energy hurtling toward a Rogue that was lunging for Rishika. The bolt hit the Rogue with a boom, sending it spinning to the ground. It didn’t get up, and even from our post, I caught the scent of burning fur.

A new kind of horror settled heavy on my shoulders, and I forced myself to take a deep breath. *This is war, Cali. Now get your head in the game.* I shook myself and raised my hands, allowing power to pool between my palms before I let it fly toward a pair of Rogues near Violet and Charlie.

For every burst of energy I sent out onto the battlefield, Artemis sent four more. I was doing my best and digging deep into that well of magic within me, but it was almost impossible to aim in the chaos, and, knowing just how lethal it could be, I didn’t want to hit anyone on our side. Why hadn’t I worked harder to get my powers under control?

Near to me, Astrid held out her hands in concentration, using all of her power to keep up the glamour that was hiding us in the tree line. A few yards away, a wolf from the Blue Blood pack went down with a broken cry.

“Astrid,” Torin hissed. “We need to do our plan!”

Astrid shifted to hold one hand out in front of Torin, momentarily diverting her power to him to glamour him into the shape of a werewolf. Then he bounded out into the chaos, dodging the action, and dragged the bleeding wolf back behind the protected tree line.

As soon as Torin was back inside Astrid’s glamour, his wolf form faded and he bent over the wounded wolf, putting his hands on a deep wound in the wolf’s belly. Under any other circumstances it absolutely would have been fatal, which was probably why the Rogue had left him for dead instead of finishing him off. I watched in awe as Torin’s magic made the wound knit back together.

On my other side, Artemis expertly sniped a wolf that was about to land a grievous blow on Ravi. Astrid kept her magic up, never once dropping our shield, even when she had to send Torin back out to grab another wounded wolf.

God, I was so useless compared to my friends. I sent off another bolt, but it went wide and hit a tree instead of the Rogue I’d been aiming for.

“Dammit!” I grunted.

Then something caught my eye. It was Greyson, moving slowly into the house. I looked around wildly, but I couldn’t see where Xavier, Colton, or Silas were, and I had a horrible sense of premonition, calling back to the legend of Kronos eating his children.

*I can’t just stand here and let Silas eat my men!*

Artemis was heavily invested in throwing her bolts at a small squad of Rogues, trying to take them out before they entered the battlefield. It was now or never.

I turned to Astrid. “Can you make me look like a wolf? Did you get a close enough look?”

“I think so,” she shrugged. “But why? That wasn’t part of the plan.”

I took a deep breath. “I need to get into Silas’s house.”

Astrid blanched. “You *what?*”

“Just trust me on this, okay?”

“I do trust you.” Astrid smiled. “You got us out of quite a few tight spots back in the Fae world, didn’t you?” I felt her shift her energy to me, and the world spun around me for a moment as I changed form.

I looked down myself, my paws, my tail, my lovely russet-brown coat. After all this time longing to be a wolf, and then learning that I never *could* be a wolf, here I was. I took a few hesitant steps away from the tree line, adjusting to my new body. Was this how it felt for Greyson and Xavier every time they shifted?

A pained howl cut through the forest, and the battle came rushing back to me. *Right. Focus, Cali!*

Behind me, I heard Artemis gasp. “Cali, don’t!”

But I was already bounding toward the battle, dodging here and there to avoid the chaos, never taking my eyes off the open front. I darted into the house without a second thought.

Greyson stood in the living room in his human form, looking out the back window. He was completely alone.

I couldn’t help myself. “Greyson!”

**Episode 882**

VIOLET

A snarling Rogue leapt at me, his sharp teeth and claws flashing in the moonlight. I dodged him at the last second, and triumph flooded my veins when I heard his body crash into the thick tree trunk that had been behind me. There was a crack and then a whine. It sounded an awful lot like he’d broken something.

*Poor baby*. If I were in my human form, I would’ve been laughing my ass off.

But there wasn’t time to laugh, or even to really savor my small victory against this one Rogue among what felt like an endless horde of monsters.

I had to stay focused on Charlie, had to keep him in my sight at all times and make sure that he was protected. A powerful wolf lunged for him and adrenaline burst through me, powering my movements as I sprang into action with a feral snarl. I sprinted across the short distance between us, leapt at the wolf, and slammed into it before it could touch even a single bit of Charlie’s fur. Before the Rogue could react or even think about fighting back, my teeth sank into its throat and I jerked my head. With one lethal tug, the Rogue’s life was over. Its blood flooded into my mouth, thick and hot and coppery, the taste of death. The taste of Charlie’s safety. The taste of my own victory.

I spat out the flesh and muscle and fragile bits I’d torn from its body, and let out a deep, proud howl. Other wolves—those who weren’t fighting tooth and nail for their own survival—joined me, and for a moment our collective power echoed through the forest.

I’d spent so much of my life on the sidelines without the physical strength, aptitude, or temperament to succeed as a fighter. I’d always been the youngest. The smallest. The frailest. A child in every definition of the word.

But I wasn’t a child anymore, and as it turned out, all I’d ever needed was the right motivation—and a little perspective.

I was still weak when Lilac had been killed, and I hadn’t been able to protect him. I’d almost lost Charlie at the hands of that Rogue back in Minnesota, too. Now that I knew the cost of that weakness, now that I knew exactly what I stood to lose if I couldn’t protect the people I loved, the choice was easy. The transformation was second nature.

If fighting and maiming and killing kept my mate from being taken from me like Lilac had been taken, then the coppery tang staining my tongue was a price I was willing to pay.

I could feel Charlie’s quiet shock through our bond, but I didn’t stop to comfort him or try to explain. Instead, I scanned the battlefield for the next threat.

The lawn was so full of ghosts that it was almost impossible to tell what was going on. They swirled around us, confusing both friend and foe. I shook my head, trying to focus, to search for threats, but I couldn’t believe how many ghosts had been unleashed upon us.

*How many more would be swarming around if we’d waited until Halloween?*

Fortunately, they weren’t able to physically attack anyone. But the way they swarmed around everyone’s heads like an ethereal cloud of bees made it difficult for the fighters to land a hit, or even get their bearings long enough to be on the watch for threats. Never in my life had I seen a ghost act this way—not even with all my run-ins with Lilac’s ghost.

A chill crept down my spine. Demeter was responsible for this. Her magic and the orb combined were powerful enough to make this happen. How could we stand against something like that? Charlie nudged my side, and I remembered why I was here. Why any outcome but walking away from this fight victorious was simply unacceptable.

We faced the battle with new determination, and our sights landed on a pair of Rogues circling Sage nearby.

*Ready?* I asked.

I could hear the grin in Charlie’s voice. *You know it.*

We were creeping forward, hoping to take them by surprise, when a ghost appeared in front of me—and brought me up short.

*Lilac*.

The rest of the battle melted away as I locked eyes with my dead twin, hungrily drinking him in.

Charlie’s voice slipped into my mind. *What’s wrong?*

Even mentally, my response was shaky. *It’s my brother. Lilac.*

Even though I knew I couldn’t stop fighting, that this wasn’t my brother, but the ghost of him that had appeared time and time again to save my life, I couldn’t get my limbs to move. Panic froze me in place, and all that fear and grief and newfound brutality banded together into something that left me cold and full of dread.

This wasn’t Lilac, but it was the closest I’d ever get to him. And I didn’t want him to see me like this, feral and strong and saving someone else when I’d failed him so terribly. The fading taste of the Rogue’s blood in my mouth suddenly turned acrid, and I gagged.

What was I doing here? How had I ever thought I could handle myself, that I could hold my own against such impossible strength, that I could honestly save *anyone*, least of all myself?

I was dimly aware of Charlie’s snarl rumbling over me, of him leaping behind me to take out a Rogue who had snuck up on us while I was frozen and vulnerable, but I still couldn’t bring myself to act.

*Violet, keep it together*, Charlie begged.

I didn’t respond. Or maybe I couldn’t. Maybe the fear and panic and shame and defeat that anchored me in place had broken my link with my mate, left me alone and helpless with nothing to do but stare at the ghost of my dead twin right up until the moment a Rogue ripped out my throat.

Charlie’s voice screamed in my mind. *Violet!*

In my peripheral vision, I saw his shape dart past, taking out another Rogue right before it slammed into me. I still took a glancing blow and stumbled, suddenly back in the present—able to move, to breathe, but so, so lost. I blinked sluggishly as the world around me spun in double-time. Charlie fought with the Rogue, their forms little more than blurs in the darkness, and still the ghosts whirled around the battlefield.

*Violet*, Charlie cried. *Please, snap out of it. I can’t do this alone!*

I couldn’t slow it down. Couldn’t return to that place of calm, controlled brutality that I’d found refuge in before. Lilac still stood in front of me. Unmoving, unblinking, not saying a single word.

Despite myself, I took a step closer to my brother’s ghost.

*Violet, please!*

Charlie’s wolf let out a mournful whine, nudging at me. His face was wet, I dimly realized. But I didn’t know if it was his blood or the Rogue’s.

And then I realized it didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered, the only thing that made even a tiny bit of sense, was reuniting with my brother. We’d be Violet and Lilac again. Together. Always.

I took one step forward and then another, heedless of Charlie’s cries, until I stood directly in front of Lilac. The battle raged around us, but I was too lost in Lilac’s eyes to care.

I wanted to reach out and touch him, to pull him into my arms, to weep into his chest and uncage months of pent-up grief. He’d been my other half long before I’d ever met Charlie, and the broken pieces of my heart still recognized their twin. I ached, to have him so close and still unreachable.

Charlie was a force of nature, dancing around me in lethal circles to protect me from the Rogues who had noticed the easy target. It was funny now, to think of how I’d come into this battle thinking I’d have to protect him. If it weren’t for my mate, I would have died at least three times by now.

But maybe if I had, I finally would have been reunited with Lilac.

*Violet, that’s not your brother*. I could hear the strain in Charlie’s voice, the exhaustion bleeding into his tone, but still he fought for me. *This is a trick! Your brother would never let you be hurt. He would never make you an easy target for danger!*

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I should help Charlie, but I was too lost in the daze of seeing my brother. Lost in whatever force was connecting us now.

*VIOLET—*

A loud yelp broke through the haze, a split second before a huge body slammed into me. I was thrown roughly to the ground, my body skidding along the dirt. There was a flash of snapping teeth and then a *crunch*.

My pendant!

I had no time to think; I just reacted. I rolled over and found my feet, belatedly snapping back into focus and fighting the Rogue that was attacking me with every bit of newfound strength I could muster.

Still, I was at a disadvantage, and in no time at all the Rogue had me belly-up and pinned to the ground. It reared back, ready to tear out my throat—

And then its body lurched over me, thrown by Charlie.

I shot him a grateful look and leapt to my feet, but the Rogue was already dead. I turned back to where Lilac was standing and then flinched. His ghost was still there, still staring at me, but simply being close to him sent a bolt of pain through my chest.

The scent of burning fur filled my nose, and I realized two things simultaneously: the burning sensation was coming from my broken pendant, and something was happening to Lilac.

The ghost flickered strangely, then disappeared into a purple mist. The mist was sucked directly into my pendant, which snapped shut as Lilac disappeared.

**Episode 883**

XAVIER

Being a ghost sucked ass. While my fellow pack members were in the fight of their lives, I was hanging out with a bunch of creepy-as-shit apparitions that didn’t do anything except whirl around and dead-eye anyone not on Silas’s side. I was only slightly better than absolutely fucking useless, but that was only because my cover was working.

Everyone on my side knew the plan and didn’t get freaked out when they saw me, and the Rogues fighting for Silas gave me a wide berth like they did the rest of the ghosts, but they otherwise didn’t seem to care that I was there.

I dodged where I could, knowing that the illusion wouldn’t last all that long if one of the Rogues body-checked me, and otherwise tried to stay on the outskirts of the fight, keeping my eyes peeled for Silas.

The plan—as idealistic and ambitious as it now seemed—had been for me to wait until the ideal moment to make my move, but so far everything had been so completely batshit crazy that I hadn’t even been able to get a clear view of my father, much less gauge when the *ideal* window of opportunity was opening.

That would be a sad and pathetic sort of poetic for us to make this grand plan and enlist a couple other packs, even bringing a handful of Fae along for the ride, fighting tooth and nail against Silas’s forces, only for the plan to ultimately fall apart because *I couldn’t fucking find him.*

I saw Ravi and Joss trying to fight their way through a thick cluster of absolutely gargantuan Rogues—seriously, was my father juicing these guys? To their credit, Ravi and Joss were holding their own as best as they could. They were both incredible fighters, but they were sorely outnumbered, and big bads as big as those guys took more than the usual amount of effort to bring down.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!* I wanted to run in and help them, but I was stuck in my human form until Big Mac lifted the spell. Not only would we lose the element of surprise when and if I finally *did* find Daddy Dearest, I’d get torn in half by one of those Hulked-out Rogues before I could blink.

I looked around wildly. Was everything falling apart? Greyson—one of our heaviest hitters—was nowhere to be seen, the piece of shit bastard, and we hadn’t anticipated this many ghosts, given that we were still a few days out from Halloween.

I noticed a Rogue giving me a double-take and jerked myself back to the present. I’d stopped acting like the rest of the ghosts. Rookie fucking mistake. *Come on, Xavier. Get it together. You literally have* one *job. Don’t fuck it up now.*

I watched the ghosts around me for a beat and then followed suit. The Rogue still gave me a strange look. Was it because he recognized me? Maybe he wasn’t suspicious of my true status as a member of the afterlife. Maybe he was just freaked out because he recognized me as Silas’s son, who had allegedly been killed on his boss’s orders, and now he was worried my ghost was here to mess with him and his buddies.

I felt a grim smile tug at my lips.

Maybe I wasn’t so useless after all.

I crept a little closer to the cluster of huge Rogues attacking Joss and Ravi, doing my best to imitate the dead-eyed stare of the rest of the ghosts, with one small exception. I gave that pack of huge bastards the biggest, brightest smile I was capable of.

Two of them stepped back, forgetting Ravi and Joss entirely. It was the window they needed to tear through the group of Rogues, and the whimpers of pain and crunch of broken bones filled the clearing.

I nodded at Joss and Ravi and then moved on. Maybe I was trapped in this form while the people I cared about were fighting for their lives, but I was going to make the most of what I had.

Nearby, Rishika was mowing down one Rogue after another, but I noticed Sage and Zainab not far away, back to back and looking exhausted. I moved over to them and gave the Rogues the same treatment.

“That’s Xavier!” one of the Rogues cried.

“Shit, what is his ghost doing here? Why is he smiling?” another whimpered.

The Rogues fell back in confusion and fear, and Sage and Zainab promptly regained the upper hand.

To my left, Mrs. Smith was fighting ferociously. She was a blur of moment, leaving nothing but blood and carnage in her wake. My jaw dropped before I remembered that ghosts weren’t supposed to look shocked. Still, I was impressed. I’d never realized she had that kind of fury in her.

One of the Rogues she was fighting turned to make his escape, and Mrs. Smith pounced on him. With a vicious snarl and a spray of blood, the Rogue was ended. And then she kept going.

*Damn.*

The absolutely lethal fury made sense, I supposed, considering everything Silas had done to her over the years. She had more reason than most of us to throw her full self into the fight. I hovered nearby, hoping to distract anyone who took her on long enough for her to disembowel them.

Not that she seemed to need my help.

I blew out a breath. Had I messed everything up with this plan? It wasn’t exactly clear how everything was supposed to play out, and we couldn’t do anything if the damn ghosts didn’t clear up long enough for us to even see what was going on. We’d already been fighting for a long time; we were going to tire out completely soon. And then what?

Across the battlefield, nearer to the house I saw a Rogue leap up and slam into Ava. My stomach lurched, and I froze, too far away to help. But before the Rogue could land the killing blow, a blast of energy flew through the woods and caught the Rogue right in the chest. He didn’t get up again.

*Cali and Artemis are still doing all right, then*.

That was one thing, at least, that didn’t seem to be completely going to shit. I’d gotten Cali to agree to a plan that would keep her safe and away from the action, and it looked like she was sticking to it. A tiny flutter of relief loosened the tightness in my chest.

At least Cali was safe. I didn’t know if I would’ve been able to focus on what I had to do if she’d been out here with her spatula. As much as it pained me to see my fellow pack members fighting for their lives while I was more or less useless, I knew I’d completely lose it if I saw Cali out here.

But it made me uneasy that I couldn’t seem to get a lock on exactly where Silas and Colton were—not to mention wherever the hell Greyson had disappeared to. I glanced up at the house and saw movement in one of the upper windows. Panic flooded me.

It was Demeter. That witch.

She was staring intently down at the battle raging on the ground below, murmuring something while clutching at something around her neck. Some kind of magical talisman?

More importantly, what was she responsible for on the battlefield? She was obviously the source of Silas’s magical powers, but was that power limited to the wards on the house and the ghosts whizzing around the battlefield? Or was there more at work here than we knew?

I clenched my fists. I wanted nothing more than to rush into the house and rip out Demeter’s throat, but I was stuck in this ghostly human form until Big Mac lifted the spell. I couldn’t waste my one chance on a half-assed revenge plan.

Once again, I was struck with doubt. Had we gone about this all wrong? Maybe we should have just gone with a frontal assault from the get-go. Maybe if Big Mac and Cali and everyone else hadn’t held me back when I’d been ready to rush forward and end Silas the moment Greyson had agreed to join them, this would all be over already. Maybe I could have taken Greyson out too, while I was at it.

I growled. Every cell in my body yearned to shift, to go back to my wolf form and join the fight. To do what came naturally. Maybe I could find Big Mac and demand that she change me back—

A howl rose above the crowd, and my heart leapt. It was Colton. This was the signal.

It was time.

I raced toward the sound of my twin’s howl, cursing all the ghosts that got in my way, and I finally found Colton, circling Silas. The battle was still raging around them. Both wolves’ hackles were up as they circled each other, each daring the other to attack.

As Colton circled back around, our eyes locked, and then my brother bared his teeth and lunged for Silas’s throat.

**Episode 884**

COLTON

The crowd was a blur. A chaotic combination of Rogues, members of our allied packs, and the ghosts that were milling about and distracting everyone.

I tried to make my way through the din, finding holes and spaces where there were none. But every time I nudged a ghost, I was subjected to the sensation of being plunged into an ice bath, their memories flashing before my eyes.

One second I was on the battlefield, and the next I was freezing cold and running through a desert. When I shook my head and snapped my eyes open again, a dark grey wolf was hurtling toward me.

I danced out of its way and side-tackled it, flattening it onto the ground. It squirmed under my weight, but I didn’t relent. I slit its throat with my claws, watching its blood stain the ground.

But before I could even process my victory, I heard a howl of agony behind me. I turned to see Zainab falling over, her side stained with blood. Sage stood over her, wailing with worry. Despite the adrenaline that flooded through my veins, numbing most emotions, I couldn’t help but feel for her.

When you cared about someone, seeing them hurt meant you were hurt too. For the millionth time, I thanked *everything* that Maya wasn’t here right now. It would’ve been like tearing my heart out of my chest and letting it crowd surf through the chaos of the battle. No fucking thanks.

Before I knew what I was doing, I started zipping through the crowd, dodging limbs—ghostly and lupine alike—on my way to the couple.

When I found them, Sage’s muzzle was stained red and I didn’t know if it was from licking at her mate’s wound or if she’d collected it while ripping out a throat. I assumed it was probably a bit of both. But right now, she didn’t look vicious. She looked lost and heartbroken. I knew Sage was a younger wolf, which meant that this was probably the biggest fight she’d ever been in. Seeing her mate go down had clearly left her stricken.

And a silver, grey-haired Rogue with bright blue eyes clearly sensed that sensitivity and darted right for Sage. I leapt in between them and snapped its neck with my teeth. I felt the crack between my jaws, and then it went limp. I tossed the body aside and turned back around, just in time to see a tawny-colored wolf making its way toward us.

I tensed for a second—the wolf was unfamiliar, but it had no malice in its eyes. No blood on its coat. It tentatively approached and started nudging Zainab to the side. I realized it had to be the healer Fae, coming to take care of her. That was good.

I looked to Sage, who reached out to me through the mind link.

*Go!* she urged me, her gaze hardening as she prepared to charge back into the fight. *Stick to the plan!*

Not needing to be told twice, I took off. I was surprised to see Ava’s wolf coming to help the couple as another Rogue descended. I pushed my way through the mass of fighting bodies. And then, through a gap in the crowd, I saw him. My father.

I howled.

It was go time.

Xavier was floating nearby, practically boring a hole into Silas’s head with his glare. I growled, trying to psych myself up for the battle ahead, and charged at my father.

Silas saw me, and his eyes widened in surprise—as if he hadn’t been sure I’d have it in me to be here. I felt myself bristle with indignation. I was a good fucking fighter! He was gonna regret underestimating me.

I lunged for Silas’s throat, but he easily danced out of my way. I’d remembered that he was strong, but I’d forgotten how fast he was. And his muscles rippled and stretched even more than I remembered.

The way he looked at me was almost casual. Like we’d run into each other at the fucking mall rather than in the middle of a battle.

We whirled around to face each other, each waiting for the other to attack. I saw Silas’s eyes widen as he looked over my shoulder at Xavier.

*That’s it, asshole. Get nice and distracted,* I thought, seething with rage. Of course seeing me meant nothing. I was always his last choice. Always the one he noticed least. I felt a resentment that I’d thought was dead rise up and make my blood boil.

Silas, his gaze still pinned to Xavier, snarled in derision at the sight of his favorite punching bag. Somehow, a ghost—because as far as he knew, Xavier was only a ghost—was getting under his skin more than the flesh-and-blood son who was trying to kill him.

I lunged for Silas as his focus turned back to me. I wanted to take advantage of his distraction. I slammed my shoulder into his chest, hoping to knock him back and shock him. But he barely budged. And it took almost no time for him to charge forward and slam right back into me.

Shit.

My bones rattled from the force of it. He was stronger than any wolf I’d ever fought. Whatever he was doing with the orb, it had him seriously jacked. He felt stronger than I remembered. I felt fear creep up my spine. How long could I last against him by myself?

*You always were the weakest of my sons,* Silas growled inside my mind. Fuck him and his Alpha blood that ran through me. *How ironic that you should be here at the end. I’ll admit, I wasn’t expecting to see you here.*

I tried to ignore his taunts. I wasn’t a genius, but I knew manipulation when I saw it. And I refused to play into his hands and let this distract me.

*You’re right, asshole*, I thought to myself. *It* is *the end.*

I lunged again, trying to go for his throat. I wondered if I could be quick enough to nick an artery and at least weaken him. But he was so fast, he was almost a blur as he darted out of reach.

Xavier was still hovering behind him. His shoulders were at his ears, and his eyes were practically bulging out of his head. He was pissed. Where the fuck was Big Mac? It was time!

It was practically past time!

But until Xavier was able to attack, I couldn’t let myself get distracted. Focusing on how the plan was *supposed* to go never got anyone anywhere when things turned out differently. I leapt at Silas again, but he reared up on his hind legs and pushed me back.

He lunged at me, but I rolled under him. I scratched him across the snout, drawing blood, but it didn’t seem to faze him. Besides that, it was like Silas could read my mind. Like he saw my every move coming from a mile away. He blocked, dodged, and countered it all with mind-blowing ease.

Was I that obvious? That easy to figure out? Was I giving myself away? I felt the frustration winding in my stomach. I started to lash out more, getting sloppier in an attempt to be unpredictable. My lungs were aching from exertion. Why wasn’t Big Mac making her move?

Behind Silas, Xavier was looking around and clearly wondering the same thing. I tried to focus on the fight in front of me. I told myself that help was on the way—I just needed to keep holding out.

But Silas’s laugh echoed in my head, and I felt something in my chest tighten. That sound had never been accompanied by anything good. Memories of running up the stairs and crawling under my bed when I heard that laugh flashed behind my eyes.

He was toying with me, like a cat playing with a mouse. I remembered the frustrated, helpless feeling I used to get when I was under the bed. I had the same feeling right now. A gnawing guilt laced with fear started to tear at me.

Why did he do this to me?

Why couldn’t I just deal with him on my own?

But I needed my brother. I needed both of my brothers. And I needed Big Mac.

I looked through the crowd, desperately scanning it for her. I saw her, hands extended as she battled a few of Silas’s Rogues. She was too engaged in the fight to realize it was her cue.

Mrs. Smith fought alongside her, shoving Rogues out of Big Mac’s path with a fierce protectiveness that surprised me. I’d never seen her like this. Her eyes were wild and sharp, her movements ruthless. But was she too focused on protecting Big Mac to remind her of her place in our plan?

Silas must have seen the dismay flash across my face, because I saw a hunger in his eyes. His chest swelled with triumph, and I bit down on the side of my cheek so hard I tasted blood. I had given something away. I’d allowed myself to look weak. He knew something was wrong.

Silas followed my gaze. When he spotted Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, his snout curled in a sneer. He looked back at me, eyes flashing.

*I guess you’ve brought me a delicious appetizer after all*, he said.

I felt the jolt of pain before I realized what had happened. I looked down at my arm and saw that it was bent at an impossible angle, the bone sticking out through the skin. I howled in pain as I realized Silas had snapped my arm.

Silas tossed me to the ground and advanced on me, teeth bared.

**Episode 885**

I took a step toward Greyson, trying to get a closer look at him. He turned to face me and I gasped when I got a look at his eyes.

They were almost black, his pupils were so dilated. They seemed unfocused, like he couldn’t look right at me for long. Like he wasn’t able to pay attention to any one thing for more than a moment.

It was clear something was wrong. He had to be under some kind of spell.

I felt my stomach twist. Magic wasn’t something I could deal with on my own. How could I have any chance of helping Greyson to fight something I didn’t even understand? Especially Demeter’s magic. Even Big Mac seemed intimidated by her. I’d fought against her once and only gotten lucky because of Artemis.

Before I could try anything, I heard a massive crash from outside. I flinched and felt Astrid’s glamour drop away. I was no longer a wolf. I was standing on two legs and staring at Greyson as myself.

My heart sank. Did this mean something had happened to Astrid? Astrid, who had only come here to help me. This fight wasn’t hers. The thought of her dying in a world that wasn’t her own, the casualty of a fight she didn’t belong in made a lump form in my throat. I hoped I was wrong, that she was okay—distracted by needing to do something else, something more important. Maybe it was the house.

Because even if Astrid *was* hurt, there wasn’t anything I could do about it. I had to prioritize and focus on the task in front of me. That was what being in a battle was like—it was about shutting out the things you couldn’t control. And I’d never been good at that.

Greyson’s eyes narrowed when he saw my true form. He took a step forward, looking at me with pure menace in his eyes. I leapt back instinctively. Was this what it felt like to be on the other side of Greyson’s protection?

I held up my hands in a gesture of peace. I couldn’t let us fall into a trap. If I didn’t play prey, maybe it would be harder for him to act like a predator.

“Greyson,” I rasped, then cleared my throat so I could speak clearly. “It’s me. It’s Cali. Silas has you under some kind of spell… Demeter probably cast it. But they did it because they know how much we need you. How much your pack needs you out there. So I’m asking you to fight it. For us. And for me.”

Greyson blinked at me, almost swaying. He looked so confused and out of sorts. But the violence in his eyes seemed to have dissipated. I took another few steps, closing the distance between us, keeping my hands where he could see them, proving I wasn’t a threat. He twitched and took in a sharp breath.

I could see that the violence had come from a place of fear and confusion, and my heart hurt for him. My Alpha’s internal compass had been tampered with. Demeter’s spell had him not knowing who his friends were.

Finally, I was next to him. Slowly, I placed my hand flat on his chest, over his heart. He twitched again, his hands moving to stop me. But he froze mid-gesture. I could feel his heart fluttering under my palm. I could feel his short, labored breaths. With great concentration, he lowered his hands to his sides.

I could feel the veins in my chest pulsing as he stared at me, his eyes slowly seeming to focus. Eventually they widened, and his expression cleared a bit.

“Cali?” he asked, the hopefulness in his voice making my heart swell.

But before I could get too happy, I heard a rustling in the doorway behind me. I spun around to see Demeter holding the orb. She was staring at us both, a smug smile curling her lips.

“Well, well, well,” she purred. “I had a feeling you wouldn’t be able to stay away from your little boyfriend. I was toying with the idea of having him kill you. Something about it seemed poetic.”

I took a deep breath and drew my magic close. The air around me began to vibrate and crackle with energy. It felt safe, like a suit of armor.

But Demeter wasn’t intimidated. She smirked at me, as if I’d brought a water gun to a shoot-out.

“You think your Fae powers are enough to beat me?” she scoffed. “You won’t survive a one-on-one fight with me, *girl*.”

She said the last word like a curse. Like there was no greater insult. And for some reason, it made me want to shudder. Her expression was so hateful, so hungry, so confident…

Demeter turned to Greyson and murmured a few words in a language I didn’t recognize. I watched as his posture snapped back into a threatening pose, his grey eyes turning almost black again. He turned toward me, looming. A feral tower of a man.

He bared his teeth and I felt myself flinch. The Greyson I knew would never hurt me. But this wasn’t the Greyson I knew.

He held his arms out, and I heard the snap of his bones cracking as he slowly began to shift. His face remained blank, unreadable, as his hands morphed into paws.

I felt fury rise up inside me. How DARED this golden-armed bitch mess with my man! Before I could even think about it, I raised my hand and sent off a blast of magic right at her.

Demeter barked a laugh and lazily deflected the beam, shooting it off to the side with her golden arm. A nearby floorboard splintered with the force of my magic. Demeter didn’t even flinch. Mainly because she was already murmuring something under her breath and firing off a bolt of magic right at me.

Shit.

I dove behind an ornate mirror, and Demeter continued to rain magic down on me. I peeked out and saw that one of Demeter’s spells had backfired. She was stumbling back. I looked over to Greyson. It looked like the spell was maybe losing some of its hold on him.

His shifting had stopped. He was fully human again.

I ran to him, knowing this could very well be my last chance. I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the door, desperate to get him away from Demeter, her magic, and the orb. But she pushed herself back up with a bellow.

She reached upward, and a sword from a family crest on the wall zoomed toward me like I was a magnet. I screamed, frozen and unsure what to do.

But Greyson sprang into action. He caught the blade midair before it could reach me. Then he flew through the air, his superhuman speed and agility seemingly restored.

I turned to him, desperately hoping that this meant my Greyson was back. That he was free of her spell.

But Demeter advanced on us, capturing my attention once more. Greyson stood there, sword still in his grasp, looking at her blankly.

I desperately hurled more bolts at Demeter, wanting to give Greyson time to come back to himself. I knew I was no match for her, that I had barely any control over my powers. But maybe I could stall her just long enough.

I felt myself growing weaker. I wobbled on legs that were turning to jelly. I wouldn’t be able to hold out for much longer. But just as I felt my vision start to tunnel, I saw Demeter’s head snap up and her eyes flit to the window.

She looked out toward the yard and reached for a pendant around her neck. With a whoosh, she disappeared into thin air, taking the orb with her. I almost fell to the floor with surprise.

Something must have happened outside that demanded her attention.

Could it be that Xavier had successfully killed Silas?

Or was that too much to hope?

I turned to Greyson, who still looked out of it. I grabbed his hand and tugged him outside. Whatever was happening out there had to be big. People could need us.

We burst out onto the porch, Greyson stumbling behind me.

I gasped at the sight of the battle. Some of the ghosts had frozen in place. Then with a flash of light, the stopped ones disappeared with a soft *pop*, dissolving into light particles*.*

The light traveled all the way back to Violet. More specifically, to the pendant she always wore. Only now, it was clutched in her hand.

What the hell?

Stunned silence gave way to absolute pandemonium. The fighting began again in earnest, no one wanting to let the surprise lose them whatever edge they had. But amid all the action, I caught a glimpse of Silas—who was locked in a fierce battle with Mrs. Smith.

Mrs. Smith snarled at him, fighting for all she was worth. She snapped her jaws at him, missing his throat by inches. But as fierce as she was, Silas always seemed to be one step ahead of her. Like he knew exactly what she was going to do an instant before she did it.

And Mrs. Smith was getting tired.

Then, quicker than I’d even known was possible, Silas struck. He clamped his jaws around her neck and tore her throat out in a fluid, almost beautiful motion.

Mrs. Smith swayed on her feet, the light still in her eyes as she started to fall. She looked confused.

But then she fell to the ground, lifeless. Her chest was still, her limbs limp. Her blood pooled around her.

She was gone.

**Episode 886**

GREYSON

The fog of Demeter’s spell cleared just in time for me to see Sabine fall to the ground, lifeless. The rest of it—everything I’d missed while I hadn’t been myself—came rushing to meet me. Nothing was in the right order. Because of the forced numbness, all of it felt equally important. I felt sick to my stomach.

*Silas*.

His witch was the unnatural force that had wiped all my thoughts away and replaced them with his will. It had felt horrific, invasive, repulsive. While he’d had me dangling from puppet strings, he’d managed to take the only real family I had. The only person who’d wanted to be around me, to protect and nurture me.

Fury coursed through my veins. I threw back my head and howled in despair. It felt like my heart had been torn out. It felt like any minute, the rest of me would die along with Sabine. Along with my mother.

As I watched, a huge surge of magic knocked Silas backward. I traced it to its point of origin, feeling like everything was moving in a surreal kind of slow motion.

Big Mac had a hand out, fury in her eyes as she hit Silas with another spell, her gaze cold and hard. Sparks were dancing off her hand, her arm, even her hair. It was like she was alive with some kind of magical energy that was beyond her control.

She roared as she let out a third blast, but it was too late. Silas had learned how to out-maneuver her. He dodged the blast and sprang at her, slamming her into a tree. She slumped against the trunk, sliding slowly to the ground, her ankle bending the wrong way.

I roared again. So loud, I could feel the windows on the house rattle behind me. I leapt forward, shifting in midair as I rocketed off the porch. All I could see was Silas.

The man who had just murdered my mother.

Determination rose inside me. I would not let him get the woman Sabine loved, too. I would save Big Mac. I would taste my father’s blood. I would end the cycle of pain and loss and abuse.

I barreled through the crowd. It felt like I was parting it just with the force of my will—because who would be fool enough to stand in my way at this point.

I came face to face with Silas, lunging for his throat without a word of preamble. Who cared about quips or insults? I was past that. I just wanted him gone.

I had never felt anything like the rage coursing through me right now. I felt hot all over, stronger than I’d ever been in a fight. I’d never wanted anything like I wanted to feel Silas’s throat tearing between my teeth.

*Guess you chose the wrong side after all,* Silas taunted me. *No matter. This was my original plan all along.*

But I didn’t care what he said. Let him have his words. I didn’t have room in my head for anything but ending him.

We charged each other, meeting in a tackle shoulder to shoulder. We both pushed, trying to see who would give first. I dug my claws into the dirt, trying desperately to hold my ground. I felt invincible with anger and rage. All I could see was red. If this fire inside me couldn’t beat him, what possibly could?

But I slid back all the same. Silas was too strong. The orb had given him a new edge. Strength, speed, and an accelerated ability to recover.

*Do you regret not joining me* now*?* he asked, mocking me. *Is it worth it to pretend you’re the better man? But what does “better” mean if you can’t beat me?*

I growled, sliding backward. He was winning. I was outgunned.

*You are* my *son*. His voice was a snarl, but it was the only thing I could hear apart from the blood rushing in my ears. *All your strength comes from me. Every move you make, every thought you have… It’s all just a pale imitation.*

I growled, not wanting to believe it. I turned my head and chomped down on the back of his neck. Trying to weaken him. Desperate for an edge. But nothing happened. I could taste his blood, but he didn’t even flinch.

I heard a new sound, a horrible keening coming from behind me. I flinched at the sound. It had to be Big Mac. My mother’s death had finally sunk in.

But I couldn’t join in her despair—Silas almost had me at the tree line. If he pushed me into the forest, where I’d be stumbling and looking over my shoulder to make sure I didn’t end up against a tree, I’d be done for sure.

Suddenly, Silas froze next to me. I rolled to the side to get a glimpse of him. He was staring at something right behind me.

I followed my father’s gaze and saw Xavier, his ghost form dematerializing and giving way to his real self. Big Mac must have lost hold of her spell on him. I watched every muscle in his body ripple as he charged forward. He shifted as he raced toward us.

He gave me a hard look that I didn’t quite know how to interpret. But that didn’t matter. I knew what to do next.

We took the stances we’d prepared for, me at my father’s right and Xavier at his left. We charged him, forcing him to either run forward or away. To retreat or to show us his back. Either way, he’d be worse off.

Silas shuffled backward, so stunned at the sight of his presumably dead son back in action that he lost a bit of his bluster. I felt intense relief and gratitude that Xavier’s plan had worked. Perhaps this would teach me to give him credit where it was due, in the future.

I side-tackled my father, pushing him right into Xavier. Silas almost fell to the ground in a heap, but he somehow managed to pull himself up at the last minute. He moved backward again, more stable this time. I could tell he was trying to regroup.

*Where’s Colton?* I asked Xavier, worried about the next part of our plan.

*Healer’s working on him now,* Xavier assured me, sounding focused. *He should be here soon.*

Well, if Xavier wasn’t worried, then I didn’t have a reason to be either. None of us would be able to take Silas on alone, but together, we stood a chance. Colton could be the edge we needed. But for the time being, we were holding our own nicely.

Silas shook out his limbs, loosening himself up once again. Whatever damage he had taken seemed to have almost fully healed. He darted forward and I saw Xavier tense, just like I had, ready for the impact.

But instead, Silas was thrown back, a Fae bolt hitting him directly in the chest. I followed the bolt backward with my eyes, watching in horror as Silas turned to face Cali.

His eyes narrowed in hatred, and Xavier and I both growled protectively. We lunged to attack him, the instinct to protect our mate strong.

But Silas got back on his feet quick, and Xavier and I both hit him at the same time. All I could see was a blur of snapping teeth, claws, and fur. I could barely tell the three of us apart in the frenzy of biting and scratching.

But the longer we tussled, the more it became clear—Silas was stronger than the two of us put together. I felt the frustration prickle at the back of my mind. The plan was starting to fail.

The element of surprise Xavier’s appearance had given us had only lasted about three seconds. The same went for Cali’s bolt. There wasn’t enough time. Whatever the orb had done to Silas had made him impossible to beat.

Xavier swiped at Silas again and again with his silver nails, but he couldn’t land a blow.

From behind me, I heard the rushing sound of a wolf’s footfalls, and before I knew it, a fully healed Colton was soaring through the air between me and Xavier. He collided with Silas and knocked him to the ground. They tumbled together in a vicious wrestling match.

Silas grabbed Colton by the scruff of the neck and tossed him aside in a dismissive gesture. Again, all we had was a bag of petty tricks. Silas was too strong for us.

*You three are becoming a real pain in the ass,* Silas growled in our minds.

And then I blinked and he disappeared. Stunned, I looked around, trying to find him. I found him rushing toward the porch, having evaded our attacks. We’d thought we had him trapped in our makeshift arena. But we’d been wrong.

I ran after him, my stomach sinking like a stone. I knew exactly where he was headed. For the house. For the porch. For Cali.

I pushed myself to put one foot in front of another. To run faster. My lungs burned, but that didn’t matter. I had to reach her first. I could feel Xavier keeping pace beside me, equally desperate to get to her. Colton was at our heels.

We leapt onto the porch, in time to watch Silas tackle Cali and roll her toward the doorway. Her eyes widened in surprise and her lips parted in a scream that didn’t come.

Silas had her on her back, his paw pressed against her windpipe. Cali wheezed helplessly underneath him.

*One more step and she’s dead.*

**Episode 887**

JOSS

I couldn’t believe Mrs. Smith was dead. My brain understood all the pieces. I could even add them up to a reasonable conclusion.

I saw her blood staining the ground.

I saw her glassy, lifeless eyes reflecting the dying light around us.

But I still couldn’t grasp it. It just didn’t feel real.

But that was a distraction. I knew I shouldn’t be feeling *anything* right now. I was supposed to be fighting. And fighting was most effective when you left emotion out of it. When you were clinical. When you let muscle memory take over and just focused on your opponent. On all of your strengths and all of their weaknesses.

Feelings just made the math harder to do.

I snapped another neck with my teeth, and another of Silas’s Rogues went down. In the distance, I could see Greyson, Xavier, and Colton locked in battle with their father. Even though I’d never admit it, they were the three strongest wolves I knew. If anyone stood a chance against Silas, it was them.

I just hoped they’d be able to kill him quickly.

I scanned the field for areas where I’d be of use. For weaknesses I could exploit, strengths I could add to. Where could I tip the scales in our favor?

Instead, I saw Demeter’s golden arm glinting as she made her way across the lawn. I followed her gaze and saw that she had zeroed in on Violet and Charlie.

I tilted my head in confusion. I wondered what it was about the two teen wolves that had grabbed her attention. But then I saw *exactly* what it was.

The ghosts around me had disappeared, transforming into an ethereal kind of light. And all that light was being sucked toward Violet. Right into that pendant she never took off.

Well that was weird.

But a useful kind of weird that we really fucking needed right now. And I was never the kind of person who looked a gift horse in the mouth—that was for people too poisoned by pride to take an opportunity when they saw it.

I rushed toward Big Mac, who was coming to against a tree. I felt torn, wondering if I should rush to Violet’s aid instead. Knowing I couldn’t do both alone, I threw back my head and howled for Ravi.

We locked eyes across the battlefield immediately, and the two of us crossed over to Violet and Charlie. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Artemis barreling toward Violet, full steam ahead. Only then did it occur to me that the two of them were close.

Or what seemed to count as close for Artemis.

*Good*, I thought to myself. *I’ll have a Fae on my side for this confrontation with the witch.*

But as relieved as I was to have the backup, I was also confused. Artemis wasn’t supposed to be out in the open like this. The Fae were supposed to stay back. But I supposed the balloon had already burst on that surprise. And Artemis was a skilled warrior—I was sure she knew where she was needed.

I stopped to help Big Mac to her feet. She blinked furiously and gasped for air. She seemed disoriented, but alive. She leaned most of her weight on me, slowly shifting back onto her heels as she caught her breath. I looked at her, trying to show her some solidarity.

I couldn’t share in her grief, but maybe I could add to her strength. It seemed like the closest thing to comfort I could give her right now.

I looked ahead and saw that the tree Artemis and the others had been hiding behind had toppled over. The Rogues must have realized where the energy bolts were coming from and torn it up.

I saw Demeter quickening her pace and gave Big Mac a look.

I raced to close the space. I shoved Silas’s Rogues aside as I ran, many of them falling to the ground. I saw Rishika rip one of their throats out and felt myself gaining momentum. We could still win this.

I wasn’t going to let one more member of this pack die at these monsters’ hands. And definitely not a pair of kids. Violet had already been through enough. Almost the entire time I’d known her, she’d been shrouded in grief. Charlie was her second chance, and I was going to see to it that she got to enjoy this next phase of her life.

By the time I reached their side, Artemis was already there, throwing energy bolts to protect Violet. Charlie had his back to them, defending them from Rogues attacking from behind. He fought viciously. He danced around, seeming to be everywhere at once. His energy was frenetic, as if the more he moved, the more he *could* move. It was clear he’d do anything to protect his mate.

I ran toward Demeter, but she raised her golden arm lazily and swatted me away with it. I felt my teeth rattle in my skull as I fell to the ground. She was clutching the orb, muttering something under her breath.

Shit. I knew that couldn’t be good. I leapt into the air, trying to snatch the orb out of her hands. I tackled Demeter to the ground and we rolled, the momentum of my hit carrying us across the field.

I ripped at Demeter’s arm, tasting blood as my teeth tore into her skin. Demeter screamed in rage and pain, but I tried to focus on getting the upper hand. We couldn’t have her waving that orb around any longer.

Big Mac blasted her off me and Demeter skid backward, almost hitting the porch. Demeter threw her hands out, blasting Big Mac with a bolt of her own. Big Mac blocked it, trembling with the effort.

“GO!” she screamed at me, gesturing wildly.

I reached out, trying to slash Demeter’s throat with my claws. But she gritted her teeth and managed to emit some kind of powerful magic that exploded from her like a bomb. I was knocked back, hard.

I tried to stumble to my feet. I’d been tossed further back than I’d thought. And when I finally managed to get my eyes to focus, I was shocked to see…

*Mrs. Smith.*

She was running right toward me. For a second, I wondered if I’d died. If this was heaven or the afterlife or something. But then she ran into Big Mac’s arms and hugged her, and I knew Big Mac wasn’t dead…

But I was still so confused. I’d seen Silas rip Mrs. Smith’s throat out. I’d seen the light leave her eyes. She was *gone*.

But then Big Mac kissed the ring on Mrs. Smith’s finger. The one with the ruby. The one she’d put my fertility essence into. And that was when I really put it all together. The spell that she’d done must have saved Mrs. Smith’s life.

*I’d saved Sabine’s life.*

I felt a surge of pride. It made me stand up straighter. But the moment was short-lived.

*Joss!* Ravi’s fearful voice appeared in my mind. *Watch out!*

I turned and saw Demeter, right next to me. Her eyes were cold, and a smile so wide it was almost a grimace was painted on her face. And then I felt the hot slice of the dagger. It robbed me of breath as I crumpled to the ground.

Demeter had plunged it right into my heart. And twisted it.

“An Alpha is nothing without his Luna,” she said.

I cried out as I shifted back into my human form. I hadn’t meant to. I didn’t stand a chance this way. I needed to be a wolf if I wanted to beat her.

Tears filled my eyes as I watched Demeter fly backward, hit by one of Artemis’s energy blasts. I looked to my other side and found Ravi, kneeling beside me. He was human as well. And despite everything, the first thing I felt when I saw him was happiness.

Because it was Ravi. Sweet Ravi. My Ravi.

It was always good to see him.

He took my hand and I felt soothed even further by the warmth of his touch. I found it hard to keep my eyes open to keep looking at him. And my vision was tunneling anyway, so it wasn’t even worth it when they felt so heavy.

I focused on the feeling of his hand in mine. That was enough.

“Joss,” I heard him say. Then something, something, something. “… breathing.”

But I wasn’t really listening.

“Stay with—”

I just couldn’t hear him. I was so, so tired. I couldn’t stay. That kind of thing was no longer in my control. I had to sleep.

I opened my eyes once more and made out the shape of Ravi. The most comforting image I could think of. And all I could think was, *I love you too.*

And then everything went black.

RAVI

“Joss,” I said, my voice shaking as I cradled her in my arms. There was so much blood. So much blood. “Don’t die on me. Open your eyes, Joss. I’m here. I’m with you. *Open your eyes!*”

And for a moment she did.

*I love you too.* Her voice echoed in my mind.

And then Joss went heavy in my arms.

**Episode 888**

XAVIER

I felt frozen. Bolted to the ground and completely immobile.

Greyson was standing stock still at my side, and we were both looking at Cali. The two of us were both watching our worst fears realized—Cali in Silas’s arms, at Silas’s mercy.

I didn’t understand how this could have happened. We had been so careful. We had planned so thoroughly. There had been three of us trying to kill him. It should have worked. He shouldn’t have stood a *chance.*

Cali was meant to be in the trees right now, with Artemis at her side. When had she left? When had she even gotten close to the house? This shouldn’t have been possible.

But it was.

Time slowed down. I could hear my own heartbeat. Cali and I had been in trouble before, and each time it had been agony. But I had always known there was a way out. There had been times where the odds had been shitty. Moments when I’d known whatever we would have to do to get free would hurt, or have dire consequences.

But now… Now was worse.

Now, I didn’t see a way out.

Having just fought Silas tooth and nail, I knew exactly how fast he was. If I attacked him, Cali would be dead before I even touched the porch, her throat slit.

I could feel the tension radiating off Greyson next to me. I knew he was in hell too. It didn’t make me angry, but it didn’t comfort me either. Not knowing what else to do, I reached out to my brothers through the mind link.

*Don’t move*, I urged the both of them. But mostly Colton. It would be just like him to charge forward into anger without thinking. I didn’t want a stupid move on his part to put Cali at risk. I knew Greyson and I were probably on the same train of thought.

I thought back to Greyson’s attempt to take Silas down alone. He’d fought with a ferocity I’d never seen from him before. And I had seen him angry. I had made him murderous. But this was something else. He’d been fighting to kill. And even then, he hadn’t been able to do it.

Big Mac had been right, when she said Greyson’s temporary defection had been the result of a spell. Demeter must have gotten in his head, somehow. There was no way Greyson was on Silas’s side. If his performance in the fight hadn’t proven that, the look in his eye right now certainly did.

I could hear the faint sounds of a commotion on the lawn. Something major was going on behind us, but I couldn’t have cared less. Looking would’ve meant tearing my eyes away from Cali, and that was impossible.

Nothing existed outside that porch. Nothing besides Silas and Cali, and what he might do. What he *would* do, if we didn’t find a way to stop him.

But how?

I looked at my father, waiting. He was playing at something, here. Cali was leverage for something. But what? He knew we’d give anything for her. I saw it in the smug set of his jaw and the twinkle in his eye. Everything about his body language was a silent boast.

He knew he had us.

But what was he going to do with us?

*Isn’t this a cozy reunion,* Silas mused, linking with his three sons. There was a fondness in his voice that made me sick to my stomach. He liked fighting with us. It made him feel close to us in a way he never really had.

*Let her go*!

The sentiment echoed, and it took me a moment to realize it was because Greyson and I had both spoken at the same time. We’d both shown our hand, and there was nothing Silas enjoyed quite so much.

He laughed, and his lips pulled back from his teeth in a crude, wolfish smile.

*I thought this would get your attention.* He looked down at Cali briefly, just a flick of his eyes. *Personally, I don’t see why you’re so wrapped up in her. Sure, she’s pretty in a Midwestern kind of way. But I raised you to be stronger than this. Stronger than any feelings your cocks can convince you matter more than power, than blood, than control.*

I wanted to scream. I felt a cry lodge in my throat, but I couldn’t release it. I was choking on it. Paralyzed by indecision. By my worst nightmare. I actually wondered if this was a dream.

*Look at you,* Silas scoffed. *Both tied to the whims of this girl. You could have been so much more.* He surveyed the three of us with disgust. *Two lovesick boys and a weak loner.*

I bristled and felt Greyson do the same beside me. Colton gave a low growl, soft enough for only the two of us to hear. He was cautioning us to say calm.

*But no matter,* Silas continued, shaking his head. *This will all work out for the best. I no longer have any use for you as sons. But that doesn’t completely rob you of purpose.*

I gritted my teeth, angry at myself for being confused. I didn’t know what he was getting at. I knew I had to find a way to outthink him. To beat him to whatever point he was trying to make and find a way to counter it.

*Once I absorb your wolves, I’ll be the most powerful Alpha that ever existed,* Silas continued. *Able to shape the world to my will.*

Cali huffed out a little breath underneath him, her brow furrowing in confusion. I realized she wasn’t privy to this conversation. She couldn’t hear a thing we were saying to each other as wolves.

But then, quick as a flash, she raised her hand and blasted Silas with her Fae power, sending him back into the door frame and knocking the wind out of him.

*RUN!* I screamed at her through the mind link.

She hesitated for a second, looking between Greyson’s wolf and mine. I knew he had to be telling her the same thing.

*I won’t let anything happen to him, Cali!* I told her, hoping that would move her along. *GO!*

Her lower lip stuck out in a kind of habitual defiance. Like she knew she should leave, but she wanted to stay, to help, to do something. I knew what that felt like. But there was nothing for her to do now. This was between us and our father.

So she turned and ran. I listened to her steps until they disappeared into the chaos of the yard. I hoped she’d be safe. I tried to stay secure in the knowledge that she knew how to take care of herself. After all, she’d just proven it.

It was just me and my brothers, now. Standing on the porch, facing Silas. We moved as one, leaping into the air and pushing our father backward and into the house.

His eyes widened with shock. The wind was knocked out of him again. He blinked, dazed and trying to focus. I knew then that this would be our last stand.

This was the last chance we’d get to kill him. We had to make it count.

Greyson raced around him, attacking from the rear and pushing him toward Colton and me. We snarled and I scratched him above the eyes, raking my claws as deep as I could and making blood flow down his cheeks like tears.

He blinked rapidly, trying to get his vision to clear, but I knew it had to be bloodstained. Colton roared in his face and Silas actually *flinched.*

Colton leapt onto a table that shattered beneath him as he jumped off it to tackle Silas. He flattened him to the ground and I tore at his ear, sinking in my teeth and ripping it away. Silas howled in agony.

Greyson chomped down on one of Silas’s back legs, making him writhe in pain. He managed to slide out of Colton’s grasp as he twisted and turned. He kicked at Greyson with his free leg and managed to send him crashing into the fireplace.

We were tearing this house to shreds. It was hardly an ideal place to have this fight. It was too cramped. It didn’t give anyone enough space to run and build momentum. But it was better than nothing.

Sensing our growing bond, Silas tore up the stairs in an attempt to get away from us. We followed him eagerly. I nearly punched a hole in the bottom step in my eagerness to chase him. To taste more of his blood. To feel his body go limp underneath me. He bolted into a bedroom with wide windows and I grabbed him by the tail, refusing to let him get out of here so easy.

Colton and Greyson ran ahead of me, placing themselves between our father and the only way out of the room and the house. I didn’t have to tell them what to do—it was like they just knew. Like we were all speaking a language we weren’t aware we’d learned.

Maybe our father had taught us something.

Silas wriggled free of my grasp, but Greyson and Colton pushed back against him. Hard. He flew out of the room and over the bannister, landing back downstairs. Greyson bounded after him and leapt down to pin him to the kitchen floor.

Colton and I scrambled to follow, but right before we reached them, Silas threw Greyson into the stove. A loud CLANG rung out as his skull crashed against the metal.

Without thinking, I ran to him and pulled him up, using my snout to push him off the floor and steady him on his feet. Once Greyson was upright, I looked at Silas.

Colton, Greyson, and I had cornered him. We all snarled in a show of intimidation. There was nowhere else for Silas to go. He was ours now.

Was this finally the end of him?

**Episode 889**

I ran out into the yard, fighting to catch my breath from my close encounter with Silas. The battle was still raging. I turned toward the house, terrified for the Evers brothers. They were powerful, but Silas was a beast. I’d never seen anything like it. I’d never felt anything like the weight of his paw on me. Like one move and it would all be over.

Greyson and Xavier had told me to run, but I wanted to go back and help them and Colton. I had my Fae powers—I’d made a lot of progress, and I could easily help with creating distractions.

My plan would be to distract *Silas*, of course, not the boys. But then again, maybe just seeing me would be a distraction for them.

*That doesn’t sound so good, does it?* I thought, panicked.

I contemplated going back for a few seconds, but then I heard a cry coming from the battlefield, more jarring than any other sound. I gasped when I saw Ravi sitting on the ground with Joss’s body lying before him, her head in his lap as he caressed her bloodied face. There were tears trailing down his chin, and Joss was…

Gone.

Joss was dead.

I felt gut-punched.

Ravi was sobbing, his whole body trembling… Poor man. I could barely wrap my head around what this meant for him. What this meant for the pack.

The Luna was dead.

I couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened if Greyson hadn’t chosen Joss as his Luna. She might’ve still been alive. But if he had chosen me, would I be the one on the ground, bloodied and broken?

I didn’t have the time to sort out my jumbled mess of emotions; I heard a growl from right behind me, high-pitched and menacing. I turned around swiftly to face a massive Rogue that was charging toward me. I was suddenly exposed, vulnerable out here, but I was not defenseless. Even when I used to use spatulas to swat off monsters, I had never let myself be defenseless—but now I had my Fae magic. It flowed out of my hands, hitting the Rogue with a hard slam that threw it on the ground.

I could do this.

I could *fight.*

I’d barely finished that thought when, from the corner of my eye, I saw Demeter. She raised her hands in an attack gesture, pointing at Violet.

“Leave the kid alone, you witch!” I screamed, running toward them. Demeter was distracted when I shot a surge of energy toward her, but my fucking aim was off. UGH!

“*You*!” She pointed at me with a hiss full of absolute hatred. “If it weren’t for that other Fae’s little trick, I would’ve killed you the first time,” she snarled. She was talking about Artemis’s mind control, which would’ve been really fucking helpful right now as well. “I’ll enjoy succeeding this time.”

“Not if I kill you first!” I spat, raising my hands as Demeter prepared to direct her spell toward me. Golden dust burst from her fingertips, charging toward me. But then I heard a roar. Ravi, raging and unhinged, slammed into Demeter, making her spell misfire into the air.

“That’s it!” I yelled. “GO RAVI!”

Ravi’s wolf and Demeter struggled on the ground, her using an invisible shield and him trying to dig his teeth into her neck. I was frantically trying to figure out how the hell I could help Ravi with my powers without hitting him. I aimed for Demeter’s head twice before Ravi got in the way. *Fuck!*

Groaning, I dropped the magic route and looked around for a long stick or something that I could use to fucking poke Demeter’s eye out. But then another Rogue joined the fray. That was the last thing I needed right now.

“GO AWAY, YOU GODDAMN—” I shot a surge of my Fae power at the Rogue but missed. Demeter threw Ravi off, and the Rogue got ready to pounce on him.

*No fucking way*, I thought*. Not on my watch!*

I charged at the Rogue, ready to use the stick that I’d picked up, but then a wolf blocked my way. I was about to fucking blast the son of a bitch when I realized that it was one of us. Mrs. Smith!

*MRS. SMITH?*

She was alive! How?! Everything was moving fast, so fast, but I couldn’t help but let out a sound that was a pretty close to a sob when I saw her back up on her feet, in one piece. Like the badass that she was, she lunged at the Rogue and ripped him to pieces.

“YOU!” Demeter screamed, ready to aim at Mrs. Smith. I was about to go after that asshole witch when a blood-curling scream pierced my ears.

“TORIN!”

Astrid. That was Astrid’s voice. Mrs. Smith pinned Demeter on the ground, and I trusted her to handle this—much more than I trusted sweet Torin to fight anyone. Making the decision in a split second, I turned around to race toward Torin. He was holding a dagger, facing two Rogues.

*This does NOT look good!* I hit the Rogues with a blast of energy and they stumbled back.

“Thank you, Cali!” Torin shouted.

Then Jay suddenly barreled into the Rogues, followed by Lola. There was a lot of growling and snapping and me sending waves of attacking magic. A long moment later, though, the fight ended with the Rogues bleeding on the ground.

“Thank you!” Torin shouted at all three of us before heading to one of the Redwood wolves to offer his healing services. I was so relieved, but then I suddenly felt a cold chill. It made my bones rattle and my breath catch, because I had just…

Walked through a ghost.

*This is crazy!* I thought to myself. Or shouted it out loud, I wasn’t sure. But things got a million times worse when I realized that the ghost, with its pale everything and empty eyes, was moving toward Violet. Mrs. Smith was fighting off three Rogues at the same time, and Demeter was back to charging at Violet.

“Violet!” I shouted, but she couldn’t hear. More and more ghosts were being drawn into Violet’s pendant, sucked up like it was a vacuum. What the hell was going on? My heart was racing, my mind screaming as I thought back to Demeter…

She used the orb to draw the ghosts and have the magical ball become their prison. Was Violet’s pendant something similar? Was that why Demeter was after Violet? Or was the pendant taking power *away* from the orb?

Either way, I would never let Demeter get to Violet. The girl was frozen, as if entranced, and the witch looked like she was ready to use a spell on her. But this time, my line of vision was clear, so I didn’t hesitate. I moved my hands in unison, sending a blast of energy toward Demeter.

And it hit her!

Demeter fell to the ground just as Mrs. Smith chased away a group of Rogues. *Victory!* I thought when Violet ran away, shifting back to her wolf. She, along with Charlie, attacked another of Silas’s Rogues, working together flawlessly.

The way they were in sync reminded me of the Evers brothers, and cold sweat ran down my spine.

*My mates!*

Panting and shaking, I turned to face the house once more. What was happening in there? Why was it so quiet? Had Silas done something to them?

“What’s up?” Artemis asked, blocking my view of the house as she appeared. I noticed a horrible gash on her arm. *Shit.*

“Oh my god,” I choked out. “Are you okay?”

Artemis shrugged, like there wasn’t blood literally pouring out of her. “I’ve had worse.” In a second flat, her cool expression went sharp and she whipped out a knife. “OH NO YOU DON’T!” she bellowed, lunging forward.

She landed on the head of a Rogue that had been charging toward me and was probably about to bite my fucking head off. I watched, gaping, as Artemis stuck the knife so deep into the Rogue’s eye that it probably reached its brain. It collapsed on the ground, and Artemis landed on her feet like a cat.

“Shit,” I said breathlessly, blinking at her in awe. “Thank you.”

Artemis shrugged again. “This is no different than fighting in the Fae world. It’s kill or be killed. Besides…” She looked me up and down as if to make sure I had no evident injuries. “I just found out I have a sister. No way am I going to lose you now.”

I sniffled. “Thank you, Artemis, that’s so—”

“Is that Violet?” Artemis gasped, pointing somewhere behind me. I whipped around to see Demeter charging for the girl again. AGAIN.

*Oh my god! Can’t she just leave Violet alone?*

“VIOLET!” I screamed, just as Demeter unleashed a spell, causing Violet’s wolf to freeze. I watched as Demeter reached for Violet’s pendant with one hand. In the other, she held a silver dagger, which was pointing at Violet’s throat.

*NO!*

Violet, sweet Violet, only eighteen years old, who’d only just found her mate. She’d lost her brother. She was too pure, too young to die.

“STAY AWAY FROM HER!” I screamed at Demeter, my rage surging right along with my Fae energy. I hit Demeter with a blast hard enough to knock her back. The freeze spell was broken once more, and with Artemis fighting off the Rogues that tried to attack me, this was my shot. I would finish this golden-armed witch off.

Seething, I was about to run toward her when an explosive *BANG!* echoed in my ears. For a second, nothing moved around me.

Stunned, I turned toward the house…

And saw Xavier’s pitch-black wolf tumbling out of the upstairs window.

**Episode 890**

GREYSON

Silas had just shoved Xavier through the fucking window.

I mind linked with Colton. *Grab that son of a bitch!*

Together, we muscled Silas toward the window. It was thirty feet to the ground, and all three of us followed Xavier’s fall, but the impact was nothing in comparison to Silas’s assault. I felt a sharp pain in my side as we hit the ground. Must’ve cracked a rib, but that was the least of my concerns.

This had to end.

*Now*.

I leapt to my feet, taking a single look around at the raging battle. There were wounded and dead everywhere. I saw Rishika and Ava’s wolves working together to fend off Rogues. Sage and Jay and Lola were fighting to keep a circle of protection around Cali’s Fae friends while Torin healed Pip. A few feet away, Mace made a kill, tearing off a Rogue’s head.

Where was Cali?

I fucking hoped that she’d heard Xavier’s and my order to run away, but I sincerely doubted she’d paid us any attention. This was Cali we were talking about. But I could barely process that last line of thinking when, deep in the chaos, I saw Joss.

She was lying on the ground. Her entire body was bloodied, her eyes wide open as she stared up at the sky…

*Dead*.

The sight hit me like a wall of bricks, right along with the realization that Joss had died because of me. Because I had made her Luna. I was a killer just like my father, this beast who had murdered my own mother just a few minutes ago.

Neither Joss nor Sabine had deserved to die, but they were gone.

They’d followed me.

The notion filled me with sorrow, but that was followed by an unbridled overwhelming rage. It was enough to distract me for a beat too long, and Silas slammed into me. His tremendous weight fell on me as he pinned me to the ground, his face full of hatred and pure evil. I fought him off with all my strength while his sharp teeth, a snarling mouth full of them, neared my neck. I had left it exposed for a tiny moment, but that was enough for Silas.

*And this is how you die, son*, he said through the mind link, but it was cut short.

Xavier’s wolf plowed into Silas, and they both tumbled to the ground. Colton followed with a howl, diving onto Silas and biting his back. I charged right after them, my claws digging into Silas stomach before he slashed at Xavier, shoved Colton, and snapped at my throat.

Even though it was three against one, Silas was keeping us at bay.

It was almost impossible to process, but the orb—Silas had gained strength from it. Immeasurable strength. If we had waited until Halloween, Silas would’ve become so powerful that the battle would have finished before it had even begun. At least now we had a shot.

At least now Xavier and Colton and I could keep attacking the monster, moving as one even while Silas kept slipping away like a goddamn shadow, charging at us only one-to-one. We had him backed up against the house now, tightening the perimeter. The old man was trapped, and he wouldn’t be able to escape an assault from all three of us at the same time.

No orb could save him now.

*I have to give you boys credit*, Silas said. *You’ve fought well. But it’s not too late—you can all join me! Imagine the power we would wield.*

I fought to block out the son of a bitch’s ravings. The sooner we killed him, the better. I glanced at my growling brothers, who cornered Silas, their teeth bared with menace. There was no way they’d be tempted by our father. We’d all experienced the horror of his ways.

*Let me finish this*, Xavier said to me, his fury palpable.

I was ready to say yes, to give this to Xavier, but then something nagged at my gut. It felt almost like Silas was baiting us. This was almost too easy—three against one, Silas allowing himself to be trapped against a wall. If I knew my father, there was probably a catch to it.

With Silas, there was always a catch.

*Hold on*, I told Colton and Xavier. *Something feels off.* *We need the right moment.*

Colton’s wolf growled. *What are you talking about? The moment is now! We have him where we want him!*

*We think we have him. But he could have us*, I replied.

*All four of us could’ve been great together*, Silas told us. *But all I see in front of me now is useless little boys. You are nothing without me! You are…*

Silas’s tirade was cut off.

He suddenly looked behind us. His eyes widened and then, with a sneer, he shifted back to human.

*What the fuck?* Colton burst out.

Xavier snarled at Silas in suspicion. *What the hell is happening?* he asked me.

Before I could demand an explanation from Silas, a sudden force hit me in the lungs. It was such a foreign feeling, out of the fucking blue, that it shocked me. It was like I was being held. Crushed.

And then I saw Cali across the way, a Rogue coming at her.

I howled, about to charge toward the bastard who dared aim at my mate. But my legs weren’t moving. I couldn’t move. Every inch of me was frozen, and panic started to bubble up inside me. What the hell? Why couldn’t I run toward Cali?

Why the fuck couldn’t I save my mate?

“Yes,” Silas said, still in his human form. His grin was sinister. “This is it!”

A second later, I felt myself being pulled in a million directions. I was torn apart, *forced* to shed the skin and fur and power of the wolf, forced to shift back to human.

In my entire life, I had never felt less in control of my body.

“Look at my boys,” Silas said, sneering. “Following directions like good little puppies.”

I wanted to tell him to eat shit and die, but my mouth couldn’t move. Colton and Xavier had shifted back to human as well and were looking like live statues. As frozen as I was.

Silas looked past us. He smiled. “Bring it to me, Demeter!” he bellowed.

This frozen state my brothers and I were in was all the fucking witch’s fault. She had cast a spell on us to make us frozen, and I fought to break its chains. It wasn’t working.

I wanted to tear her in half.

“I see you’re having fun here,” she told Silas, chuckling as she moved past us. Her expression was gleeful. She joined Silas, and I felt repulsed by the sight of them together—two fucking psychopaths, looking satisfied with themselves.

Thinking they’d won the war.

*What the fuck do we do now, you geniuses?* Colton snarked.

*I’m trying to break free, but it’s not working,* Xavier said.

*Wait, I see Nolan!* I told my brothers, staring at Nolan.

*Help us!* I pleaded. Hell, I fucking ordered him.

But Nolan pushed past us, shifted into human, and then…

He joined Silas?

*What. The. FUCK?* Colton screeched.

*He betrayed us. We should’ve never trusted him,* Xavier said.

Ava’s wolf appeared, growling at Nolan. She stepped toward him. *What are you* doing?

Well, *I* knew what he was doing. Nolan was a fucking traitor.

“You boys haven’t yet grasped the magnitude of the orb’s powers,” Silas told us, grinning. “Perhaps a little demonstration will convince you to join me.”

Demeter smiled.

I was going to break them both the moment I broke this spell.

Silas gestured at Nolan. “Observe the so-called *Alpha* of the Samara pack…”

A silent Nolan stopped walking in front of Silas, bowing his head.

*Nolan, no!* Ava’s wolf shouted. *Stop what you’re doing, right now! Join me before they hurt you!*

But Nolan didn’t move a muscle, and I started to realize there was a solid chance that this wasn’t his fault.

*Demeter is controlling him*, I told my brothers.

Their response was to growl.

“Shall we?” Silas asked Demeter indulgently, and she beamed at him before revealing the orb. She held it up, mumbling a spell that I was sure as fuck I wouldn’t like. But it wasn’t directed at my brothers and me this time.

The witch aimed at Nolan.

He clutched at his chest, dropping to his knees with a whine. It turned into a horrific scream a second later, bursting out of him the moment his wolf was torn from his chest, shimmering like a ghost.

Ava’s wolf howled and Nolan’s wolf howled back, as if asking for help to escape this savagery, this steady drag toward the orb, like a tornado pulling in everything in its path.

I watched, wide-eyed and horrified, and then a moment later, the inevitable happened.

Nolan’s wolf was getting sucked into the orb.

**Episode 891**

XAVIER

I watched, holding my breath as the last of Nolan’s wolf disappeared into the orb.

It was disturbing, terrifying to see. It made me think of my own wolf, when it had been taken away from me. How lost I had felt, how vulnerable and empty.

Had this been Silas’s plan all along?

To steal everyone’s wolves with the orb?

To leave us all human and defenseless while he became the most powerful Alpha ever?

“*Please*!” Nolan gasped. He stared between his chest and Silas. He was shaking on his knees. The spell he’d been under had been broken enough for him to realize what the hell was going on. “Don’t do this!”

Silas, ignoring Nolan’s pleas, turned to Demeter. “Bring the orb to me.”

Ava’s wolf howled in protest and rage, but Demeter blew her back with a wave of her hand. I couldn’t move, and my brothers couldn’t either. We were just standing there like statues, staring as Demeter presented Silas with the orb.

*I’m trying to regain control,* I told the others through mind link. *But it’s not fucking working!*

“Now, look at this, children,” Silas told us, grinning. He placed his hands on the orb. Demeter began to chant the moment his fingers made contact with the surface. The hissing sound of her voice made the hair at the back of my neck rise.

*What the fuck is going on?* Colton asked Greyson and me.

*She’s helping him gain more power through the orb and Nolan’s wolf*, Greyson said.

*This is fucked up*, Colton growled. *We have to stop them!*

“It’s ready now,” Demeter told Silas, looking at him with glowing eyes. Everything about this was so creepy that I felt sick to my stomach. Silas took a deep breath and stared at the orb. His mouth stretched into a sneer before opening wide.

A moment later, Nola’s ghost-like wolf was drawn out of the orb and into Silas’s mouth. Nolan’s pleas turned into screams of agony, more terrifying than ever, getting louder and louder as his wolf was inhaled. Devoured. It was so terrible that even Colton had been stunned into silence.

Silas closed his eyes, sucking the ghostly wolf in as it struggled to move away. His chest expanded, his muscles tensing while Nolan kept sobbing. He was no longer staring at Silas. He turned to us and screamed, “Stop him! Stop this before it’s too late!”

*This is insane! I have to help him!* Ava snarled, staring at me. *Help me, Xavier, please!*

For once, I wished I could, but I was frozen because of Demeter’s spell. I couldn’t look away from my father, and within the next five seconds, the last of Nolan’s wolf was inhaled.

Silas held his breath and then slowly exhaled.

Nolan wasn’t a good man, he wasn’t even a good Alpha, but what we had just witnessed was… cannibalism. It was so fucked up that it couldn’t have any other name.

I was filled with a sinking dread.

*This is it?* I told Silas. I was shaking with disgust and rage. *This is how you’re supposed to convince us to join you? You fucking monster!*

Silas smiled at me, then at Greyson and Colton. “Oh, please. Don’t tell me you feel sorry for this human?”

Silas reached down and lifted Nolan off the ground by his hair. As if Nolan weighed nothing more than a feather.

“NO! LET ME GO!” Nolan screamed, grimacing as he struggled to break free.

It was in vain. Silas’s grip was too strong to fight off. It was as if becoming human had made Nolan smaller, somehow, and Silas bigger.

*You psychopathic bastard!* Ava’s wolf snapped, lunging for Silas. Silas laughed, effortlessly throwing her away. Ava slammed into the house, and her wolf rolled to the ground, dazed by the impact.

“Look at that pathetic little girl,” Silas said, shaking his head. “Nolan”—he shook Nolan, still holding him by the hair, his feet hovering off the ground—“has been treating his sister like shit, but she still wants to save him. How idiotic is that? Empathy is a weakness, my children,” he told us. “And weakness is a human emotion. Werewolves have no place for it. And this…” He shook Nolan for emphasis. He wailed. “This is weakness. A werewolf without his wolf is nothing. I have no use for him now.”

Before Ava could stand on her feet again, Silas moved his other hand on Nolan’s head.

And ripped her brother’s head off.

The sound of bones cracking made my stomach convulse. The sight was chilling, straight out of a horror movie. But I wasn’t shocked.

Nothing shocked me anymore.

Silas tossed Nolan’s lifeless body into the yard, throwing his head after him almost as an afterthought. My father had always been a tyrant, and I had seen my share of murders over the years—many that I had committed myself. But this kind of savagery?

This kind of callous sadism?

Silas was stronger, crueler, and more out of control than ever.

He had already been the most feared Alpha in the country, and this evolution was nothing short of a fucking nightmare.

My ears were buzzing.

Through the echo, I could hear Ava crying out for her brother. Even though I hated her, even though I saw myself never forgiving her for all the things she’d done, her whimpers made me feel her pain. I didn’t even fucking know what I’d do, how I’d feel if that kind of horrible death happened to Colton… Or even Greyson.

And then it hit me.

If Silas continued to use the orb, we would all perish like Nolan.

*What the fuck do we do now?* Colton shouted. His panic was obvious, and pretty goddamn rare. This kid had gone through hell and back growing up, but this moment, right here, had managed to rattle him.

Judging by his silence, I could tell that Greyson was horrified as well.

*Fuck.*

“This was just a little sample to show you what I can do,” Silas told us in a mild tone. Like he was telling a bedtime story. “Nolan was useless, anyway. Too weak to be of any real help. Which is why I am pleased to have my own children here—three of the most powerful werewolves in the world, all gathered before me.” He smiled crookedly, chillingly, gesturing at us. “Can you imagine all the power we could share together?”

*We will never join you*, Greyson told him. He said it so calmly, as if he wasn’t afraid at all. For a second, I was in awe of him. Especially when he added, *No matter what you do, we will never kneel for you, Father.*

Silas laughed. It was mocking, evil through and through.

“But you don’t have a choice! You are who you are because of me! You are strong because I”—he punched his chest—“made you this way! It’s *my* strength that courses through your veins! And now, there’s much more from where that came from!” He gestured to Nolan’s body, Ava weeping over it. “Don’t you see? Don’t you realize how much power all four of us can share?”

Silas kept talking about power.

He kept talking about it like it was the greatest gift of all. And I realized that to him, it was.

To him, nothing else mattered.

And that was the number one reason why none of us would ever fucking follow him.

“Are you ready to join me? I’m not a patient man!” Silas demanded, just as I heard a scream.

I knew that scream. It was full of outrage and fury and a bit of madness, tinged with no self-preservation instincts.

*Cali? CALI!*

Cali and Artemis, hands raised in attack, were charging toward us. I stood there, relieved but also wondering how many times I’d have to fucking tell Cali to just *go away*. This was too dangerous! Would she ever *listen?*

Greyson’s expression said that he agreed with me.

“These damn Fae always getting in my—” Demeter’s grumbling was cut short when a blast of energy knocked her back, dumping her to the ground. It was so massive that even Colton, Greyson, and I were shaken up, Demeter’s spell broken.

*LET’S FUCKING GO!* Colton howled.

I fell to the ground, dry-heaving, ecstatic to have full use of my body again, relieved that Cali had helped us. Cali had helped us, and we owed her our lives, but now *her* life was in danger.

“Cali!” I choked out, running toward her to shield her from Demeter’s upcoming spell.

At the same time, Ava went to cover Nolan’s body, and Greyson jumped up and lunged toward Silas. But Silas was too fast—he dodged Greyson’s attack.

“Demeter!” Silas shouted. She paused before she could throw her spell toward Cali and nodded at Silas with a grin. Just as I reached my girl, though, Cali’s eyes widened in horror.

Looking behind me, she screamed, “GREYSON!”

I turned around to see Greyson, on his knees in front of Silas.

He was clutching his chest.

And his wolf was being drawn out of him, heading toward the orb.

**Episode 892**

GREYSON

It felt like my heart was about to explode.

The wind had been knocked out of me. My wolf—the one thing that had always been with me, the one thing that I had always been able to count on—was leaving me. I fought to stop it, but my hands only caught air. A crushing weakness hit me as I fell to my knees, overwhelmed, overpowered, *weak*.

Never in my fucking life had I felt so weak.

“GREYSON!” Cali’s piercing voice broke through the pain. I was hit by a series of memories. They grabbed onto me, digging their claws in, making everything hurt ten times worse. One of my earliest memories landed the hardest—the first time I saw Xavier and Colton. I’d been barely three years old, and I could still remember how fascinated I’d been by the sight of them.

I had brothers.

Younger brothers who were so small.

Little brothers who I needed to always protect from our father’s rage, no matter what.

*No matter what.*

The memory faded to one of my mother—my mother, a young Sabine. I wondered how I hadn’t made the connection before, when I first met her. But who the fuck knew if this was a real memory? Maybe I’d lost my goddamn mind, losing everything bit by bit as the orb fought to swallow my wolf.

Then I was thrust into another memory, and this one was real.

I knew this one was real, because it was Cali’s lips against mine, just before the Lupo Finale. My surprise when she’d kissed me, the hunger I’d felt at the sensation of her against me—so fucking amazing that I couldn’t believe my luck, that I couldn’t believe I could ever have this. That I could ever have her.

Then the memory switched to us together, this time in that field in the Fae World, when she’d been about to give herself to me for the first time, both of us ready to surrender before we’d been interrupted by the guards. And then another memory—when I’d told her I loved her.

When I’d told her I loved her, only to tell her to choose Xavier as her mate.

What kind of fucking self-sacrificing, holier-than-thou *asshole* would ever do that?

When the hell had I become so selfless?

How the hell had I ever let love make me better, a better person, when all I truly wanted was to be with Cali, no matter the consequences? I wished I could take it all back, beg her to choose me over Xavier, but now…

Now, with my wolf getting clawed out of me—slowly, like never-ending torture—perhaps it was for the best. Perhaps Cali being with Xavier would be for the best, and he would take care of her, and he would protect her, even if she was—mine.

Cali was mine, and I had to protect her.

I had to live for her.

I couldn’t let myself go out without a fight.

*I couldn’t let myself be defeated by Silas. Not like this.*

The thought jolted me back into the present, where my father was looking at me with empty, evil eyes. “Since you won’t join me, you’re leaving me no other choice but to destroy you, Greyson,” Silas said, a demented smile on his face. His voice was soothing, almost, but still so terrifying that the air around him was pulsating. “Let it go… Let it all go, son.”

I could feel my wolf slipping away as I fought to hold onto him, and Silas laughed.

Silas laughed at me.

“You were born to be destroyed, boy.” He glanced at Cali. “And your little mate is next.”

His words made something inside me roar. I channeled all the strength I had left, my fury reaching a madness that could only rival Silas’s, and then I *lunged* at him. I wrapped my arms around the bastard’s legs and knocked him back, making him stumble and fall.

In that moment, it was enough to interrupt the transfer of my wolf.

But for how long?

“I’m going to fucking kill you!” I growled, clawing at my father, trying to pull him down, to wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze. I wanted to see the life bleed out of him, finish this once and for all. I wasn’t the helpless human my father wanted me to be, not yet. But Silas was still stronger, and I could feel it.

I could feel the difference from earlier, feel the power brimming inside him as he defended himself against the onslaught of my fists slamming into his face and skull, his chest. He must’ve been energized by Nolan’s wolf, but my attacks didn’t allow him to breathe long enough to turn into a wolf. I needed to keep it that way. The moment both my hands wrapped around his neck, Silas choked, laughing as he looked behind me.

“Looks like your little mate is in trouble!” he hissed.

That was all I needed to get distracted.

It took Silas only a second to shove me backward and throw a punch hard enough to make my head throb. His hands wrapped around my neck, but before he could squeeze and crack, a massive wolf slammed into Silas.

It bit him right in the fucking shoulder.

*Colton.*

Colton’s wolf growled, ripping out a chunk of our father’s flesh before he spat it onto the dirt. Silas howled in pain, all his rage directed toward his third son, now. He threw me off, slamming me to the ground before attacking Colton. I lay there for a brief moment, dazed, my body throbbing with pain. But then Cali’s enraged scream made my bones fucking shake.

Demeter was throwing off all of Cali’s attacks, and my mate was shaking, struggling to fight her. The witch was strong. I fought to shift, but I couldn’t. Even if the transfer had been incomplete, the orb, still in Demeter’s hands, continued to pull at my wolf. It beckoned my wolf—softly, but more menacingly than ever.

It didn’t matter, though.

Xavier and Colton had Silas pinned, and Artemis was fighting three Rogues at once, and Cali was defenseless.

I could never let her be in danger.

With a roar that made my chest vibrate, I charged toward Demeter, who was still holding that goddamn orb. If I couldn’t overpower Silas, I could at least take care of the witch who fucking *dared* to attack my mate. I was going to tear her into a million pieces, my rage so potent I could taste it. I slammed into Demeter, hard, hoping to knock the orb out of her hands.

But there was a shield.

There was a shield around her that made me bounce back, and then I saw a flash of silver.

The witch had a silver dagger, and right after tossing Cali on the ground, she lunged toward me with a cackle. “Look at the mighty Alpha!” she screeched. “So weak for his mate—weak enough to die!” She slashed at me with the dagger, and I barely avoided it—I felt the blade graze the hair on my arm.

Now that the orb was closer to me, I could feel its power again.

Demeter shoved me to the ground, straddling my chest, one hand holding the orb and the other holding the silver dagger. I grabbed her wrist to stop the attack, hissing. It felt like I was fighting two opponents—Demeter with her blade, and the force that was pulling at my wolf, the fucking orb cradled tightly against her chest.

If I could just get that thing, I would stop my wolf from leaving, shift, and bash Demeter’s fucking head in.

“SUCK ON THIS, BITCH!”

Cali came out of nowhere, like she usually did, so why the fuck was I surprised? She jumped onto Demeter’s back, yanking at her hair. Demeter actually screamed in pain, and the sight of them physically fighting right above me would’ve been comical if it weren’t so fucked up.

“Cali!” I shouted. “Get back! I can handle this!”

But of course, Cali did not back off.

She punched Demeter right in the mouth, knocking her off me. I lay on the ground, panting. I was fighting to stand, feeling weaker by the second as the orb glowed greedily in Demeter’s hand. Demeter then struck Cali with her golden arm, a hit in the stomach that made Cali choke and stagger.

“Cali…” I breathed, clambering to my knees. I tried to stand, to run toward her, but my legs gave out. I fell back to the ground, my wolf howling in despair when Demeter stood over me.

Glaring down at me with an evil grin, she let the orb glow close to my chest. My ears were ringing, my strength rapidly leaving me as my wolf’s ghost hovered over my body, fighting to stay with me despite the orb’s demands.

Somewhere to my left, I heard Silas shout, “Kill him! Kill him now, Demeter!”

Demeter smiled down at me. “Oh, how the mighty have fallen.” She laughed, raising the silver blade and aiming for my chest.

As I wondered if this was the end, if this was how I would lose Cali after all, I heard Xavier’s familiar growl. He slammed into Demeter, so hard that the orb tumbled from her grasp, rolling away.

Xavier had saved me.

*Don’t you die on me, asshole!* he shouted at me before he charged at Demeter.

I guessed that since my infuriating little brother had ordered me to, I wasn’t allowed to die today. Trembling, I fought to gather my strength. I scrambled for the orb at the same time as Colton and Silas. For a second, Colton got hold of it, but before I could cheer, before I could scream halle-fucking-lu-jah, Silas accidentally knocked it out of Colton’s grip…

And straight into Cali’s hands.

**Episode 893**

I had no idea how the orb had gotten into my hands.

*Um, EXCUSE ME?* I felt like screeching. *Who said I was ready for this kind of responsibility?*

The orb was much heavier than I’d thought it would be—how the hell had Demeter held it for so long? It was smooth like marble, and a blue substance floated around inside of it, glowing slightly. Strange patterns swirled beneath its glossy surface, and they were very weird, and I hated them, thank you very much. But before I could scream for Greyson and Xavier to get this thing away from me, I heard a sound.

There were sounds and voices coming from inside the orb.

*What. Is. Happening?*

First, it was just a few whispers that kept growing and growing until they built into a cacophony of noise, then suddenly…

Suddenly, it was just me and the orb on the battlefield.

Suddenly, I could focus on nothing but the orb.

The ghosts were calling for me, only me, and I was hit by a strange surge of energy, a feeling of strength. Of *power*.

And I liked it.

*Something’s wrong, Cali! Let that thing go!* my mind yelled, but I ignored it.

Holding the orb, I felt different.

I felt *changed*.

I could feel everything around me, every aspect of the battle on every inch of this field, my senses hyper-aware. Was this what it was like to be a werewolf? To be so in touch with your senses that you could make out every sound, every movement, but not be distracted by any of it?

This had to be what real power felt like.

And it was in my control.

So in theory… I could control everyone. *Right?*

*I know what you’re thinking.* A strange voice seeped into my head. *How hungry you are to use what I offer…*

I gasped, clutching at the orb harder. Was it—was this round blue thing talking to me?

WHAT?

The voice continued. *But you must know that limitless power can’t be contained, or controlled. It’s infectious, like a disease, and it will make you rot from within.*

*It will make you rot from within…*

*It will make you rot from within…*

*It will make you rot…*

The voice’s words echoed when I gasped in pain. My chest seized, the black veins from the *due destini* pulsing. They were sending spasms of agony through me, and for a wild moment, I panicked, wondering if this was it, if this was what it felt like to be rotting, decomposing from the inside out.

Just like the orb had described it.

I started shaking, almost dropping the thing. And then the voice laughed.

*I warned you,* it said. *I am too much for your world…*

Fighting not to cry from the pain in my chest, I realized that the orb was definitely right—it didn’t belong anywhere near us.

I had to destroy it.

*But you can’t destroy me,* the voice said softly, sending chills down my spine. *You seek to break the curse that binds you. Do not destroy me, but keep me safe, and I can help you. I can help you, Calliope…*

A werewolf’s roar brought me back to the present.

How long had I be talking with the orb?

It felt like forever, but when I saw the battle scene in front of me, I realized it must’ve been just seconds. Greyson, Colton, and Silas were fighting, all of them shifted back into wolves. They snarled and snapped at each other, claws and teeth and blood all over them, rapidly healing wounds that kept coming.

Xavier was after Demeter.

*Fucking kill her already!* I thought, disturbed by my train of thought but also quite ready to get rid of that evil witch. I gripped the orb tightly—I had to keep it away from Demeter and Silas. I had to keep the Evers brothers and their wolves safe, no matter what.

I was about to run away when a *THUD!* made the ground shudder beneath me. I gasped, turning to face Xavier—he lay on the dirt, shaking and dazed. Demeter had knocked him back with her magic.

*Xavier, no!*

“GET THE ORB, DEMETER!” Silas shouted, raging. He had shifted back into human, but he could still single-handedly hold off Colton and Greyson’s weakened wolves.

*Greyson!*

“I’m tired of your useless little games, Fae,” Demeter hissed at me, her eyes narrowed. “Hand over the orb. It’s too much for a mediocre Fae like you.”

My chest heaving, I backed away. I was panting so hard that I could barely breathe. Demeter had a strange pull on me that I felt in my bones. It had to be her magic, her evil fucking magic that just wouldn’t stop.

“Leave me…” I rasped, shaking the orb. “Leave me and my mates alone, otherwise I’m going to break this thing!”

Demeter laughed, stalking toward me. I fought to move away from her, to step back, but suddenly, my feet felt heavy. My feet were pinned to the ground, and Demeter came closer and closer. “You have no idea what the orb can do, child. Let the grown-ups deal with it.”

She reached toward me with her golden arm. All I could do was watch, holding my breath as it all happened before me in what felt like slow motion.

For a moment, we were both holding the orb.

All I could feel was a cold, steady terror that made me freeze in my tracks. I could sense the evil magic latching onto me, the orb and Demeter grabbing for my power at the same time.

*No!* I screamed inside my head. *Stay away from me!*

They were both attacking me at the same time. And then I felt a searing pain in my stomach. A throbbing ache that made my insides pound and seize. I gasped, looking down.

That goddamn maniac Demeter had fucking stabbed me with her knife.

“You’re not gonna get away with this,” I choked out, stumbling backward.

“I think I already have,” Demeter said, laughing. She grabbed hold of the orb. “Now give me this!” She fought to rip it from my hands, but I was so pissed off, so enraged, that I found an ounce of adrenaline left in me.

Screaming in pain and rage, I grabbed the handle of the knife and yanked it out of myself. I tried to avoid looking at the blood dripping down from it. *My blood*. Demeter was evidently shocked that I managed to do this—this horrible witch who kept underestimating me—that she gaped at me for a second. It was a second too long—I plunged the blade into her chest.

“Fuck… you,” I said, looking directly into her eyes. Then my vision started to get foggy, which was probably not good. The pain overwhelmed every inch of me. I fell onto my knees, somehow still clutching onto the damn orb. The ache was searing, shooting through me relentlessly.

“We’re not done, Fae,” Demeter snapped, slowly pulling the knife from her chest. “You have something that’s mine.”

I couldn’t believe this was happening. I had used my magic against her multiple times. I had punched her. I had pulled her hair. I had *stabbed* her. Xavier and Greyson had also tried to kill her multiple times, and yet, there she was. Still standing.

*How the fuck was she still alive?*

Demeter sneered at me, moving toward me with her hands outstretched. She was aiming for my neck. I wanted to scream at her to go jump off a cliff, but I felt woozy. I was trembling, unable to move from the ground, the pain so horrible that I couldn’t even speak to cuss her the hell out.

*Is this it?* I thought, shaking. *Is this how I die? After all the shit I’ve been through,* this *is how I die? At the hands of a golden-armed witch? How is that fair?*

My eyes watered, thinking of Greyson and Xavier, Xavier and Greyson, with Demeter hovering over me, but then…

*WHOOSH!*

A whip wrapped around Demeter’s neck?

A whip wrapped around Demeter’s neck!

Demeter clutched at her throat, gurgling out nonsense words, as she was pulled violently backward, toward Artemis. I hadn’t even known she’d brought a whip—where had she gotten it? Had she made it? My mind buzzed with questions.

I watched as Artemis ripped the knife from the witch’s hand, glaring down at Demeter with a scowl. “Don’t you fucking touch my little sister,” she said.

And a second later, she sunk the knife deep into Demeter.

Straight into her heart.

*YES!* I thought, delirious. *THAT BADASS IS MY SISTER!*

Demeter choked, blood spilling out of her mouth. Her eyes were wide, like she couldn’t believe this was happening. Like she couldn’t believe that she had been defeated by a couple of young, very goddamn angry, Fae sisters.

Demeter howled, collapsing to the ground, coughing for a moment before her body slowed. Her eyes stayed wide open, looking up at the sky.

She was finally broken.

The witch was finally, *finally* dead.

One more to go.

**Episode 894**

XAVIER

Demeter’s dying scream shot through my ears.

I saw her turn into a pile of ash right in front of me, leaving nothing but her golden arm behind. But then I saw blood on Cali; she was clutching her stomach in pain. Artemis was helping her to her feet. “We have to get you to Torin!” Artemis said. “He can heal you!”

I struggled to hold Silas down as Colton attacked him, my heart practically stopping when I saw Cali stumble and fall. Artemis groaned. “You’re losing too much blood. I’ll go get Torin, stay there! Use your power as a shield!” she shouted, and dashed off across the battlefield.

My head and pulse were pounding. This was all Silas’s fault, and I had never fucking hated him more. If I lost Cali…

*You’ll be okay*, I told her through our mind link. *I’m so sorry I let this happen.*

Cali locked eyes with me as I dropped Silas and rushed toward her. *No, go back! Don’t worry about me. Get Silas, get the bastard!*

I stopped halfway, torn. There was Cali, sitting on the ground bleeding, and then there were my brothers, fighting against Silas. Cali’s outrage was so familiar and almost *endearing* that I felt the urge to keep running toward her. To reach her and hold her, tell her that I loved her, kiss her better. But my brothers were struggling to control Silas, and I couldn’t leave them like this.

*Go back, Xavier!* Cali pressed. *Jay has my back!*

Sure enough, Jay fended off a Rogue that tried to attack Cali. I was momentarily relieved, and I reminded myself that I needed to do this.

I had to help in Silas’s defeat. For the survival of the Redwood pack. For all of our sakes.

For Cali’s sake.

Gritting my teeth, I turned my back on Cali and returned to the battle. I was more determined than ever to break Silas down and send him to hell, where he fucking belonged. He had Greyson pinned to the ground while Colton clawed at his back. But then he kicked Silas in the ribs and our father fell back, his wolf howling.

The orb had weakened Greyson momentarily, trying to suck his wolf in, but now Greyson seemed to be back at full strength, hitting Silas’s stomach with all his might. I followed Colton’s lead and attacked his head, but Silas’s defense game was impeccable, his speed unmatched.

*Ah, Xavier!* he said. *You’ve always been my favorite, don’t you see that? If you join me now, you will be the most powerful of your brothers! Help me vanquish them, get the orb from the Fae, and then, if you’re good at following orders, I might let you keep her!*

I was so repulsed by his glee and megalomania that I tried to block my father’s voice from my head.

*Listen to me, Xavier*. Silas mind linked with me again as my brothers and I kept attacking him. *Because if you don’t, I’ll just tear Cali’s heart out and fucking eat it.*

I choked at the horrendous image. I got distracted, and Silas landed a powerful blow on my chest, knocking me back. When he made a move to claw at me, though, Greyson got in the way, protecting me, giving me the opportunity to glance back at Cali.

The sight broke my fucking heart.

She was holding the orb, taking shallow breaths, still sitting on the ground. Wounded and helpless. Jay and Lola were protecting her from two Rogues, and I had to wonder: where the fuck was Artemis with Torin?

*INCOMING!* Colton shouted through the mind link, and a second later, he slammed into Silas and they both fell right into me. Greyson piled up, biting Silas’s nape. Silas roared in pain as Colton tore at him, and Greyson got the opportunity to grab him and throw him against the house, flinging him ten feet away. Panting and snarling, Silas’s wolf looked at all three of us as we closed in on him slowly. We were catching our breaths.

We needed it to attack him once more, and this time, keep him down.

*The motherfucker is not getting away now!* Colton shouted.

From the corner of my eye, I was so fucking relieved to see Artemis arrive with Torin. Both of them were hovering over a pale and weakened Cali. If Torin failed to heal Cali…

The thought was too disturbing to complete.

And I couldn’t afford to think that way right now.

*Now, my sons, calm down*, Silas said. He was finally cornered. *Let’s talk.*

I faced him, growling. *We’re done fucking talking, Silas!*

Our father had multiple wounds. A chunk of flesh was still missing from his shoulder, where Colton had bitten him. The deep, gushing claw marks on his stomach were Greyson’s work, and the bleeding bites all over his chest were mine.

*I’m proud of you, boys*, Silas said continuing with his fucking tirade. Would his raving ever end? One more reason to kill him right here, right now.

*You’ve proven to be even stronger than I ever hoped*, Silas went on. *You even destroyed my witch. But it’s not too late, you can still reunite and form the most powerful pack the werewolf world has ever known!*

*You’re fucking delusional*, Colton spat.

*Why?* Silas replied. *We’re not so different. You share my blood, you hunger as I do. You seek control. I can give it to you!*

For a second, I was struck by his words. But then I said, *We’re nothing like you. We may share your poisoned blood, but you seek power to control others, to destroy them—to make yourself feel strong.*

*I AM strong, boy!* Silas roared.

*No*, I declared. *You’re weak, too weak to fight the dark instincts that werewolves have. My brothers and I have learned to be true to who we are. We don’t need to kill to feel empowered.*

A moan interrupted my mind link speech. It was a sound of pain, and I would’ve recognized it anywhere. *Cali*.

I glanced back as Torin worked his magic on her. A purple glow moved from his fingertips to her bloody wound, and my gut twisted in worry.

*She’s your weakness,* Silas hissed.

I turned back to face him. His wolf’s face was twisted in a sneer. *She’s your weakness, and Greyson’s too.*

*Shut your fucking mouth!* Greyson growled.

There was only five feet between us and Silas now. We kept closing in.

And then Silas said, *Let her die, boys. Because once I finish with you, the last image you’ll see as you take your dying breath will be me killing your beloved mate.*

The shimmering anger inside me exploded, fury overcoming every one of my senses as I lunged for Silas. I plowed into him, forcing him back against a tree that cracked under the force of my hit. I used my claws to slice him from collarbone to belly before he clawed at my chest. The pain was ferocious and piercing, but my fury was bigger. I fought to reach his neck.

I would rip his throat out with my teeth.

*You should’ve waited for us to attack together!* Colton snapped, before rolling into our fight, joining in to help me pin the struggling Silas down. He was bloodied all over now, so many wounds inflicted by my brothers and me.

The realization struck me: Silas was bleeding. He had been bleeding all along, and even with his energized essence, even after he’d stolen Nolan’s wolf and used the orb to summon the ghosts and suck in more strength, my brothers and I could stand our own against him.

He wasn’t some immortal, all-knowing creature—he was just another man, another werewolf who cared for nothing but power. That did not make him invincible, and it did not make him exceptional.

It just made him evil.

It just made him a monster that needed to be destroyed.

And I would have the pleasure of doing it.

*You love her, don’t you?* Silas laughed in my head. In Greyson’s head. *You love a useless little Fae girl who I could snap in half with one hand! You’re too weak. Both of you. And Colton—you think I don’t know that you’re in love too?*

Colton’s shock was so massive that his grip on Silas loosened.

*Love is for fools and weaklings!* Silas spat, struggling on the ground. Colton and I howled as one and slammed him down, pinned him in the dirt. As he looked up at the sky, Silas laughed. *Lost little boys. I should have killed you all long ago!*

*You’re the one who’s lost, Father,* Greyson said with a snarl, his wolf’s massive paw landing on Silas’s ribs to immobilize him. *You’re the one who’s weak, no matter how hard you try to spread terror and pain. It ends NOW!*

With a roar, Greyson slashed Silas’s chest open.

And then I watched as my older brother reached inside our father’s rotten body and ripped out Silas’s still-beating heart.

**Episode 895**

The Evers brothers had killed Silas.

I watched, holding my breath, grimacing from the pain of my wound, replaying the moment when Greyson landed the final hit on his father. He had slashed through Silas’s chest, then dragged his heart out while Xavier and Colton held Silas back.

All three brothers, working together to finish this.

No more sadistic games, no more tirades, no more threats from Silas.

The image of them murdering their father was so terrifying and disturbing that I would have looked away if this hadn’t been Silas we were talking about.

That man deserved a horrible, gruesome death.

He deserved that and so much more, for all the evil things he’d done throughout his lifetime. His ending was met with a piercing howl from the Rogues. They stopped fighting, sensing that their leader had gone down.

Silas was gone.

The realization sank in slowly.

*The Evers brothers had ended their father.*

Silas’s reign of terror was over.

The war was finally over.

We were all… *free*.

I let out a sob of relief, but my wound sent a pang of pain across my body. My hands were wet with my own blood as I put pressure on my stomach. At the same time, I was clutching the heavy orb, not wanting to let it go. I couldn’t let it go. Not after it had spoken to me, warned me of its powers. Not after it had promised to help me.

But the blood spilling from my wound was too much, wasn’t it?

Would the orb be of any use when it came to the *due destini* curse if I just died today?

*Am I actually dying?*

I could hear Torin and Artemis speaking to me, but their voices sounded far away, like they were coming through a tunnel. The pain in my chest was still raging, the black veins continuing to throb and spread. Was this the rot that the orb had spoken of?

*Hang on a second*, I thought. *Will I die because of the veins, or because I was stabbed? Or both?*

If the stab wound wanted to kill me, it seriously needed to get in line because the curse had called dibs already. I was in agonizing pain, angry and frustrated. I wanted to let go of the orb, but I couldn’t. It was as if a force from within me refused to drop it. It was as if there was part of me that wanted the orb as close as possible.

*What the hell is going on with me and this thing?* I wondered, panicked, which probably wasn’t good for losing the blood.

“Cali!” Xavier shouted. He had shifted into human form and rushed toward me. Greyson followed, shifting as well. Both my mates ran to my side, bloodied and hurt and bruised, but alive. They were alive, and I was so fucking lucky to have them.

“I’m here, love,” Greyson said, taking my hand.

“Cali, stay with me,” Xavier choked out, squeezing my other hand. He looked up at Torin, glaring. “What the fuck are you waiting for? Do something!”

“Heal her!” Greyson demanded.

Torin replied with something that I didn’t catch, and then I felt the orb being taken away from me. I was too weak to hold onto it. *Hey, wait! That’s mine!* I thought. I wasn’t sure who picked it up, wasn’t sure what was happening. I was only certain that I was powerless to stop it. I was dizzy, my vision blurring. But at least when I looked up, I could see both my mates’ beautiful faces.

At least Xavier and Greyson were here, by my side.

“Cali, please baby, it’s gonna be okay,” Xavier said frantically. “Look at me, can you hear me?”

“I’ve got you, love,” Greyson muttered, squeezing my hand. “Don’t give up. Don’t you ever give up…”

Their voices, their touch, being surrounded by them… It all made me feel woozy, but in a good way. A way that felt like floating, like nothing could hurt me. But the truth was that we were still in danger. The orb was powerful and cunning, and I had to warn my mates about it.

If only I could muster the strength to speak…

“The surviving Rogues are running away,” Colton said. He’d just shifted back to human as well. He looked at me and nodded, his expression somber. Then he asked his brothers, “Should we hunt them down?”

The thought of more senseless bloodshed made me shiver. I wasn’t able to talk, not even whisper, but I managed to mind link with Greyson.

*Hasn’t Silas done enough damage?* I asked. *When is all this death going to stop?*

Greyson locked eyes with me. He raised my hand to his lips, planting a soft kiss there before nodding. He turned to Colton. “Let them go.”

Slowly, Greyson got to his feet, looking around the battlefield. “The fight is over! Silas is dead. We have won. There is no need for more blood to be shed.”

For a moment, there was silence.

And then, as if in sync, all the friendly packs howled as one, with the Redwood pack leading. I was shaking as I gazed up at Greyson’s powerful form. I was in pain and overwhelmed, but I was still moved by his command. By his compassion.

But then, my vision was obscured by a blue light.

*Torin?*

Torin moved his hands over my wound like he had earlier, only this time his chanting and singing was louder. The warmth that spread on my body made my skin twitch, and I looked down at my stomach. I saw the gushing wound knit itself back together, the flesh moving on its own.

Torin was healing me.

*It’s working!* I thought, relieved.

“How are you feeling?” Artemis asked me, caressing my face. She looked haunted, worried. This was the first time I’d ever seen her like this.

*Looks like my annoying older sister* does *give a damn about me,* I thought. *But I already knew that, no matter her protests*.

“I’m…” I trailed off, my hand hovering over the hole in my T-shirt. The gash had closed up, but I still felt weak. Disoriented. “I feel like I’ve been stabbed.”

Xavier snorted, kissing the top of my head. He looked so relieved and fond that I felt like crying. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” he whispered.

“Once the muscles heal fully, the pain will go away,” Torin reassured me with a smile.

“Thank you, Torin,” I said. Xavier and Greyson both helped me to sit up slowly. I looked over Greyson's shoulder at the yard and beyond. So many were dead, so many wounded. Rishika was bleeding. Sage and Zainab were limping. Mace lay on the ground, wincing in pain. Ravi was cradling Joss’s body, silent tears running down his cheeks. Shaggy was dead, and Pip was mourning for her pack member.

Ava cried over Nolan’s decapitated head and body.

I was overcome by a wave of sadness for every tragedy before me. Even for Nolan and Ava. *That was such a horrible way to go*, I thought, choking up.

“You feeling better?” Big Mac interrupted my thoughts. She stood over me, eyebrows raised. She was holding the orb.

*There it is!*

I stood up with Greyson and Xavier’s help and reached for the orb. “I should take this.”

Big Mac snorted, taking a step away from me. “The orb is not safe for humans, Fae or werewolves. None of this”—she gestured to the yard— “would have happened if the orb had remained hidden. Your kind are too weak to be trusted with it.”

I frowned at her words as she stepped over to Silas’s torn-apart body. She held the orb over him and began to chant. I glanced between Xavier and Greyson, weirded out. “What the hell is she doing?”

Colton, looking as annoyed as I was, scowled. “Haven’t we dealt with enough bullshit for one day?” He’d barely finished his sentence when Silas’s body levitated a few inches off the porch.

“What the fuck?” Colton breathed, blinking rapidly as a *WHOOSH!* kind of breeze invaded the atmosphere. I swallowed roughly, my eyes widening when I saw Silas’s ghostly wolf rising from his body. It was drawn quietly into the orb. The wolf had to know that its master was gone, and there was no reason to fight.

“What are you—” I stammered, staring at Big Mac. “What are you doing?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” Greyson said with a frown while Xavier narrowed his eyes at the witch. Big Mac waited for the last of the wolf to be drawn into the orb, and then she turned to me.

“I’m just making sure he never escapes,” she said coldly.

“But he’s… dead.” The moment the words left my mouth, I realized that there was no such thing as *dead* around here. Ava was living and breathing and crying. I glanced at Nolan’s body, but she was gone now.

*Wait, where did she go?* I wondered, alarmed. But my thoughts were interrupted when Greyson stalked toward Big Mac, looming over her. His gaze was pinned to the sphere, his expression severe.

“If it’s too dangerous to keep the orb,” he asked, “then how do we destroy it?”

**Episode 896**

GREYSON

“No!” Cali burst out.

I turned to face her. There was dirt and blood on her face, and her clothes were torn and scratched up, but she was okay. I could barely wrap my head around it, but Silas was gone, and Cali was alive. Cali was safe and sound, and even now, she looked beautiful to me.

But she was also really fucking confusing.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

She walked up to me. I saw her wince slightly, but she brushed it off. Always so tough. “We can't destroy the orb, Greyson.”

“Why?” I asked. “You’ve seen what the orb can do—it’s too risky to keep it around.”

“But the orb might be able to help me with the *due destini* curse. It might be able to help *us*.” She gestured between Xavier, herself, and me. “Besides,” she insisted, “there’s no telling what destroying it will do.”

Cali’s anguished expression made me pause.

“She has a point,” Big Mac piped up. “If we destroy the orb, we’ll be releasing its powers unchecked into the world.”

Fucking hell. More powers getting unleashed? More magic and spells? I’d had enough of that bullshit. But I knew that despite my reservations, I had to hear Cali out.

“Why do you think the orb can help us?” I asked.

“It spoke to me,” Cali explained breathlessly. “While I was holding it earlier, the orb spoke to me.”

“Right.” I paused. “I’m not so sure if you should believe any information that comes from magical objects that could probably kill you, though. What if the orb was just trying to trick you?”

Cali gasped before her eyes narrowed in suspicion. She stared at the orb accusingly. She was fucking adorable, but we had other things to deal with at the moment.

“Bring the orb back to the pack house. We can discuss what to do with it there,” I told Big Mac. I looked around at the battlefield. My voice lowered, throat tightening. “In the meantime, we need to gather up the dead and wounded and go home.” I turned to Cali, holding her hand. “Okay?”

She took a deep breath. “Okay.”

I wanted to hug and kiss her, to soothe myself and her with the comfort of our connection, but now was not the time. I squeezed her hand, letting go before turning to the pack and our allies. “Jay, Xavier,” I told the somber men. “Drag the Rogues’ bodies into the house.”

As they moved to carry out the order, I turned to Cali. “I’ll be right back,” I whispered, leaning in to kiss her forehead. She nodded, holding onto me a beat too long before I turned toward the field.

I needed to find my mother.

The battle had put me in such a tunnel vision, especially after seeing Sabine’s body. I wasn’t one to wallow in self-pity, but I felt hit by the unfairness of it all. Just when we were starting to accept each other, Sabine had been killed. Silas had killed her. There was a lump in my throat as I looked around for her body, trying to figure out how to mourn a mother I’d never really known. A mother I’d lost a moment after finding her.

“Greyson.”

I went rigid. I knew that voice. Someone touched my shoulder, and I spun around to face them. It was Sabine. Mrs. Smith.

My *mom*.

Alive?

“What…” I touched her shoulders, almost patting her down to make sure she was real. “I saw you die! How are you even *here?*”

Sabine offered me a soft, tired smile. “I assure you, I am very much alive.”

I swallowed roughly. “But *how?*”

She held up her engagement ring. The massive sparkly ruby. “The ring brought me back. It saved me.”

I fought to process this. “Big Mac…”

Sabine snorted. “MacKenzie’s habit of withholding certain facts is frustrating, but in this case, I’ll let it pass. Since I’m alive and all.”

She was alive.

My mother was alive.

A weight flew away from my shoulders. I gripped her arm and pulled her in for a crushing hug without thinking about it. Shaking, I whispered, “I thought he killed you. I thought you were gone.”

When I faced her, she was crying. But her tears weren’t sad. She seemed… at peace. “He’s the one who’s gone now, Greyson. Silas has finally paid for all he’s done.”

It was strange to feel overjoyed that my mother was alive, while at the same time celebrating the death of my father. I didn’t think that death was enough punishment for Silas, but it would have to do. It would have to be enough.

“Thank you for fighting so hard, Greyson,” Sabine whispered. She gave me another tight hug before Big Mac called for her. I watched my mother go, feeling just a tiny bit better about everything.

Until I saw Ravi.

Ravi, who was carrying Joss’s limp body, her head hanging over his arm, blue hair everywhere, her eyes closed, her face and chest bloody. The sight made me choke with overwhelming guilt.

My throat willed to close up.

*Joss*.

Ravi stopped in front of me. His expression was sharp, but his eyes were full of tears. When he spoke, his voice was raspy but hard. “*You* did this,” he said, shaking with rage. “You’re just as responsible for her death as the Rogue who killed her. You didn’t want her as your Luna, you didn’t even love her. You *used* her—”

“Ravi, don’t—” My voice broke.

“You know I’m telling the truth,” he snapped. “And I’ll never forgive you.”

I watched as Ravi carried Joss away, the tears coming. I didn’t dare ask for forgiveness. I didn’t dare follow him or deny his words. After all, what he’d said wasn’t a lie. Maybe it was Silas who had caused all this, but I was the one who’d put a bullseye on Joss’s back.

And now that she was dead, I only had myself to blame. The guilt clawing at my insides was the least that I deserved.

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After making my way around the carnage, checking on my pack and thanking our allies as everyone cleaned up, I returned to the house. I needed to see Silas’s body one last time.

Just to make absolutely sure that the fucker was properly dead.

I turned to Jay. “Are all the Rogues’ dead bodies inside the house?”

Jay nodded. I grabbed my father’s body from the yard and tossed it onto the front porch like it was nothing but a pile of bloodied flesh. To me, that was all it was. His soul—as evil as it was—was gone.

“What are you gonna do with the bodies?” Colton asked me cautiously.

“Burn them,” I said.

Xavier stared at me. “Burn them?”

“Burn everything,” I said. “Burn the Rogues. Burn Silas. And burn the house with them.”

Colton nodded, stepping forward. “I’ll do it.” He sauntered off to find what he needed to start the flames. Xavier and I exchanged a look.

“Does he know how?” I asked.

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t know all of his hobbies.”

Snorting, I looked to where Cali was talking with Artemis and Torin. She seemed to be better. Stronger. Her draw was too hard to resist, so I walked toward her without thinking.

Without saying anything, we hugged.

She pressed herself against me, and I felt like shit that she’d gotten hurt, but seeing her right now, seeing her standing and healthy, was amazing. *I love you*, I told her through our mind link. *I love you so fucking much, Caliana. I’d lose my mind if anything ever happened to you.*

*I love you too*. *I’m so happy you’re okay*, she replied, looking up at me through watery eyes. *But please, don’t say stuff like that.*

It was the truth, though. If Silas had killed my mate, I would never have forgiven myself. I would probably have gone Rogue again, pack be damned.

It was a selfish thought, but I’d always been a selfish asshole.

Joss had told me so multiple times, and she was right.

Fighting the sharp pang I felt in my stomach, I looked down at Cali.

“Let’s get out of here,” she murmured.

I shook my head. Xavier was watching us. He didn’t seem angry, just severe. I could accept that. “You should go back with Xavier.”

Cali’s eyes were searching.

“I just need some time to deal with all this,” I said, gesturing at the house.

Slowly, Cali nodded. She wrapped her arms around my neck, brushing her lips over mine. Her closeness sent a jolt of longing through me.

“I’m proud of you,” she whispered, before letting go.

I watched her walk away, almost aching from her tenderness. She joined Xavier, who silently shifted. She caressed his wolf’s face, the fur around his ears. She murmured something in his ear. Then she climbed onto his back and they rode off. I was shocked to realize that in that moment, I wasn’t jealous of their connection.

That was definitely new.

“It’s ready,” Colton said, walking up to me. “I drenched everything with gasoline—found it in the basement.” He grabbed a match and was about to light it. But then he paused and turned to me.

“Here,” he said. “You do the honors.”

I lit the match and threw it onto the front porch. Immediately, the house was aflame, the fire rapidly spreading as Colton and I watched.

“Everything’s gonna turn into ash. Gone forever,” Colton said quietly. “That’s what I like about fires.”

I understood what he meant.

Staring at the flames as they began to grow, I muttered, “Good riddance.”